



In the Flesh

by Sara Sweet

The human body – capable of good and bad – breathes, ponders, examines, questions, desires, solves, and feels emotion. It is a complex organic structure about which we are yet to fully understand. What is it that makes human beings human? These questions have led to challenging evaluations which sort to decipher the answers that surround the term humanness. The National Portrait Gallery presents 'In the Flesh' – an exhibition curated by Penelope Grist that centres predominantly on the theme of humanness. This ambitious survey of creations composed by contemporary Australian artists include; Jan Nelson, Natasha Bieniek, Patricia Piccinini, Juan Ford, Petrina Hicks, Ron Mueck, Yanni Floros, Sam Jinks, Michael Peck and Robin Eley. Sixty-three works are demonstrated within ten themes – intimacy, empathy, transience, transition, vulnerability, alienation, restlessness, reflection, mortality and acceptance.

The artists have strategically and powerfully brought into existence artworks that demand contemplation and observation. 'In the Flesh' is a visually endless and stimulating expedition that sprouts unlimited interpretations that constantly diverge and lead to self-reflection. The tools and materials of each artist are undeniably admirable; from oil on linen, pigment prints, charcoal on paper, to an assortment of artificial and natural fibers, all aid the skills of the inventor to express their narratives.

Each piece potentially resonates deeply with personal experiences of the viewer. Certain scenes depicted encourage a connection of familiarity and understanding to align. For example, Ron Mueck's *Untitled (old woman in bed)*, 2000-2002 depicts an elderly woman draped heavily with a blanket. The scale of the work is surprisingly small with the woman resembling the same fragility and vulnerability to that of a newborn seeking warmth and protection beneath the covering. The experiences that come with being human are

imprinted on her aged body. A similar delicate demise is witnessed in Sam Jinks' *Still Life (Pieta)*. The idea of mortality is represented in all its rawness; a scene that references the visualisation of the expiration of one's body in order to face the inevitable. The realistic qualities of these sculptures are so heavily detailed that they come with a slight imaginary expectation that they may move, breath slightly or relax further into their pose.

A familiar and significant issue – human acceptance of difference is explored in Patricia Piccinini's photographs 'The Fitzroy Series 2011' where playful, cheeky and unthreatening creatures seek empathy and understanding. They engage in friendly banter with young children who seem to look on without judgment, untainted by the preconceptions of society.

'In the Flesh' calls for viewers to observe the works in the physical presence. The collection alerts the eyes to the calculated techniques applied by

the artists to reinforce their intentions, drives and areas of focus. The situations constructed are profoundly self-reflective as they lead to contemplations of existence; the revealing fragility of the human body and what it means to be human. Unmasked and confronting realities are brought into view that challenge ways of thinking. The show digs deep to uncover the nervous and unsettling thoughts that many share and haunt the mind of the every day. Perhaps 'In the Flesh' will allow some to see the beauty in the natural processes of the human body.

National Portrait Gallery

Until 9 March, 2015

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- 1 Sam Jinks, *Still Life (Pieta)*, 2007, silicone, paint and human hair, 73 x 160 x 123cm
- 2 Jan Nelson, *Walking in tall grass, Viktor*, 2005, oil on linen, 82.5 x 53.5cm
- 3 Patricia Piccinini, *Workshop, 7pm* (from 'The Fitzroy Series'), 2011, C-Type photograph, 160 x 100cm
Courtesy the artists, Sullivan + Strumpf, Sydney, and Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne