



PATRICIA PICCININI  
CURIOUS  
AFFECTION

WAGAM



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**Affirmation  
and a passion  
for difference**

Looking at Piccinini  
looking at us

Rosi Braidotti



Connection and empathy are at the heart of my practice. My creatures are imaginary beings that are almost possible. They are not always traditionally beautiful, but they have a beauty and an honesty within them. They are more vulnerable than threatening. People find their strangeness off-putting at first, but they usually learn to see past this — to look beyond their strangeness and see the connections.

Patricia Piccinini



Our culture — its art, music, theology and techno-science — is filled with the promises of monsters, that is to say, the irreverent energy of those who deviate from prescriptive normality.<sup>1</sup>

The connotations of that very term — monsters — however, tell a significant tale about our collective relationship to those who are otherwise embodied, both anthropomorphic and animal. Considered 'other', it is as if monstrous, non-human, animal and hybrid others inhabit a specific dimension that endows them with exceptional imaginary and metamorphic powers. They are both less- and more-than human, and other-than human at the same time. Otherwise constituted, monstrous bodies blur the distinction between normal and pathological, self and other, human and non-human, and, in this capacity, they are a privileged site of phantasmic projection. Their influence on the cultural imagination is far-reaching: hybrid, monstrous bodies are cast in the mode of a familiar, yet threatening, otherness — a quasi-kin. They embody ontological impropriety. As objects of simultaneous wonder and fear, admiration and disgust, they cause a disturbance in the status quo, evoking a mixture of fascination and loathing. Whatever the response, they are culturally produced as sensational objects of visual display.

There is also a paradoxically reassuring quality about them: their hybrid, monstrous bodies have already undergone a catastrophic mutation and have survived. Most people go through life dreading that they will have to confront a traumatic experience, but monsters already have. They embody both the trauma and the act of overcoming; having passed their test in life, they count as existential aristocrats.<sup>2</sup> Their resilience grants them a cathartic function in relation to those — especially humans — who are still fearfully anticipating a blow.

With such deep gifts for endurance and survival, these hybrid entities become semi-sacred figures of martyrdom. Donna Haraway makes this point in relation to transgenic animals like the OncoMouse, made in our own scientific laboratories for the purpose of biomedical experimentation — they die in order to save other species' lives.<sup>3</sup> In this respect, they are Christ-like figures of sacrificial love, which we should honour with new symbolic rituals. Post-secular prayers are in order — my monster, my saviour, my other/self. The promise you embody is redemption through endurance: would that I could!<sup>4</sup>

Patricia Piccinini knows all this well, and her artwork enacts these insights with a combination of critique and creativity. Piccinini challenges us to review our preconceived ideas and socially enforced relationships with the otherwise embodied. This critical process starts by questioning the very cultural repertoire and mental habits that have structured our visual, cognitive and affective relationships with these others. This repertoire has a long and complex history; however, it has done its time. First and foremost is the reference to normality as the standard of judgment or measure. Since early modern times, including the age of the Enlightenment, natural philosophy defined monsters as entities whose bodies were marked by either the absence or the excess of organs, or by their displacement to the wrong parts of the human anatomy. Too little organic matter,



too much of it, or the right amount, but in the wrong place — all measurements indexed against a notion of normality.

