

## Mystical Places

In over a decade of practice, the artist Polixeni Papapetrou has exclusively focused on individuals involved with the manipulation of appearance and identity, such as Elvis impersonators, body builders and transvestites dressed as Marilyn Monroe. In recent years her subject has been her daughter, Olympia, re-enacting the works of the Reverend Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, better known by his pseudonym, Lewis Carroll. In this series Papapetrou draws upon his children's book *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, and his photographs of girls and young women in staged or fictitious situations. The project was initiated by Olympia, wanting attention, and the arrangement has since developed organically. Out of play between mother and daughter emerge these startling images, each one a window, or looking glass into the imagination.

This series represents a shift in subject from adult role-playing to that of children, which furthers the connections between reality and fiction, between the self and the other, and between art and play that are the backbone of Papapetrou's art.

Play is generally considered to be an important aspect of children's development. The role of fantasy is critical as it allows children to develop creativity, concentration, logic and problem solving skills, to rehearse real-life situations and to strengthen family bonds. In play the child tests out the rules of the world, both physical and social. The flexibility of a child's understanding of the relation between the real and the unreal is famously explored in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, a tale about a fantasy land, distinguished by outlandish shifts in roles and in scale.

In his analysis of 'play', French philosopher and writer Roger Caillois, classified games into the four essential impulses of chance, competition, mimicry and vertigo. The latter two are driven by the law of temporary escape and loss of the true self into illusion and are apt descriptions of Papapetrou's recent works and of her sources. Vertigo, resulting from destruction of the stability of perception, is evident from the opening of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* with Alice taking a long fall down a rabbit hole, "Down, down, down. Would the fall never come to an end!", before landing in a world where she undergoes a series of dramatic metamorphoses.

Mimicry involving the escape from the self into another form or being is evident in Dodgson's photographs. These document children imitating other identities such as 'beggar girl' or 'Chinese merchant'. To have Olympia and friends re-enacting the play of these girls is a doubling of mimicry, or a role-play of role-play.

Furthermore, the photographs themselves contain slightly disorienting or vertiginous spaces. Scenes from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* are played out against the giddy illusions of painstakingly painted trompe l'oeil sets based on the

book illustrations by Sir John Tenniel. In contrast, many of the recreations of Dodgson's photographs are set against an inky, depthless black background, where the scenes appear to float in indefinite space. Location and ground appear mutable as perspective, a tool for making space fixed, is stood on its head by submitting to the caprice of theatre, merging its two contending elements of vertical and horizontal-the wall and the floor.

In tandem these two aspects of play, mimicry and vertiginous adventure, combined in Papapetrou's series, provide a fascinating depiction of imagination. Papapetrou's representations of Olympia and friends re-enacting Alice's adventures set up a contrast between the intelligent, self-aware gaze and reality of Olympia and the enchanting fictitiousness of the painted backdrops. The scenes appear to demonstrate the process of the individual consciousness escaping into a fantasy world. Alternatively, other scenes in front of a black background situate the children amongst real objects, and appear to document, from outside, the external evidence of play. Rather than illustrate an imaginative world they leave more up to the viewer's own imagination.

These photographs by Papapetrou utilise the similarity in creative process between art and play. The creation of a fictitious reality and the latitude for innovation are common characteristics between art and play, and the sense permeating the works is one of imaginative wonder and curiosity at what can be learnt from another world or perspective. Olympia offered the title for the exhibition from a song on a favourite television program, "Mystical places of happiness and peace: a wonderland, my land of dreams". Similarly, a pertinent quote from Alice as she journeys through Wonderland is "curiouser and curiouser!"

© Vivienne Webb 2004

*Vivienne Webb is the Curator, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney*