

POLIXENI PAPAPETROU HAUNTED COUNTRY

In the summer of 1977, I stayed with a school friend's family on their houseboat on Lake Eildon, a popular tourist destination a few hours' drive from Melbourne, Australia. While there, I decided to climb the mountain, Mount Enterprise in the National Park. On the day, I set off at 6.00 am. I thought that it would be a quick jaunt up and down the mountain and I would be back in time for breakfast. What was I thinking and why did I allow myself to go into the bush alone? I had never been in the bush before—I had never climbed a mountain—but I set off alone, unprepared, without water, armed with a walkie-talkie with flat batteries. Reaching the top of the mountain was relatively easy. I was young, had the stamina and all I had to do was hike upwards. But once at the top, I did not know how to come back down. The land looked unfamiliar. I was lost.

After many hours of walking, I found a dry creek bed and figured that it must lead to water. I followed the creek bed, found my way back to the lake and walked around many inlets until I found the houseboat. I was sunburnt, scratched, dehydrated; and, overcome with the relief of returning, I collapsed into a flood of tears. I had been spooked beyond my imagining. The unfamiliar sounds of the bush and the animals that I had previously seen as cute and cuddly had terrified me. The height of the trees combined with the impenetrable ground-cover closed in on me and made me dizzy and disoriented. Between 1977 and 2004, I successfully shut the land out of my life, but it came back to haunt me.

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.

The scenes were staged in the natural environment at sites in Victoria such as the Wimmera, Daylesford and Hanging Rock, where children became lost. My two children, and their friends, acted as the lost subjects. I cast the children in different epochs, but with the constant presence of the Australian landscape: inspiring, ancient, uncontactable, not completely owned. Having experienced first-hand the ocean-like vastness of the bush, it is no wonder that children became stranded, distracted, disoriented. Perhaps they just saw the land, as I did, as their playground rather than something to be feared. As I continued making the work, I dwelt more and more on the theme of the bush-lost child as a metaphor to reflect upon other

ways that children become lost to adults. In these images, I have tried to capture feelings about Australia, but also about children and their eternal vulnerability in both the natural and social orders. There is a metaphorical 'other' space in the Australian landscape where boundaries do not exist and landmarks are hard to locate. Those who wander into this space run the risk of becoming the prey of the land and being forever lost to us.

In these stories, the lost children return to us in different ways. Some lost children are found alive, but in the public imagination they never seem to grow beyond the age they were when they were lost, (such as Jane Duff lost with her two brothers in the Wimmera in 1864); some are brought back dead such as the three boys lost in Daylesford in 1867 (thus allowing the parents to bury their children), but other lost children are not found at all, disappearing without a trace. If these children come back, if only in the imagination, they return to remind us of the inhospitability of the land and sometimes its inhabitants.

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