

## Polixeni Papapetrou's Haunted Country

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Children have become a tabula rasa onto which the triumphs and failures of society are inscribed. When great projects are undertaken, the ostensible motivation is to make the world better for the next generation; when cracks appear in social systems supposedly established to facilitate better living, it is children who tend to fall through them. When things go terribly wrong for a child, his or her plight stands as a form of reckoning, not just for the individuals directly involved, but somehow for society as a whole. The names of young murder victims JonBenet Ramsey and James Bulger have been etched into the public consciousness; the nature of their deaths taken as evidence of an increasingly decrepit society. Australian photographer Polixeni Papapetrou has made a study of the iconography of childhood as a means by which to investigate issues of contemporary relevance. In her recent series "Haunted Country," the theme of the lost child is used as a metaphor for the sense of apprehension and rootlessness experienced by settlers in Australia, from the 1800s to the present day. Playing with iconic Australian tropes of children who have disappeared, she creates works that draw upon fact and fiction, actual and imagined circumstances.

The title "Haunted Country" suggests an ancient place imprinted with memories; it refers to the belief held by Australia's indigenous people that the land is a living entity. When white people first came to Australia, they were motivated by various concerns; some came unwillingly, as prisoners; others were primed with a belief that they could establish a better life in this "newly discovered" land. All arrived without any real knowledge of the place; their expectations had been colored by propaganda and buoyant speculation. Upon arrival, they found that the land was unlike any they had experienced--and that they had an almost complete lack of relevant survival skills. Many white people came to view the land as hostile rather than fecund, and the fact that Aboriginal people had prospered here for thousands of years prior to their arrival only emphasized the settlers' ignorance. Nineteenth-century graveyards are littered with headstones of those who died in unfortunate encounters with the bush--which was perceived by many as savage and melancholic. Papapetrou has drawn on a number of accounts from history for this body of work, in which the child, implicitly endangered, stands for the anxiety experienced by many of the early settlers.

Papapetrou's *Hanging Rock* works depict Victorian-era girls in crisp, lacy white frocks clambering over the famous rock formations near Melbourne. The girls' plight is a fictional one--set forth in Joan Lindsay's 1967 book *Picnic at Hanging Rock* and Peter Weir's 1975 film of the same title. In the story, the insinuated, uncontrollable

forces of the land lure pubescent schoolgirls either to their demise or to the edge of reason. It is an apt reference to the perceived menace of natural forces in the unrealistic plans of the settlers in Australia. It also alludes to another type of capricious transition: the physical journey through unfamiliar terrain all individuals undergo as they mature from child to adult.

Not far from Hanging Rock is the small town of Daylesford, where a real-life story of misfortune played out in 1867. Three young boys wandered off the beaten track in search of wild goats. Their bodies were found months later, huddled together--according to the local coroner, they died of "exposure and want." Newspapers of the time relished such tales of woe. Prurient written descriptions were often accompanied, incongruously, by charming illustrations that all but negated the gruesome nature of the events. In Papapetrou's interpretation of the Daylesford incident, the boys do not appear to be particularly distressed by their predicament; instead, they evince a calm self-awareness as they pose for the picture. Papapetrou's image is a nod to the media's documentation of the case, rather than a rendering of the victims' actual trauma.

Papapetrou's work manages, without explicitness, to tap into cultural anxieties pertaining to the past, the present, and the future. The destinies of the children in her work are uncannily familiar, both as harrowing stories one has heard, and as echoes of deeply ingrained fears--untouchable and enduring--of losing what is most beloved to forces unknown.