

The Art of Patricia Piccinini

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Abstract: The subject of research for this paper is Australian artist Patricia Piccinini, a speculative designer. Patricia Piccinini's work reveals the complexity of contemporary genetic technology involved in the creation of life, expressing the interrelationship between technology and humanity. (Piccinini, 2019) Her work interprets and redefines the relationship between humanity and the creation. She focuses on the possibility of future bioethics that is, the increasingly complex development of and integration between humans, nature and other living creatures.

Keywords: Patricia Piccinini, speculative designer, genetic technology, bioethics, technology, humanity

1. Introduction

Patricia Piccinini is a female Australian artist who was born in Sierra Leone in 1965. She migrated to Australia when she was seven years old. Piccinini studied painting at art school in the early 1980s, and her career began with a focus on biology and technology (Michael, L. 2003) (Turley, L. 2015). Figure 1.



Figure 1 Patricia Piccinini's early work in biology and technology

She uses mixed media and sculpture to explore the possibilities of genetic engineering and experimental biotechnology. She creates surrealist sculpture on a human scale. Patricia Piccinini's work involves sculpture, painting, photography, and other techniques. Her concern is with with bioethics, social attitudes and responsibilities towards a changing life, such as those between man-made structures and nature, the relationship between people and the environment, and the relationship between the audience and the artwork. Therefore, her work focuses on 'artificial' and 'natural' and discusses changes in lifeforms brought about by modern science and genetic engineering. A central tenet of her art is a profound personal response to the medical intervention in the issues involved in human life. (Goriss-Hunter, 2004). (Michael, L. 2003) In Piccinini's world, nature and culture are closely linked to the body, ecology, technology and the current times. Patricia Piccinini's work attempts to inspire an emotional response from the audience, giving them a friendly attitude towards all potential life-forms.

This article considers Piccinini's sculpture as an example. The main focus is on exploring the conceptualisation of hybrid organisms in this work, the products of this genetic engineering. This investigates the outcome when such a hybrid creature emerges, the social changes and the changes of thought that are involved, and how the creator treats these creations. This is followed by the shift in boundaries caused by contemporary biotechnology. The interpretation of Donna Haraway shows the constant transition of boundaries between people and animals and an optimistic interpretation of the breaking of these boundaries. Piccinini's creation also expresses a re-recognition of the real world.

(Piccinini, 2019) She uses artistic creation to reproduce and interpret the changes that science and technology have brought about for humanity and other species. She creates a post-human homeland, and shows her audience people and nature, with scenes produced by this fusion.

2. The wonder of the grotesque

Patricia Piccinini's choice of subject is often an imaginary creature, the possible result of a combination of human and animal DNA. (Michael, L. 2003). Piccinini's hybrid human-animal creature blurs the line between reality and fiction, with impossibility, grotesqueness and cuteness. Advances in biotechnology have provided Piccinini with the ideas and direction for creating her work. Her work, regardless of how unrealistic the elements, create scenes that invent reality but evoke a particular experience for the audience. In her post-human world, through genetic modification and bioengineering, humans produce a variety of heterodyne, exotic hybrids, artificial species, genetically modified organisms, human bodies and other animals such as pigs, beetles, apes, birds. She even constructs an imaginary world where human and animal boundaries have completely collapsed and blended into each other. Patricia Piccinini is skilled at using a variety of materials, such as silicone, fibreglass, human hair, and so on, to create realistic and highly detailed sculptures complete with pores, fine lines and spots. Figure 2. She presents a new and realistic-seeming lifeform which provides a visual impact that is shocking and causes the audience to reflect. She expresses her thoughts about the relationship between new technology and humanity. (Marosok, S 2014, P10) Her aim is to reshape people's thoughts and attitudes towards the post-human world. (Turley, L. 2015)



Figure 2 Patricia Piccinini created realistic and highly detailed sculptures complete with pores, fine lines and spots.

