

Weekend Fin

BEHIND THE MASK

Serious illness led Polixeni Papapetrou to focus on her inner world. The Melbourne artist muses on life, death, and her favourite works. By Katrina Strickland.

Polixeni Papapetrou is articulate about not only her photographs, which have been exhibited around the globe and are held by many Australian institutions, but also about her cancer. The 52-year-old Melbourne artist was diagnosed with a rare form of breast cancer in 2007. It was a traumatic time that had a strangely positive effect on her work in subsequent years. “There was no longer any firm script to follow, I ceased to be attached to theories, worries, anxieties, and particular narratives that one is under pressure to follow in art,” she says. “Figures I saw on the street would trigger memories from childhood, and I started looking at how my inner world belonged in the real world.” Papapetrou felt “as fit as a fiddle” at the start of November. A month earlier she had passed the five years clear of cancer mark, in celebration of which this ever-stylish dame bought herself a new wardrobe. Over the course of a mid-November day, however, she became sick enough to ask her husband, art academic Robert Nelson, to take her to hospital. The news turned out to be devastating: the cancer had returned, this time in the peritoneum. It is not treatable. There are things Papapetrou is grateful for. That the artistic life she pursued after giving up a career in corporate law in 2001 has involved her children Olympia and Solomon, who have posed for her since they were young, and her husband, who has painted backdrops, held lights and light reflectors, and been chief driver, navigator and prop handler. Olympia and Solomon are 15 and 13 respectively now. “I’m glad I made these pictures of



the children because I have given them a record of their childhood, and the experience of working very closely with both me and Robert,” she says. “The kids would lie on the day bed and watch Robert paint the backdrops and talk to him. It might sound strange to other families, but for us it has been very rewarding.” Less rewarding was getting caught up in the 2008 furore over nude depictions of children sparked by the work of another Melbourne photographer, Bill Henson. The outraged turned on Papapetrou when a photo of a naked Olympia, aged six, graced the cover of *Art Monthly*. New stricter government protocols for artists working with children were developed as a result. The experience was bruising, but on the upside, it sent her work in a promising new direction, depicting children only with masks on. The year 2013 was meant to be a busy one for Papapetrou, who held her first show overseas in Montreal in 2005. In May she will represent Australia at Fotográfica Bogotá, the largest photographic festival in Latin America, and a month later a solo show of her work will open in New York. Back in her home town, Nellie Castan Gallery will exhibit her new and final series, *The Ghillies*, in March, and in May the Centre for Contemporary Photography will survey her early work, mostly black and white images depicting drag queens, body builders, wrestlers and Elvis impersonators. It has not turned out as planned, but Papapetrou is neither falsely upbeat nor paralysed with fear. “It is what it is.”



The Loners (2009)

This picture reminds me of couples who only have each other, and are coming to the end of their lives. It is often a time when they move to the coast, or go walking on the beach. It’s about the pathos of the human condition, which I think a lot of my work is about. It’s tender and bittersweet. I have used masks since the brouhaha over depicting children. And actually, I think the work has become more interesting. Rather than focus on the known identity of a child, the anonymous figure becomes more universal. These characters are no one in particular, but in some ways they represent us all.



The Beating Drums (2003)

Childhood must feel a bit like this. You have all these adults telling you what to do. “Say thank you”, “don’t be rude”, “go to bed”, “I’ve had enough of you”, “eat this”. The voices are like these beating drums in your ears. This is about a child saying “enough already, just stop all this noise and let me be”. It is one of the works I made referencing Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. The cake plate and knife comes straight from Carroll. The bodyless hands are the voices of the anonymous adults who just won’t give up.

IPAD
See our gallery
for more photos



Salt Man (2012)

I knew about the salt lakes in Mildura that turn pink in October. I broke my ribs on September 17, but despite this I was determined to go to the Mallee in search of them. I said to [my husband] Robert, “if I don’t go now I will never make these pictures”. So we set off, me with broken ribs, to the Murray Sunset National Park. This is my son Solomon in a ghillie suit, which are used for camouflage in hunting and by the military, and in online computer games. Solomon was desperate to have one, and really wanted me to photograph him in it. This series was conceived by him. It is also my last series. I found out that my cancer had returned a month later.

The Wimmera 1864 (2006)

Top left: Stories about children lost in the bush are one of the ways we filter the alienation our early settlers must have felt. This picture portrays the three Duff children who were lost in the Wimmera in 1864. They were found barely alive nine days later by an Aboriginal tracker called King Richard. One of the children, Jane Duff, became a national heroine but King Richard didn’t. The work is also about the interaction between the settlers and indigenous Australians, for whom the land was not an alien or dangerous place. It was home.

Miles from Nowhere (2008)

Centre left: Growing up the child of Greek parents in Australia, I felt we were miles from somewhere. Nowhere was Australia and somewhere was Europe, and it was a six-week boat trip in between. This work reminds me of my childhood: it is my young self dreaming. Where might this little plane take me? The reclining pose and gaze of Olympia, looking straight back to us, reminds me of Manet’s *Olympia*. I love her pink fingernails, too. We were there at Lake Mungo (in south-western NSW) on a bit of a break and I painted our nails just for fun.

