

CULTURE EXHIBITION



Perfection – at any cost

Science meets art in a show examining gene modification, plastic surgery and body image, writes **Stephen Todd**.

Graham has a perfect male physique, eminently fit for purpose. As long as that purpose is surviving a low-impact car crash. Devised by Melbourne artist Patricia Piccinini for the Victorian Transport Accident Commission in 2016, the silicon, fibreglass and human hair sculpture is like a melted Michelin Man, a meat head with no neck and a cascade of tumescent man boobs cushioning its ribcage like pendulous airbags. Extra leg joints enable nimble escape.

Graham is the de facto mascot of *Perfection*, a show which examines notions of beauty and accomplishment, to open at the Science Gallery Melbourne next week.

Curated by a panel composed of a particle physicist, a computer scientist, a plastic surgeon and a musicologist, the show – dubbed part exhibition, part experiment – considers “what it means to pursue perfection in a non-perfect world”, according to Science Gallery director Rose Hiscock.

The lineup of 20 projects selected from a global call-out process includes installations, videos, painting and vector graphics that examine the possible impact of CRISPR genetic modification, biohacking, sex robots and social media on our lives. Even the humble Brazilian wax gets an exposé.

French artist Orlan’s video of her plastic surgery procedures shows her face being modified to replicate those of female prototypes from art history: the high forehead of the Mona Lisa, the dimpled chin of Botticelli’s Venus, the pillowy lips of Francois Boucher’s Europa ... until the topography of her visage is nigh-on unrecognisable.

Orlan’s trademark devil’s horns, the result of her 1993 performance art surgical intervention titled *Omniprésence*, will be familiar to fans of Lady Gaga in her *Born This Way* monster phase.

Melbourne’s self-proclaimed sci-fi artist Lucy McRae has created a *Biometric Mirror* beauty salon wherein mathematical algorithms determine the visitor’s “perfect” face based on the ideals of the golden ratio (Phi, 1.618) developed by Hollywood plastic surgeon Stephen R. Marquardt. (Marquardt famously declared Michelle Pfeiffer the

most beautiful woman in Hollywood because her mouth is exactly 1.618 times the width of her nose.)

“A facial recognition program assesses the psychology of the sitter’s face, measuring age, gender, even qualities like weirdness, aggression and kindness, which are then calibrated and transformed into the statistically and mathematically perfect face,” McRae explains.

The program, called the Biometric Mirror, was developed by Dr Niels Wouters, of Melbourne University’s Microsoft

Sure, we’d all like to be perfect, but who can say quite what that is?

Marie Kinsey, Science Gallery

Research Centre for Social Natural User Interfaces.

But the installation’s results are always slightly surreal, cartoonish, since the program carries inherent bias picked up from the scanning of thousands of real subjects to create an ideal norm.

“The result is these uncanny valley alien creatures,” says McRae, referring to the tipping point at which the level of realism in



robots has been shown to elicit negative reaction in humans. Like much of McRae’s work, *Biometric Mirror* is more *Little Shop of Horrors* than beauty pageant.

“Science is a creative endeavour, so for us it’s about inspiring creative thinking,” says Hiscock.

“We strive to integrate the creativity and aesthetic values of the arts with the critical thinking and ethical considerations of the humanities and the problem-solving tools and rigour of the STEM fields.”

The Science Gallery Melbourne, which launched last year with the exhibition *BLOOD*, is a member of the Science Gallery International Network that began at



From top: *Graham*, by Patricia Piccinini; Lady Gaga and performance artist Orlan transform their appearances to challenge perceptions of beauty.



Need to know

Where
Perfection is at the Melbourne School of Design, University of Melbourne, Masson Road, Parkville.

When September 12 to November 4.

Artist Lucy McRae in her Biometric Mirror beauty salon, above, where mathematical algorithms are used to determine the ‘perfect’ face. PHOTO: JESSE MARLOW

Dublin’s Trinity College in 2008 and now has nodes in London, Detroit and Bangalore and the goal of five more including Venice by 2020.

Embedded in the University of Melbourne as part of the \$500 million Innovation Precinct, the thinking is that by inserting the ‘A’ of Art into the Science, Technology, Engineering and Math of STEM you’ll get STEAM – a program which is based on the belief that art and design coupled with the sciences has the ability to transform the post-industrial economy.

The gallery’s core demographic is 18 to 25-year-olds, but adults – including this one – are equally drawn to the beauty and rigour of its agenda.

At a time when we can surgically transform our bodies, transition genders, clone our dogs, insert microchips into our arms to biohack the city, we all become performance artists of a sort.

Not least on social media – where we routinely transform ourselves into idealised avatars leading picture-perfect lives.

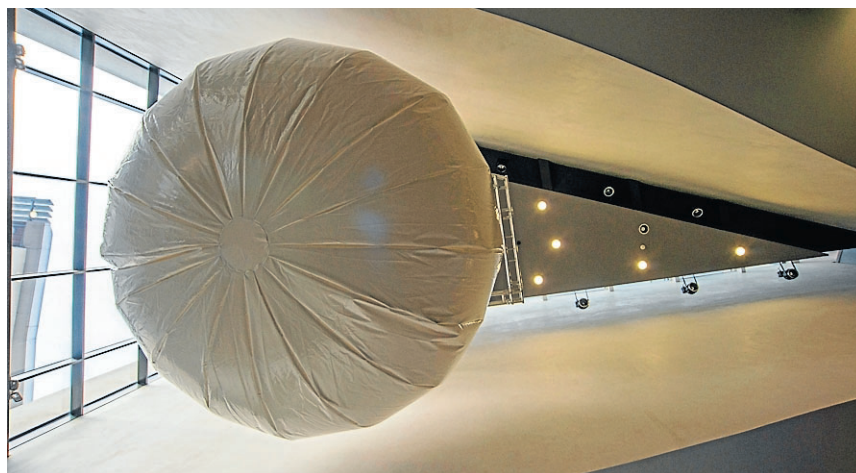
English artist Ant Hamlyn embodies “Like” culture in *The Boost Project*, an interactive installation involving a giant inflatable orb designed to emulate the fleeting sense of acceptance and self worth linked to online approval. Every time *The Boost Project* is followed or hash-tagged on Twitter or receives a Like on Facebook it emits clusters of coloured LEDs, creates a loud, obnoxious roar and gradually increases in size, swelling slowly until it reaches its peak.

We all know people like that. If ignored, it immediately begins to deflate and slowly takes on the form of a saggy slab of plastic. We all know that feeling, too.

“Social media is probably the biggest contributor to the pressure being put on young people who constantly feel the need to be perfect,” says Marie Kinsey, 23, a zoology graduate who is one of a group of 20 young mediators from varied backgrounds – known as the “Sci-Curious” – at Science Gallery.

“Because of how connected we are, we’re able to get a bigger scope on our problems. Mental health, gender equality, the environment, the pressure on young people to perform, to address problems in the world creates a lot of strain. Sure, we’d all like to be perfect, but who can say quite what that is?”

The Science Gallery Melbourne will take up permanent residence on the site of the former Royal Women’s Hospital at the corner of Swanston and Grattan Streets, Carlton, in 2020. **L&L**



Ant Hamlyn’s *The Boost Project*, which explores self worth as a factor of online approval.