
PATRICIA PICCININI

A Case Study

Introduction

Patricia Piccinini's artistic practice spans across many mediums, including installation art, painting, sculpture, video and photography. Her subject matter lingers on the underlying themes of genetics and mutation, and consequently life itself, which she has explored consistently since she began working professionally as an artist. One of her first works, *Lump (The Mutant Genome Project)*, 1994, dealt with the themes of normality and abnormality as perceived through media and medical culture after the launch of the "Human Genome Project" in 1993. Though it is often thought her works are based on her interest in science, she has said;

"It is not really science itself that I am interested in, as much as how it impacts on people. I think my creatures... are chimeras that I construct in order to tell stories that explain the world I live in but cannot totally understand or control."

The Long Awaited, 2008

Silicone, fibreglass, human hair, leather, plywood, clothes



THE ARTIST

Patricia Piccinini is an Australian artist who was born in Sierra Leone in 1965. She created her first hyper-real silicone sculpture in 2001 ("SO2"), for the Melbourne Festival at Melbourne Zoo.

The Stags, 2008

Fibreglass, auto paint, leather, steel, plastic, tyres





Skywhale, 2013

Nylon, polyester, nomex, hyperlast, cable

Artwork Analysis #2

Subjective Frame: *Skywhale* is, at first glance, a fantastical giant creature with a complacent expression on its face. The reactions to the balloon were quite varied, with some people finding the creature repulsive due to its pendulous breasts and others finding the creature's odd appearance intriguing. The sculpture is reminiscent of a sea cow, or another gentle female mammal, and the breasts remind viewers of the fertility of the creature, making it seem more motherly than intimidating. When creating the artwork, Piccinini said she "wanted to create something 'wonderful', in the sense of a thing that invokes a sense of wonder. Something 'remarkable' in the sense that you might remark on it."

Cultural Frame: This artwork was created for the Centenary Celebrations in Canberra, and it was commissioned by the government at the time. Piccinini was given no limitations as for what she wanted to make, only that it had to be a balloon. The artwork became a controversial topic in politics, with ACT Leader of the Opposition Jeremy Hanson, having said 'I really don't know whether to laugh or cry. It's an embarrassing indulgence only a fourth term government would contemplate.'

Structural Frame: *Skywhale* is coloured to look like a real-life animal, with pinkish flesh and a green-hued back that resembles a shell. The fan-like tail at the back of the creature has small claws protruding from each section, and the creature has ten pendulous breasts hanging down the sides of it. The viewer's eye is drawn immediately to the breasts of the creature, which were intended to highlight *Skywhale's* maternal nature, because they make up such a large portion of the sculpture.

Postmodern Frame: The sculpture is postmodern in the sense that it is outside of what could be considered as 'mainstream art', due to the medium it was created in (a hot air balloon), and the subject matter. A sea-cow that floats in the sky could hardly be considered classical art, and it challenges the social/cultural notion of what can and cannot exist in the animal kingdom.



"It's hard to know where ideas come from, they just happen. An idea usually ferments for a while - years even - and sometimes it just melts away, but sometimes it grows bones and wants to walk."

Big Mother, 2005

Silicone, fibreglass, polyurethane, leather, human hair

Artwork Analysis #1

Subjective: In the sculpture, *Big Mother*, Piccinini is trying to portray the fragile and gentle nature of the baboon-like creature as it nurtures a baby that it will never truly be able to call it's own. The main figure in the sculpture is very obviously a mother figure, as implied by her breast-feeding of the human child. The creature has a very human face and the viewer empathises with the creature's situation, mainly because of its human attributes. Piccinini said about conveying empathy in the sculpture; "I try to address ethical questions, but through emotion and empathy... especially in regards to issues like biotech or GE."

Cultural: The sculpture is related to Piccinini's long-running interest in medicine, genetic engineering and biotechnology, and looks to be a hybrid between a baboon, human, and other unidentified species. The sculpture was created around the same time that chimps were found to be the closest living relatives to humans, and so that discovery increased the viewer's capacity to understand and empathise with the emotion shown on the creature's face.

Structural: The sculpture is life-size, though it may feel larger than life because it is often displayed on a raised platform, making the viewer feel as though the creature is somehow removed from society, even though it is so close to use. The human features of the creature, namely the emotion-filled eyes and breasts that are capable of nurturing a human child, also make the viewer empathise with the creature because we recognise these features as being common in our society. The sculpture is created to be hyper-real, and the process behind creating a sculpture to that degree of realism involves multiple layers of silicon being melded over a skeleton (in a material of the artist's choice) and painted. Human hairs are inserted into tiny holes in the silicon to create an even more realistic look.

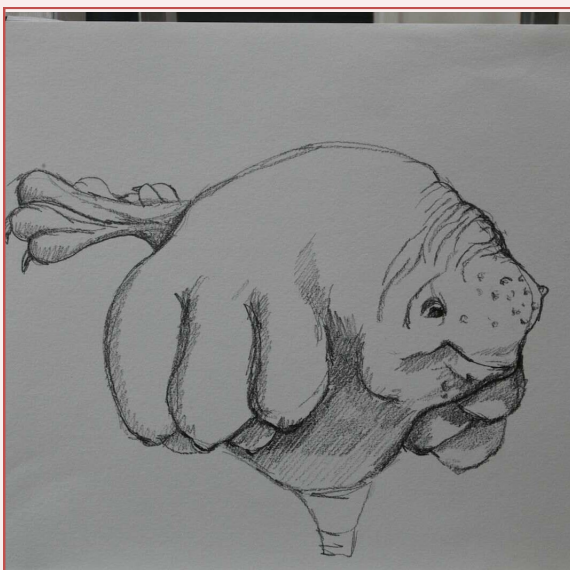
Postmodern: Like *Skywhale*, this sculpture can also be considered through the postmodern frame because it cannot be considered classical art and it again challenges what can and cannot exist inside of the animal kingdom.



The Mutant Genome Project

Material Practice

Patricia Piccinini works through external fabricators, such as *Rapid Prototyping* (who created the framework of Piccinini's work *The Strength of One Arm* (2009)), to create the frames of her artworks before they are returned to her and she works closely with staff in rendering the frame with silicon and hair. With all her sculptures and artworks, she sketches the idea in incredible detail before the idea is sent off for fabrication. In the case of *Skywhale* (2013), she sketched the sculpture before it was sent to the hot air balloon manufacturers. The manufacturers then worked with Piccinini in creating a scaled-down mould of the creature using cardboard and sticky tape, which was used as a reference to then create the hot-air balloon. My material practice is not dissimilar to Patricia Piccinini's, with the main inconsistency being that I don't have people to help me make my sculptures. Mirroring her, my sculpture/s begin with a skeleton, which is then covered in a flesh-like material. Though her sculptures' skeletons are made from ABS (Acrylonitrile Butadiene Styrene) and mine from aluminium foil, it's the same principal. We are also both interesting in hyper-realism in our sculptures.



Material process for *Skywhale*



Prone, 2011

Conceptual Framework

Part of Piccinini's conceptual practice draws on the scientific and medical advancements of the time, as well as stories from family and friends. Her *Lump (The Mutant Genome Project)* (1994) was directly inspired by Human Genome Project that was launched in 1993. Similarly reflecting happenings in her life, Piccinini's sculpture *Big Mother* (2005) was inspired by a tale she heard from a friend at a party about a child being taken by a baboon whose own infant had died. Piccinini is able to take events from both her personal life and world news to refine her concepts and ideas, whilst keeping a theme constant; life and genetics. I'd like to think that in my work I'm able to show as much dedication to an idea as she does, but at this point in time it seems unlikely.

I looked into Piccinini's work because her material practice was similar to mine, but on closer observation of her conceptual practice, I've found that we're both interested in genetics and human life, though my interest in these areas may not show through as well in my artwork.



The Listener, 2013

Conceptual Framework

World: Patricia Piccinini's work has existed in the timeframe of the late nineteen-nineties up until the present, and her art references events within this time period. Namely, her artworks reflect the scientific and medical advancements made regarding human life during this period of time. The scientific forays into unlocking the secrets of DNA, and the following utilisation of those discoveries to manipulate genes, had been at the forefront of the news when Piccinini's work was starting out. The ideas of what was and was not acceptable to experiment with were stretched as scientists began splicing species together. The rise of postmodernism in the 1980s allowed for artists to delve into more radical subject matters in their works and also allowed for more freedom in terms of how artworks were made. It was increasingly common for artists not to make their own works, but rather outsource them.

Artwork: Patricia Piccinini's works encompasses sculpture, time-based forms, installation art, painting and photography, and explores the relationship between humans and other species, how life can be altered by science, and how humans perceive life. In her *Nature's little helpers* series, she explored the idea of human being able to save endangered species through genetic engineering.

Audience: Over her career, Patricia Piccinini has exhibited in both national and international exhibitions regularly since her first group show in 1993. Her work has been published in many journals and has been featured in newspaper articles as well as school art textbooks. This indicates her work reaches members of the general public as well as art audiences. In 2013, her artwork, *Skywhale*, was flown across Canberra as a part of the Centenary celebrations and that created a significant amount of controversy and publicity for her work, eliciting stunned, disgusted and fascinated responses from the public.

Artist: Born in 1965 in Sierra Leone, Africa, to an Irish mother and Italian father, Piccinini moved to Italy in 1967 and then to Australia in 1972. The family lived a quiet suburban life in Canberra until 1980, when Piccinini's mother was diagnosed with stomach cancer and underwent aggressive treatments for a year. Her experience with medicine during that time, a mixture of expectations and disappointments, continues to reflect in her artworks today. She studied for a Bachelor of Fine Arts at the Victorian College of the Arts (after previously having studying Economics at the Australian National University), and through the early 1990s she explored different medias from painting to computer-generated imagery. Her combined interest in medicine and computer-generated images led to the creation of *The Mutant Genome Project* (), and the *LUMP* series (). In the late 1990s her works, such as *Truck Babies* () and *Car Nuggets* () were inspired by her travels around the world with her husband Peter. In recent years, her works have varied from hyper-realistic sculptures such as *Big Mother* (2005), C-type digital photographs such as *Domain* (2005), automobile sculptures such as *The Lovers* (2011), and hair paintings such as *Vanitas* (2013).



Thorns, 2012

Silicone, fibre-glass, human hair



Interview Trascript

*Originally published: (tender) creatures, exhibition catalogue. Artium.
by Laura Fernandez Orgaz and Patricia Piccinini (2007) .*

LF: In your work we find synthetic gardens, virtual horizons or rooms that breathe; an encounter with a biotechnological bestiary made up of creatures that defy classification, children aged before their time and vehicles in the shape of a baby. To create this astonishing artificial world, you undoubtedly possess not only a tremendous imagination but also certain scientific knowledge. Could you comment on how and when your interest in this field developed? Is that what inspires you when you begin work? What other sources have influenced you?

PP: It's hard to know where ideas come from, they just happen. An idea usually ferments for a while - years even - and sometimes it just melts away, but sometimes it grows bones and wants to walk. Then I find all the pieces to bring it to life. I certainly don't sit down and say: "I'm going to do a work about tissue engineering." I'm more likely to be struck by an image or moved by a story and that will lead on to something else. For example, in 1997 I glimpsed this bizarre image of a mouse with an ear on it's back during the evening news. It was so weird and sort of tragic and amazing at the same time. A bit of research led me to the emerging field of 'tissue engineering', which seemed to embody quite beautifully the natural/artificial convergence that preoccupied me at that time. From here came 'Protein Lattice', which is as much about this tragic/heroic figure of the mouse - and its questionable 'naturalness' - as it is about the technology.

While I read widely and am fascinated by contemporary science, I am happy to remain very much a lay person. I think that gives me a certain independence. I don't have anything invested in any particular discipline, and nor do I have any illusions of omnipotence. To me the most spurious thing about some science is that scientists seem to be so definite - even when they are wrong. I marvel at so much of what I hear about, but at the same time I often find myself asking 'why' somebody might want to do it. I'm sure many scientists would wonder the same thing if hearing about what I do...

My interest in medical science began when I was a teenager. My mother was sick for many years before she

died. During that time I hoped and prayed that science - medicine - could help our family. In the end there was no help but I still feel that I am waiting for science to help; to help me, to help my family and to help the world I live in. However, I also know that science is not perfect, no matter how clever it seems to be. Science did not help my mother. I understand that it cannot always deliver its promises. I understand that disappointment.

However - and this will sound very strange - it is not really science itself that I am interested in, as much as how it impacts on people. I think my creatures are actually more mythological than scientific. They are chimeras that I construct in order to tell stories that explain the world that I live in but cannot totally understand or control. Like most myths they are often cautionary tales, but they are also often celebrations of these extraordinary beasts. You need to remember that the gods of the ancient myths had great power but also very human motivations. They followed their own interests, with very little feeling for the effects they might have on normal people.

Australia is a country whose landscape was devastated during the colonial period and which is now very environmentally aware and active. In one of your recent works, "Nature's Little Helpers", you have created new creatures intended to hypothetically protect other Australian species at risk of extinction. How important is your Australian background when it comes to choosing the themes you pursue? To what extent do you regard yourself as an artist committed to such issues?

The issues that interest me are important throughout the developed world, but in my work they retain a particular Australian nuance. My work originates in an Australian context and I am happy that it reflects specific aspects of that context and its history. However, I think that the ideas that underpin it are ultimately more universal.

Australia has a particular and fascinating ecology and with many unique animals. Non-Australian audiences are often willing to believe that any kind of fabulous creature might actually exist here, and I do play on that. With the Nature's Little Helpers series, I have imagined a series of 'assistant species' designed to help preserve a number of Australian endangered species. However, the conditions that these works address are not specific to Australia. I could have found any number of equivalent species with similar problems anywhere in the world. These works use the specificity of a particular Australian circumstance to focus on much more general issues, both ecological - species and habitat loss - and subjective - good intentions and hubris.

In regards to the final part of your question: I regard these issues as fascinating and important, but they are not the only ideas that motivate me and my work. I think you can read my practice in other ways as well. I am happy to talk about what my work means to me, but I'm not interested in telling people what to think. What I am committed to is the importance of the discussion, rather than any particular solution or course of action. I do have my own ideas about what the best thing to do might be, but I'm willing to admit that I'm probably wrong.

One inspiration for 'The Surrogate' came from a museum exhibition that looked at research aimed at using cloning to revive the Thylacine, an Australian marsupial wolf that was hunted to extinction in the early 20th century. On one hand, the idea of using technology to reverse the appalling destruction of a species is wonderful, as is the desire to right the wrongs of the recent past. However, I wonder if it is really ethical to focus resources on a single dead species when we have whole existing ecosystems under threat. Is it better to abandon a single near-extinct species to its doom and instead concentrate on several others that are less vulnerable? To what degree are we willing to let people suffer to help other species? Can our intervention fix problems that we created through previous interventions in the first place?

Also, I am just as interested in the characters and their relationships and narratives. There are conceptual and political issues that underlie all of my work, but the core of it is emotional and narrative. My real interest is how the conceptual or ethical issues are transformed by emotional realities. I think that all of my work has that emotional dimension that shifts the apparent rational implications.

You can see this in Undivided, which again presents the Surrogate creature, this time curled up in bed with a young boy. There is a strange combination of innocence and disquiet in this sculpture, with the child in pyjamas and the bare creature. The pyjama-clad child seems completely at ease with the Surrogate, as if she were his pet dog. However, most viewers find their closeness difficult. Most of us are happy to engage the idea of a creature

engineered to help an endangered species, but are much less comfortable with the idea of it getting too close.

LF: Since the very early days of your artistic career, you have undertaken a number of projects in which there is a clear underlying intention, which is to question and to initiate a debate on fundamental aspects of bioethics, the scope and the limits to biotechnology, its unpredictable consequences, who is able to make the most of these advances, etc. These are uncomfortable issues. You have worked with the scientific community on a number of your projects. How do they respond to your work? Plus, what reaction do you hope to provoke among the visitors to the exhibition in ARTIUM? Do you think that by and large the public has a clear understanding of the backdrop to your work?

PP: I definitely see my work as coming from a lay person's viewpoint and on the whole I am more interested in how everyday people respond to it than the scientific community. That having been said, I do often get requests from scientific writers or ethicists to use images of some of my work in their texts. It is disappointing when the images are used to support some polemic or other. 'The Young Family', for example has been requested to support arguments both for and against genetic manipulation. In the gallery context, I hope viewers recognise that these works reflect the impossibility of such simplistic postures. I find that most people have a good sense of the processes and issues that I work with.

I think if people are disturbed by my work it is because it asks questions about fundamental aspects of our existence - about our artificiality, about our animalness, about our responsibilities towards our creations, our children and our environment - and these questions should be easy to answer but they are not. What I love is when people argue over what the work is trying to say, when they begin the process of examining the issues from a number of perspectives. I love watching a person move from an initial sense of revulsion against the strangeness of my creations towards a sense of understanding or sympathy. I love it when people realise that all this stuff is actually about our lives today.

LF: The exhibition at ARTIUM is entitled (tender) creatures, a direct allusion to the vast number of hybrid animals that you have created, such as SO2, the Young family and the more recent Offspring and Progenitor, and even pieces such as Truck Babies, Nest and Cyclepups. All of them convey a kind of softness and tenderness that quickly arouses a feeling of empathy in the spectator. Do you do this for any particular purpose? Do you think that this quality can make it easier for others to read the message you hope to communicate? Or is it instead a distraction from the problems you allude to in your work?

PP: Empathy is at the heart of my practice. I don't think that you really can - or indeed should - try to understand the ethics of something without emotions. It can easily be argued that such a focus on empathy might distract from a true rational understanding of the issues, but in fact that is exactly what I am aiming to do. Emotions are messy and they do get in the way of rational discourse - as they should. The empathetic nature of my work deliberately complicates the ideas. It is one thing to argue for/against cloning when it is just an intellectual issue. However, things change if you have a mother or son who might need it. I like to think that my work understands that the point at which 'good' becomes 'bad' does not stand still, which is why it is so difficult to find. Ethics are not set like morals, they have to be constantly negotiated. Bioethics are especially flexible, which makes them especially difficult.

You mention a number of works in your question and I think it is worth drawing attention to a trope that further links them: children. Truck Babies, Cyclepups, Undivided, The Gathering, Nest, the drawings, Still Life with Stem Cells, The Young Family, the SO2 photographs and many other of my works all contain different representations of infants. Children embody a number of the key issues in my work. Obviously they directly express the idea of genetics - both natural and artificial - but beyond that they also imply the responsibilities that a creator has to their creations. The innocence and vulnerability of children is powerfully emotive and evokes empathy - their presence softens the hardness of some of the more difficult ideas. The children in my works are young enough to accept the strangeness and difference of my world without difficulty, and they hint at the speed at which the extraordinary becomes commonplace in contemporary society. We see this idea clearly in SO2 or Still Life With Stem Cells. Finally, the act of giving birth becomes a commonality between species as well as a gesture of independence, because being able to reproduce is a vital prerequisite for self-determination. We see this in works like the Young Family or Truck Babies, where there is a strong tension between assisted and independ-

ent reproduction.

There is an emotive quality that much of my work shares, which is never presented as purely the domain of the organic. Video installations like *Swell* or *Plasticology* effect the viewer in a direct and visceral way, providing them with an experience that is no less real despite the virtual nature of the environments. The core dynamic of *Nest* is the poignant connection between the mother and her offspring. These are the mechanical fauna of an alternative world that does not recognise a distinction based on the usual organic/inorganic or natural/artificial distinctions. In my world the primary differentiation is caring/indifferent.

