

The background of the slide is a faded, light-colored version of Michelangelo's famous fresco, "The Creation of Adam". It depicts Adam on the left, reclining and reaching towards God on the right, who is seated and leaning forward. The central focus is the gap between their hands, creating a sense of tension and divine spark.

LECTURE 5 – SEMINAR SESSION

Coexistent Perspectives (ADAA7000)

posthumanism

(art in the anthropocene)

Question 2. De/constructing the Human: *In what ways do **contemporary artists and designers** challenge and reconfigure dominant constructions of the human subject through lenses such as **feminist theory, posthumanism, queer critique, or psychoanalysis**? How do such practices trouble the boundaries between self, other, and machine?*

Theme 2 – De/Constructing the Human

Posthumanism

Case Study: Patricia Piccinini

Essay focus:

How does Patricia Piccinini's sculptural practice reconfigure the human through posthumanist ethics of care, kinship, and hybridity?

Case Study: Patricia Piccinini

Essay focus:

How does Patricia Piccinini's sculptural practice reconfigure the human through posthumanist ethics of care, kinship, and hybridity?





background **context**

Patricia Piccinini (b. 1965, Sierra Leone/Australia) creates hyperreal sculptures of hybrid creatures — fusions of human, animal, and machine. Her practice explores empathy, biotechnology, and interdependence. Rather than dystopian fear, she offers an *affirmative posthumanism*: a vision of shared vulnerability among species.

theoretical context

Patricia Piccinini's practice occupies a liminal space between the biological and the technological, the real and the imagined. Her hyperreal silicone sculptures — such as *The Young Family* (2002) and *Kindred* (2018) — depict hybrid beings that are at once tender, grotesque, and unsettlingly familiar. Drawing on **Donna Haraway's** concept of *companion species*, **Rosi Braidotti's** *posthuman subject*, and **Karen Barad's** theory of *intra-action*, this essay argues that Piccinini's work reimagines the human as *relational rather than exceptional*: a porous assemblage of matter, affect, and interdependence.

Her work challenges humanist hierarchies separating the human from animal, machine, and environment — not through dystopian critique, but through an *ethics of empathy*.

Theoretical Context

Posthuman Thought

Posthumanism dismantles the Enlightenment notion of “Man” as rational, autonomous, and central.

Haraway (2003): proposes *companion species* — a model of co-evolution and co-dependence among humans and other life forms.

Braidotti (2013): defines the posthuman subject as **embodied, embedded, and relational**, grounded in an *affirmative ethics* that embraces difference and interconnectedness.

Barad (2007): introduces *agential realism* — all entities emerge through **intra-action** rather than pre-existing boundaries; matter itself is active and generative.

Together, these theorists frame Piccinini’s practice as one of **material and affective entanglement** — art as a speculative ecosystem for posthuman ethics.

Theoretical Lens:

Key Posthuman Thinkers

Theorist	Concept	Application to Piccinini
Donna Haraway	<i>Companion species; cyborg ontology</i>	Hybrid creatures as kin — unsettling but tender.
Rosi Braidotti	<i>Posthuman subject; zoe-centrism</i>	All life as interconnected; empathy as ethics.
Karen Barad	<i>Intra-action; agential realism</i>	Human, nonhuman, and technological forms co-constitute one another.
Cary Wolfe	Posthumanism and biopolitics	Critique of human exceptionalism; ethical relations to nonhuman life.



- **The Young Family (2002)**
- A hybrid mother nursing her offspring. The sculpture evokes both compassion and unease — asking what kinds of beings we might one day be responsible for.



- **Kindred (2018)**
- An orangutan mother cradling human infants. The familial tenderness challenges species boundaries and reclaims kinship beyond the human.

Key Works

Reading the Work...

- Piccinini visualises **Haraway's companion species**: creatures as co-evolving partners, not "others."
- Her hybrids dissolve distinctions between **nature and culture, organic and synthetic**.
- The viewer's mixed emotions — affection and discomfort — embody **Braidotti's affirmative ethics**: learning to care across difference.
- The sculptures' biological realism mirrors **Barad's intra-action** — life and technology entangled in continuous becoming.

Developing a Research Essay...

Possible titles/questions:

- How does Piccinini's art visualise posthuman empathy?
- In what ways do her sculptures challenge anthropocentrism?
- How might her practice reframe our ethical responsibilities in biotechnology and AI?



Case Study 1: *The Young Family* (2002)

- A hybrid creature — part sow, part woman — nurses a litter of human-animal infants.
- The work's extreme verisimilitude (silicone flesh, human hair) provokes empathy and discomfort simultaneously.
- While the creature's form appears monstrous, her pose is maternal, protective, vulnerable.

Analysis:

- *The Young Family* visualises **Haraway's companion species** — a kinship that refuses purity or hierarchy.
- Piccinini asks: what if biotechnology produced beings worthy not of horror, but of care?
- The work subverts anthropocentrism: we are *already* hybrid — products of evolutionary and technological interdependence.
- It also invokes **Barad's intra-action**: species boundaries dissolve as biological and technological processes co-constitute life.





