

Sculptures blur lines of humanity

Piccinini's odd creatures discomfort at Hosfelt Gallery

By Charles Desmarais

We know at heart that we are animals, but we conceal our beastliness from others, and even from ourselves. We mask our impulses, ritualize our bodily functions, tame our hairiness.

The most disturbing aspect of Patricia Piccinini's horrid sculptures of animalized humans — and they are decidedly that, and not the other way around — is not that they are cross-bred. We can imagine, for whatever warped or wicked reason, designing a creature to our culture's specifications. What we could not abide would be the loss of our own prim shells of seemliness.

"Inter-natural," the Australian artist's exhibition at Hosfelt Gallery through Jan. 26,

"Patricia Piccinini: Inter-natural": 10 a.m.-5:30 p.m., Tuesdays-Saturdays; Thursdays until 7 p.m. Through Jan. 26. Hosfelt Gallery, 260 Utah St., S.F. 415-495-5454. <http://hosfeltgallery.com>

concentrates on the most animalistic of her work. The machine hybrids we saw in her last show at the gallery were easier to pull off, for the simple reason that industrial designers have been taking cues from nature at least since they started adding tail fins to automobiles.

In the current outing, the artist whiffs as often as she connects. The piece that greets viewers as they enter the gallery, "The Builder" (2018), imagines a small child's body

with beaver-like teeth and tail. One can picture the work as an animation model for the next Pixar production: just so cheeky as to attract attention, mawkish enough to sell lots of tickets.

Not that eliding the supposed boundaries between fine art, film and the amusement park is necessarily a zero-sum competition. One can find many cases where one field has fed the growth of others. It works best, though, when nourishment is the point.

"The Field" fills the gallery's main room with 2,000 white, crab-like forms on white stems. It's Instagrammably impressive, at first. A second look, however, reveals the flower heads to be more plas-

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Peter Hennessey

Patricia Piccinini's "The Loafers" (2018)



Hosfelt Gallery photos

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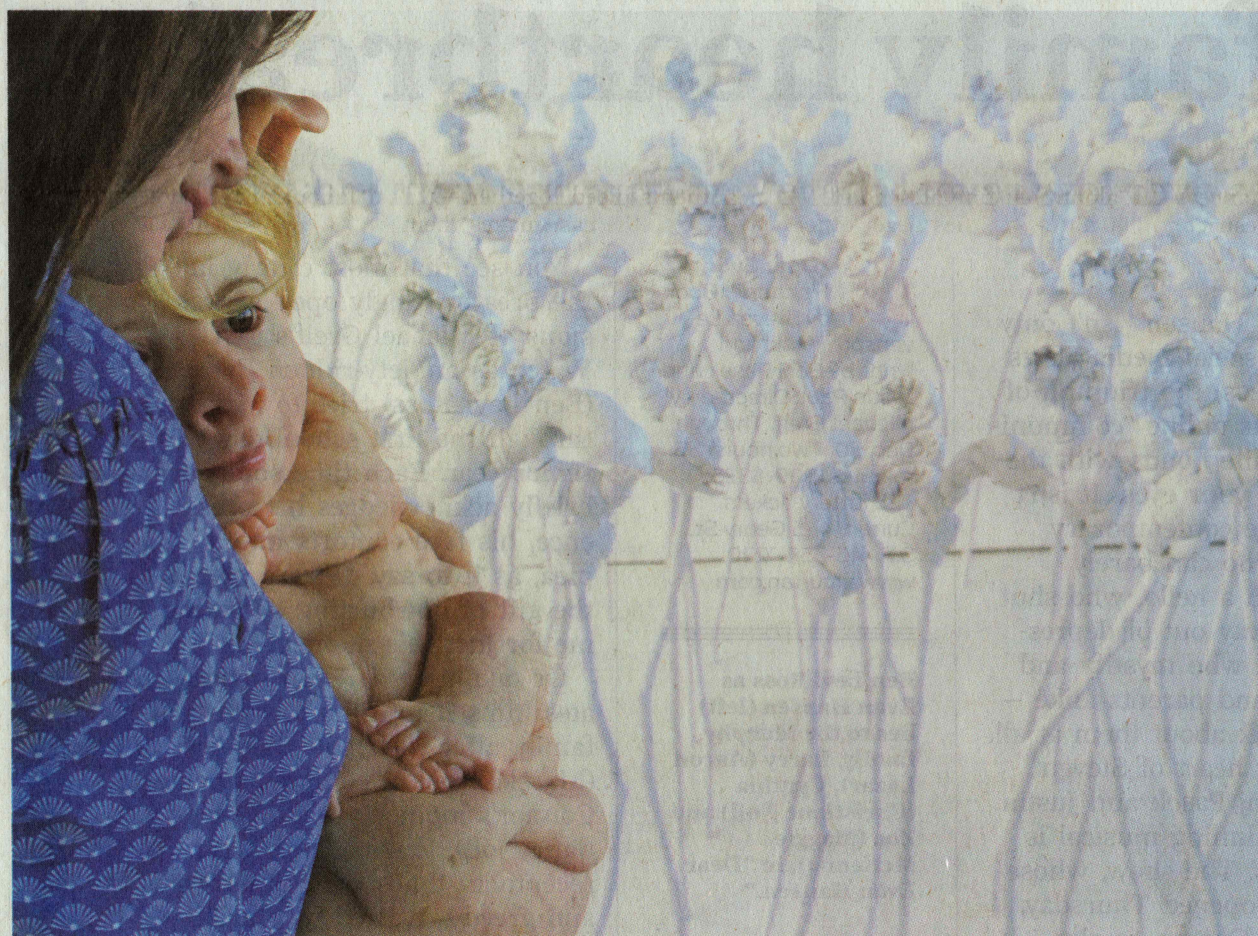
tic than preternatural, with articulated joints that snap in the way a doll's arms do, for variety.

