

Evolution's monstrous encounters

DURING the past 1½ decades, Patricia Piccinini has attained a distinctive status as a fantasy artist of the biotechnology age: its utopian aspiration and its lurid nightmares. In terms of her international success and her topicality, she could be compared with Stelarc.

Her transgenic mutations, immaculately fabricated in fibreglass and silicon, with tufts of hair and dirty paws and posed in alarmingly poignant or even threatening life-like tableaux, can be at times unforgettably confronting, at least in the way a bad dream can flash back in your mind.

This may be an art of special effects illusion, but it's poetic in its ambition and reach, and it also intelligently probes the sorts of ethical issues that have given it cachet with a new wave of post-humanist philosophers such as Donna Haraway.

Piccinini, too, can speak fluently to audiences, with the persuasive poise of a television anchorwoman, about the genetic and evolutionary biology that provide the surprisingly functional substructure of her outlandish, cartoon-like monsters. And monstrous they are, not only as the capricious phantasms of what Goya might have called "the sleep of reason", but also as portents of a brave new world populated with engineered species.

Evolution, which covers the past seven years of Piccinini's career and includes new work specifically produced for the exhibition, is a big, confident show about big, complicated ideas. And it impressively occupies not only all the temporary exhibition space at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery but also dramatically intervenes in the dioramas and the hang of the permanent collection.

In some respects her cast of bizarre mutant creatures could hardly find a more congenial habitat than the one they're offered in an institution that houses art along with taxidermed zoology, anthropological artefacts and mineralogical samples. The gallery's eclectic mix of cultural connoisseurship and scientific inquiry is reminiscent of the eccentric taste found in a baroque castle's *wunderkammer*, or cabinet of curiosities.

In this atmosphere, many of Piccinini's sculptures of morphed animals and humanoids disconcertingly adopt the aura of museum specimens, as if the faint silicon sheen of their naked skin or hide isn't due to them being made from plastic but is instead the pallor of a real, cosmetically conserved corpse. The illusion can be arrestingly uncanny. With this sense of theatre — rivalling ghoulish waxworks — you can be morbidly and almost irresistibly drawn to poke or furtively caress

VISUAL ART

Patricia Piccinini: Evolution
Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, Hobart. Until June 14.

these bodies to see just what they're made of.

This is a temptation that has been central to Piccinini's technique: to lure us into empathising with the ugly ducklings of evolution. To see in them a face only a mother could love.

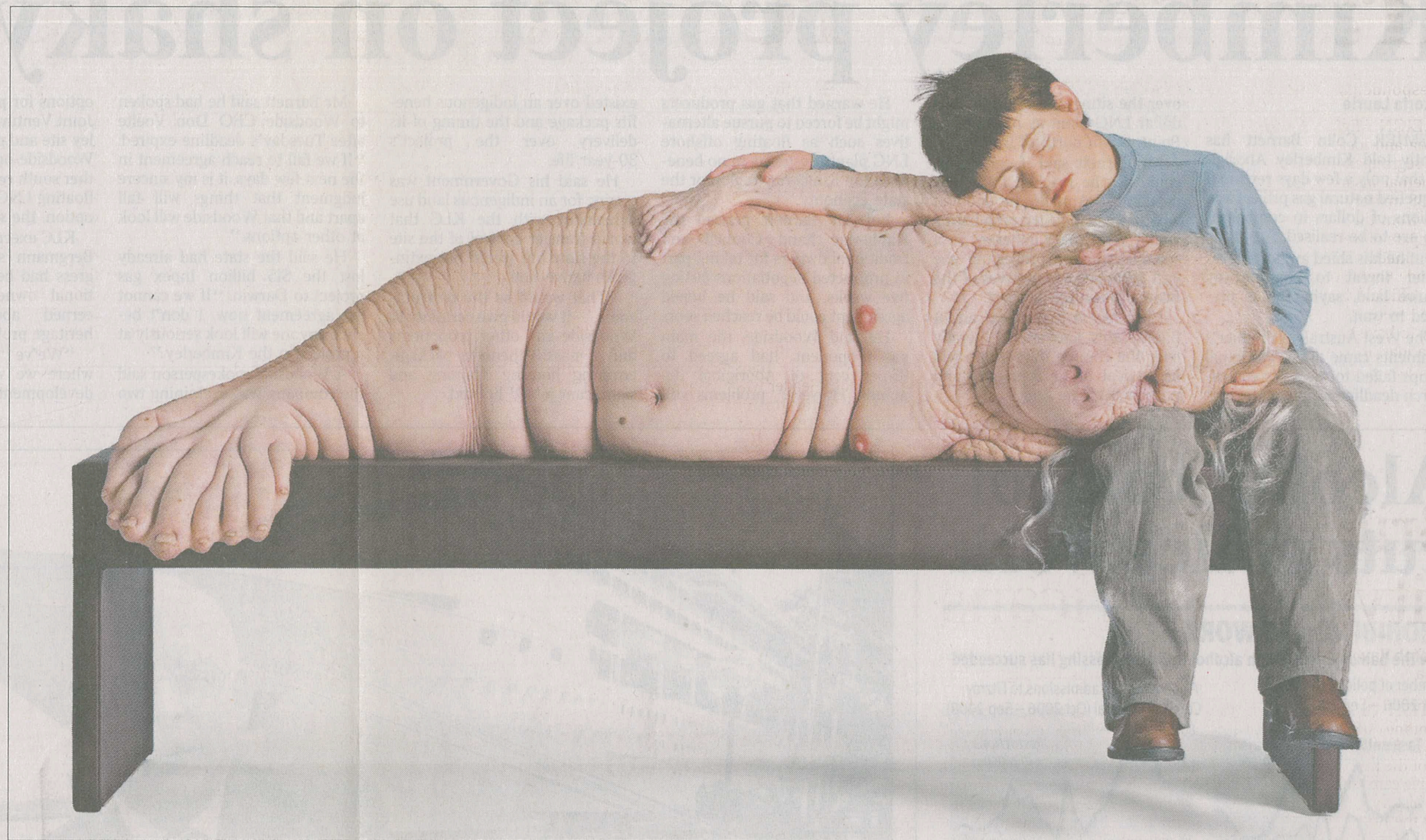
Prompted by the exhibition's curator, Juliana Engberg, Piccinini has created three wrinkly, mole-like babies for the gallery guides to carry about, nestled in marsupial pouches made of lambskin mittens, so visitors can interact with them.

