

## Polixeni Papapetrou

In *Authority* (2000), Polixeni Papapetrou juxtaposes photographs she has taken of friends wearing designer T-shirts with well-known examples of royal and aristocratic portraiture. Thus on either side of a picture of Sir Walter Raleigh we have a photo of an attractive Italian-looking woman twisting her hands in a Versace singlet and a powerfully-built dark-skinned man flexing his muscles in a Helmut Lang. On either side of a painting of Elizabeth I we have a shaven-headed man looking off right in a striped Gaultier and an Asian woman staring confrontationally hands on hips in a Versace Sport. The faces and bodies all have a certain "look" about them: carefully-groomed, self-confident and self-possessed, just the sort of 20 and 30 year old somethings we would expect to see involving themselves in the art scene. (And, indeed, the catalogue confirms that they are all personally known to the artist.)

At first sight it is tempting to think that this is some kind of exercise in sociological decoding, that by means of the particular brand of T-shirt each sitter chooses to wear we can "read off" what kind of person they are. (This is, of course, the very thing the designers here are trying to sell: the idea that by buying, for instance, a Donna Karan T-shirt we are somehow participating in her aura, separating ourselves from the ordinary run of people.) The juxtaposition with the various royal and aristocratic portraits, then, can only strike us as a mocking of the distinction to which each of these sitters aspires, this democratically-dispensed form of mass elitism. (There is nothing sadder than seeing this anonymous-looking group of individuals all trying to be different, the exclusiveness each brand name strives so hard to generate flattened out by seeing them all together like this.)

There is undoubtedly something of this cruel edge in Papapetrou's other studies of various subcultures: the working class Elvis worshippers of *Elvis Lives* (1997/8), their own resolutely ordinary features in such contrast to the King's almost unearthly beauty; the bronzed and oiled bodybuilders of *Fallible Archetypes* (1997), whose phallic pretensions are undermined by setting them next to actual architectural columns; the female bodybuilders of *Curated Bodies* (1996), whose features subtly morph into those of drag queens; or the drag queens and transvestites from the same show, who dress like grandmothers in some faded and obsolete ideal of glamour. In each of these series, there is a clear classificatory intelligence at work, ruthlessly dissecting the ambitions and delusions of the photographer's chosen subjects. In the analytical formality of its juxtapositions and the harsh almost forensic black and white of its documentation, what we seem to be looking at here is not so much anything artistic as a type of embodied sociology.

This is indeed the way Papapetrou's work is often read and even curated - as either a 1970s-style John Bergeresque critique of our "ways of seeing" or a 1980s-style demonstration of the "performativity" of sexual roles. But if this were all that

was at stake in it, we would be right to be dismissive of it. It would be patronising, high-handed, pseudo-objective, with the photographer believing that she observes things from a neutral, secure point of view, speaks the truth of appearances in an empirical or even scientific way. Fortunately - and it is particularly the later series that show us this - the work is more ambiguous, more conflicted, more aesthetic, than this. The photographs' sociological import is qualified or suspended by their status as works of art.

Let us go back, for instance, to the portraits of Authority. What we said we saw there was an attempt somehow to categorise the various sitters by the labels they wore (this like efforts by sociology to analyse consumption: to divide up households according to the objects they use, the furnishings they choose, the television shows they watch, the sports they participate in...). We are what we wear, Papapetrou seems to be saying - a desire to be unique that is mocked not only by the nearby kings and queens but also by the classificatory activity of the photographer herself. And yet what is overlooked by this - and this is the real comparison to be made to the portraits next to the sitters - is that humans are not entirely defined by their image but also play with it. They manipulate it to their advantage; they pose. In other words, they are not simply subject to the gaze of the photographer but are able to take it into account, turn it against itself. They are able to tell a lie in the form of the truth (to dissemble under false appearances, not to be what they pretend to be), and thus can tell the truth in the form of a lie (we in turn can see this, take into account their own difference from themselves).

This is the distinctively human relationship to the image, which can treat it not as something prescriptive but as a mask or screen. And this opens up the real stakes in Papapetrou's photography, for what she is finally trying to photograph is not at all the ostensible subjects before her camera but precisely her own gaze, this gaze she might somehow catch reflected in them. This is the real contract initiated between her and her subject, which is not at all the unilateral, exploitative one understood by such critics as Berger. It opens up such possibilities as Papapetrou's subjects deliberately posing for her but having to appear not to, when their self-absorption would no longer be simply unconscious but something hard-won and a kind of triumph over the photographer (think here of her bodybuilders) or Papapetrou being able to discern in her subjects' apparent disdain and indifference, something that would aspire to the haughtiness of a king, an attitude precisely only staged for and existing within the photographer's gaze (think here of her wedding photos from Curated Bodies).

Such complexities and inversions are properly Alice in Wonderland-like in their twists and turns - and it is these Papapetrou has systematically begun to explore in her more recent series involving her daughter Olympia. For what more furtive and labyrinthine a way of seeing herself would a woman photographer have than photographing her daughter? Beneath all the masks and disguises to which she subjects her (Olympia as a baby, Olympia as a Turkish Pasha, Olympia as Lewis Carroll's Xie Kitchin - this last reminding us so much of a certain other Olympia in the history of art), what Papapetrou is fundamentally looking at, what she is trying to find, is herself looking back. And what more profound disguise - disguise in the proper sense of something both revealing and concealing, something functioning as a kind of trap for the gaze - than one's own daughter? In these recent works, Papapetrou somehow stumbles upon, like Alice in the Looking Glass, the true and uncanny aspect of having children: when one looks at one's child, is it oneself or it is another staring back?

© Copyright Polixeni Papapetrou  
All rights Reserved  
Printed from <http://www.polixenipapapetrou.net/>