One example of contemporary art that makes this point and draws attention to the world of post-humanity was displayed in the Venice Show (2003), where Patricia Piccinini exhibited a work entitled "The young family" from her series of sculptures "We are family". In this theme, this work is an allegorical work that focuses on the relationship between new technologies and human relationships. It expresses the ethical issues brought about by biotechnology and shows what this means to the post-human world. In "The young family", a genetically modified organism is presented. (Figure 3) "We are family" makes use of sculpture as a means of creation, and the artist directly expresses ethical issues through biological art. (Marosok, S 2014, P10) This is a form of biological art, and these works do not use biological materials or cause harm to any creatures but are also very shocking.



Figure 3 Patricia Piccinini's artwork entitled "The young family" from her series of sculptures "We are family", Photograph by Graham Baring.

In this sculpture, the strange female creature is a mixture of human and animal that using materials such as human hair, silicone, fibreglass. A female body sculpture that is nurtured by her four children, who have human limbs but pig-like faces (or sheep or dog). The mother's long ears are naturally hanging from the sides of the cheeks. The hair of the mother looks very similar to human hair. She is nude, has a human skin colour but wrinkles on the neck and torso, which are similar to the texture of the animal's epidermis. In the real world, her counterpart may be a 62-year-old woman who had become pregnant by in vitro fertilisation (IVF) by the Italian fertility doctor Severino Antinori (Michael, L. 2003). She is depicted lying on the ground, feeding her four children, with a loving, caring expression on her face. Her three children are suckling from the breasts on the front of her abdomen. The other child is playing near her and watching. This sculpture demonstrates the similarities between human and animal emotions and life. For example, the joy of the birth of a new life, and the relationship between mother and child. Although the mother is a mixed creature, she still has a natural maternal instinct, similar to humans or other mammals (Goriss-Hunter, 2004). Her slightly swollen abdomen and limbs are similar to those of a human after giving birth. She is feeding her cubs, and her life-like skin, slender body hair, blood vessels and markings under the skin are so realistic that the audience expects the group of creatures to breathe. Piccinini's concepts are derived from science and ethics, especially biotechnology. 'The young Family' was inspired by the expectation for the growth of human organs in other species. There is great controversy about the creation of such hybrids, since people are very anxious about the uncontrollability of technology. Piccinini responds carefully to the relationships and responsibilities of humans towards other species. Her work focuses on inventiveness, particularly the inventor's obligations and responsibilities in terms of creation. Piccinini tries to solve the problems in the first world of these creatures in a very compassionate way, and she shows a very gentle, peaceful motherhood image.

Patricia Piccinini uses sculptures to explore the relationship between biological genetics research and humans. She does not dictate the meaning of biotechnology and humanity but focuses on the many possibilities of future biotechnology and the potential consequences in accordance with her imagination. Piccinini's mammals create an active diversion from the controversy of novel bio-objects such as transgenic creatures, DNA traces and bioethics. This generates a world for the audience created by the integration between humans and nature, where only love is needed to adapt to the strange variation of (post)humanity. (Marosok, S 2014, P10). In terms of the theme of her work, 'we are family', this is an inevitable premise.

3. Research and analysis

Piccinini's works emphasises the close relationship between humans, animals and mixed creatures, and a future where all must respect one another. She depicted a new future world without species and borders, where all species are 'one family'. As is suggested from the name of the sculpture, the image is of a scene of a new family's life. Piccinini's creatures do not antagonise the audiences because they seem to be a happy family. They do not represent "motherless, ostracism and melancholy" which make people want to "adopt". (Michael, L 2003) Piccinini's essay 'In Another Life' poses the question of care

in words: 'I am particularly fascinated by the unexpected consequences, the stuff we don't want but must somehow accommodate. There is no question as to whether there will be undesired outcomes; my interest is in whether we will be able to love them'. (Haraway, D. 2011. P1-18) Therefore, the creatures created by Piccinini are not superficial and horrifying, rather, they are mostly calm and pleasant. They are an affirmation of biotechnology in that the creatures are harmless but just look different from humans, which is merely an aesthetic surface problem. Piccinini almost urges viewers to do the same. That is, pause your judgments, don't think, don't talk, just ask yourself if you can put yourself in the position of these young children and adapt to them.