Case Study 2: *Kindred* (2018)

- Depicts an orangutan mother holding two human infants.
- The maternal tenderness contrasts with the unease of species confusion.
- The sculpture stages an encounter of recognition: we see our kinship with other species mirrored back through an uncanny lens.

Analysis:

- Aligns with **Braidotti's affirmative posthumanism**, which embraces zoe (vital life) as a shared ontology across species.
- By humanising the nonhuman and animalising the human, Piccinini invites an ethics of **care and co-existence**, not domination.
- Her “monsters” refuse the dualism of nature versus culture, human versus animal — they are *living embodiments of relation*.





Affect, Ethics, and the Posthuman Body

Piccinini's work operates affectively rather than didactically.

- The viewer's visceral reaction — empathy, revulsion, tenderness — becomes part of the work's posthuman logic: *we feel our boundaries blur*.
- This affective dimension aligns with Braidotti's call for an **embodied ethics**, where emotion and encounter replace abstraction.
- The sculptures' meticulous craft also implicates technology itself in acts of care — the silicone skin as both synthetic and sensuous.

Conclusion

- Patricia Piccinini's practice offers a compelling visualisation of posthuman ethics: an art of empathy, interdependence, and shared vulnerability.
- Her creatures are not allegories of technological dystopia but proposals for living otherwise — for recognising our continuity with the nonhuman world.
- In doing so, she reconfigures the “human” as an evolving, relational category — an affective assemblage of organic and synthetic, self and other, life and machine.
- Her posthumanism is not a rejection of humanity but its radical re-imagination.

Essay Structure (Five-Paragraph Model)

Overview

Essay Question:

How does Patricia Piccinini's sculptural practice reconfigure the human through posthumanist ethics of care, kinship, and hybridity?

- **1. Introduction (Setting up the question)**
 - **Purpose:** Define posthumanism and situate Piccinini within its discourse.
- **2. Theoretical Context (Framing the argument)**
 - **Purpose:** Establish conceptual tools for analysis.
- **3. Case Study 1 – *The Young Family* (2002)**
 - **Purpose:** Apply theory to a specific artwork.
- **4. Case Study 2 – *Kindred* (2018)**
 - **Purpose:** Extend and complicate the reading.
- **5. Conclusion (Critical synthesis)**
 - **Purpose:** Bring together theory and practice to answer the question.

Essay Structure (Five-Paragraph Model)

Introduction

- **Introduction (Setting up the question)**
- **Purpose:** Define posthumanism and situate Piccinini within its discourse.
- **Content:**
 - Outline posthumanism's critique of human exceptionalism.
 - Introduce Piccinini's hyperreal hybrids as provocations to rethink empathy and ethics.
 - Present a thesis statement, e.g.:
- Piccinini's sculptural practice enacts an affirmative posthumanism that replaces human exceptionalism with an ethics of interdependence, reimagining empathy as the basis for coexistence among species and technologies.

Essay Structure (Five-Paragraph Model)

Theoretical Context

- **Theoretical Context (Framing the argument)**
- **Purpose:** Establish conceptual tools for analysis.
- **Content:**
 - Summarise **Haraway's companion species** and cyborg theory.
 - Introduce **Braidotti's posthuman subject** and zoe-centred ethics.
 - Outline **Barad's intra-action** — agency as distributed across human and nonhuman matter.
 - Briefly indicate how these theories inform a more *ethical* and *relational* view of the human.

Essay Structure (Five-Paragraph Model)

Case Study 1

- **Case Study 1 – *The Young Family* (2002)**
- **Purpose:** Apply theory to a specific artwork.
- **Content:**
 - Describe the hybrid creature and viewer response.
 - Interpret through **Haraway**: the creature as *companion species* — both familiar and alien.
 - Analyse the tension between attraction and repulsion as an ethical test: *Can we care for that which unsettles us?*
 - Discuss the work's implications for bioethics and empathy.

Essay Structure (Five-Paragraph Model)

Case Study 2

- **Case Study 2 – *Kindred* (2018)**
- **Purpose:** Extend and complicate the reading.
- **Content:**
 - Describe the orangutan mother with human infants.
 - Apply **Braidotti's affirmative posthumanism**: the sculpture celebrates zoe, shared vitality across species.
 - Draw in **Barad's intra-action**: human and animal as co-emergent, entangled beings.
 - Reflect on the role of affect: tenderness and unease as pedagogical tools for rethinking kinship.

Essay Structure (Five-Paragraph Model)

Conclusion

- **Conclusion (Critical synthesis)**
- **Purpose:** Bring together theory and practice to answer the question.
- **Content:**
 - Reaffirm that Piccinini's posthumanism is not dystopian but *empathetic*.
 - Suggest that her work visualises a new ethics for the Anthropocene — care beyond species boundaries.
 - End with a broader reflection:
- “Piccinini's hybrids embody the posthuman promise that to be human is to be in relation — a condition of mutual becoming rather than mastery.”