

OLYMPIA

PHOTOGRAPHS BY

POLIXENI PAPAPETROU

ARTWORK LABELS

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Polixeni Papapetrou (1960–2018) was a singular Australian artist, known for her compelling photographs that show childhood as a complex realm of imagination and storytelling. In her work Papapetrou explored a range of the stereotypes that surround childhood. Early bodies of work considered historical archetypes and the place of children in society. Later, as her children moved through adolescence, she increasingly explored issues of identity and the individual.

In the beginning Papapetrou's daughter Olympia was an unwitting, if willing, participant in making art with her mother, but, over the ensuing twenty years, she assumed the more active and complex roles of model and muse, collaborator, champion and child. Polixeni Papapetrou's photographs of her daughter are deeply personal pictures, but she shared them, as artists and storytellers do, because they symbolise something in all of us.

The storyteller

from the *Lost Psyche* series 2014

2014

inkjet print

Private collection

The immigrant

from the *Lost Psyche* series 2014

2014

inkjet print

Private collection

'In the series *Lost Psyche* I wanted to talk about history, memory and psyche. *The immigrant*, for example, portrays a nineteenth-century immigrant (played by my daughter), but countless others have followed her, often bringing with them to their new country a world of harrowing memory and fragile hope. Often the immigrant – such as my parents coming from Greece to Melbourne – is torn between the past of their homeland and the future of their adopted country. The work is also a metaphor for the journey from childhood to adulthood.'

POLIXENI PAPAPETROU, 2015

The daydreamer

from the *Lost Psyche* series 2014

inkjet print

Private collection

Olympia's Clothes and Phantomwise

The first encounter that viewers have with Olympia is somewhat unexpected. In *Infant/Infanta*, 1999, she sits at the centre of a triptych, flanked on either side by child portraits from seventeenth-century Spanish court paintings by Diego Velázquez. Despite being seated next to a kitsch 'Mona Lisa' cushion, Olympia has a surprisingly regal demeanour. It is an introductory image that hints at the sophistication of the relationship Olympia was to develop with the camera and the viewer.

The story of Olympia at age four, picking up one of her toys, a paper mask, and demanding to be photographed wearing it is cited as the start of the rich collaborative relationship between mother and daughter. In the series *Phantomwise*, a preschool-aged Olympia first took on the active role that was to characterise the partnership between artist and model, mother and daughter. Here Olympia assumes a range of characters, determined by the masks at hand: a sailor, a clown or a Chinese lady. With simple costumes and elementary props, the precocious Olympia adopts poses that, much like the 'attitudes' assumed in Victorian parlour games, imaginatively tell a story.

Infant/Infanta

from the *Olympia's Clothes* series 1999
1999

type C photograph

Private collection

For kids

In this photograph, Olympia is using dress-up clothes to pretend to be someone else. Can you see that she is wearing a mask? The picture is called *Jack Tar*, which is an old-fashioned name for a sailor, so Olympia is wearing clothes that make her look like a sailor. She has on a hat and a stripy shirt, and she is carrying some rope. In other pictures she is dressed up as different characters.

What would you wear if you were dressing up for a photograph like this?

Jack Tar

from the *Phantomwise* series 2002

2002

type C photograph

Private collection

Chinese lady

from the *Phantomwise* series 2002

2002, printed 2014

inkjet pigment print

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Gift of Robert Nelson through the Australian Government's

Cultural Gifts Program, 2016

2016.131

Indian brave

from the *Phantomwise* series 2002

2002, printed 2019

inkjet pigment print

Private collection

The beauty of the high seas

from the *Phantomwise* series 2002

2002, printed 2014

inkjet pigment print

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Gift of Robert Nelson through the Australian Government's

Cultural Gifts Program, 2016

2016.132

'Olympia was about four years old when we started this project. The masks that Olympia wore in *Phantomwise* concealed her face from above the nose but allowed her mouth and ears to be revealed. The eyes, eyebrows and forehead are fully drawn in the mask. There was a small eyehole in place of the pupil that enabled Olympia to see. I was interested in exploring the performative nature of the masks and how the mask could be used as a device to move Olympia and the photograph from the "real" to the "imaginary" – both body and photograph were transformed by the mask.'

