

The Instruments of Life

Patricia Piccinini

22.1–25.4.21

Curator:
Anna Mustonen

1. *Shadowbat* (2019)

Silicone, fibreglass, hair

The flying fox is a large bat, native to Australia, that is increasingly falling victim to climate change. Flying foxes lack the ability to cool themselves and they have succumbed to heatstroke in large numbers. Piccinini's *Shadowbat* approaches the problem by genetically engineering a skin-like umbrella – hanging by a hook consisting of fingers – to shade the creature.

Bats are also particularly interesting animals in the context of the current global pandemic, with our newfound understanding of their role in the incubation of viruses. Bats have an extraordinary immune system, which leads to their role as carrier and cross-breeder of viruses, but they may also offer the key to understanding how we might deal with them. Bats also play an important role in nature and their loss has effects beyond the species itself.

2. *Eulogy* (2011)

Silicone, fibreglass, human hair, clothing

Blobfish became an internet sensation in 2013, when it was awarded the title 'World's Ugliest Animal' by the Ugly Animal Prevention Society. Unfortunately, the attention it received as a result did little to stop the deep-sea trawling that has brought this incredible creature to the brink of extinction.

Eulogy was created two years before the blobfish was made famous around the world. As the title implies, this is a tribute to and celebration of the animal's life. Piccinini herself describes it as 'a quiet work' that is 'not histrionic'. The middle-aged man gently holding the fish symbolises today's commercially driven world, subtly calling for attention and empathy for the surrounding – and astonishing – animal kingdom.

3. *Shoeform (Tresses)* (2019)

7. *Shoeform (Bloom)* (2019)

8. *Shoeform (Orchard)* (2019)

11. *Shoeform (Sprout)* (2019)

Resin, automotive paint

Patricia Piccinini's *Shoeform* sculptures are hybrids that celebrate life and diversity. *Shoeform (Sprout)* is simultaneously an organ-like flower in its fleshiness and a sneaker at its roots. Living by its name it is sprouting yellow flower-like growths that are opening up like sunflowers towards the sun. The shoe base reminds us that the roots of this being are within humanity, and the glistening colours of yellow, orange and fleshy red give it a man-made feel.

As with many of Piccinini's work, it is also a very sexual creature; the flowers inviting in their openness, mimic the appearance of reproductive organs in spite of their

abstract shape. Although belonging to the 'real world' in its objecthood, the *Sprout* inhabits a space somewhere between dream and reality. Piccinini herself describes these objects as 'tributes to the idea of hybridity, celebrations of life without any particular notion of what it should be'.

Piccinini is also interested in fungi. Fungi are often classified as vegetables, but they form their own eukaryotic life kingdom that also includes microbes such as yeasts and moulds. Fungi are their own kingdom and are neither plants nor animals, much like Piccinini's creatures.

4. *The Loafers* (2018)

Silicone, resin and hair

Patricia Piccinini's work is often about boundaries. The endearing figures in *The Loafers* are chimeras – simultaneously very human, with a resemblance to the platypus, but also blended with an inanimate object – a boot.

Piccinini often depicts shoes in her work, particularly cowboy boots that are both incredibly masculine but with a beautiful poetic and decorative quality about them. The booted heels in *The Loafers* serve almost as extensions for the little bodies. The work is simultaneously intimate, surreal and metaphorical, inviting us to imagine what our relationship could be with this imaginary creature.

5. *Sapling* (2020)

Silicone, fibreglass, hair, clothing

The branches of *Sapling's* tree-like child embrace the human father's shoulders as his head rests on top of his. The roots – both literal and metaphorical – are not only attached to the mother, but also to the father. By replacing the mother figure with a father, Piccinini subverts traditional gender roles.

Trees have been given deep and sacred meanings in many of the world's mythologies as symbols of growth, death, rebirth and the eternal. *Sapling* explores themes of nature, fertility, mythologies, and the themes of growth and nurturing bodies. The sculpture reminds us that plants, like people, can feel and remember. Piccinini offers a subtle reminder of how humans can also destroy what they have created. If we cannot save our environment, how can we save our offspring?

6. *Cleaner* (2019)

Fibreglass, auto paint, silicone, human hair

Cleaner envisions a creature genetically engineered to solve a potentially life-threatening situation it faces due to human-made pollution in the oceans. This is part sea turtle, part mechanical shell with vacuum intakes that have been designed to suck up

plastic waste before it reaches the animal's mouth.

With this work, Piccinini highlights the impact that man-made plastic waste accumulating in the oceans has on animals and the environment. Yet the solution she offers both practically and metaphorically shows how we have shifted the responsibility from ourselves to the creatures who in fact are the innocent victims.

9. *Sanctuary* (2018)

Silicone, fibreglass, hair

Sanctuary draws inspiration from bonobo apes, a species closely related to both chimpanzees and humans that are endangered due to habitat loss. Bonobos are known for their high sex drive and they use sex to express affection and social status, as well as to resolve conflicts.

The sculpture shows an elderly couple in an intimate embrace. The relationship between the couple is undoubtedly sexual, but also comforting and loving. The work addresses one of the taboos of our society, the sexuality of the elderly. The title of the work, *Sanctuary*, has many meanings: it is both a refuge and a safe place. With bonobo apes, it also refers to the extinction of the species. *Sanctuary* represents the central tension in Piccinini's work, balancing between love and death, light and darkness.

10. *The Coup* (2012)

Silicone, fibreglass, human hair, clothing, taxidermied parrot

The Coup shows a young boy with long, hairy forearms and a distended upper lip holding a taxidermied parrot. The boy is monkey-like both in its appearance and behaviour, characteristic of young boys. It is unclear whether the boy has mischievously caught the parrot and is trying to harm it, or is simply protecting and caring for it. The work is about the ambiguous relationship between the boy and the parrot, as well as the interplay between the artificial and the natural.

12. *The Awakening* (2020)

Video (9 min)

The Awakening speaks about rebirth and the potential of life with the accompanying soundtrack of an irregular heartbeat. The pulsating, fleshy, and gently 'smiling' creature has an eye-like hole within the bodily folds, from which periodically an egg-like form pops out. It is unclear to us whether this is an egg being released from the ovaries, the birth of an animal, an organ, or in fact the birth of the Universe itself.

But most of all, this is a celebration of the body as a site of production: it's messy, gooey, humorous, awe-inspiring and wonderful

at the same time. The animated imagery depicts an abstract and ambiguous scene that, characteristic of Piccinini, is simultaneously one of expectation and wonder.

13. *Big Mother* (2005)

Silicone, fibreglass, polyurethane, human hair

The work *Big Mother* is inspired by a story about a female baboon who abducted a human infant to replace its own dead baby. The work shows how close baboons and humans are as species. It also informs us of our shared physiology.

Like humans, baboons also grieve their deceased infants. The bodies of baboon mothers, like human bodies, will keep producing nutrition to feed the infant that no longer exists, making the grief even more poignant. *Big Mother* demonstrates Patricia Piccinini's ability to approach ethical questions through emotion and empathy, without preaching, reminding us that at the end of the day we are nothing but animals ourselves.

14. *The Offering* (2009)

Silicone, fox fur, possum pelt

The Offering features an adorable small creature, resting with its eyes closed like a human baby in a nest of fur. Similarly to Patricia Piccinini's artworks, this chimera is not conventionally beautiful yet has an endearing, ethereal quality that evokes a strong desire to care and nurture. Unlike with the silicone sculptures, the artist is inviting us to actually hold, touch and feel this work, the softness of the fur, the delicate skin and all the small details, creating a real physical connection between the viewer and the artwork.

