

between art & nature

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australian perspectives



## NATURAL SELECTION

This exhibition is presented in the context of our changing perceptions of what is 'natural' in the face of extensive human transformations of the environment and the impact of technology. Today genetic engineering threatens the autonomy of natural processes. At the same time, our urban environment may now be considered as being in some way our 'natural' habitat.

In this exhibition nature is neither independent (and therefore exploited or idealised) nor merely a product of civilisation. Works by six contemporary Australian artists combine the natural and the artificial (or cultural), making these conventionally discrete categories seem interdependent or even indistinguishable.

Patricia Piccinini's strange couplings of human and animal in a digitally generated forest show the potential of evolution in a plastic world, where the distinction between natural and artificial is indeterminate, even redundant. As Piccinini has written, 'a real-time meeting between a smoothed over, cosmetic-surgery enhanced model and a bunch of computer-generated cows in a field is as natural as can be expected on TV'. Her installation, which draws on our history of identification with animals, is a dark parody of the evolutionary possibilities of genetic engineering. *Plasticology* is destiny. The manipulation of pixels or genes promises divine power, but this work suggests that the promise of technology may be as elusive as the promise of nature itself.

An artificial tropical forest tableau is the centrepiece for an interactive video installation, *In the Garden of Eden* by Lyndal Jones, which explores the myth of the Fall in relation to theories of natural selection. Dualisms central to stories of origin, such as nature/culture and man/woman, have traditionally diminished one of the opposing terms. This work approaches a more inclusive way of thinking about nature without resorting to biological determinism or essentialism. Through televised performances and a process of interaction, it asks us to ponder the gap between psychoanalysis and biology. How do the discourses of sexuality relate to 'natural' sexual feeling? How does human self-reflexivity and language play a role in distinguishing our sexual behaviour from that of other species?

Vera Möller's installation *my wild life* investigates the inversions and juxtapositions of meaning that occur between natural and cultural signs. Discarded artificial materials are transformed to create objects that we might identify with both the accoutrements of a personal history—dressing-up materials and domestic ornament—and the surfaces, textures and patterns of biological forms. Peculiar correspondences emerge from remembered observations of nature filtered through personal experience. In the natural world, colour, pattern and texture

### Natural Selection

ELIZABETH GOWER

LYNDAL JONES

VERA MÖLLER

PATRICIA PICCININI

RUTH WATSON

LOUISE WEAVER

Curated by

LINDA MICHAEL

MUSEUM OF

CONTEMPORARY ART

1 AUGUST–7 SEPTEMBER

### Artists Talks

Museum of Contemporary Art

Friday 1 August, 1pm

Lyndal Jones, Patricia  
Piccinini & Louise Weaver

Monday 4 August, 1pm

Vera Möller

Wednesday 6 August, 1pm

Ruth Watson

Wednesday 13 August, 1pm

Curator Linda Michael



are often functional rather than merely decorative. Möller's works explore how these elements shift meaning when transposed from nature into culture—and how our 'animal acts' of seduction, camouflage, warning and offence may be communicated through particular colour combinations and kinds of adornment.

Ruth Watson's *The Real World* and *Past, Present, Future (Perfect)* are globes of animal tissue, hair, carbon and skin—literally worlds made flesh. While the world maps have an abstracted, graphic relationship to the topography they describe, the materials are the stuff of life, experienced through being. Combining these systems of meaning creates an uncomfortable tension between the conceptual space/time of vision (implied in looking at a globe from an 'objective' outer space), and our visceral relation to material through the physical experience of being. Such a conjunction makes it impossible to speak of our civilised culture and animal nature as two separate realms. The globes are each presented on a different axis, suggesting the relativity of different conceptual perspectives, but there is also the sense that we are nevertheless bound by the constancy of the material world.

In Elizabeth Gower's *Chance or Design*, collected images of flora and fauna are cut out of books and magazines and grouped together according to common categories such as 'flower', 'tree' or 'snake'. From these extraordinarily varied and disparate clippings, Gower creates designs of order and beauty inspired by the colours, shapes and patterns of the natural forms. Each design is also a compendium of chance visual correspondences, as the scale and colour of the images do not relate literally to the natural forms they represent. The work presents a conceptual dilemma tied to our compulsion to classify and collect. The necessary incompleteness or arbitrariness of each category or collection appeals to our belief in nature as an infinitely creative domain, while simultaneously showing nature as a product of human conceptions.

Simple objects—both natural and artificial—are transformed and combined in Louise Weaver's installation *Still Falling* to create a delicate balance between artifice and natural process, life and death. Objects appropriated from other cultures are shown with dead branches and antlers protected by crochet covers, 'snowflakes' made of glass. Captured or rescued from natural attrition, they become poised for another imaginative life. Each part of the installation is for the moment interlinked, like the crystalline structure of the snowflake or the crocheted thread (both equally ephemeral, able to dissolve or unravel). New life is not solely the province of nature but also of language, imagination and metaphor.