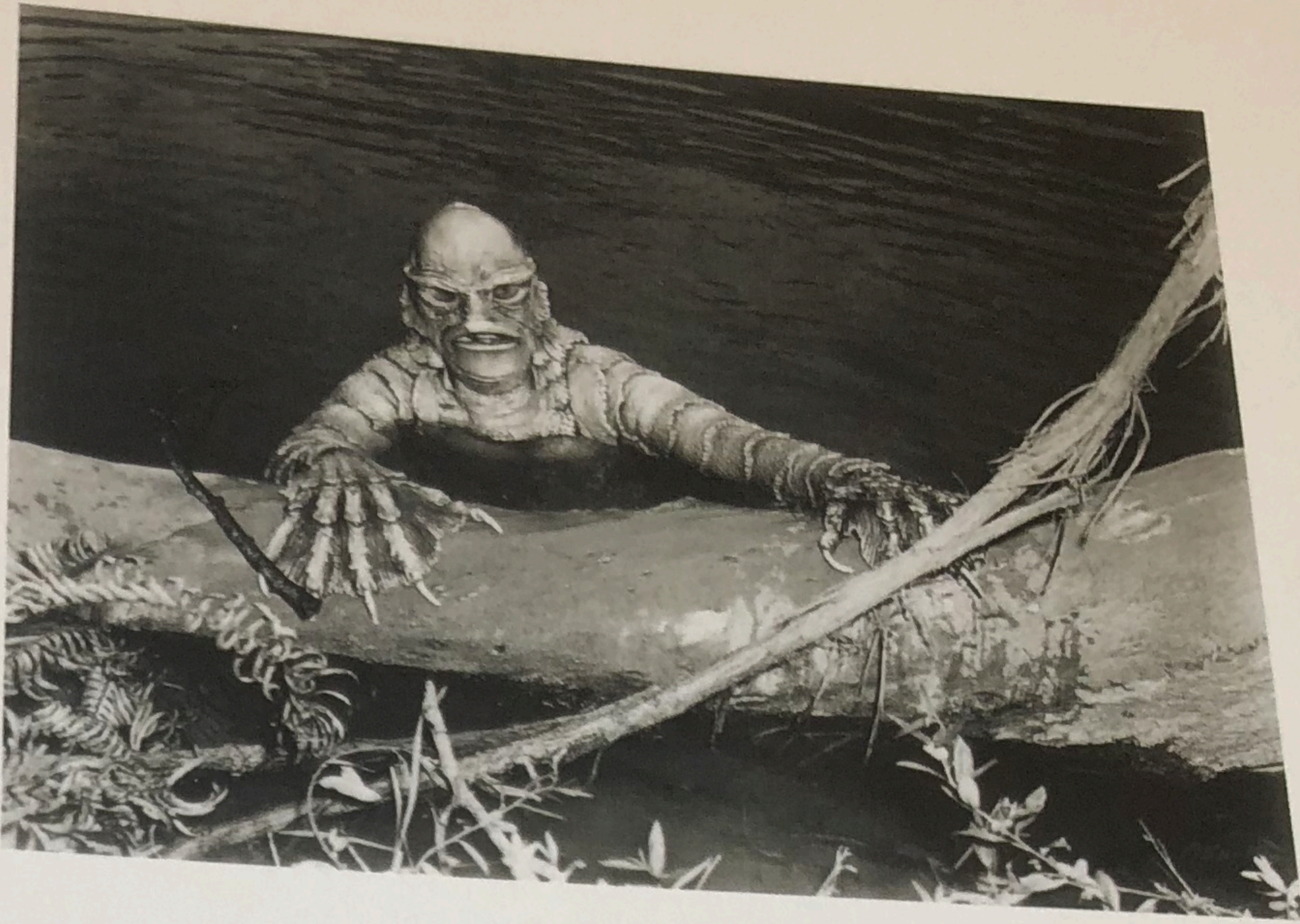
This ideal of normality was historically shaped by the humanist idea of universal 'Man' as the measure of all things. Aesthetically, it supports the Renaissance Vitruvian norm of perfect proportions in terms of both the human body and the architectural and urban frames created to accommodate it.<sup>5</sup> As Canguilhem put it, normality means the zero-degree of monstrosity, the least possible difference from the norm.<sup>6</sup> By extension, this means that any deviation from the ideal counts not only as being 'different-from' it, but also as being 'worth less-than' the dominant standard.

The apparatus of subjectivity that defined normality as zero-deviancy also organised differences according to an oppositional and hierarchical scale governed by this idealised standard. Deleuze and Guattari call it 'the Majority subject' or 'the Molar centre of Being'.<sup>7</sup> Irigaray labels it 'the Same' or the hyper-inflated, falsely universal 'He'.<sup>8</sup> It enacts a sort of 'metaphysical cannibalism' that feeds on structurally excluded others.<sup>9</sup> Difference emerges from this scheme as if caught in a double bind: it fulfils a constitutive function, because it confirms the normality of the dominant subject by falling short of it, and yet it is connoted negatively and translated into the language of monstrosity. Monstrous others consequently illuminate the complex and inequitable power relations at work in the making of these subject-positions.

The second habit challenged by Piccinini's work is difference as pejoration. The social history of monstrous bodies is marked by systemic practices of physical elimination, social exclusion and marginalisation. Exposed at birth in antiquity, tortured and killed off as signs of diabolical malignity throughout the Middle Ages, exhibited as human freaks and extravagant entities since the eighteenth century, the monstrous other brings the negative charge of difference to a peak. The stigma of this pejoration is contagious: the monstrous body lends itself to associations with moral and sexual abnormality, deviancy, criminality, abjection and ugliness. These traits are distributed across the spectrum of the many unprivileged 'others' of the classical ideal of 'Man': the sexualised other (women and LGBTIQ+ subjects), ethnic or racialised others, and naturalised or 'earth others' (animals and plants, and the planet as a whole). They complement the subject of modernity in that Man — the measure of all things — constructed himself as much through what he excluded as what he included, in his self-entitled frame of subjectivity.<sup>10</sup>

Mass popular culture was quick to reinforce these associations, registering the commercial potential of these spectacular others and the invitation for pejorative responses. The budding film industry, notably the science fiction horror genre, was keen to exploit new brands of hybridity. New monsters were engendered by superimposing features from different species onto the surface of the body; examples include the classic films *Freaks* 1932 and *Creature from the Black Lagoon* 1954, and, more recently, the hybrid creatures of the *Star Trek* films and television series. This formalised a process of fusion and fission of body





parts, an organic mix-and-match that defied any sense of morphological order. The legendary metamorphic powers of the creatures that were the classical monstrous others thus got recoded and subjected to a different political economy of visualisation. The horror they embodied came to express not so much radical otherness, or degeneracy, as a perennial process of mutation — an unsettling and unpredictable state of in-between-ness.

