

‘Photographing is not about taking the world as an object but making it become an object, exhuming its hidden alterity under its pretended reality, to make it rise like a strange attractor and fix this strange attraction in its image.’

Jean Baudrillard, *Because the illusion is not opposed to the reality...* Descartes & Cie, Paris 1998

It was in discovering a work of the American photographer Diane Arbus that Polixeni Papapetrou felt her first great emotion in photography. The pupil of Lisette Model, Diane Arbus drew up a troubling portrait of America of the '60s notably by photographing people beyond the norm, the mentally handicapped, twins, transvestites, people of tiny stature. Without talking of direct influences, the work of the American artist constitutes a major source of inspiration in Polixeni's own work.

Polixeni Papapetrou is an Australian artist, born and living in Melbourne. Mentioning her nationality is an important fact because her work is inspired by nature—very present on this continent in its enigmatic dimensions—but it is also inspired by historical events that conditioned the Australian people. All her photographs tell a story with direct references to specific events.

Inspired by childhood and indeed by her own childhood, she draws us into a poetic world, surreal and dreamlike, where the references to art history and photography are a constant source of inspiration and where the influence of literature, with the notable inclusion of *Alice in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll, reinforces her contentions in the matter of childhood.

In her series on lost children called *Haunted Country* from 2006, she reappropriates the iconographic codes of Australian painters like Tom Roberts, Fred McCubbin and Hans Heysen to refer specifically to the tragic history of children missing in the bush during the nineteenth century. Real or turned into phantasms, the illustration of these children lost in a hostile and inhospitable environment strongly affected the minds of many generations of Australians. With this series, the artist began to make work centred on fear, the anguish of disappearance and abandonment. She interrogates here how children can develop naturally in a hostile environment, all the while being dependent upon adults.

Polixeni pays particular attention to clothing that gives precise details as the reference points to historical events. Made mostly in Victoria, the images of the series *Haunted Country* highlight the psychological as well as physical appearance of anxiety. *The Wimmera* tells of the incredible disappearance of three children in 1864 who were found alive after nine days. In this work, she evokes the notion of survival. Here the children seem occupied by harvesting brush to build a hut to rest. We discover that very hut in the image of *Daylesford # 2* where three boys who disappeared in 1867 are asleep. *Whroo* evokes the waiting, the questioning and

eventually the anxiety before the unknown. The trace of the return path is no longer visible. Head down, each child seems touched by the situation. They are paralysed by the prospect of their inability to find their home again.

In the series *Games of consequence* from 2008, references to art history are less present. Here the issue is really the theme of childhood, play, loneliness and boredom. If again the scenes are always situated outdoors in a very present nature, the photographic device is mastered by Polixeni. Taking advantage of ambient light supplemented with flash and shooting on color negative in a photographic camera completes the *modus operandi* of the photographer. She accentuates the strangeness of nature. The resulting shadows give an additional strength at each frame. The little girl walking with a decisive step with her skipping-rope and with a disturbing black river in the background illustrates again the power behind her images. The scene of two young girls of which one is found tied to a tree represents the whole ambiguity and cruelty of children's games. The evocation of the theme of exclusion in *The Fall*, where two young girls seem to reject a third from their games, illustrates the violence in the often conflicting relationship of a trio.

Childhood, adolescence, the passage between the world of childhood to maturity is at the heart of the photographs of Polixeni Papapetrou. It reminds us that children and adults do not live in the same imaginary worlds. If the artist first discovered the photographic work of Lewis Carroll before reading *Alice in Wonderland*, she found in the character in Alice many similarities with her own history.

Like Alice, we penetrate the universe of Polixeni as if crossing into another space; we do not find abstract ideas in it, no boring moral, but a poetic universe in which a reader wears the mask of a bear with a schoolgirl uniform, where penguins are agitated and confabulate as ambassadors according their own logic. A world that resembles that of dreams. In the series *Between Worlds*, created in 2009, we are positioned within that other space where children wear masks while recreating comical and absurd situations linked to the magic of theatre, as in the image of *The Players* where the reverence and salutations of the girls figure the childish games of "you should be king and I the queen".

The use of masks in all the images from the series *Between Worlds* takes on an oneiric quality in the sense that the artist addresses the question of identity. Children or adults? Who is hiding behind the animal heads? We do not know and it ultimately does not matter. Ralph Eugene Meatyard, who used members of his family in his work, and Diane Arbus have directly influenced Polixeni in their work where the characters wear masks.

Unlike the serial and systematic approach of the Dutch photographer Rineke Dijkstra, who made her name with her portraits of teenagers on the beach and whose work subscribes to a documentary approach, Polixeni Papapetrou works rather in the form of sequences with children and adolescents who are close to her. The work of Polixeni Papapetrou subscribes to a poetic narrative photography where her highly constructed tableaux, linked to her own childhood, refer to a dream world and represent the whole theatricality of life.

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