

## On Between Worlds 2009

### **Between Worlds**

Susan Bright

The time has come, the Walrus said,  
To talk of many things:  
Of shoes - and ships - and sealing wax  
Of cabbages - and kings –  
And why the sea is boiling hot –  
And whether pigs have wings

*The Walrus and the Carpenter, Lewis Carroll, 1872*

Privacy laws regarding the photography of children, and especially the "Droit à l'image" in France which dictates that it is illegal to photograph minors in France, Spain and Germany without written parental consent has led to there being no frontal photographs of children in the media. News agencies have been sued by European parents where they have discovered their children imaged in newsworthy events – from the Tsunami to Carnivals. It would seem that public space is not so public anymore. Because of this law a kind of autocensorship in portraying children has occurred - a young body has become a chopped up one: half leg jumping, an ear covered with hair, a little hand rising to the sky and the very popular shot of a child from the back. These laws create a problem in that the future of documentary pictures of children in public spaces will only be from emerging countries where no one will put in claims and no such laws exist, like Steve McCurry's famous Afghan girl or thirteen year old Omayra Sanchez dying in the mudslide in Colombia in 1985

<sup>i</sup>. If that girl had been French we would never have seen her. In twenty more years nobody will know what it is for a European child to buy groceries, like Henri Cartier Bresson's boy buying a bottle of wine, nor will we ever see them with their parents - and most certainly never in school. <sup>ii</sup>

Laws such as these and the anxiety resulting from images of children in the media are one of the main motivating forces behind Polixeni Papapetrou's new series *Between Worlds*. She decided to portray children as something else, as creatures that are one the one hand recognizable, but also hybrid. In doing so she blurs the lines of what we immediately recognize and what we don't and gives real reason for anxiety, where otherwise there is little cause for alarm.

Papapetrou trends the line between between fantasy/theatre, mythology/reality, archetype/play, male/female, child/adult and animal/human. As with all her work this series tells a story that includes her autobiographical relationship with her children, but it also says a lot more about the condition of childhood - its place in our culture

and how we react to images of children in photography. There is much handwringing about representations of childhood, but little that actively and conclusively addresses the collective consciousness and real confusion over what is acceptable and where it is disseminated. As a result draconian rules apply across both art and media. But to what effect? Complex issues of the darker side of parenting and childhood are censored leaving only stereotypical and timorous images which contrast greatly with overly sexualized images of teenagers. There seems to be nothing in-between. Papapetrou has a perspicacious understanding of this and the confusing signals sent out as children turn into adolescence and this series is an attempt to address that transition with all the emotions and confusion it may well raise.

Therianthropic creatures such as Pan, the Minotaur and deliciously seductive mermaids have long occupied an established place in myth, legend and folklore. Indian deities such as Ganesh are no strangers to the hybridization of human and animal and in contemporary fine art the artist Matthew Barney, in his seemingly indefatigable *Cremaster Cycle* (1994-2002), repeatedly returns to moments of early sexual development in a swirling self odyssey of elaborate half human, half animal characters. What is rarer, however, is the mixture of children with animals. Why? An untouchable subject? Too transgressive perhaps? Are children deemed too innocent to attempt to merge with something unhuman?

But the subjects in *Between Worlds* are not nefarious; in fact they can be rather sweet as in *The Debutants*. Others are harder to read, but there is still a feeling of trust there which is a strange reaction to get from characters in photographs. The hard working pigs in *The Harvesters* care for the land and you feel you are in safe hands with the benevolent rabbits in *The Loners*. *The Caretaker* is perhaps the most unsettling, but is that because gorillas, although loveable, are also threatening? They have not been domesticated and trained to serve humans like many of the other animals depicted here. We love wild animals as long as they are not too wild or cause too much of a threat. Interestingly *The Caretaker* was photographed in the bush fire ravaged Kinglake National Park where the indigenous Xanthorrhoea tree (formerly referred to as blackboys) miraculously survived the fire. These grass trees evolved in isolation to the rest of the world and date back to the Jurassic Period<sup>iii</sup>. The combination of these two ancient life forms, ape and flora, in such a desolate landscape and their combined racist histories make for an uncomfortable and potent combination.

The hallucinatory and hypnotic landscapes play as an important a role as the characters do – it's their relationship with one another which is key to the works. In Papapetrou's earlier work on childhood she explored the imaginative space that children inhabit. As the children grew older she moved from the realm of fantasy into the natural world. This seemed to be a natural move as the children she was working with were growing older and their experience of the world was shifting from the imaginative interior world of dress-ups and make-believe into a more pragmatic experience with the world outside. "This is when I turned to the Australian landscape to tell certain stories about growing up. I haven't portrayed the Australian landscape as a series of vistas, but have used it to explore narratives about how children animate—and exist in—nature and how nature accepts them."<sup>iv</sup> Perhaps also, allowing her children to enjoy dressing up is a chance for her to benefit from them being childlike before they grow up and become too self conscious or disinterested in such games.

Not because it is the most recent, but *Between Worlds* seems the most confident

and accomplished of Papapetrou's work to date. Taking away any direct references to the history of photography and films and making the subjects more ambiguous (as she also did with *Games of Consequence*) leaves room for speculation, conjecture and confusion. It seems she is also 'between worlds' as she watches her children become teenagers, and the mixture of sadness, excitement and the unknown is transferred into the work. As a mother she has to change too. These transitional places in one's life are often the most creative, and as we grapple for answers and clarity what is often realized is ambiguity and confusion that reigns supreme. Like fairy stories, Papapetrou uses absurdity to make symbolic sense of world she struggles to understand. It's that careful balance of autobiography, collective anxiety mixed up with wonderful and almost carefree fantasy that reverberates throughout the series and the combination makes for bold and unsettling works. They are not easy photographs, and like the characters *The Walrus and the Carpenter* by Lewis Carroll they invite an audience to 'talk of many things' and, more importantly, risk finding answers they might not like.

<sup>i</sup> By Frank Fournier, 1985. The shot caused a moral and ethical outcry and in 2005 was one of the winning shots for the World Press Photo Award.

<sup>ii</sup> Ayperi Karabuda Ecer, Vice President Pictures/Graphics, Reuters News Agency was enormously helpful in providing information on the droit à l'image and information in this paragraph is from correspondence with the author, 12th June 2009

<sup>iii</sup> From correspondence with the artist, 2nd June 2009

<sup>iv</sup> From correspondence with the artist, 17th March 2009