

Polixeni Papapetrou: Strike a Pose

By Adrian Martin

More than ever, contemporary photography in Australia (as in the rest of the world) is splitting starkly into two camps. On the one hand, there is documentary photography, bearing witness to the extremes of suburban grunge and the spontaneous effusions of daily life. And on the other hand, an extremely stylised type of photography which revels in artifice, in the constructed image.

Many artists incessantly cross the tracks and try to mix these two forms, but Melbourne-based Polixeni Papapetrou dedicates herself purely to the research of the artificial. Her models - dressed as Elvis or Marilyn or Alice in Wonderland - have an affecting flesh-and-blood reality, but everything around them is studiously unreal, from the props to the backdrops. Papapetrou is a master of staging, of that art known from theatre and cinema as *mise en scène* or 'setting the scene'. In that great aesthetic choice that all artists must make between the studio and the street, Papapetrou chooses the studio - even if it is a makeshift one tucked away in her home.

To judge how far Papapetrou has gone in thirteen years of exhibitions - all of them technically precise, conceptually tight and aesthetically assured - we need only cast a glance over her recent successful shows "Dreamchild", "Phantomwise" and "Saturday's Child". These exhibitions form a vast series of restagings of photographs by Lewis Carroll, as well as recreations of the famous illustrations that accompany his novels. The undoubted star of the series is the artist's striking young daughter, Olympia.

With the help of *trompe l'oeil* backdrops painstakingly provided by Papapetrou's husband Robert Nelson (art critic for *The Age*), Olympia becomes the reincarnation of Carroll's muse, posing in exotic, fantasy worlds that might be situated, say, in an imaginary Orient, or else somewhere 'through the looking glass'. There is no detail of furniture or clothing, not the smallest or slightest prop, which is not under Papapetrou's strict control. The values of tone and colour, light and shade, composition and framing are rigorously orchestrated to achieve expressive effects of mood and meaning.

But what are these images all about? They are neither a simple homage to the fertile imagination of Carroll, nor a politically correct deconstruction of Victorian male fantasies. They combat the kind of reading, sadly popular today, which finds in Carroll's dreams only traces of a dirty or perverse complex. Papapetrou is not out to expose the 'dark side' of Carroll's fancies; rather, she is trying to clear out a space in which to insert her own fantasy and imagination. She confronts the charged history of Carroll's imagery but also, in borrowing his idiom, creates a remarkably intimate mode in which a mother observes her daughter and watches her slowly

grow into a woman, as the child tries on and discards a myriad of masks both literal and figurative.

The notion of the mask and all it implies is central to Papapetrou's art. There is a kind of 'cultural study' in her photographs, a veritable archaeology of images tracked relentlessly through the history of visual representations. Her work devotes itself to a careful, loving, sharp-eyed study of the postures, gestures and attitudes that have been immortalised in the various registers of pictorial representation down the ages - painting, photography, sculpture, cinema, advertising.

Glamour, taken in its broadest sense, is Papapetrou's true subject. Her work inhabits a kingdom of appearances and masks, a modern parade of the Vanities. Beauty is a matter of costume, attitude, staging - of striking a pose. And the poses that constitute our contemporary lexicon of glamour exist in a 'museum without walls' - that flux of stereotypes and mythic archetypes we call pop culture.

Papapetrou's favoured models - whether drag queens or Elvis fans, friends wearing logo-encrusted T-shirts or young children playing dress-ups - find themselves caught up in a dizzy spiral of historical references. In adopting the look of an adored, 20th century star, they spontaneously (or with the artist's gentle nudging) recreate the expressions and stances of mythic figures depicted in classic works of art. For example, Marilyn Monroe as channelled by Ben Jacobsen, depicted in Papapetrou's series "Searching for Marilyn", is juxtaposed with strikingly similar figures in images such as Nattier's "Thalia, Muse of Comedy" (1739), Reni's "The Death of Cleopatra" (c. 1635) and Murillo's "The Penitent Magdalen" (1650-55). Not for nothing did Papapetrou name one of her early shows "Curated Bodies".

Since memories of the rock'n'roll music and Technicolour Hollywood fantasies of the 1950s fill our minds when taking in Papapetrou's images, we might reach for a comparison with the American filmmaker Kenneth Anger, who back in the '60s coaxed young, muscly bikers into posing as Brando or Jesus Christ while kitschy tunes like Bobby Vinton's "Blue Velvet" played on the soundtrack. But there is something quieter and cooler, more restrained and contemplative about what Papapetrou does.

There is a philosophical edge to her work, reminiscent of what the French artist, novelist and essayist Pierre Klossowski (brother of Balthus) made of Nietzsche's concept of the 'eternal return'. Klossowski argued that none of us can ever remain very solidly ourselves, because everyday we find ourselves unconsciously repeating 'immortal' gestures that have been performed millions of times before, by other people long dead, and also by our ghostly doubles in works of art. Klossowski believed this process turned us all into phantoms, 'dispossessed' beings.

Papapetrou's models sometimes have this haunted look about them, as if their desire to be glamorous and fabulous originates not in their own personal will, but in something beyond them. Perhaps they are possessed by vain, restless spirits hungry to relive their fleeting glory days of youth and beauty. Maybe - as Papapetrou's images suggest - even Marilyn or Elvis were not really 'one of a kind' but themselves merely reincarnations of some nameless, eternal 'type'.

The vividly evoked but spectral figures in Papapetrou's photographs are caught in a kind of furious, unstoppable vortex. On the one hand, they are free to play, to pose, to define their own fantasy of who they wish to be on any given day before the camera lens. On the other hand, the materials they have available at their fingertips for this play-acting are saturated, through and through, with the unwashable stains of history, culture and politics.

The situation is irresistibly like Gloria Swanson as Norma Desmond in Billy Wilder's classic movie *Sunset Boulevard*, a long-faded star descending the stairs in her forever-young delusion, calling out to her director: 'I'm ready for my close-up now, Mr De Mille.' Norma is no victim, just as Papapetrou's subjects are not victims - we find no trace in her art of that facile analysis of power relations (so prevalent in our whining 'culture of complaint') which blames patriarchy, capitalism or religion for anything that ails us.

The drama animating Papapetrou's work is, mercifully, of a quite different order. If her models seem a little vain and narcissistic, if they love themselves as Norma Desmond loved herself, that is because they must pit the force of their inner, personal desire against both the ravages of time and the influences of the external world. Like Papapetrou herself, sizing up and appropriating pre-existing forms from the complex histories of art and pop culture in order to breathe something personal into them.

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