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Curious Affection

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By Eben Kirksey



A gigantic balloon—pink and glistening—billows up overhead. It is like a womb, or a tumor, filling the huge atrium at the entrance to Patricia Piccinini's biggest show to date: *Curious Affection* at the Gallery of Modern Art (GOMA), in Australia. I meet Patricia under this sculpture and she escorts me into a dark room where there is a field of three thousand white fleshy stalks. The floor underneath is spongy. As we walk the stalks move, in response to our footsteps. It is like a mycelial network, sensing our presence in a forest. The stalks are reminiscent of Ghost Pipe (*Monotropa uniflora*), a white plant without chlorophyll that is parasitic—deriving its energy from fungi that form mycorrhizal networks with trees. But, rather than having clear flowers with petals, fleshy bulbous organs are swaying on their stems. The organs look like they are ripe for harvesting. Perhaps they are kidneys or livers, ready for transplantation into humans. Or maybe eyeballs are enclosed inside the nodes of flesh.

A pair of human legs is marching nearby, with one foot planted firmly in the earth, and the other kicked up towards the sky. This pair of legs has no head, no body—but a hairy orifice in the mid-section, where there is a groin of sorts. A small humanoid creature, with big curious eyes, a tiny penis,

and long brown wisps of body hair—a pollinator, Patricia says, is climbing up the side of the sculpture, reaching into the orifice. These sculptures embody fecundity. Pointing to droopy swelling below the hairy hole, she says that the marching legs appear to be pregnant—perhaps with a child or an egg inside.

Piccinini's world involves a proliferation of life. Katydid and crickets call in the background. A thunderous noise booms from around the hall. In this emergent ecosystem, we are left to speculate about the roles of the different organisms. Why is the small humanoid creature interested in the hairy cavity of the marching legs? When we aren't looking, is the humanoid also running around this field of ghost plants, stealing the organs to eat before the harvest? Where is the energy coming from to drive this system? Are there subterranean deposits of organic matter, or perhaps toxic waste? Donna Haraway insists "Piccinini's objects are replete with narrative speculative fabulation...Her visual and sculptural art is about worlding—that is, 'naturaltechnical' worlds are at stake, worlds needy for care and response, worlds full of unsettling but oddly familiar critters who turn out to be simultaneously near-kin and alien colonists" (Haraway, 2014: 242).

Humans clearly played a role in fashioning the emergent world of *Curious Affection*, but there are also other unruly agents on the loose in this heterogeneous field of desires. Brian Rotman's writing comes to mind. Human nature "is melting," insists Rotman, "running off in new directions." We have become entangled in an "open-ended project of mediated self-construction with shifting boundaries and no identifiable *telos*," an assemblage of "bio-techno-cultural hybrids." We are *becoming beside ourselves* with glee and dissolution, intermittently present to ourselves, becoming multiple and parallel, in assemblages of para-selves (Rotman, 2008: 103-4). The marching legs, in this field of fleshy organs, look human—yet, don't seem to be driven by conscious purpose. The organs growing on the plants might be part of a farm, making parts to refurbish hybrid human biotech bodies. Or they might be escaped products of transbiology, exploding with their own prolific life.

Transbiology, in a technical sense, means the splicing genes or DNA sequences from one species to another. This splicing has the potential to change the phenotype, or outward appearance, of an organism. According to Sarah Franklin, transbiology "is not just about new mixtures, playful recombinations of parts or new assemblages: it is fundamentally defined by the effort to differentiate these dirty descent lines into functional, safe and marketable human biology" (Franklin, 2006: 176). Piccinini has opened up an opportunity to encounter wild and unruly products of transbiology. She also invites us to imagine safe and functional more-than-human hybrids.



Patricia Piccinini, "Kindred," 2018.

A fully formed adult, *Kindred*, is sitting among the fleshy plants—in a clearing—with two youngsters clinging to her body. She is completely naked, comfortably resting on the ground. The large head, shaggy orange hair on her arms, and prehensile thumbs on her feet make this woman clearly identifiable as an orangutan-human hybrid. Her body is maternal—with small drooping breasts, and love handles sagging on her back—but formidable. The baby crawling up the hair on her back appears to be fully human, and she also cradles an infant with a simian face to her breast. Patricia insists that these babies make the mother vulnerable. She could not run away from a predator, or a threatening human. She would need to stand her ground and fight.

Kindred illustrates the possibilities of gene editing with tools like CRISPR-Cas9 says Patricia. She asks: How do we relate to difference? Is there room for things and beings that are different from us? Can we approach them with a sense of wonder?