A pathway cut through "The Field" prevents our wandering and leads us to a figure. Back turned to the viewer, it could be mistaken at first for a live woman, but as we come around to face her, she is still. In her arms a fleshy, flabby juvenile of indeterminate species nuzzles her breast.

It is called "The Bond" (2016), and it is nothing more than silicone and fiberglass, with store-bought clothing and implanted hair. We want to treat it as something else. The baby's eyes are limpid, its nostrils damp. The pointed ears at the top of its head poke through soft blond locks, as the woman touches her cheek to its crown.

Who could be insensitive to the pathos of so grossly mismatched a pair? How could we not extend our sympathy? Whether the bond between them was forged in a moment of passion or violence, or it is a compassionate link between rescuer and foundling, the apparent biological transgression could not be their fault.

A pair of ursine creatures huddle in a tent like lovers on the run, survivors of some cataclysm. They embrace but are lost in their own reveries. Their fear fills the space, the canvas enclosure a fragile



Above, a pair of ursine creatures huddle in a tent like lovers on the run in Patricia Piccinini's "The Couple." Left, a young woman comforts a not-quite-human baby in Piccinini's "The Bond" (2018).

protection from the barren environment that is the gallery outside and, by implication, the world.

Their nakedness is not incidental. Most of Piccinini's characters are similarly sexualized, in the age-old tradition of horror tales.

At the same time, for all their obese impurity, these are

creatures fresh from the lab, never aging, unscarred by the trials of their existence. Piccinini, of course, is the designer of their appearance, and also of their fate — the single person responsible for their being.

In a video produced by the Queensland Art Gallery and Gallery of Modern Art, she

plays a dewy innocent. Staring into the camera, she intones, "I imagine that perhaps these are the only two creatures of their kind," as if she were not the one who loosed them upon us.

The sculptures she makes are not creatures she has come across somewhere, but her own propositions. Sure, a

novelist might do the same, but what would we say of an author who could not control the monsters she creates?

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