This is not only to satisfy our curiosity or to cater to the fetishistic pleasure of prodding the fake flesh; it's also a bit like a sex education class, when a teenager takes protective custody of an egg as a lesson in duty of care for an infant, even if this infant is the hairy misdeed of a mad genetic scientist. It is didacticism disguised as playfulness. A tutorial in the obligatory affections of surrogacy that can redeem a changeling's abnormality.

But there's a hazard for us insinuated into such a pious sentimental gratification. And this ambiguity deftly complicates what is undoubtedly the signature piece of the show, the imposingly grotesque *Big Mother* from 2005. Human in scale and partly in form, this erect and naked ape with a pristine human baby casually at its breast seems on first approach almost a comically blasphemous travesty of the Madonna and child. Is this a wet nurse? A surrogate mother who has been impregnated across species? An impoverished servant biologically colonised by her human overlords? Or has she been the vessel for a miraculous, messianic birth?

Maybe these amount to the same thing. Perhaps it's the baby — not the ape — who is the harbinger of a new mutant species. Whatever this thing in her arms is, it wears her but she nurtures it with grim determination, driven by a maternal instinct that operates her like a puppet. Her skin sags and the expression on her simian face exudes the pathos of a slave with no future other than this one task.

But the closer you get and the more you might feel compassionate, the more dangerous this thing looks. The ape has been designed as a bodyguard as well as a nurse. Its massive arms don't just cradle, they jealously possess the baby. They could flatten any intruder, even one with a natural right to take the baby back. The eyes become apprehensive, fuelled by an inarticulate protectiveness that harbours a



Odd friendship: *The Long Awaited*, with its daydreaming boy hugging a grandmotherly sea creature, features in Patricia Piccinini: Evolution



Here's one I mutated earlier: Piccinini with one of her creatures

single and simple-minded urgency. With bike panniers at her feet (no doubt filled with disposable nappies), she could be, like the Madonna pausing on the road to Egypt, in flight from a threat to the baby. She could also have kidnapped her prize.

Any empathy you experience with this surrogate finally burns away when you step behind her and see her gargantuan, mutated and obscene rubbery sexual organs and anus. Any ambiguous fear about the feral strength of this creature turns into unambiguous disgust.

nativity and devouring or excreting. The sleeping child becomes an imperilled innocent as well as a kind of prey for a maternal hunger. It becomes a sacrificial offering.

In one of Piccinini's most accomplished and undeniably eerie installations, *Perhaps the World is Fine Tonight* (a traditional museum diorama made with the TMAG preparator this year), a young girl is lying face down on slab of rock in the centre of a claustrophobic nocturnal Tasmanian wilderness. She's either in a meditative yoga pose, communing with dark nature and being visited benignly by a dozen curious night creatures that circle her as if in a fairytale, or her neck has been broken and the body dumped by the murderer for scavengers to feed on.

Up above, two wedge-tailed eagles carry off a ghastly bag resembling a massive tumour-ridden scrotal sack or mammaries; or could it be Ganymede, the mythical child abducted by a god for sexual pleasure? The artist calls this object a gift, but there is something unfathomably sinister about it.

This happens even when mothering takes the form of cutely animated anemones in the digital video of *The Gathering* (2007). They creep out from under a bed — the archetypal domain of childhood horrors — to surround a girl asleep on the floor, only to rear up and inexplicably, but menacingly, thrust their foetus-like tongues at her through some indeterminate furry orifice. In moments like these of anomalous and not just ambivalent behaviour, Piccinini's creatures become savagely abnormal.

Our recoil from this abject physiology of motherhood, from its fantastically engorged

carnality, seems unavoidable. What can possibly mitigate the phobic quality of Piccinini's inspiration once its obscene side is exposed?

To shy away from it is to be timid, but unfortunately this is what happens when her work becomes approachable, when it succumbs to its own temptation to be endearing.

Foundling, an ET-like gnome with plaintive Bambi eyes in a plastic baby capsule, or *The Long Awaited*, with its amiably daydreaming boy hugging an equally contented, grandmotherly sea creature (both from last year), are trite and sentimental compared with the uncensored repulsiveness that leaps out elsewhere in the show. And for all their charm and popularity with audiences, the metamorphic Vespa scooters at play in *Stags* (also 2008) seem like glossed but inert antidotes to the blackly comic, gothic dread around them.

Piccinini's work is original, and is at its best when it is hardest to swallow. The artist acknowledges just how deliciously toxic her work ought to be in her self-portrait, *The Embrace* (2005), which has been hilariously installed in the colonial gallery, where a feral possum-like chimera has leapt off the gallery wall to clamp itself desperately and completely over her face.

In a gesture that parodies the face-hugging creature from the film *Alien*, this animal comes to life by copulating with its creator through her mouth. The sex is smothering, carnivorous. Mothering is presented as obliteration. And her art, when it consumes fear this way, is like a wasp laying its eggs.

Edward Colless