Educator’s Guide with Self-Guided Materials
For School Groups

Hug: Recent Work by Patricia Piccinini

FRYE ART MUSEUM
www.fryemuseum.org


Hug: Recent Work by Patricia Piccinini is cocurated by Robin Held, chief curator and director of exhibitions and collections, Frye Art Museum, and Patricia Hickson, curator, Des Moines Art Center. This self-guide was created by Janelle Graves, educational consultant, and Deborah Sepulveda, manager of student and teacher programs, Frye Art Museum.
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Getting Started

This educator’s guide includes a variety of materials designed to help you prepare your class for a visit to the exhibition *Hug: Recent Work by Patricia Piccinini*. The first section titled “For Educators” should be read before visiting the museum. The second section, “For Students,” can be printed out to use in the museum. The goal of this guide is to challenge learners to think critically about what they see and engage them in the process of discussing art. It is intended to facilitate students’ personal discoveries about art and is aimed at strengthening the skills that allow them to view art independently. The gallery activities should be explored in groups, and are meant to encourage dialogue.

While this guide focuses on a few works of art, students are encouraged to spend time examining the entire exhibition and works in the permanent collection. We also encourage teachers and students to review Patricia Piccinini’s artwork by visiting her website at: [http://www.patriciapiccinini.net/](http://www.patriciapiccinini.net/).

About the Exhibition

*Obviously the things I create don’t actually exist but perhaps they could. In fact, perhaps I create them because they should. The ideas, the context, the technologies required for their existence is certainly already part of our world; genetic engineering, biotechnology, stem cell research, cloning, bioelectronics are all part of everyday life for us. The possibilities for my creations are already amongst us, and before too long the things themselves could turn up unannounced, without our ever having had the opportunity to wonder how much we want them.*

Patricia Piccinini

Fantastic and hyper-real life forms are featured in *Hug*, the first U.S. survey of artwork by Australian artist Patricia Piccinini. Informed by recent advances in and complex questions raised by our interaction with technology, Piccinini’s sculptures, photographs, drawings and video installations explore potential new relations among humans, animals, and human-animal hybrids. Her art engages our contemporary world in all its social and political complexity and contradiction—the destruction and preservation of the natural world, the promises and failures of cutting edge technology, its related topic of ethical responsibility, the allure of consumer culture, and the influence of popular culture. Her art prompts us to consider the stakes and potential consequences of our production of new life forms as a result of biotechnology. She asks how far will we go to undo the damage we have done to the environment? Is it a good idea to create new life to help an endangered animal? Who is responsible for the creature once it is created? Also, what if we used this new ability in a less self-serving way, creating new species to help living creatures other than humans? Her artwork provides us with no easy answers to the complex ethical debates of today’s world, but rather implicates us in both the problems and their possible solutions. Non judgmental but wary, Piccinini provides a fresh perspective in imagining a very different contemporary world in the near future. At once grim and hopeful, Piccinini’s world demands our immediate attention and thoughtful consideration, then challenges us to empathize regardless.

Did You Know?

Contemporary art is the art of today. It is both a mirror of contemporary society and a window through which we view and deepen our understanding of the world and ourselves. It is much like a visual history book in that it illustrates what is happening in the world around us.

Curiosity, accepting that you can apply your own ideas, and open discussion are the most important tools you will need to appreciate contemporary art. Oftentimes art viewers assume that they should be able to immediately understand or “get” what they see before them. And if not, they may walk away feeling confused or frustrated.

With contemporary art, great importance is attached to the role of the viewer. The viewer becomes an active participant in the process of creating meaning. The viewer needs to give himself or herself “permission” to really look at the artwork and derive his/her own meaning from it. Because art is influenced by the world around us, more often than not, the viewer will assume some of the same ideas about the art and its meaning as the artist.
About the Artist

Patricia Piccinini was born in 1965 in Freetown, Sierra Leone, and immigrated to Australia in 1972. Trained as a painter in the early 1980s, Melbourne-based Piccinini began her career with drawings and paintings based on anatomical studies. Her artworks often reflect her interests in world issues such as bioethics, families, what it means to be human, and the environment. Working in a wide range of media, including painting, sculpture, video, sound, installation and digital prints, Piccinini explores the often blurred lines between the artificial and the natural. Her imaginary, hyper-realistic sculptures of customized life forms — humans, animals, machines, and often something in between — emotionally involve the viewer in the complex ethical debates brought about by cutting-edge technology, science, and medicine.

