

Legend

By Adrian Martin

Searching for Marilyn: the very title suggests not merely that Marilyn Monroe is now gone, but that she was never really there to begin with. Pop mythology has enshrined her as that poor, unfortunate woman stranded between two identities: Norma Jean and Marilyn, the real person and the fabricated Hollywood icon, the flickering candle and the imperishable myth. But the poignancy of Marilyn's story comes from the fact that she was as lost to herself as she would forever be to her idolaters. The modern pop ethos is as suspicious of pristine, innocent origins as it is in awe of transcendent, incandescent stardom. Through telemovies, songs and a flood of biographies both elevated and trashy, we rehearse the primal division of Marilyn from Norma, but we finally believe in the humanity of neither figure; both are mere creations, images. And these images consumed, to the point of death, the individual who fragilely incarnated them.

Marilyn was double, and she was also - even in her lifetime - ceaselessly redoubled. When tales of her decline began to circulate in the early '60s, ingénue Stella Stevens played a blonde, showbiz wannabe eaten away by self-doubt and hitting the barroom skids all the way to prostitution in John Cassavetes' *Too Late Blues* (1962). Stag movie loops from the 1950s fool even modern viewers with their naked, tawdry, look-alike Marylins lolling about in an alcoholic, sexed-out, drug-induced haze - footage that, once recycled in Bruce Conner's 'found footage' avant garde '60s classic *Marilyn Times Five* or the Jennifer Jason Leigh erotic thriller *Heart of Midnight* (1988), now merges in the public consciousness with the latest revelations about suppressed photographs of a dissipated, partying Marilyn at some celebrity hideaway. In the '80s there was Madonna as Marilyn, the Material Girl recreating the staging of the "Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend" number from *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953) - but also, more on the independent/underground circuit, Australia's own Linda Kerridge in American movies including *Mixed Blood* (1984) by Warhol's ex-collaborator Paul Morrissey, a blonde bitch left alive just long enough after being shot in the head to be able to gaze on her blood-stained, white dress and laconically drawl: "I look like shit".

More than just about any another pop figure, Marilyn (like Elvis) is a mythic continuum holding together staggeringly diverse scenarios, associations and images: her early innocence and her late degradation; her inner naturalness and her prefabricated craft; her childlike charm and her 'bombshell' sexuality. She comes over as both domesticated and wild, guileless and predatory, scheming and dumb. All her most memorable movies, including *Niagara* (1953), *Bus Stop* (1956), *Some Like It Hot* (1959), *The Misfits* (1961) and *Monkey Business* (1952), play on the thrilling and ambiguous oscillation between these extreme possibilities contained in her persona.

Marilyn was born to cinema as a composite image in an era when - with the help of Widescreen and Technicolour - pop culture revelled in its own exaggerated artificiality and makeshift nature. Even in those years, the myth of Marilyn could scarcely be separated from the paroxysms of inspired infantilism offered by the likes of *Mad* magazine and Jerry Lewis comedies. It was only a small step from Marilyn to her grotesque parody, Jayne Mansfield (seized on gleefully as a screen icon by Lewis' mentor, Frank Tashlin, in *The Girl Can't Help It* [1956] and *Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter?* [1957]). Among her legion of serious commentators, Norman Mailer saw Marilyn as a forerunner (after Mae West) of camp irony, 'femininity as a masquerade'; just as Raymond Durnat slipped easily from a study of her physical and facial mannerisms to a rumination on "the joke in female impersonation".

Polixeni Papapetrou's art has long been devoted to a careful, loving study of postures, gestures and attitudes as immortalised in the many registers of pictorial representation (painting, photography, sculpture, film, publicity). Glamour, understood in its largest sense, is both her ethos and her subject. The 'poses' that constitute the lexicon of glamour exist for her in a kind of eternal, wall-less museum of archetypes and stereotypes - forever recreated within the present-day phenomenality of everyday culture.

Papapetrou's subjects - whether drag queens or Elvis fans, friends wearing logo-encrusted T-shirts or her own young children playing dress-ups - find themselves caught in a sometimes unwitting spiral of historical reference. In feigning the 'look' of an adored, 20th century star or pop culture type, they spontaneously (or with the artist's subtle prompting and *mise en scène*) recreate the expressions and stances of mythic figures as depicted in classic works of art. These depictions, in turn, refer to an anterior 'legend', an inventory of signs tied, via the code of allegory, to specific states, values, emotions and meanings. Thus the 'sexiness' of Marilyn, as rendered in Ben Jacobsen's living performance - itself a veritable vertigo of doubling, displacement and fantasy projection - comes to frame, in each triptych, figures such as Jean Marc Nattier's "Thalia, Muse of Comedy" (1739), Guido Reni's "The Death of Cleopatra" (c. 1635), or Bartolme Esteban Murillo's "The Penitent Magdalen" (1650-55).

There is an aspect of cultural study in Papapetrou's art - an archaeology of images, tracked relentlessly through the history of representations. The best comparison, on the levels of intricacy, intensity and elegance, might be the American experimental film artist Kenneth Anger, whose *Scorpio Rising* (1963) draws its real-life biker subjects into a fetishistic, subterranean image-history that begins with Marlon Brando and James Dean in posters and on TV screens and gleefully plunges back into depictions of Hitler, Christ and Satan. But there is also something measured and philosophical at work in Papapetrou's vision, tactful and yet quietly compelling. I am reminded of the uncanny phenomenon of 'eternal return' as imagined by Nietzsche and extended by disciples like Pierre Klossowski (in literature and art) and Raul Ruiz (in film): individual identities are instantly dissolved or 'dispossessed' the moment that any of us, knowingly or not, repeat or 'incarnate' a gesture performed, staged or recorded by someone else, somewhere - gestures without origin, but with a wealth of accumulated, phantom association. Marilyn was herself one such dispossessed soul.

Fittingly, the question that continues to dog Marilyn's legacy - could she really act, or was she just 'playing herself?' - goes right to the heart of Papapetrou's own explorations. One never knows, looking at the living subjects captured in her art, to what extent they are performing or 'putting on', believing or sending up, the images they wear as their second skin. Again, like the inscrutable mystery of Marilyn herself

- but also the mystery of each of us every day, in our clothes and make-up, our adopted attitudes and postures. Raymond Durnat saw in Marilyn's '50s screen artificiality "intriguing discrepancies (not to say montage effect) between her postures, gestures, and expressions É each part of her face fluttering contrapuntally from one identikit position to another." To wonder whether there was a 'self' hidden amidst all this manufactured, put-on imagery is, finally, to wonder there is a self inside any of us - or, instead, a flickering procession of ghostly apparitions haunting the facades of ephemeral pop culture, eternal high culture and, last but never least, our own impermanent bodies.

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