POLIXENI PAPAPETROU, 2006

Winter clown

from the *Phantomwise* series 2002

2002

type C photograph

Private collection

Olympia as Lewis Carroll's Alice dreaming by the riverbank

from the *Dreamchild* series 2003

2003

type C photograph

Private collection

Olympia as Lewis Carroll's Xie Kitchin as Chinaman on tea boxes (on duty)

from the *Dreamchild* series 2003

2003

type C photograph

Private collection

'Olympia was six years old when we made this photograph. I was interested in restaging some of Lewis Carroll's photographs to look at the importance of role-play, dress-ups and performance in the child's world. Through these games and costume dramas, children can switch identity and be male/female, young/old, Asian/Caucasian or wherever their imagination takes them. I wanted to explore how Olympia presented herself as a girl and how she and I – the mother artist – could explore the boundaries of her identity through her dress-up performances before the camera.'

POLIXENI PAPAPETROU, 2015

Olympia as Lewis Carroll's Irene McDonald (it won't come smooth)

from the *Dreamchild* series 2003

2003

type C photograph

Private collection

Olympia as Lewis Carroll's Julia Arnold (Little Vanity)

from the *Dreamchild* series 2003

2003

type C photograph

Private collection

Olympia as Lewis Carroll's Beatrice Hatch in 'Apis Japonensis'

from the *Dreamchild* series 2003

2003

type C photograph

Private collection

Olympia as Lewis Carroll's Beatrice Hatch before White Cliffs

from the *Dreamchild* series 2003

2003

type C photograph

Private collection

Dreamchild and Wonderland

Papapetrou created two influential bodies of work, *Dreamchild* and *Wonderland*, that explored the writing and photography of Lewis Carroll, author of the well-known 1865 story *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. In *Dreamchild* Olympia was cast as some of Carroll's most frequently photographed child models, including Alexandra 'Xie' Kitchin, Irene McDonald and Beatrice Hatch, in simply restaged images based on Carroll's photographs. With the *Wonderland* series, Papapetrou recreated scenes from Carroll's book, directly referencing John Tenniel's original illustrations and casting Olympia as Alice.

A notable shift in Papapetrou's work occurred around this time: the staging of her photographs became increasingly elaborate. Olympia's costumes, based on Tenniel's illustrations, and the intricate trompe l'oeil backdrops, painted by her husband Robert Nelson, set the stage for expansive, imaginative play and image-making. Papapetrou recognised the importance of the painted settings in these photographs when she wrote, 'The naive painted illusion is activated in a magical way, brought into reality, given a new frisson of immanence, induced by the photographic presence of Olympia behaving in the scene as if it were real'. The images in these series, perhaps more than any other in Papapetrou's oeuvre, resemble the narrative tableaux photographs that were so popular in the nineteenth century.

For kids

Do you know the story of *Alice in Wonderland*? It was written by Lewis Carroll and is about a girl who follows a rabbit down a hole to an imaginary land where nothing is the same as in real life. In these photographs Olympia is acting out favourite scenes from the story, such as when Alice goes to a tea party with the Mad Hatter.

Do you have a favourite book? Which character from it would you like to pretend to be?

A book without pictures or conversations

from the *Wonderland* series 2004

2004

type C photograph

Private collection

Flying cards

from the *Wonderland* series 2004

2004

type C photograph

Private collection

Riddles that have no answers

from the *Wonderland* series 2004

2004

type C photograph

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

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Cultural Gifts Program, 2015

2015.113

'I would like to think that Olympia, like Alice, can make sense out of an adult world. In this work I wanted to explore Olympia's psychological and physical presence in the fictive role (belonging to fable and myth) that she steps into. While Olympia remains distinctively – acting the part of a child – her girl's presence latches onto a famous hallowed story, assuming a larger-than-life stature, a lyrical enhancement which is part Carroll's, part Tenniel's, part mine and part hers. Through the performance, Olympia's self is challenged as much as it is celebrated.'

POLIXENI PAPAPETROU, 2006

Pepper soup

from the *Wonderland* series 2004

2004

type C photograph

Private collection

Prize thimble

from the *Wonderland* series 2004

2004

type C photograph

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

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Haunted Country and Games of Consequence

After 2004, Papapetrou moved out of her studio to find new settings for her staged photographs. Her narratives also relocated, moving from well-known European tales to Australian stories and her own childhood memories and experiences.

The photographs in the series *Haunted Country* restage some of the most famous Australian tales of children who went missing in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Papapetrou's fascination with historical tales of lost children was driven, at least in part, by her own experience of being a child lost in the bush. Later, as an adult, she gave an account of her thoughts and decisions from the fateful moment when she set out alone to her terrified return many hours later.

The *Games of Consequence* series tells a more familiar story, in which children are shown absorbed in play-acting and games of their own devising. Drawing on her own youthful experiences of unsupervised adventures, Papapetrou invites us to share in the pleasures and terrors of childhood, the secret space where it is the children who make the rules, control the play and accept or reject one another with cruel abandon.

She saw two girls and a boy 1966 #1

from the *Haunted Country* series 2006

2006

pigment ink print

Private collection

Whroo 1855

from the *Haunted Country* series 2006

2006, printed 2019

pigment ink print

Private collection

Witness

from the *Haunted Country* series 2006

2006

pigment ink print

Private collection

'It was on an overseas trip in 2004 that I felt a yearning for the Australian landscape. I returned to the bush as an artist, inspired by the stories I read, both real and fictional, about children who had been lost in the bush. The figure of the bush-lost child is one of the poignant themes in Australia's cultural remembering. My desire was to create photographs that embodied the harrowing psychological aspects of these stories. I wanted to somehow draw the viewer into this emotional space, experience the undercurrent of the psychological drama unfolding, and make connections between past and present consciousness about land and country.'

POLIXENI PAPAPETROU, 2006

The Wimmera 1864 #1

from the *Haunted Country* series 2006

2006

pigment ink print

Private collection

Wild world

from the *Games of Consequence* series 2008

2008

type C photograph

Private collection

Miles from nowhere

from the *Games of Consequence* series 2008

2008, printed 2014

type C photograph

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Gift of Robert Nelson through the Australian Government's

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Song to the siren

from the *Games of Consequence* series 2008

2008

type C photograph

Private collection

Dreams are like water

from the *Games of Consequence* series 2008

2008

type C photograph

Private collection

‘The ideas for the pictures in *Games of Consequence* came from my childhood memories of play, whether I was out wandering by myself or playing with friends where, for much of the time, I was not overly constrained by adult supervision ... In exploring my childhood memories of play I wanted to reflect on the liberties that we had in these arcane spaces. I would like to think that I conveyed the idea of free wandering and self-determination of childhood experience before life became so heavily controlled by parental involvement and keen media interest.’

POLIXENI PAPAPETROU, 2008

The witch's house

from the *Fairy Tales* series 2003–14

2003

type C photograph

Private collection

The encounter

from the *Fairy Tales* series 2003–14

2006

type C photograph

Private collection

‘I would describe the pictures as storytelling, works that contain narratives about identity and how we create roles that sometimes take us to another world. I would say that I create spaces, creating a new reality from fiction and fantasy ... I try to achieve a balance between fantasy and reality by relying on narrative which straddles both; and so too with mood or atmosphere, lighting, costumes and the acting by the subjects. Perhaps the pictures could be described as a still from theatre or a film.’

POLIXENI PAPAPETROU, 2015

The girl who trod on a loaf so as not to spoil her shoe

from the *Fairy Tales* series 2003–14

2005

type C photograph

Private collection

Melancholia

In one of Papapetrou's most poignant series of works, *Melancholia*, Olympia plays the role of a clown. Wearing various forlorn masks and vivid costumes, Olympia assumes abject poses and projects wretched sadness. The choice of the clown figure in this series was made deliberately to provoke discomfort in viewers. In contemporary art, representations of this character are often associated with the grotesque and the uncanny. Papapetrou's clowns are, instead, sorrowful. Olympia is shown sitting in isolation against a black backdrop, playing the role of a lonely keeper of knowledge.

These images are made more affecting by the knowledge that the artist had just been given her second, and ultimately terminal, cancer diagnosis. Discussing the series, Papapetrou wrote, 'The works are titled to evoke the sad emotions often connected with the clown character and also death. ... In drawing a parallel between perceptions of the clown and the ontology of dying, it occurred to me that neither wears its true face and both are imbued by sadness and fear'.

Sombreness

from the *Melancholia* series 2014

2014

inkjet print

Private collection

Melancholia

from the *Melancholia* series 2014

2014

inkjet print

Private collection

'Something very poignant happened in the hospital. I didn't know I would be coming out. We had to make my funeral arrangements and so on. I said to my daughter, "Thank you so much for letting me photograph you and make this work with you". And she said, "No, Mum. Thank you, because we worked together to create something outside of ourselves". It's like a third character, another member of the family. I just feel it's a good thing that we've made all these pictures.'

POLIXENI PAPAPETROU, 2013

Pathos

from the *Melancholia* series 2014

2014

inkjet print

Private collection

Despondency

from the *Melancholia* series 2014

2014

inkjet print

Private collection

Grief

from the *Melancholia* series 2014

2014

inkjet print

Private collection

Sorrow

from the *Melancholia* series 2014

2014

inkjet print

Private collection

Decrepitude

from the *Melancholia* series 2014

2014

inkjet print

Private collection

Between Worlds and The Dreamkeepers

In the series *Between Worlds* and *The Dreamkeepers*, Papapetrou continued her exploration of the transformative power of masks.