Patricia Piccinini always places these hybrid species in everyday human scenes and creates a vision of harmony with humans, especially through the use of children. (Figure 4) Piccinini directly presents the results of biotechnology research and development. The mother in the work really cares about her children and looks at them gently. Piccinini raises the issue of distinction between human and animal characteristics, and in spite of the physical appearance of the hybrid, the humanity and emotions are no different. Children often feature in Piccinini's works as she believes the world of children to be pure, since they do not measure the world by the beauty and ugliness of adult standards. "The world is brand new to them, there is no prejudice, and the children are inclusive". Piccinini's aim is replete with narrative and speculative design. (Michael, L. 2003) Her vision and sculpture focus around the body, in the context of a world of "body and technology," delivering the message that the world needs care and attention. Her works are full of unfamiliar but extremely familiar creatures.



Figure 4 Patricia Piccinini's artwork entitled "One family" from her series of sculptures "We are family"

Exploring the world of Piccinini requires curiosity and emotional participation. (McTavish, 2003) Her works do not succumb to clear boundaries or bottom lines, and cannot be categorised as life or non-life, primitive or technology. In the book "Speculative Everything", the author states that "Speculative design works do not represent real things, and are not suitable for pre-defined behaviour patterns; they are physical fiction, and the starting point of complex imagination has never been regarded as "real" or reflecting reality." Speculative design is not about imitating reality, nor is it intended to enable us to take action, but it promotes the acquisition of new ideas, ideologies and possibilities from another world. (Dunne & Raby, 2013. P90-91) Patricia Piccinini engages the audience through a very warm and happy scene, that making it easier for them to accept the concept of such a hybrid species. These hybrid species are produced by advances in biotechnology, and are accompanied by huge controversies involving bioethics, genetic modification, and animal rights. (Michael, L. 2003) What is more important to Piccinini is people's attitude towards them, and she argues that since humanity has created them, people must accept and love them. (Piccinini, 2019) In her article 'In Another Life' Piccinini said "I am particularly fascinated by the unexpected consequences, the stuff we don't want but must somehow accommodate. There is no question as to whether there will be undesired outcomes; my interest is in whether we will be able to love them". Donna Haraway reviews Piccinini's work, "Looking after imperfect, messy, really existing, mortal beings is much more demanding-not to mention playful, intellectually interesting, and emotionally satisfying-than living the futuristic nightmare of technoimmortality. (Marosok, S 2014, P10) (Haraway,D, 2011. P1-19)

4. Conclusion

Author is of the opinion that Piccinini's early works made audiences feel uncomfortable. The social impact of new technologies can be radical, but Piccinini's work encourages us to think about how to understand human nature, how this exists in a life that is closely integrated with technology life and how relationships between the natural and the artificial can be built. She prompts us to think about how our human attitudes toward future technology can create new species, with the associated possibilities of associations and communities. Piccinini's speculative design has spurred people's responsibility and thinking about life. It does not attempt to disband the boundaries that define our nation states and cultural groups, but it does attempt to weave connections between them to show the benefit of interacting. Her world provides imagination and hope for an intimate relationship between future species. Piccinini invites humanity to reimagine the world. She delivers a lot of ethical information, and she is full of sympathy and concern for all animals and plants that share the earth with us, as well as the unknown creatures that may live among us in the future. This is the system, ecology and species that together promote prosperity. There is a focus on survival. Recognising this is for the benefit of all in terms of negotiating a common interest between humans, animals, non-humans, and the environment. (Haraway, D., 2011. P1-18) By analysing Patricia Piccinini's sculpture, it can be seen that her work engages people because she does not take sides. Although her work is considered to be "a powerful discussion of the value of genetic engineering and the possible consequences", she also promotes the saving power of social values and interpersonal relationships.

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