The calm, pensive, gaze of the orangutan-woman invites speculation about subjectivity and mental interiority. Patricia intimates that she would like to be more like an orangutan mother herself. The orangutan, for her, is a figure of an ultimate nurturer since she will keep kids close for six years. Patricia insists that this sculpture is not anthropomorphic—illustrating how animals are like us—but it instead embodies her desire to be more like another species. The human lips, and hint of an Adam's apple, suggest that Kindred might be able to talk. Would she say words of wisdom if she opened her mouth? Can the post-human speak?



Patricia Piccinini, "Teenage Metamorphosis," 2017.

Hyper-serious post-human realism bleeds into the surreal as one continues to stroll through the field of fleshy stalks. A fat porcine baby is lounging on a beach towel, with a copy of Kafka's *Metamorphosis* and a 1980s cassette radio boom box beside him. The boy's back has symmetrical tread marks, like the sole of a Nike running shoe. A slight woman with frizzy hair and a plain dress holds the shoe-boy, as a baby, up on a pedestal. The woman is wearing ornate cowboy boots.

As we walk up a ramp, past a boot with hair spilling out of it on the wall, Patricia says that she finds ornate boots on men attractive. These icons of Western masculinity, seem a little queer.

A beautiful male body, with sculpted abs, is growing like a tree or a succulent plant—perched on a platform near the ceiling of the gallery. Of all the things she has created, Patricia says that this one makes her the most uncomfortable. The body seems to be stretching—leaning off to one side.

Strange fruit, helmeted heads, are dripping off of the shoulder—perhaps ready to be harvested. An explosion of extra elbows emerges from the other side. Each of the helmets is a slightly different form—some of the visors are oblong, while others are skinny slits. The helmeted heads seem to be growing in response to slightly different environmental conditions. Maybe some are getting more sunlight than others. The elbows suggest that a riot of feminine arms are about to burst out of the side of the torso. The body is propped up on an upholstered tripod, with three feet—clad in motorcycle boots—firmly planting it in the ground.

This outburst of fecundity, which she calls Hartwood, is a big step in her practice, Patricia says. Co-mingled life explodes, nothing stays in its place. An eagle with huge wings outstretched, is perched atop the Hartwood tree. This particular eagle species, the Wedge-Tail (*Aquila audax*), is the largest bird of prey in Australia. It is an icon of adaptation, since it can be seen wheeling between skyscrapers.



Patricia Piccini, *The Eagle-Egg Man*, 2018.

Peering down from the platform, Patricia points out a wall of mushroom-bats, hanging from banisters. The bats hang along a wall which encloses a grotto where the Eagle Egg Men sit hunched around clutches of eggs. Tibetan bells sound solemnly. The figures have strong noses, sharply defined masculine brows, defined shoulder muscles, lats, and upper arms. Their flesh is enfolded around the eggs, forming living nests. White eggs of different shapes and sizes—like a jumble of potatoes—rest inside of the flesh nests. Their ginger hair is tussled. One is looking down, brooding over a large clutch. Another, with a single egg in a involuted

pucker of a nest, gazes wistfully up at the sky. The third stares pensively off into space. The bodies are masculine, but maternal. Nurturing with their very flesh. Ornate cowboy boots, outgrowths of their bodies, help stabilize them on the ground.

Are these queer trans-human figures nurturing their own kind, or are they caring for what Donna Haraway calls odd kin? If the Wedge-Tail Eagle is a figure of adaptation and survival, perhaps these fabulated female-men are caring for eggs of other species that are radically declining in an era marked by an explosion of techno-mechanical-masculine hybridity? The jumble of differently shaped eggs invokes the legacy of DDT—the pesticide that began driving many eagles towards extinction as it accumulated in the bodies of apex predators, producing fragile, thin-shelled eggs. The bodies of the Eagle Egg Men, wrapped around the eggs in fleshy and wet practices of care, illustrate a singular purpose, a clear *telos*—in sharp contrast to the wild products of synthetic biology marching around the field with dissolution and glee.



The multitude of brown and black bodies, hanging upside down above the egg men, suggest to me a lively assemblage of seed-bombs ready to fan out across a human dominated landscape. None of the bats have clearly defined faces, but have bulbous heads—like a mushroom cap. Some grip the banisters with a single, slightly human hand. Patricia said that huge fruit bats fly over her house every evening at dusk in Melbourne and inspired her to make this piece. Fruit bats are convivial members of Australian cities. They bring a cosmopolitical kiss of life to urban ecosystems (Rose, 2012). In Patricia’s back yard, sometimes the fruit bats take a bite of pear, and then drop it in the garden where it explodes and rots.