For the *Between Worlds* series, Papapetrou changed Olympia and her other models into something more than human. By dressing the children in animal masks, Papapetrou created modern-day mythological creatures, beings that were neither human nor animal and therefore, importantly, not entirely of either realm. In these works, masks operate as a visual metaphor for the transitional phase between childhood and adult life.

The Dreamkeepers series once again brings an element of autobiography to Papapetrou's work, with some of the scenes and characters drawn from her own memories of childhood. But they also tap into viewers' collective memories. For example, we recognise the group with a camera as holiday-makers, and Papapetrou's choice of costumes conjures a sense of familiarity and nostalgia. Wearing grotesque human masks, Olympia and the other models are, on the one hand, 'playing' at being adults and, on the other, taking adults back to those moments in their own childhood where they watched, and learned about, adult behaviours and identities.

For kids

In these pictures the artist is remembering scenes from her childhood and recreating them. Olympia and the other children in the pictures are pretending to be grown-ups. They are wearing clothes that make them look like adults, and they are acting out things that grown-ups do. They are also wearing strange masks that make them all look like old people.

Do you ever imagine what it is like to be an adult?

The holiday makers

from *The Dreamkeepers* series 2011–12

2012

pigment ink print

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Gift of Robert Nelson through the Australian Government's

Cultural Gifts Program, 2015

2015.118

The shell collectors

from *The Dreamkeepers* series 2011–12

2012

inkjet print

Private collection

The photographer

from *The Dreamkeepers* series 2011–12

2012

pigment ink print

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Gift of Robert Nelson through the Australian Government's

Cultural Gifts Program, 2015

2015.119

'I decided to use masks in my work as the mask is a powerful device and creates paradoxes in the photograph. The mask has the power to shift identity from real to imaginary – both body and photograph transformed and fixed by the mask. By using masks on the children I was able to move beyond their identity as both subject and child and therefore speak in a more universal way about childhood. A mask can conceal the identity of the wearer but also expand the reading of the subject as a universal figure. The masked person is no one in particular, but can be anyone or everyone.'

POLIXENI PAPAPETROU, 2013

The wanderer

from the *Between Worlds* series 2009

2009

inkjet print

Private collection

For kids

Is this a person or an animal?

In this photograph Olympia has been changed into something that is half deer and half human. In other pictures she is dressed up like a dog on the way to a dance, or a rabbit walking along a beach. The artist is thinking about how, as we get older, we change from children to adults, but for a short time we are 'in-between'.

If you could be half animal, what animal would you choose?

The loners

from the *Between Worlds* series 2009

2009

inkjet print

Private collection

The harvesters

from the *Between Worlds* series 2009

2009

inkjet print

Private collection

The debutants

from the *Between Worlds* series 2009

2009

inkjet print

Private collection

‘Although the children appear as something we immediately recognise, they have been fantastically hybridised. Though in a sense absurdist, I portrayed the children as animals because I see parallels in their worlds. Animals enter our consciousness in mysterious ways and we look at them in order to understand ourselves and our emotional realm. For most of the history of philosophy, it is what we don’t share with animals that defines us as human. In a similar way, children are the other that defines adulthood, and for that reason, children pervade our consciousness, at times adorably and at times threateningly.’

POLIXENI PAPAPETROU, 2012

The reader

from the *Between Worlds* series 2009

2009

inkjet print

Private collection

It's All About Me and Eden

In 2016 Papapetrou photographed two distinctly diverse bodies of work exploring representations of young women.

The series *It's All About Me* was, in part, inspired by Olympia's analysis of social media and its impact on the behaviour of teenage girls. In 2013, Olympia, then aged sixteen, wrote an opinion piece, published in *The Age* newspaper, in which she articulated the inherent complexities of life as a teenage girl in the era of selfies and social media. Three years later, Olympia was instrumental in articulating her concerns once again, this time through art: selecting costumes and assuming the poses she knew so well from social media, and collaboratively creating photographs with her mother.

In the series *Eden*, Olympia is photographed beautifully festooned with a multitude of flowers. But these images are more complex than the simple adoration of youth and beauty; they also reference the passage of time. For Olympia, these images may be seen to signify the beauty of youth and the transition to adulthood, but for Papapetrou, the flowers also came to symbolise her own mortality, with the transient nature of cut blooms, their beauty and decay, a poignant metaphor for the transitory nature of life itself.

