

CURIOUS IMAGININGS

Written by Lin Stranberg

Photography: Hilary Walke



This season's hottest art ticket takes viewers on an unusual and engaging journey. The unlikely destination is the 105-year-old Patricia hotel on East Hastings Street in Strathcona, Vancouver's oldest neighbourhood and home to much of the indigent Downtown Eastside. "I think that area is the most true area of Vancouver, where real life questions are faced," says Vancouver Biennale Senior Curator Marcello Dantas.

A corridor's length of rooms on the second floor of the old hotel turn out to be a brilliant curatorial choice for the immersive experience of "Curious Imaginings," the sculpture and video exhibit by Patricia Piccinini presented by the 2018 – 2020 Vancouver Biennale. Although the life forms she imagines don't exist today, genetic engineering could open unforeseen possibilities in the future.





The Australian hyperrealist sculptor's works, based on themes of genetics, ethics, the planet and its possibilities, have attracted a huge international following. Her 4-city travelling exhibition in Brazil, whose record-breaking 1.4 million attendance established her as the most-visited contemporary artist in the world, was also curated by Mr. Dantas; he sees this venue, as her first outside a museum, as "a platform for inclusion and discussion."

Working with her husband/partner/production manager, sculptor Peter Hennessey, and her team of collaborators, she prepared a selection of existing works and videos, and sculpted a new piece specifically for Vancouver. "The Builder" is a small transgenic beaver-based character – a buck-toothed humanoid who squats on a fleshy tail amid a disarray of white linens in a small, dim room.



Seen in the context of lived-in rooms in a faded hotel, her unnervingly lifelike pieces force viewers to confront the disturbance and anxieties they may experience when facing any kind of physical differences. At first repellent, then alluring, they find

a way to draw us in, provoking the journey from anxiety to connecting with things we initially thought were weird. “The initial reaction to Patricia’s creatures is repulsion but then you find love and tenderness in them,” says Marcello Dantas. “They long for inclusion, just like the people around East Hastings.”

Ms. Piccinini’s broad definition of beauty, compassion and recurring themes of fertility, motherhood and sexuality instill layers of depth into the characters she imagines in silicon, fibreglass and human hair. Ultimately, she makes us see they are all beautiful.



“Curious Imaginings”

is on from September 14 – December 15 at the Patricia Hotel, 403 E. Hastings. ■