

Polixeni Papapetrou: Games of Consequence

A young girl lost in thought emerges from a dark shadow, walking stridently and purposefully along the banks of Melbourne's Yarra River. She is clutching a skipping rope that trails off with a knot suspended mid-air. Gum trees glisten in the distance, reflected in the inky depths of murky water. Dressed in knee-high socks, pleated skirt and old-fashioned white sneakers, her eyes are downcast. Perhaps it is twilight – an eerie foreboding pervades the image as she steps perilously close to the river's edge. What are her preoccupations? Polixeni Papapetrou has photographed her daughter Olympia in *Dreams are like water*, luring us into the mysterious and enchanting world of childhood.¹

With the watchful observation of a photographer and mother, Papapetrou's intimate knowledge of her subjects lends a sense of complicity and trust to each image. A glance or gesture evokes the capacious realm of childhood with its associative range of loss, innocence and vulnerability. Infused with an emotional intensity, the series *Games of Consequence* avoids grand narratives in favour of a taut psychological edge. Captured with a cinematic flair, her staged tableaux present young characters amidst the Australian landscape. Papapetrou's frozen scenes are idyllic yet unnerving depictions of children at play, absorbed in their internal world of imagination, daydreaming and unfettered emotional states.

Papapetrou's fastidiously detailed *mise-en-scène* fuses landscape and portraiture with ease. Her formal control flexes the camera's hold on the unsettling tropes of youth. Costumes, props and carefully scouted locations reinforce a highly stylised sensibility to these scenarios, further enhancing their haunting beauty. Resisting digital manipulation, Papapetrou utilises natural light to heighten her vivid palette. Away from our familiar urban environment, Papapetrou's children act out roles that take us into a familiar but forgotten past. In doing so, Papapetrou induces what she calls the '...wonderfully heterogeneous dimensions of childhood, where the fear and danger mix with the angelic.'²

Props are deployed as the accoutrements of childhood games. A skipping rope, hula hoop, quoits and a blindfold accentuate the language of play with all its competitiveness, disappointments, humiliation and taunts. Whether whispering secrets in *The fall* or tugging a rope before a treacherous ravine in *Dight's Falls*, there is an underlying sense of malice and threat. Other photographs are more circumspect and enigmatic. In *Miles from nowhere*, the main protagonist reclines like *Lolita* on a banana lounge, her pink gingham frock offset by lurid, red nails. On the cusp of adolescence, Papapetrou's daughter gazes suspiciously but knowingly at the camera, relaxing in an arid field with a light aircraft nearby.

Papapetrou recalls her own childhood growing up in Port Melbourne with two

siblings. Free to roam the streets with her sister and baby brother in a pram, she relishes the memory of 'going for a Sunday drive' and road trips to Victoria's Lake Eildon and to country New South Wales. Now, she is accompanied by her own young family who journey to various locations and sites. This is a family affair. The landscape resides as a backdrop from the dry undulations of Lake Mungo in Wild World, the forest terrain of Ravenswood and the rugged, graffiti sprawl of Sisters Rocks in Stawell.

Papapetrou takes her directorial role and complex task of staging outdoors, beyond the controlled studio environment. Costumes are sourced from her own wardrobe and vintage stores: 'My mother, perhaps like many Greek migrants, was extremely fastidious and proud about good clothing...My mother made exquisite clothes for my sister and me and, judging from some photographs that I have retained, we did indeed look like a cross between dolls and adults...'3 Like her cast and crew, these children enact dramas from their mother's mind. Papapetrou's watchful maternal eye is combined with meticulous research and planning distilled into a thorough clarity.

Historically, photographs of the Australian landscape began modestly. The bush made its first appearance as a backdrop in photographs – commissioned predominantly for private, family albums – of rural properties belonging to prosperous settlers. Introducing aspects of the picturesque in the 1870s, photographers attempted to define the distinctive features of the Australian continent and flora. Stimulated by scientific developments (especially the interest in geological time and Darwin's theory of evolution), rocks and giant trees became favoured subjects.4 Papapetrou returns us to the picturesque tradition overlaid with complex emotional resonances: '... the landscape is portrayed as a metaphorical shelter, an arcane place where children can make discoveries about themselves and where their imagination can flourish.'5

At times Papapetrou's subjects are introspective and brooding. In Scout hall bride, Olympia is enveloped in a ghostly, white sheet, her gaze averted. Like a shroud or an improvised wedding dress, her costume evokes longing and yearning. Papapetrou has re-enacted a childhood memory of pretending to marry a local boy at the age of twelve with an equal measure of tenderness, distance and ennui. Moreover, her constructed images recall the earliest days of photography, especially Julia Margaret Cameron's fantastical depictions of Victorian childhood. Yet staged photography has more recently emerged as a trenchant commentary on an increasingly media-induced reality. Papapetrou adds further inflections with games that represent a vast emotional gamut from hurt and humiliation, to affection and jealousy. Lost in a beguiling narrative, the young characters in Papapetrou's fabrications wander without a story, escaping the inevitable fate of all tales: an ending.

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1. Since 1993, Papapetrou has been making works about children: 'Photographs of children hold a certain magic for me because, when we look at children, there are things we can't yet know: their future is a mystery.' Polixeni Papapetrou interviewed by Alasdair Foster, *Photofile*, No. 82, Summer 2008, p.21.

2. Polixeni Papapetrou interviewed by Cristina Franzoni, *Zoom*, 2008, forthcoming.

3. *Ibid.*

4. Helen Ennis, 'Land and Landscape', *Photography and Australia*, Reaktion Books, London, 2007, pp. 51-72.

5. Conversation with the artist, December 2007.

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