

POLIXENI PAPAPETROU



The Beauty of the Harem

OLYMPIA MASKED

9 August – 16 September 2002



Ballarat Fine Art Gallery
40 Lydiard Street North
Ballarat VIC 3350
Phone: (03) 5320 5858
Gallery Hours daily 10.30 to 5.00

BIOGRAPHY

Born: 1960 Melbourne

Lives and works: Melbourne, Victoria

Education: University of Melbourne (Bachelor of Arts 1984), University of Melbourne (Bachelor of Law 1984), RMIT University (Master of Arts, Media Arts 1997), currently undertaking PhD in Fine Arts, Monash University.

Solo exhibitions include: *Olympia Masked*, Ballarat Art Gallery; *Searching for Marilyn*, Monash Gallery of Art, Melbourne; *Authority*, Australian Centre for Photography, Sydney and Centre for Contemporary Photography, Melbourne; *Olympia's Clothes*, Stripp Gallery, Melbourne; *Elvis Immortal*, Bendigo Art Gallery and Old Treasury, Melbourne; *Fallible Archetypes*, Australian Centre for Photography, Sydney; *Curated Bodies* Centre for Contemporary Photography, Melbourne; *Elvis Lives (in Melbourne)*, State Library of Victoria.

Recent group exhibitions include: *Play*, Plimsoll Gallery, University of Tasmania; *Photographica Australis*, Canal de Isabel II, Madrid, Spain; *Telling Tales: The Child in Contemporary Photography*, Monash University Gallery, Melbourne; Bendigo Art Gallery; Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane; Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts; University of South Australia Museum of Art; Campbelltown City Bicentennial Art Gallery; *What John Berger Saw*, Canberra School of Art Gallery; Monash University Gallery, Melbourne, Orange Regional Gallery, University of South Australia Museum of Art, John Curtin Gallery, Perth, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane; *Striking*, Campbelltown City Bicentennial Art Gallery, Bendigo Art Gallery, Mildura Arts Centre, Geelong Art Gallery, Monash Gallery of Art, Melbourne; *WorkStation*, Platform, Melbourne; *The First Age*, West Space, Melbourne; *Immortality*, Centre for Contemporary Photography, Melbourne; *For My Part*, Centre for Contemporary Photography, Melbourne.

Awards include: Australian Post-Graduate Award 2002, Australia Council Visual Arts/Craft Fund, New Work Grant 2000.

Collections include: National Gallery of Victoria, State Library of Victoria, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, National Library of Australia, Canberra, Ballarat Fine Art Gallery, Monash Gallery of Art, Melbourne, Artbank, Sydney, Bendigo Art Gallery and private collections throughout Australia.



The artist wishes to thank Robert Nelson and our daughter muse Olympia, Dr Rex Butler, University of Queensland, Asko Ryhanen for his flawless printing of the work and Monique Ueckerman (Latrobe Photographic), Belinda Fry for her assistance and my mother Eftihia Papapetrou for making the costumes.

Polixeni Papapetrou is represented by Kalli Rolfe Contemporary Art, Melbourne
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OLYMPIA MASKED

What characterises Polixeni Papapetrou's work, and distinguishes it from any form of sociology, is a certain *reflexivity* on the part of its subjects. That is, her sitters are not defined by their image, but also play with it. They manipulate it to their advantage; they *pose*. They are not simply subject to the gaze of the photographer, but are able to take it into account, turn it against itself. They are able to tell a lie in the form of the truth (to dissemble beneath false appearances, not to be what they pretend to be) and thus can tell the truth in the form of a lie (we in turn can see *this*, take into account their own difference from themselves).

This is the distinctively *human relationship* to the image, which can treat it not as something prescriptive but as a mask or screen. And this opens up the real stakes in Papapetrou's work, for what she is finally trying to photograph is not at all the ostensible subject before her lens but her own gaze upon it, this gaze she might somehow find reflected there. This is the contract initiated between her and her sitters, which is not at all the unilateral, exploitative one theorised by such critics as John Berger. It opens up such possibilities as Papapetrou's subjects deliberately posing for her but having to appear not to, when their self-absorption would no longer be merely unconscious but something hard-won and a kind of triumph over the photographer (think here of her bodybuilders) or Papapetrou being able to discern in her subjects' apparent disdain and indifference, an attitude only staged for and existing within the photographer's gaze (think here of her wedding photos from *Curated Bodies*).

Such complexities and inversions are properly *Alice in Wonderland*-like in their twists and turns—and it is these Papapetrou has begun to explore in her more recent series involving her daughter Olympia. For what more furtive and labyrinthine a way of seeing herself would a woman photographer have than photographing her daughter? Beneath all the masks and disguises to which she subjects her (Olympia as a baby, Olympia as a Turkish Pasha, Olympia as Lewis Carroll's Xie Kitchin—this last reminding us so much of a certain other *Olympia* in the history of art), what Papapetrou is looking at, what she is trying to find, is herself, herself looking back. And what more profound disguise — disguise in the proper sense of something both revealing and concealing, something functioning as a kind of trap for the gaze—than one's own daughter? In these recent works, Papapetrou somehow stumbles upon, like Alice in the Looking Glass, the true and uncanny aspect of having children: when one looks at one's child, is it oneself or it is another staring back? To put this another way, what Papapetrou is looking for is precisely a *distance* between Olympia herself and her various disguises, a certain reserve or withdrawal—and it is this, paradoxically, that would be Papapetrou herself, that would be brought about by Papapetrou, the real gift a mother can give her daughter.

LIST OF WORKS

The Beauty of the Harem 2002 toned gelatin silver print 100x 120cm

The Fair Equestrian 2002 toned gelatin silver print 100x 120cm

American Brave 2001 toned gelatin silver print 100x 120cm

Indian Squaw 2002 toned gelatin silver print 100x 120cm

Chinese Mandarin 2001 toned gelatin silver print 100x 120cm

Chinese Lady 2001 toned gelatin silver print 100x 120cm

The Beauty of the High Seas 2002 toned gelatin silver print 100x 120cm

Turkish Pasha 2002 toned gelatin silver print 100x 120cm

Jack Tar 2002 toned gelatin silver print 100x 120cm

Winter Clown 2002 toned gelatin silver print 100x 120cm

Court Beauty 2002 toned gelatin silver print 100x 120cm

Cop 2002 toned gelatin silver print 100x 120cm

Legal Counsel 2002 toned gelatin silver print 100x 120cm

Chef 2002 toned gelatin silver print 100x 120cm

The Gypsy Queen 2002 toned gelatin silver print 100x 120cm



Jack Tar