Over the years, Piccinini has established a strong reputation as an artist who examines complex social issues, issues that are never black or white, right or wrong, true or false. The mapping of the human genome, cloning, stem cell research, and other technologies have inspired her to make art that communicates the unstable relationships between humans, nature, science, and technology. Complicated issues like protecting endangered species and the environment play a major role in her work.

Employing a wide range of materials and techniques, Piccinini’s artworks are made collaboratively with a support team of specialists.

I conceive the work and then bring together the pieces. If I didn’t have great people working on the projects, it wouldn’t work. I don’t want the ideas to be limited by what I can physically do. The ideas come first.

Patricia Piccinini

The artist develops a conceptual goal and she and her collaborators work together to achieve it. Her role is much like that of a director; she employs a diverse team of people from digital animators to auto painters to help realize her artworks.
**About the Artwork**

The following is background information about the artworks featured in the Gallery Activities.

**STOP #1**

*Progenitor (for the Leadbeater’s Possum)*, 2005.
Silicone, fiberglass, leather, plywood and hair, 2 parts.
©Patricia Piccinini. Courtesy of the artist and Yvon Lambert New York.

*Offspring (for the Leadbeater’s Possum)*, 2005.
Silicone, fiberglass, leather, plywood and hair, 2 parts.
©Patricia Piccinini. Courtesy of the artist and Yvon Lambert New York.

*Some things, once done, are not easily undone. We might recognize later that we should not have done them in the first place, however undoing them is not so easy. Like an egg, which once broken cannot be unbroken, when something is created, it is difficult to contain. This stands as much for a work of art as it does for a genetically modified creature.*

Patricia Piccinini

From her series *Nature’s Little Helpers*, these sculptural creatures were created to protect an existing endangered animal, the Leadbeater’s Possum. Once thought extinct, the small Leadbeater’s Possum’s survival now depends on its ability to find suitable hollow-bearing trees in which to nest. However, the ash forests it relies upon are in short supply due in large part to excessive timber harvesting. Piccinini’s imagined species directly addresses this challenge. Designed with oversized incisors, it is physically equipped to shred bark and hollow out the trunks of trees to provide the living space for its near extinct relative.

At its core, Piccinini’s artwork is about good intentions or, more specifically, doing the wrong thing for the right reason. Can we use technology to solve environmental problems? Should we try to preserve, create or even clone species rather than change human behavior? Who is responsible once an action is taken? Though well-meaning, past experiences have shown us that scientific intervention into the environment often results in long-lasting, even irreversible outcomes.

**Did You Know?**

Piccinini’s art explores the unintended results of human intervention into the natural world. She relates her concept of “doing the wrong things for the right reasons” to a cautionary tale from early-twentieth century Australia when scientists introduced, with unexpected results, the cane toad into the wild to eliminate cane beetles that were destroying valuable sugarcane crops. The toad killed not only the beetles, but many other native species, and due to its increasing numbers, it continues to threaten Australian indigenous animal populations.

In recent months a similar man-made environmental disaster was reported here in America. In 1972 as many as two million tires were placed off the coast of Fort Lauderdale, Florida with the intention to create an artificial reef that would attract a rich variety of marine life. Now, twenty-five years later, little sea life has formed, the ocean floor is littered with a path of tires, the length of thirty-one football fields, which are blocking coral growth and devastating marine life. This well-intentioned attempt to create the world’s largest artificial tire reef is now considered an ecological disaster.
Bodyguard, from the Nature’s Little Helpers series, is imagined as a protector of the Golden Helmeted Honeyeater or “HeHo,” a small, beautifully colored endangered bird, native to Australia (pictured on the video monitor across from the sculpture). In 2004 there were only fifteen pairs of the bird left in the wild. At present, captive breeding programs are in place to keep the bird from extinction.

Piccinini designed the Bodyguard to help protect the HeHo from human encroachment. Its long arms allow the monkey-like Bodyguard to swing quickly from tree to tree scaring away the HeHos’ predators. She also took into account the HeHos’ eating habits: the Bodyguard’s sharp incisors can easily release the tree sap that HeHos feed upon.

The Nature’s Little Helpers series asks the viewer to consider the following questions:

- How far will we go to undo the damage we have done to the environment?
- Is it a good idea to create new life to help an endangered animal?
- What is the relationship between the creature and its creator?
- Who is responsible for the creature once it is created?
Piccinini further explores the impact of the Bodyguard species in her narrative photographs, envisioning possible relationships that might result if her creatures were introduced into our world.

No visible sense of fear exists in Piccinini’s imagined contemporary community that lives side-by-side with her Bodyguard species. The narrative photographs depict the Bodyguards in a variety of environments from Arcadia, where they frolic in the wilds, to Domain, where a group of young Bodyguards are seen playing on a pile of construction debris while the alpha male keeps watch. In Encroachment, a creature approaches a human worker at a home construction site, while in Thunderdome, the Bodyguards participate as spectators at a drag-racing event. The Bodyguard was created to help the Golden Helmeted Honeyeater, or the HeHo. Is there any evidence of the creature helping the HeHo in these photographs or have they simply become a part of the community?

Accompanied by descriptive captions, the group of photographs take the form of a “mockumentary” that tells the story of the Bodyguards’ population explosion and movement from their “natural” habitat in lush forests to the suburban neighborhoods of Melbourne, where they are said to be merely “tolerated” by humans and canines alike. The scenes bring to mind the cane toad infestation discussed previously. If introduced, there must be a place in the world to welcome the creations. Again, accountability and responsibility for the results of scientific creations and interventions remain a constant theme. Who is responsible? What happens to these creatures once the environmental problem is addressed?
There are a lot of babies in these drawings. I'm interested in children for a number of reasons. For one, a young child represents possibility, both positive and negative. Also, babies don't make judgments. The world is totally new to them — they just take it in. They have no expectation and are always surprised. Children aren't threatening. On the contrary, they bring out the best in us; we want to care for them, protect them.

In this case, I use children to evoke the idea of vulnerability. In my work, it is often the creatures that seem vulnerable. They are mostly reliant on us and at our mercy. In these works it is us — the humans, the children — that are vulnerable. The situations that these children are in feel uncomfortable. They are just too close to the creatures and it's creepy. It is ambiguous whether there is any animosity or just the rough and tumble of play. It's like that moment, as a child reaches out to pat even the most familiar pet, when we worry that they will be bitten.²

Patricia Piccinini

Piccinini's artistic process often starts with drawing. These drawings explore one of the central themes of Piccinini's art: our relationship with the things that we create. The drawings build intimate stories about her creatures and children. The children pictured alongside the artist's creatures mainly seem at ease and able to go about their everyday lives; they play with cell phones, nap together, wrestle each other, and perform music.
Leather Landscape, 2003
Silicone, acrylic, human hair, leather, clothing, and wood
©Patricia Piccinini. Private collection.

My interest here again is in our relationship to the animals and creatures we may create. In this work, you can see a series of humanoid, transgenic creatures, based on the African Meerkat. They have a very beautiful environment to live in. I gave them white leather because both it and they are fragile. There is also an explicit interaction between the creatures and humans in the form of a little toddler, who is looking at the creature the same way the creature is looking at her, with real curiosity. A toddler does not know that they are made-up creatures. Everything is strange to her, but everything is accepted. I guess in a way this work is about the idea of evolution, and how we can now change the way evolution is going. The question is whether 'human assisted' evolution is any different to 'natural' evolution.6
Patricia Piccinini

Leather Landscape stages a meeting between a family of human-animal hybrids and a human toddler in which the girl and one of the creatures approach each other with an open curiosity. The hybrids, like the real-life meerkats they resemble, display a strong sense of communality: at the top of the structure, a male stands upright with wide, alert eyes, demonstrating his role as the group’s watchman; below him, a female cares for several babies; and opposite, a creature embraces his companion. The relationships depicted in Leather Landscape emphasize the emotional bonds and familial tendencies shared by both humans and animals. These imagined creatures are presented as ordinary beings capable of loving and playing.

Did You Know?