Fungi give nutrients to trees, moving minerals from rocks into ecosystems through micro-filaments, Patricia notes, taking sugar back for themselves. In the speculative world of Piccinini, these Mushroom Bats might be able to digest plastic, steel, and concrete. These emergent forms of life might have evolved new biochemical pathways that enable them to adapt—to invade an occupy worlds designed with the well-being of humans in mind. If rot and decay are generative life-giving processes, the key to reciprocity in the food web (Radin, 2017), urban architectures have conventionally been built to arrest life—preventing growth, change, collapse, and rejuvenation (cf. DeSilvey, 2017: 9). On a planetary scale, industrial capitalism is producing what Deborah Bird Rose calls “double death,” an uncoupling of life and death which diminishes death’s capacity to turn dying back toward the living (Rose, 2011). I see promising futures in Piccinini’s Mushroom Bats. Like actual fruit bats, lively and unruly parts of contemporary Australian urban ecologies, these flying fungal fabulations might help bring the kiss of life to barren and desolate architectures. These creatures might help turn sterile cities into lively places. They contain the promise of reanimating dynamic relationships—with gifts of energy, life, and matter flowing across generations. Legions of Mushroom Bats could catalyze a global *détournement*—rerouting the planetary process of double death, back towards life.



Patricia Piccini, *The Struggle*, 2017.

Around the corner from the grotto, where the Eagle Egg Men are flanked by legions of Mushroom Bats, technology has come alive. A deer like Vespa motor scooter is under attack, with a predatory tiger of a motorcycle biting its neck. Technology mimicking nature, come alive. A mimetic doubling of animals and machines, where the machine no longer is bound by “a strict adherence to rational, economical rules” (Canguilhem, 1991: 56). A massive video looms overhead, depicting a breathing landscape of hairy flesh. A pucker emerges and a fleshy form sprouts like a seedling. The fleshy protuberance begins to wiggle. Four human legs sprout and the flesh begins to dance around, spinning in the hole. Gleefully, becoming beside itself, the four legged creature then pops out, standing. Two legs are standing on the ground while the other two waives about in the air like hands. Eyes and a mouth appear in the jiggling belly, as it tries out some yoga poses. It begins to crouch and extend—moving at hyper speed. Then it launches off into space.

Around the corner a sunset appears in the distance, as a backdrop to a diorama. Butthole Penguins, fleshy lumps with a single orifice and Mohawk hairdos, squat on their haunches next to a trio of Gazellements—flesh helmets trotting through the gallery on a pair of gazelle legs. Lions, with rubber tires growing around their manes as protective helmets, sit with their eyes squeezed shut—looking constipated. Lightning flashes in the distance. Asphalt is broken up by emergent native plants that are proliferating alongside surviving forms of animal flesh.

When rhinos and wombats begin to die, when their existence as species is

threatened, we are compelled to intervene, Patricia says. As she talks, she brushes up against one of the most important existential questions of our era, first posed by Matthew Chrulew: “How should we love in a time of extinction?” (Chrulew, 2011) This final room illustrates a limit in the human capacity to love and care. Rather than contain a room full of endangered animals, carefully preserved, the diorama is host to emergent forms of wild life (Franklin, 2003; Collard, 2014). Trans-biology has escaped the laboratory to form ecological communities, social relationships, and romantic bonds without reference to the human.





Patricia Piccinini, "The Couple," 2018.

The Couple, a pair of hairy monsters with long claws, are tenderly cuddling in an RV trailer, parked in the room with the Butthole Penguins, Gazellements, and Tire Lions. They are naked, under white sheets. A half-finished liquid meal is on the table, next to a biology text book illustrating hair follicles inside of a cell. Patricia says that Frankenstein was a bad parent. When his offspring found love with a blind person, the scientist forbade the relationship. The monster went crazy when he was denied a mate, killing Dr. Frankenstein in the end. The Couple illustrates a different possible future for transbiology. The male monster is asleep, gently resting his head on his lover's chest. The female cradles his head with her clawed hand, staring pensively at the ceiling. She is protecting him, caring for him, while he gets some much needed sleep. He is strong, beautiful, but vulnerable.

Perhaps this couple is on the run, Patricia says. Maybe they are living on the outskirts of human society. Or, maybe they have found a trailer park, to live alongside marginalized people. Piccinini has captured them in an intimate moment, in a cocoon of sorts, where they have created a safe space beyond the social, historical, political, and ecological forces assailing them. Perhaps the couple has just made love. Together in bed, they embrace ideas of fertility. These monsters are fully capable of reproducing without human assistance. We cannot control their destiny.

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interplay of natural and cultural history. Duke University Press has published his two books—[Freedom in Entangled Worlds](#) (2012) and [Emergent Ecologies](#) (2015)—as well as one edited collection: [The Multispecies Salon](#) (2014). Currently he is Associate Professor of Anthropology at Deakin University.

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