Piccinini's intervention in this mode of representing the hybrid, monstrous other could not be more critical. Not only do her creatures return our gaze, they look back at us and thus undo the consumeristic objectification of their otherness. They also look into us, with eyes full of compassion and understanding. Their intensity explodes the boundaries between human normality and its others. They stand in their plenitude, looking at our lack. Although it is tempting to take this remark as a humanisation of their gaze and their moral fibre, it would also be condescending to attribute human qualities, as if these traits were inherently superior. It is rather the case that Piccinini's others transcend the binary divides altogether and come to exist in a continuum with a multitude of human and non-human others. In so doing, they challenge and shift boundaries. Their relational power induces a trans-species form of care, while their empathic force expresses a posthuman relational ethics.

### The posthuman turn

The posthuman condition is defined in terms of the convergence of post-humanism — the end of the normative rule of 'Man' — with post-anthropocentrism, the end of species supremacy.<sup>11</sup> This convergence occurs within advanced capitalism, which relies on extensive and intrusive bio-genetic big data and predictive algorithms. This massive technological intervention — which also triggers violent social disruptions and political resistance — alters our relationship to the human. It redefines the terms of the self/other, throwing open the debate on embodiment, materialism, normality, sexuality and other differences. Piccinini's work is a subtle and theoretically informed record of this convulsive transition. The classical divide between nature and culture has been replaced by a 'natureculture' continuum,<sup>12</sup> which also includes the influence of advanced technologies and ends up as a sort of 'medianature',<sup>13</sup> or rather, 'media natureculture'.<sup>14</sup>



Ours is the age of proliferating difference. Advanced capitalism has unhinged difference from its classical binary scheme, inducing a proliferation of quantitative differences for the sake of profit. Consumer choice is based on multiples of the same product — with little qualitative diversification. The best way to resist these flows of profit-driven production is to introduce a neo-materialist affirmative ethics focused on qualitative transformations; for instance, the collective construction of social horizons of hope, and the joyful pursuit of the freedom to become and to endure in our existence. This ethical approach has some important implications.

It is clear that advanced capitalism proved more flexible and adaptable towards technological changes, and the mutation of the status of the human they induce, than the modernist Left expected. Not only did the capitalist system not break, it even bent to enfold new technological advances, becoming cognitive capitalism.<sup>15</sup> It has turned the production of cognitive data about 'life itself' into the new capital.<sup>16</sup> The 'different differences' co-produced by genomics (stem-cell research; robotics, neural sciences and AI; nanotechnologies) and information technologies have been turned into the practice of co-constructing marketable, consumable and tradeable data about all matter. The true capital today is the vital, self-organising power of matter itself — life as surplus value.<sup>17</sup> You may also call it 'biopiracy', or the commercial patenting of living entities.<sup>18</sup> This goes further than the consumerist consumption of exotic differences, to which we have become accustomed in post-industrial societies. Contemporary technologies go further and remake life as code — bio-genetic and computational code — in a manner that displaces the centrality of the anthropomorphic 'Man' of reason, but also relocates his dialectically ordained 'others'.

Moreover, all these breathtaking technological advances are postulated on the brink of the abyss. Ecological disaster in the era of the Anthropocene has taken the euphoria out of the notion of technological progress and the drive towards the mastery of nature.<sup>19</sup> The spectre of extinction is upon us. Science and technology — far from being the leading principles in a teleological process aimed at the perfectibility of the human — have turned into sources of permanent anxiety over our present and the sustainability of our future. The current technological revolution also makes it urgent to resolve issues of access and participation in a democracy threatened by the informatics of domination.<sup>20</sup> We need to rethink the human, the non-human, the inhuman, the trans- and post-human in an era that is defined both as the fourth industrial revolution and the sixth extinction.<sup>21</sup> Although this may seem like a contradiction, it reflects the complexity of our era. We need to learn to live with these contradictions; it is a case of 'and . . . and', not of 'either/or'.<sup>22</sup>

Anxiety is so pervasive that it has become culturally hegemonic; it also informs a contemporary style of governance by fear and terror. The accident is imminent, but, as Massumi astutely puts it, it is also immanent — it is about the here and now, in the most familiar and intimate dimensions of our lives.<sup>23</sup> There is no longer just one enemy, but rather, a general break-in of our immunity systems and a breakdown of the bonds of trust that used to unify us. A general sense of disaster opens into the infinite possibility of enemies everywhere. In the