The Mourner (2012)

Bottom left: This is the last costumed photograph that I took of Olympia alone, and for that reason it is very special to me. We were both born under the sign of the rat in Chinese astrology, hence the rat mask. What is frighteningly prescient about this picture is that I have depicted her as a mourner. At the time I made it, dying would’ve been the last thing on my mind. I knew of course that she would be my mourner one day, but not so soon. Some people might find this chilling, but for me it suggests that nothing is accidental in life.

Progressive:
Sir Thomas
Stamford Bingley
Raffles was a poor
Londoner with
little education.
He succeeded
because of his
independent
vision. Photo:
Getty Images

Imperial failure who had the last laugh

He fought with the East India Company, but founded Singapore, Bernard Porter writes.

Thomas Stamford Bingley Raffles, the founder of modern Singapore, was an imperialist – no two ways about that – and imperialists aren’t much loved in progressive circles these days. But if you have to have them – and colonial expansion of one kind or another has been the rule rather than the exception in world history right back to the cro-magnons – Raffles seems a decent sort. This is one of the reasons he was considered such a failure, by and large, by other imperialists before his coup of 1819, when he secured the island of Singapore for his employer. The East India Company, of which he was a servant, wanted him only to squeeze profits out of the stations of which he was put in charge. (It was a capitalist company, after all.) But all of them ended up in debt. Raffles wanted to do good for their inhabitants and couldn’t see how

that could be done without investment. He insisted that this would pay dividends eventually – happy populations would produce more – but the company’s shareholders didn’t do “long term”. So he was sacked from his posts in Java and Sumatra and criticised for exceeding his orders – for example, by abolishing slavery there off his own bat. When he retired through ill health, and lost almost everything in a shipwreck on his way home in 1824, he received no compensation and no pension, and was required to pay back some of his salary. Most canny 19th-century imperialists did better for themselves than that. (But then most of them – every one of Raffles’s colleagues, according to Victoria Glendinning, author of a new biography of Raffles – were Scots.) Raffles was a poor Londoner –

though he was born at sea – with next to no formal education, he got a job at 14 as a clerk in East India House, and went on, and up, from there. He succeeded mainly through his charm and ability, although he had some influential connections, which he had had to cultivate – and luck. He was distinctly “pushy”. That caused jealousy and resentment among his competitors for jobs, especially when it pushed him higher than his social origins seemed to merit. “Though a clever man,” wrote one of his detractors, he “was neither born nor bred a gentleman.” When the Prince Regent knighted him in 1817, some of his colleagues referred to him as “Sir Knight”. (He, on the other hand, thought he should have been made a baronet.) There’s an interesting general point to be made here: many of the leading lights of the British empire in the

19th century are not easily categorised as upper or middle or lower class, but came from the interstices between the classes: men and women uncomfortable with their social positions. It often gave them more independent views than those more conventionally one thing or the other. As well as being anti-slavery (not so rare then), Raffles also opposed cock-fighting, gambling and the death penalty – except for murders “by Amok” (in the course of riot). He was for free trade but against large-scale capitalist exploitation: “When I see every man cultivating his own field I cannot but think him happier far than when he is cultivating the field of another.” His main virtue, and the reason for any success he had in the East Indies, was his interest in and genuine empathy for cultures other than his own. He learned the local languages,

for example, and got along on terms of perfect equality with the people. One of his reasons for picking on Singapore Island for the East India Company’s great new entrepôt between India and China was that it had once, 600 years before, been the great “Lion City” of the original – pre-Muslim – Malayan civilisation. When he took it over (by treaty) it had declined to just a few fishing villages; so he was hardly appropriating a going concern. Within three years it had 10,000 inhabitants. Today it has 5 million. Glendinning’s new work is unusual in including almost as much about Raffles’s relatives and friends as about him. This is as it should be, as they were crucial to his career as well as to his happiness; especially his two wives, the vivacious Olivia, who died in 1814, then the strong and resourceful Sophia, who bore him his children and fanned his reputation,

and her own, after Raffles’s death. (Her memoir of him hardly mentions Olivia.) He loved them dearly and they him, accompanying him everywhere, over mountains and through jungles in terrible humidity, even when Sophia was heavily pregnant. (One of their babies, like Raffles himself, was born on a ship.) They also loved their children. One of the reasons for the deaths of four of them at a young age in Sumatra was that Raffles and Sophia couldn’t bear the idea of shipping them off to England, as was the usual practice. Sophia proved to have a stronger constitution than her husband, who died of a kind of seizure in 1826. He was small and slight, prone to over-exertion, both mentally and physically, and often laid low by fevers and headaches, the latter of which may have been due to a huge “arteriovenous malformation” found during an autopsy on his skull.

That may also account for the flaming rows he had latterly with his erstwhile friend Colonel William Farquhar (another Scot), who claimed he should have given equal credit for the foundation of Singapore. Raffles had a black side. But it’s his statues that grace Westminster Abbey and Boat Quay in Singapore; and his name that adorns the famous hotel. And it is he who has attracted most of the biographies, including this relatively straightforward – there’s not much analysis – but marvellously readable, personally illuminating and highly entertaining new one. They don’t make them like Raffles any more. © The Guardian Raffles and the Golden Opportunity by Victoria Glendinning, published by Allen and Unwin.