

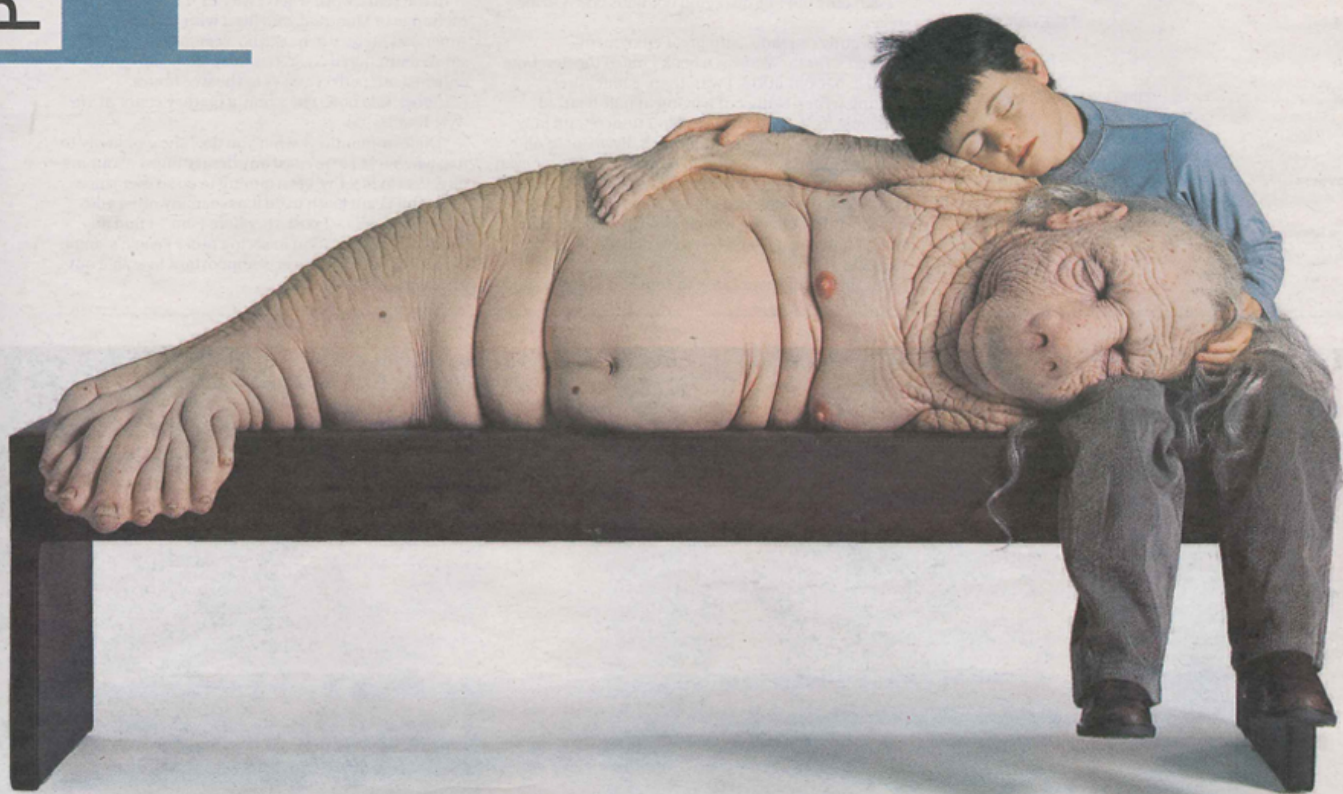
PANORAMA

CHANGING TRACKS

Guy Pearce on his
debut album

CINEMA AND THE CIA

What resonates in a post-
WikiLeaks world



In the flesh

A new show explores what it means to be human

The Canberra Times
November 1, 2014



Flesh in all its glory

An eclectic and provocative collection of works by contemporary Australian artists comprises the NPG's latest show, writes **Sally Pryor**.

It must surely have been one of the most bizarre toy houses ever constructed – a scale replica of a modern art gallery populated by huge, hyper-real sculptures, teensy miniatures, and strange half-human creatures, sharing space with large-scale drawings and paintings.

Deep behind the scenes of the National Portrait Gallery these past few months, a group of curators and designers have been hunched over this strange panorama, shifting the pieces around the rooms like chess pieces. It's the only way a show like *In the flesh*, which opens next week, can be conceived, such is the eclectic range of works on show.

But, eclectic though they may be, these 63 works have one thing in common, aside from being contemporary and created by Australian artists. They all deal, in some way, with what it means to be human.

Because, well, we're all human, only human. But what does this mean? What sets us apart from other living beings? With this range of works, from Ron Mueck's celebrated 2.5-metre *Pregnant Woman*, to Patricia Piccinini's mind-bending *The Long Awaited*, from Sam Jinks' hyper-real *Unsettled Dogs* to Natasha Bieniek's intimate miniatures, viewers are in for an illuminating and, perhaps, unsettling experience.