Following on from this, I'd like to talk about *Young Family*, one of your internationally most famous works. In it, you tackle issues related to biotechnology, such as assisted reproduction, and cultural anthropology, such as the current concept of the family. This, like other pieces of yours, is ambiguous in its appearance, which is unpleasant yet hugely familiar, and it is easy to identify with these animals. I think this is due to the fact that despite their shocking appearance, they have an attitude that exudes tremendous humanity. It seems as if you want to emphasise the human side of these animals and at the same time the animal side of humans. Are you suggesting, as Peter Singer did in the 1970s in his *Animal Liberation*, that no species of animal, including humans, is superior to the others. That is something that we humans forget all the time.

The *Young Family* is a good example of the natural flexibility of bioethics, that I was speaking about earlier. The idea behind this piece is that here is a creature which has been bred to provide replacement organs for humans, an idea that springs from the very real prospect of doing so using genetically modified pigs. We see a creature that seems to have a degree of sentience, or perhaps we just project that because of the shared animalness of her having given birth. We cannot help but empathise with her, and the 'moral' of the work seems obvious: How could we possibly breed this beautiful creature just to kill it. We are moved by her apparent sentience and fatalism. However, it has another less obvious side. How would you feel if within her or her offspring grew the heart that your baby daughter needed to live? If it came down to a choice between her life or my son's it would not be a difficult decision for me to make.

I do think the idea of our common 'animality' is central to my work. I think it is impossible to find anything biologically 'special' about humans. However, that does not really lead me to an 'animal liberationist' position. Actually, when you think about it, caring about other species is one of the least 'animal-like' characteristics that people have - it is not something you see in many other animals. One of my interests in acknowledging our animality is also about trying to understand our humanity. There has to be more to life than genetics and biology.

LF: The relationship between human beings and technology is one of the key points in your work. Trucks that look like a baby, a mother motorbike with her child motorbike, helmets with attractive, sensual designs— This seems to be an alternative universe in which machines want to shrug off their coldness and artificiality and become human, to be as 'natural' as possible. What is the meaning of these pieces and how are they connected with your other projects?

PP: Another of the key, shifting boundaries that my work follows is the increasingly permeable border between the artificial and the natural. I have never really felt comfortable in the wilderness. I wouldn't last five minutes outside the city, which is my 'natural habitat' as much as grasslands are for kangaroos. While what is artificial and what is natural seems immediately obvious, when you look more closely it becomes much more difficult to tell them apart. A car would seem obviously artificial, but I would argue that it is very much more natural to me than a horse, given how much time I spend in a car. In fact, a horse is the product of millennia of human intervention in the form of selective breeding. Surely that would make it no less 'artificial' than the car.

I like the idea that my work comes together to create an 'alternative world', one that is only just slightly different for the real world. In some ways it is an alternative world made out of the implications of the real one. You don't have to change much in order to get to my world. It is much closer than it seems. I often wonder why baby trucks seem so much more outlandish than genetically engineered babies. It gives you an idea of just how easily we have adapted to a genetically modified future.

You asked how the works connect, which is a common question but one that always surprises me - because I see all of my practice as fitting very closely together - like two sides of the one coin. Having said that, it is worth

pointing out another key idea that cuts across all of the works in this exhibition, but that might not be immediately obvious: the idea of 'customisation'.

In one way or another all of the works in *(tender) creatures* reflect the idea of 'customisation'. In the more automotive pieces - like Cyclepups or Car Nuggets - this is customisation in the literal sense of 'custom cars'. In the video works - such as Plasticology or Swell - it is more about the confusion of the artificial and the natural. Whereas in the creature works - Nature's Little Helpers or SO2 for example - it is the organic customisation that biotechnology allows.

On the whole, I see customisation as a positive force, and the creation of new forms and beings is something that I celebrate. I associate it with a certain degree of care for the outcome, which I see as vital. In car culture, customisation represents the creativity of the individual who takes the ultimately generic, mass-produced commodity of the car and turns it into something unique and personal. The genetic customisation present in many of the other works is more ambiguous. Ultimately my main interest is the relationships between the creations, their creators and the world. I believe that with creation - be it parenthood, genetic engineering or invention - comes an obligation to care for the result. If we choose to customise life then we must be prepared to embrace the outcomes.

Certain recent experiments in genetic engineering were the starting point for pieces such as *Protein Lattice*, inspired by a mouse with an ear created in a laboratory, and *Game Boys Advanced*, which calls to mind Dolly the sheep, which was put down at an early age due to premature ageing problems. *The Embrace*, one of the sculptures in the "Nature's Little Helper" series, is a self-portrait with a creature stuck to your face in such a way that it looks as if it is attacking you rather than protecting you, which is what it was created for. Somehow it makes me think about what could happen to the human species due to the dizzying advance of biotechnology and the lack of ethical limits.

For me, *The Embrace* is more equivocal than that. It shows the moment just before it is possible to judge the true nature of an encounter. It shows the point where things could go either way. It may be an attack or it could just be an exuberant embrace, like when you are knocked over by an enthusiastic pet. *The Embrace* suggests that it is sometimes impossible to really evaluate something when you are in the moment when it is happening, and also that even the most affectionate embrace can end in injury.

Strangely, I am actually a firm believer in 'progress' - which I understand to mean the idea that the world my children will inhabit will be a better than it was when I was born. My work is about both the importance and dangers of progress. I would never argue against progress, only against the assumptions about what constitutes it. (I don't think Plasma TVs constitute progress, for example.) If biotechnology can bring a cure for cancer or AIDS than that is progress and it is a good thing. If that cure only reaches a small portion of the developed world then I am not so sure. We focus too much on the 'what', rather than the 'who' and 'how'. Take GM crops: for me the GM crops that feed the world's hungry are great and the GM crops that lay them open for exploitation by agribusiness are terrible. The problem is that they are the same GM crops. So, how can we decide if GM crops are 'good' or 'bad'? I don't know but I don't think it will ever be that simple. I do know that as a society we need to continually examine the implications of evolving technologies with an open mind.

I think that it should be obvious by now that I am not 'anti-technology', nor am I against those who seek to develop new technologies. My mother died from cancer and I still wait anxiously for news of a possible cure. I have nothing but respect and admiration for the motives of those researchers who labour to bring new medicines to the world. However, I also recognise that the world - and the human body - is far more complex than we would like to think. The real world outcomes of a scientific breakthrough can be very different from the reasons that drove the search for it. That doesn't mean that we should stop looking for a cure for cancer or technological solutions to environmental problems: It means that we should understand better the contexts into which these cures and technologies will be placed. We cannot blame scientists for what the companies that own their intellectual property choose to do with it - but we can blame the companies.

LF: In your writings, you have made a number of declarations such as "Some things once done, are not easily undone", "doing the wrong things for the right reasons", "The danger here is to confuse creation with control. Just because we can create and manipulate does not necessarily mean that we can control our creations". Are you im-

plying that it is essentially human arrogance that is the cause of the problems you discuss in your works?

PP: I guess I do often target human arrogance in my work, but I think it is also important to understand my ambiguous feelings about 'wrong' outcomes. You see, I'm not entirely against things that might be considered 'failures'. Each of the quotes you refer to here has a kind of double meaning for me.

For example, when I refer to "doing the wrong things for the right reasons" in relation to Nature's Little Helpers, I am quite sincerely celebrating the desire to correct the mistakes of the past while at the same time lamenting our extremely poor success rate. I am not arguing against the attempts, I am wondering how we can do better. When we look at the ecological mistakes that were made in the past, it is easy to wonder: 'What were they thinking? How could they be so stupid?' However, we have to remember that they were just as sure of themselves, their methods and the desirability of the outcome as we are now. My question is about how we look beyond that certainty, and how we come to terms with outcomes that we did not expect.

You can see this if you look at the Nature's Little Helpers photographs. They depict a species that I conceived as a bodyguard for an endangered bird. In the photographs we see that this creature is so well adapted that it has spread out from the forests to the fringes of the ever expanding city, coming into conflict with humans. 'Roadkill' is one of my favourite images from this series. It shows one of these creatures dying on the side of the road where it has been struck by a car. There is a real pathos in the scene but it is tempered by the realisation that these creatures, because of their success, may have become a danger to the ecosystem they are supposed to protect.

Similarly, in pointing out the confusion of "creation with control", what I am referring to here is the fact that it is impossible to really calculate all of the ramifications of our actions when it comes to things as complicated as organisms or ecosystems. However, my feelings about this impossibility is not necessarily negative. I am aware that bad things happen as a result of human intervention but I am also fascinated by that which we cannot control. I love the uncontrolled. Perhaps we don't know enough to know what a success really is. Perhaps it is our failures that the world needs, even if they aren't good for us. I like the idea that we might inadvertently create something new that we cannot control that might go off and do something wonderful that we never expected. My sympathies are definitely more with the uncontrolled 'failures' than the successes - I think they are more intriguing and challenging, and I celebrate their independence. This is both the triumph and tragedy of most of my creatures, and I love them for it.

LF: Your university training is pictorial. For a number of years, you also did numerous anatomical drawings. Drawing is a fundamental part of your working process: your early ideas are captured in sketches and then materialised in other media with the help of various collaborators. In your latest series, the drawings are no longer part of the preparatory phase but have become the work in their own right. Why this change? Do you see them as having a better ability to communicate?

PP: I have always started with ideas and pictures, and then gone out in search of the medium that I felt best suited them. Obviously, I use drawings both to develop the ideas and to communicate them to the people who fabricate the works. I do not regard these drawings as art. I have always loved working with drawing, and recently returned to making drawing works for a couple of reasons. On a very practical level, it was something that I could work on independently and at odd hours in between breast-feeding my first child. However, my real reason starts with the desire to make a series of works that focuses on the relationships between some of my creatures and small children. Drawing has a real intimacy and delicacy that reflects the softness of these encounters. These drawings are less glossy and spectacular than other ways of presenting these figures, and their warmth and domesticity suits the fragility of the beings and their relationships.

LF: You have used hyperrealism in making many of your works. There are certain hyperrealist sculptors today whose work has generated tremendous enthusiasm and expectation. Queues of people patiently waiting to see their impressive works have been known to form. Are you not worried that your work might be regarded as a spectacle full of special effects, somewhat like a theme park, and that the message may be distorted?

Of course that possibility worries me - I think it probably worries many of the other sculptors that you refer to. Ultimately, I use a variety of media depending on how I feel a certain idea or image might be best expressed. I

work with extraordinarily skillful collaborators across a number of fields - sculpture, photography, drawing, video - but somehow the figurative silicone sculptures seem to be the ones where the technical production values are most distracting. I am the first to acknowledge the importance of their exceptional detail and quality in making the pieces succeed but that is not my main interest. Ultimately however, I think that most people do look beyond the production process to the ideas, and if they don't then I think they are really missing out on the heart of the work.

LF: Lastly, I would like to comment on a scientific text I read recently that said that uncontrolled gene manipulation could become more dangerous than radioactivity. The speed of these advances make us feel defenceless. How do you see the future? What kind of world would you like your grandchildren to have?

That is a huge question! I would hate people to think that I make work that predicts the future. In fact, I think my work is about the present. I use what is happening around me as a context for stories about ourselves and our relationship with other beings and the world. I do not make any pronouncements on what the world will or should be like.

Going back to the beginning of your question, I think that you could argue that 'uncontrolled gene manipulation' is the basic requirement for evolution. We have always lived in a world of uncontrolled genetic change - that's how we got here. The real change in recent years is the rise of what we like to think of as 'controlled' gene manipulation. I find it hard to believe that, left to itself, 'the market' will make the world better for all people and animals. I hope that our children and will be smarter and kinder than we were, and that they can find a way to live in the world that will be mutually positive. The only thing that I am really certain of is that the world will change, and in ways that we will not be able to fully predict or control.



Swarm (Scarab), 2014

Britannia metal, felt