



Patricia Piccinini

Retrospectology – The World According To Patricia Piccinini

Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne

www.artnow.com.au

21 December, 2002 – 2 March, 2003

Sandman

The Ian Potter Centre: NGV Australia at Federation Square, Melbourne

www.ngv.vic.gov.au/ngvaustralia

28 November, 2002 – 23 February, 2003

If Jean Baudrillard died and came back in another life he would be an Australian female new media artist. In other words, he'd have to be Patricia Piccinini. What Baudrillard circumnavigates through theoretical tropes and metaphor, Piccinini forms into visual and aural scapes. It is impossible to view Piccinini's second retrospective without framing her oeuvre in terms of hyperreality and simulation; two notions firmly embedded in today's lifestyle vernaculars that are modernity's supermarket.

It's hard to escape the web Piccinini has woven in Australia's art scene; having just had her first retrospective curated by Rachel Kent at the The Ian Potter Centre: Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, then showing simultaneously at NGV Australia and Australian Centre for Contemporary Art and – lest we forget – being this year's *Venice Biennale* Australian representative – one of the youngest female artists Australia has ever chosen – Piccinini has carved her own brand status and *Retrospectology* demonstrates why – it converts even the cynical to *The World According to Patricia Piccinini*. It is a seductive and ambient world in which amorphic forms and aural sensations are tightly woven.

In comparison to the expansive and yet tightly interwoven projects housed in *Retrospectology*, Piccinini's recent installation, *Sandman*, in the Macquarie Gallery at NGVA's Ian Potter, pales as an interdisciplinary formulaic exercise. While it has some compelling components, such as the amorphic flat car seats lying like human bodies or the big black mass with blue highlights which sports a panel van bonnet from one end, the installation's various aspects feel like they needed the space alone to allow the viewer to fully engage.

Sandman consists of a large projection of a girl swimming and then submerged under the foreboding and yet seductive ocean, large photographs of a girl in day to day scenes including with a panel van 'Xanadu' and her at the beach, and the already mentioned sculptural forms. In the painted blue space with dark, atmospheric lighting, the works struggle against each other, each discipline attempting to say something more about the same narrative. The photographs read as didactic, as if telling the reader something explicit which creates noise against the video projection and beautiful hybrid forms that seem to create a dialectical tension.

On the other hand, *Retrospectology*, curated by Juliana Engberg, succinctly paints an environment in which Piccinini's various projects over the last seven years can be contextualised and experienced. The first of the two main rooms of ACCA houses an assortment of Piccinini moments, while the second gallery is built into three mini-world video installations. In the first room are Piccinini's more recent and less original works – *Still life with stem cells* [2002] and *Game Boy Advanced* [2002]. The first work consists of a hyperreal girl playing with muted stem cells on a grey carpet, while the latter work consists of two boys playing game boy. These two works – a fusion between the work of Ron Mueck and the Chapman brothers – were nicely off set by the guard who sat next to the latter work and basically scared the proverbial shit out of me when he moved.

The first room operated much more like a lolly shop with various beautiful surfaces, industrial forms and facades. The viewer could move through eight [more or less] seminal Piccinini works from the iconic *Truck Babies* [1999], hyper-glossy *Car Nuggets* [2001–2002] and the photographic and video work *Protein Lattice* [1997] of which the beautiful woman with the mutant mouse is legendary, having graced buildings and magazine covers.

Whether it be the simulated fauna landscapes of *Plasticology* [1997–2002] in which fifty-seven monitors play images of hyper-real forests dancing in artificial wind; or the hypnotic and yet stomach churning seascapes of *Swell* [2000–2002] to the amorphic ethnoscapes of *The Breathing Room* [2002] in which body parts morph accompanied by a soundscape of undulating breathing rhythms causing the room to vibrate and the viewer to either [or simultaneously] feel an overwhelming sense of helplessness or abjection, Piccinini creates a world in which technology and humanity are married. While the exploration of technology and its relationship to humanity has been a project fraught with ambivalences from the beginning, Piccinini – like a good sci-fi writer – presents us with variations on our imagined and conflicting notions of dystopia. Particularly in her video installations like *Swell* and *The Breathing Room*, Piccinini takes from the supermarket of sci-fi imagery and implicitly allows us a moment to practice and experience what we often only philosophise about until – before we know it – we live it.

Larissa Hjorth

Left: Patricia Piccinini, *The Young Family* [Installation view], 2002
Photo courtesy the artist and Australian Centre for Contemporary Art
Right: Renee So, *Creature Comfort*, 2002. Photo courtesy the artist



Gertrude Studios 2002

Guy Benfield, Chris Bond, Zhong Chen, Cate Consandine, Clare Firth Smith, Natasha

Johns-Messenger, Paul Knight, Andrew McQualter, Nick Mangan, Harriet Parsons,

David Rosetzky, Renee So, Masato Takesaka, Daniel Taylor, Andrea Tu, Christian de Vietri

Gertrude Contemporary Art Spaces, Melbourne

www.200gertrudestreet.com

22 November – 14 December, 2002

Trying to spend some quality time with the art work at a group show like *Gertrude Studios 2002* is a challenge on a good day. Without the usual curatorial guide rope, the visitor is confronted with a barrage of ideas in a multitude of media, none particularly related to the other but brought together only through the circumstance of being the work of the sixteen artists in residence at Gertrude's studio program. By nature of that program the work in the annual end of year show is diverse. Artists of different ages, working in a wide variety of styles, and who are all at various points in their careers, make up the group. Also by nature of that program, their work is accomplished and challenging – especially when you put it all together in the one room.

Guy Benfield's performance/video *LP Werk* came short of dominating the main room, resonating like a well-delivered joke. Benfield's wry take on the process of art making, which had an LP making the 'werk' by drawing ink dots and spirals onto a piece of paper with a marker pen taped to the centre of a turntable, tickled the collective cynical consciousness. The paper onto which the dots and swirls were drawn balanced precariously over the marker, steadied by a wooden beam connected to Benfield's big toe. There couldn't possibly be a more contrived way to make artwork. *LP Werk* was served with lashings of irony, but why is Benfield so ambivalent about art – what's his beef?

At the other end of the spectrum was Renee So's *Creature Comforts*. So seemed to have taken a fork in the road with her knitted sculpture, and ended up in wonderland. Her installation consisted of giant sperm and toadstool-like shapes surrounded by a treasure of giant jewels and a gold chain, all knitted in gold yarn. Gone were the bright graphics and logos of last year's chocolate bar wrappers, replaced by these quite theatrical objects – although which children's matinee production they come from remains a mystery.

Another feature of the show was work made from details of larger works shown previously. This kind of work can sometimes be baffling without the wider context, but other times, is a good study of a certain aspect of the larger work, highlighting its strengths. What Nick Mangan imagines a 'sculptural ornithology' to be was hardly illuminated by his *Drawings for sculptural ornithology* [*The Obolus*] #1 & #2, but

his sophisticated sense of space and perspective [his work has been described in conversation as "exploded architecture"] was clear in the two drawings. [The 'ornithology' comes from a sound scape of bird calls that was part of the complete work.]

Equally as curious was Christian de Vietri's photographic print *FUJ1400* which, no matter how long you looked at it, refused to give up the identity of its subject. A white cap appears clearly in the image which looks as if it might sit on top of a mountain – such as Mt Fuji – but it is clear from the texture and colours in the image that this is no landscape. It is hard to see whether the extreme graininess of the image is from the print or the subject matter, or what kind of perspective exists between the foreground and the background – it looks flat, but again you can't be sure. What you assume is a piece of snapshot photography looks in its flatness like it could also be digitally generated, but there's something dirty looking, or more organic about the textures that rule this out too. Perhaps it's a close up of a white paint stain on asphalt?

Zhong Chen's *Paint by Numbers Chinatown Series No. 1* was another highlight of the front room. Playing with the style of popular Asian iconography, Chen's painting critiqued kitsch representations of Asia, reframing familiar imagery in a more sophisticated context, but one that was equally as playful and appealing.

Other standout work was Harriet Parson's *Call Signs #4* – the delicacy of these small decorative sculptures made from needlelace and electronics, and the kitten-like meows that emanate from within-, only make them more endearing on each encounter. Andrew McQualter's watercolour wall painting was characteristically gentle and typically odd. Chris Bond's blank frames, Natasha Johns-Messenger's wall excavation and David Rosetzky's *Living together is easy* were also resonant.

Lucinda Strahan