Curator Penny Grist says all the show's works are bound to provoke the kind of visceral responses that force us, almost unwittingly, to consider the nature of consciousness and self-awareness. The show was conceived several years



Among the works in new National Portrait Gallery exhibition *In the flesh* are (top) *Aster*, Natasha Bieniek, 2014 and (above) *Unsettled Dogs*, 2012 Sam Jinks.

ago as a part of the gallery's push to look at the themes that underlie portraiture. But it wasn't until a group of staff got together to nut out some themes that the show took shape.

"It was curated in a really unusual way, actually," Grist says. "We knew we wanted to look at things like nurture

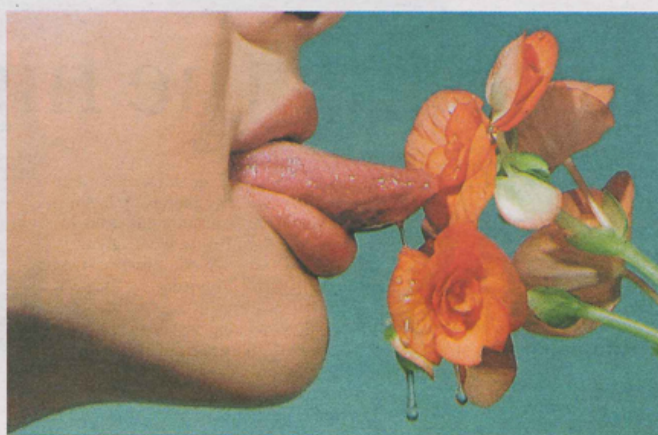
and empathy and those psychological themes, so we were looking for artists who really directly addressed those themes of what it is to be human, but then a whole group of us – this the most unusual thing – from across the team ... all got in a room and examined our own humanness and, by feel, made the initial selection."

The works span various mediums, from sculpture to photography, oil painting and drawing to video, and all were created recently. Grist also wanted internationally acclaimed artists like Mueck and Piccinini to sit alongside emerging artists like Yanni Floros. And, while all are Australian, such is the broad sweep of the show's subject that there is nothing especially Aussie about it.

Instead, Grist says, the show is designed to provoke a certain response.

"The concept we really went with, and in a way why we ended up with this particular selection, is to get work where you have that complete visceral, totally instinctive reaction before you start intellectually examining how you feel about it, and then that immediate human reaction contextualises everything you think or feel about the work. That's a particular quality of all of the work that we've selected," she says.

The exhibition is divided into 10 themes – intimacy, empathy, transience, transition, vulnerability, alienation, restlessness, reflection, mortality and acceptance – as a way of encouraging reflection on human existence, rather



Clockwise from top left: *Small Things*, Sam Jinks, 2012; *The Chrysalis*, Petrina Hicks, 2010; *Walking in Tall Grass*, Lily, Jan Nelson, 2012; *Recruit* (Self Portrait in the image of my son), Michael Peck, 2012; *Omega*, Robin Ely, 2013; Ron Mueck, *Pregnant woman*, 2002; Ron Mueck, *Wild Man*; *Look Closer*, Yanni Floros, 2013; *Walking in tall grass*, Lucy, Jan Nelson, 2010 and *Peony*, Natasha Bieniek, 2014.



than searching for a narrative, or even a set of answers. There are psychedelic portraits of teenagers, startlingly intimate miniatures, children and mythical characters.

The gallery is also making a point with the show of engaging children and young people, with an immersive children's space. "where the intention is that that feeling of being 'enfleshed' and dealing with textures and senses and getting in touch with your senses is communicated, in the gallery space, so that's something really unusual," Grist says.

"There's been another coincidence which wasn't deliberate, but there are a lot of depictions of children in the exhibition. It's interesting how children become that vessel for thoughts about potential and potential relationships; change and growing and a whole lifetime is often encapsulated in the image of a child."

The gallery has also produced an unusual audio tour to accompany the audience – a set of anonymous voices telling personal stories.

"We found people who either in their personal or professional lives would have had cause to think about what it is to be human. So they're from a broad spectrum," she says.

"It's all anonymous so

the stories can become the listeners' story, in a way, so events in your own life come to the fore in a way they wouldn't if the person was identified. Each theme has one of these one-to-two-minute personal stories, and they don't directly respond to the work, but they run in parallel and some of them are extremely moving. Just recording them was quite an experience."

And despite the inclusion of 14 of Bieniek's tiny miniatures – culled from collections across the country and seen together as a rare treat – the exhibition is, not surprisingly, a physically imposing show, taking up a large portion of the gallery – filling up the temporary exhibition space and spilling into what is usually a permanent gallery.

This, says Grist, is thanks to the generosity of the many private lenders who have contributed to the show.

"By corresponding with some private lenders to the exhibition, we've come across people who have collected across these artists, and that's been interesting for me," she says.

"I started off with this view that this is quite an eclectic mix – we know what we're talking about but how is it going to translate? But then I found all these lenders who are collecting along the same lines. So it does actually work."

📍 *In the flesh* opens at the National Portrait Gallery on November 7 and runs until March 9.