Unfortunately for meerkats, they are a tasty treat for larger carnivores, especially jackals, eagles, and falcons. However, meerkats have developed a way to forage in relative safety. Adults will take turns acting as guard so that the others can safely look for food. The guard climbs to the highest rock, termite mound, or bush he or she can find, stands upright on two legs, and then announces the beginning of guard duty with a specialized call.

Meerkats also share the duty of raising the babies, called pups. The mother will need to spend time foraging food in order to supply her pups with milk, so other females and males will stay behind to care for and protect the young.

Cyclepups reverse the idea of the ‘genetic engineering of nature’ into a ‘genetic naturalization of engineering.’

Patricia Piccinini

In contrast to the serious subject of the real and potential effects of human intervention in the natural world, Piccinini also confronts popular trends and consumer culture in her work. Automobile culture is as widespread in the artist’s native Australia as it is America where customizing a car is an accepted form of personal expression.

Piccinini responds to this car culture by breathing life into the inanimate machines. Blurring the boundary between animal and machine, Piccinini’s biomorphic Cyclepups imagine ways in which biological processes might affect technology. These “baby motorcycles” assume embryonic or tadpole-like forms that will ultimately develop into full-grown motorcycles.

The artist brings the qualities of infancy and sweetness into their biomorphic design through the Cyclepups’ small scale, rounded shapes, and large eyes and heads, much like her helper creatures. However, the Cyclepups also possess the characteristics of custom car culture: shiny chrome details, slick surfaces, custom designed metallic and glossy paints, ornate flames and patterns, and dyed-to-match leather upholstery. Each Cyclepup assumes a unique imaginative personality that would express its individual owner’s dreams and desires.
Pre-Visit Activities

Elementary

- Discuss endangered species and the idea of extinction with your students.
- Discuss the reasons why animals are endangered or extinct.
- Ask students if they have ever seen a non-domesticated animal around their neighborhood or in the city. Discuss why they think these animals may be in the city rather than in the woods.
- Ask students if they could create an animal to help protect endangered animals, what would it look like? What would it be able to do?

Middle & High School

- Discuss contemporary art and the importance of the role of the viewer.
- Have the students read the self-guided materials. In small groups, have them discuss the materials and create a list of questions they have about the artwork.
- Ask students if they could create an animal to help protect endangered animals, what would it look like? What would it be able to do?

We also encourage teachers and students to review Patricia Piccinini’s artwork by visiting her website at: http://www.patriciapiccinini.net/
The exhibition, which provokes discussion about the complex, technologically advanced world in which we live, is appropriate for classes studying the intersection of art, technology, and society; endangered species and the environment; and the visual arts, especially sculpture and digital media. The artwork also addresses the following four themes: empathy and responsibility, our animalness (what it means to be human), families, and the idea of the natural environment (what is considered natural now).

**Elementary**

- Re-visit the idea of extinction and endangered species from the pre-visit activities. Look at the list of endangered and threatened species at the U.S Fish and Wildlife Service Web site – http://ecos.fws.gov/tess_public/SpeciesReport.do?null. Select one animal from the list and write three paragraphs about the animal or prepare a short presentation. Consider the following questions:
  - What is the animal?
  - Where can it be found?
  - Why is it threatened?
  - What is, or is not, being done to protect it?
  - Should the animal be preserved? Why or why not?
  - Are we responsible for preserving nature? Why or why not?

- What if we could create an animal to help protect these endangered animals? What would it look like? What would it have to be able to do? Have the student create an imaginary animal to protect the endangered or extinct animal. Consider having students choose from various mediums like drawing, painting, sculpture, or computer generated-creatures.

- Think about what Seattle looked like before people started developing it. What changes have been made since then? How might these changes have affected animals and their natural habitats?

**Middle & High School**

- Stage a debate on the topic: Why are we trying to preserve, breed, or even clone species rather than changing human behavior?

- Explore artists and literature that Patricia Piccinini identifies with such as Eric Swenson, Roxy Paine, Berlinde de Bruyckere and David Cronenburg. Check out the book, *Never Let Me Go*, by Kazuo Ishiguro.

- Choose an issue of personal relevance and create a work of art in any form or combination of forms that comments on the issue you selected.

- When explaining the fact that many of her artworks are actually made by other specialists, Piccinini said, “I tell people straight out that I conceive the work and then bring together the pieces. If I didn’t have great people working on the projects, it wouldn’t work. I don’t want the ideas to be limited by what I can physically do. The ideas come first.” In other words, while she develops the concept of all her artworks, in some cases her art might be made entirely by another hand.

Work in groups to explore other artists, musicians, or dancers who work collaboratively to complete their ideas.

- What are the benefits and drawbacks to working in a group? Why do these artists choose to work collaboratively? Is there a lead artist and a team of workers? What is the role of each person? In the end, who gets recognized as the artist of the artwork? Why? What are the potential complications in sorting out who is the leader/creator and worker/assistant?
Gallery Activities for Elementary School Students

STOP #1
The artworks presented in the first four exhibition stops are part of Piccinini’s *Nature’s Little Helpers* series. In this series, the artist explores the creation of imaginary animals designed to protect real-life endangered animals.

- Why do you think these creatures were created?
- What is the relationship between the women and the creature? Do you think that they are embracing in a friendly hug or an attack?
- Why would you create new life?

STOP #2
- The Bodyguard opens his mouth wide, showing off his sharp teeth, perhaps to scare away a predator of the HeHo. Look carefully. What other clues can you see that may help you understand the purpose of the Bodyguard?
- Do you think it is a good idea to create a creature to help an endangered animal? Why? Why not?

STOP #3
- What is going on in these photographs?
- Do you think the Bodyguard looks at home in these photographs?
- What type of creature would you create to save an endangered animal? What special features or traits would it have to have in order to protect your animal? Who is responsible for the creature once it is created?
- Draw a picture of what your new creature would look like.

STOP #4
- What is the relationship between the child and the creature?
STOP #5

- What relationships do you notice between these creatures?
- Describe the family:

STOP #6

- These are baby motorcycles. How do you think they will change as they grow up?
- What kind of personalities do you think they have?

Before You Leave the Museum

Choose an artwork in the galleries that is not discussed in the self-guide, and give yourself “permission” to construct your own meaning. Feel free to work alone or in groups. Ask yourself: What's going on in this artwork? Write down your ideas and when you are back at school share them with your classmates.
Gallery Activities for Middle & High School Students

STOP #1

The artworks presented in the first four exhibition stops are part of Piccinini’s Nature’s Little Helpers series. In this series, the artist explores the creation of imaginary animals designed to protect real-life endangered animals.

- These man-made creatures are intended to help the endangered possum survive. Do you think this is a good reason to create a new life form? Why? Why not?
- Why would you create a new life? What do you think the relationship between its creator and the creature would be like?
- What questions about nature, technology, and their interrelationship does this artwork raise for you?

STOP #2

- Do you think the Bodyguard is able to protect the endangered HeHo?
- Do you think the animal is controllable? Why? Why not?
- Describe the setting. Why do you think the artist chose this futuristic, man-made setting?

STOP #3

- Consider each of the photographs, and discuss what is going on in each. What questions do these images raise for you?
- Accountability and responsibility for the result of human interventions are a constant theme in Piccinini’s artwork. Who is responsible? What happens to these creatures once the environmental problem is addressed? How do you think these new animals might affect other animals or plant life?
**STOP #4**

- How does the relationship between the child and the creature make you feel?
- What questions does this image raise for you?
- How does the use of drawing influence your perception of the work?

_______________________________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________________________

**STOP #5**

- Describe the relationships between the creatures in this artwork.

_______________________________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________________________

- What does the environment of these humanoid creatures tell us about them?
- What questions about humans and their relationship to animals does this sculpture raise for you?

_______________________________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________________________

**STOP #6**

- How is technology part of your daily life?

_______________________________________________________________________

- What questions about humans and their relationship to technology and daily life does this sculpture raise for you?

_______________________________________________________________________

- What does the customizing of these Cyclepups tell us about the owner?

_______________________________________________________________________

**Before You Leave the Museum**

Choose an artwork in the galleries that is not discussed in the self-guide, and give yourself “permission” to construct your own meaning. Feel free to work alone or in groups. Ask yourself: What’s going on in this artwork? Write down your ideas and when you are back at school share your ideas with your classmates.
Patricia Piccinini Quotes:


