

Pose-impose

The body of work by Polixeni Papapetrou collectively entitled *Authority* deals with fashion and power. The work involves a dialogue between contemporary and pre-industrial people and their clothes, connecting radically different conventions which, in spite of lying on either side of a historical divide, carry on a tradition of projecting *Authority*. The comparison is not without irony. Parallels between ancient majestic guises and contemporary fashion would be chilling were it not for the buoyant and parodic theatricality with which Papapetrou and her sitters take on the weight of their logos.

Although the industrial revolution sprang from the Enlightenment, the ideal of rationality prevailing over sentiment has seldom prevailed. Industrial progress at no stage lessened the class tribalism observable in pre-industrial society; indeed, as Marx identified, the proliferation of consumer goods in the bourgeois economy produced an artificial semiotic order which he characterized as fetish value. Far from effecting an egalitarian distribution of mass-manufactures, the exponential growth in buyable objects inspired a heightened awareness of social difference. By means of consumption, people identify themselves in highly codified images, publishing-as it were-their cultural knowledge and standing, all aspects which give them *Authority* within their class.

The contemporary network of codes is synthetic and abstracted from the signs of work and station that certain old sumptuary conventions of jewelry, colour and textiles signalled with precision. Industrial manufacture structurally encourages standardization; so the variety of goods is distinguished by labels rather than by design. The best example is the designer T-shirt. T-shirts mostly conform to one design; they are ubiquitous and are worn by people of diverse classes. There is very little difference in shape or construction between T-shirts of any number of brand names, from the expensive to the cheap. In order to distinguish one brand from another, it is necessary to devise a logo, prominently displayed on the front, which declares the identity of the manufacturer and relates the wearer to an authorized image promoted globally through the media.

The prominence of the graphic design compensates for the lack of presence and uniformity of the textile design. The T-shirt is unequivocally distinctive as DKNY, Versace, Gucci, Calvin Klein, Dolce & Gabbana or whatever, even though they are all identical when turned inside out. The great themes of cultural difference and class superiority are expressed by graphic means.

Authority is a series of photobased triptychs in which a grand aristocratic portrait is flanked by contemporary people-in fact friends of the artist-who wear designer T-shirts of famous brands, all sporting the hallmark of fame and exclusivity, the logo. By and large, casual-wear is the only context in which the logo features prominently. T-shirts are weekend attire, which does not quite equate with the

formal costumes of the princes and gentry with whom Papapetrou compares her contemporary sitters. Suits are commonly associated with *Authority*; and indeed most of the contemporary men in Papapetrou's images would wear crisply ironed cotton shirts and silk tie-if not suits as well-during the week. But that mediocre uniform which convention imposes upon men does not signal the kind of *Authority* that Papapetrou wants to explore.

In looking at the new medialized manifestations of cultural *Authority*, Papapetrou's work refers to the historical precedents of royalty and power, implying that certain ideological motifs of the archaic aristocratic order have survived. Visually, there is little to connect the clothing of the contemporary sitters to the lords and ladies of England and Italy. Like the difference between ornamental baroque palaces and our minimal square-set galleries, the difference between the decorative regalia of 1600 and the plain flat T-shirts is striking. As opposed to the sensual language of Renaissance and baroque costumes, the T-shirts are appreciated abstractly. The logo does not make the T-shirts ornamental, any more than the name of an artist on the wall of a contemporary gallery makes the building decorative. By means of the logo, the T-shirt is literally read. There are few tucks and folds or beading or complicated panels. The letter-forms are projected on the blank canvas, as it were, and you instantly classify the shirt into the commercial taxonomy of the fashion houses of prestigious cities in the northern hemisphere.

The designer T-shirt is a common T-shirt that has been impregnated with media. The wearer carries not only the cotton but the connotations imparted by the advertising program of the corporation. The media content adds the value; it is the margin that brings the shirt its higher price-tag and the wearer a higher status. The rhetoric of media is democratic; but it does not genuinely overturn ancestral paradigms of power and privilege.

In Papapetrou's work, the *Authority* based on the logo and fashion glamour is presented as a new reign replacing the traditional dynastic figureheads of a former aristocratic *Authority*. What is the difference between the two? Both are theatrical. We see people posing with an air of serious force, right down to weeny children who seem as imposing as ancient rulers. But unlike the traditional concept of royalty, the new glamour is not predicated on blood or sperm. Potentially, the logo T-shirt promises universal access, giving ordinary people the mark of high status without the wearer needing great wealth or power. But to bring off the air of confidence that the clothes promise, you need some of the sexiness by which advertisements project the virtue of the clothes.

Thus, blood (as in aristocracy) is replaced by hormone (as in the erotics of advertising). Metaphorically speaking, the rights of accession in the two periods are respectively gained by different body fluids. Where once *Authority* was passed on by semen-congealed as title and sometimes expressed as blood lines-it is now transmitted by the libidinous talent of making the body present confidently in its powers of attraction and assertion.

By comparing friends wearing designer logo T-shirts with art-historical images of royalty and landed gentry, *Authority* implies that the fashion houses such as Prada or Moschino are the new and future royalty. The archaic exemplars of *Authority* are simply rejuvenated through contemporary looks. The logo-wearers are the new vassals, proud followers of a high-born idea: they translate the exclusive paradigms of loyalty for a single monarch to an allegiance to fashion itself. The work also admits, pessimistically, that nothing has changed. Great capital (at the manufacturer's head quarters) is still the source of prestige; and the people who

lack the capital are still the ones who provide the support.

The potential for pessimism in Papapetrou's vision is offset by a humour which her sitters project in their assumed aloofness, their theatrical severity, their condescending air of benignity, their steadfastness of gaze and posture, their imperious brow and stances paradoxically poised between the fashion magazine and the European museum. The histrionic gravity of the sitters echoes the equivocal status of the logo T-shirts that they wear with such pomp. The designer T-shirt epitomises the mass production and consumption of standardised accessible designer-wear pieces, providing access to fashion and modernity to all classes. For some fashion-conscious people, the designer logos play a crucial role in defining their fashion identity and status, enabling them to act out roles and belong to a higher (fashion) order. Potentially, Papapetrou could have framed her sitters as such victims. But that would be a different clientele. Papapetrou's sitters are not necessarily logo-consumers; and the shirts that they wear do not necessarily belong to them. They are friends with impressive looks who, once propositioned, have consented to pose for the camera in logo T-shirts for the sake of an artwork. But in taking on the role, they seem naturally to acquire the air of nobility, suitable for being placed alongside a baroque courtier.

As with all Papapetrou's work, *Authority* acknowledges the performative element of photography; and part of the artistic charge of the images is due to the presence and gifts of her sitters. Photographer and sitter share an understanding of fashion. Fashion makes theatricality seem natural, as if fashion-consciousness allows people simply to step into the breeches of anterior princes by the laws of destiny. It is a feeling and a myth that can only be represented ironically.

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