Ask me again when I am drunk

from the *It's All About Me* series 2016

2016

inkjet print

Private collection

I'm sexy and I know it

from the *It's All About Me* series 2016

2016

inkjet print

Private collection

It's all about me

from the *It's All About Me* series 2016

2016

inkjet print

Private collection

'Why are we girls competing to be the Queen of Pouts? Why do we scour through photos of celebrities and all our ambitious friends to find out who is the new princess of prurient poses? Even demure girls are tempted to strike sexually suggestive poses. But they must be careful, not because parents are looking but because they might not score any "likes" and might then feel a failure, unworthy among their peers.'

OLYMPIA NELSON, 2013

Sexy bitch

from the *It's All About Me* series 2016

2016

inkjet print

Private collection

Blinded

from the *Eden* series 2016

2016

inkjet print

Private collection

Heart

from the *Eden* series 2016

2016

inkjet print

Private collection

Amaranthine

from the *Eden* series 2016

2016

inkjet print

Private collection

Eden

from the *Eden* series 2016

2016

inkjet print

Private collection

‘When I was conceiving how to make *Eden* an odd thought kept running through my mind: if these were to be my last photographs, what would I have to say about my life and my work? As it turns out, that voice was prescient and I am glad to have followed my instinct to create work about how we are nature. By reflecting on the changing body of young people as they shed one skin for another, we are embedded in the cycles of life. The seasons of growth, blossoming and wilting are visibly illustrated in the life cycle of the flower, which also highlights our mortality.’

POLIXENI PAPAPETROU, 2016

MY HEART – still full of her

‘My children are now adults and I appear to be at the end of my life with terminal cancer. I cannot think of a more valid way to have lived the past twenty-five years as an artist and in particular tapping into that liminal and mysterious space of childhood, to have had the privilege of engaging in conversations with children, because this is where my inspiration came from. It did not come solely from my imagination, but rather from paying attention to theirs.’

POLIXENI PAPAPETROU, 2017

The end of life came for Polixeni Papapetrou in April 2018. At the time, the last exhibition mounted in her lifetime was on display in Sydney. Prophetically titled *MY HEART – still full of her*, it was an eloquent summation of maternal love and Papapetrou’s fascination with photography as a medium for storytelling. Partnering self-portraits from the start of her career with early images of Olympia from her archive, she mined the complexity of the relationships that were central to her life and work. Curator Natalie King, the artist’s close friend, encapsulated this, writing, ‘Here, mother and daughter are almost interchangeable, revealing their profoundly intimate relationship. Highly attuned and watchful, Papapetrou’s unembellished style possesses an unequivocal intensity and familiarity.’

Crouching Aphrodite

from the *MY HEART – still full of her* series 2018

2018

photo-screenprint, metallic foil, water-based pigment

Private collection

Thousand yard stare

from the *MY HEART – still full of her* series 2018
2018

photo-screenprint, metallic foil,
water-based pigment

Private collection

I am a camera

from the *MY HEART – still full of her* series 2018

2018

photo-screenprint, metallic foil, water-based pigment

Private collection

My ghost

from the *MY HEART – still full of her* series 2018

2018

photo-screenprint, metallic foil, water-based pigment

Private collection

I once was

from the *MY HEART – still full of her* series 2018

2018

photo-screenprint, metallic foil, water-based pigment

Private collection

Muse

from the *MY HEART – still full of her* series 2018
2018

photo-screenprint, metallic foil, water-based pigment

Private collection

Curtain

from the *MY HEART – still full of her* series 2018
2018

photo-screenprint, metallic foil, water-based pigment

Private collection

Giving birth to myself

from the *MY HEART – still full of her* series 2018

2018

photo-screenprint, metallic foil, water-based pigment

Private collection

To(ge)ther

from the *MY HEART – still full of her* series 2018

2018

photo-screenprint, metallic foil, water-based pigment

Private collection

The gaze

from the *MY HEART – still full of her* series 2018
2018

photo-screenprint, metallic foil,
water-based pigment

Private collection

Court beauty

from the *Phantomwise* series 2002

2002

type C photograph

Private collection

By the Yarra 1857 #1

from the *Haunted Country* series 2006

2006

pigment ink print

Private collection

The wave counter

from *The Dreamkeepers* series 2011–12

2011

inkjet print

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
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2015.117

'I decided to use masks in my work as the mask is a powerful device and creates paradoxes in the photograph. The mask has the power to shift identity from real to imaginary – both body and photograph transformed and fixed by the mask. By using masks on the children I was able to move beyond their identity as both subject and child and therefore speak in a more universal way about childhood. A mask can conceal the identity of the wearer but also expand the reading of the subject as a universal figure. The masked person is no one in particular, but can be anyone or everyone.'

POLIXENI PAPAPETROU, 2013

Everyone loves a slut

from the *It's All About Me* series 2016

2016

inkjet print

Private collection