



# LOST PSYCHE

POLIXENI

PAPAPETROU







Polixeni Papapetrou's *Lost Psyche*  
and the ghost of consciousness

History is a narrative, where consecutive events determine one another. In the process, this analysed story suggests that human development is linear: it takes us from primitiveness to sophistication in a motif of progress that we cherish.

The master-narrative of progress is flattering because it tells us how advanced we've become in science and technology, plus cultural and social advances. The narrative is self-congratulatory; and from its implicit swagger, there is also a tacit authority, which claims ownership of progress for the authors of history.

But history can also be considered as a balance sheet, where anything gained also represents something lost. A bit like a wardrobe that will only expand so far before the doors won't close, history works on the principle of 'one thing in, one thing out'. For every gain, there is also a loss. If the balance sheet included a column for the environment, history is in free-fall, where more and more devastation is wrought by ever-increasing consumption of energy and other resources, heedlessly promoted by capitalism which has no natural restraint or ecological ethics.

History is also humbling. We can no longer write poems like Dryden, just as we cannot paint like Rubens, write music like Bach or Mendelssohn. We no longer draw or make music in the house; few people can knit or darn; and with every advance in medicine, we consider ourselves more fragile and dependent on treatments. As with the proliferation of pharmaceuticals, we have an exaggerated supply of goods and services that makes us dependent right down to the way that we define ourselves as brand-bearing consumers (which Papapetrou eyeballed in *Authority* in 2000).







In her series *Lost Psyche*, Polixeni Papapetrou ponders history again. Most of her previous work has touched on the past (like the masked work *Phantomwise* of 2002), even the cultish recent past (like *Elvis immortal*). As a lover of Titian and Shakespeare and history itself, Papapetrou has never entertained a linear view of the past. For her, history indicates a view of culture that is more congruent with mortality, with the biological swell of great things arising and perishing, brilliant and melancholy, august and yet brittle. Without judgement, she reorients history as phenomenology: it contains a bracing dimension of loss which is congruent with that fatal sentiment lodged in our unconscious, that our very being—our psyche—is ultimately lost.

Bringing together hand-painted scenic backdrops, reproduction Victorian paper masks, a smattering of props and her teenage children Olympia and Solomon as actors, Papapetrou weighs up the persistence of some historical conditions and the disappearance of others. She begins her series with *The Immigrant*, where the figure seems washed up on a stormy deserted shore. Her dress belongs to the nineteenth century, which indeed saw large waves of migration to reinforce economies such as that of colonial Australia. But her work gestures to the hostile terms by which the dispossessed today negotiate the perilous passage to a new coast for a new life: to begin again.

Two works speak directly about narrative and the literary gift of the voice: *The Storyteller* and *The Poet*. Though running from the rhapsodic to the harrowing, these images contemplate the art of the yarn or rhythmical utterance in a world where stories are industrialized, held by global corporations with massive dissemination networks in publishing, music, film and television. The storyteller is a bird by a billabong, with ancestry in the *commedia dell'arte*, not only suggesting the flight of theatrical fan-



tasy but the local, the Australian landscape, where traditions of telling yarns once flourished as much as TV does today.

*The Poet*, like Tischbein's *Goethe in the Roman campagna*, is contemplative, with an illustrious mantle; but devastation is all around him in a wasteland of broken slabs. He could sing but no one would listen. Poetry as a genre is seen as redundant, as with *The Troubadour*, whose circus tent recalls Piero della Francesca's *Dream of Constantine*. The quest of the emperor might be likened to the restless journeying of the independent musician to find a toehold in today's media; but the divine intervention that encouraged Constantine doesn't arise and the troubadour sits on a suitcase in the enervating prospect of unemployment.

Social rank and its patterns of patronage fall out of history, as in *The Duchess* (with its echoes of Goya's *Duchess of Alba*) or *The Antiquarian*, who resembles many a noble in eighteenth-century painting. They are archetypes that now attract suspicion; and yet privilege and access to other people's patrimony still persists in terms that are less declared and more cunningly dissimulated today. So too the damsel of *The Orientalist*, who is like a projection of an Asiatic fantasy. The legitimacy of the fantasy is gone but the reality persists in more twisted forms of commercial seduction.

The business vigour of Asia is acknowledged in *The Merchant*, appealing to a time when larger enterprises conducted wholesale trade, and retail was left to small shopkeepers. Now both ends of the spectrum are subsumed in a jealous continuum, where global corporations control brands and advertising, taking the products way beyond the dock and the counter and into the private imaginary, by means of marketing and advertising.



*The Summer Clown* is a joyful work which warmly answers Papapetrou's *Winter clown* from *Phantomwise*; but the amiable spirit of the work nevertheless queries the continuing relevance of the clown in an age of 3D animation. Further, with its charming attachment to the weather, the picture implicitly asks whether we still experiences the seasons as we once did. The blithe rock-hopping of the figure might be compared to the lyrical detachment of *The daydreamer*, who is the last invention in Papapetrou's *Lost Psyche*. Like *The Summer Clown*, the figure of *The Daydreamer* is relaxed and happy, as chirpy as a bird, but with a gift of reverie which is largely gone, as the very word 'dream' is now co-opted as a synonym of aspiration, ambition, determination, plan, something that can be recommended and sold to you.

*Lost Psyche* is always about lost cultural innocence, where culture gets too smart and ends by messing with an earlier equilibrium. Papapetrou identifies these moments not to promote gloom but to recognize all the parallels that make for redemption. Parts of the psyche are undoubtedly lost; but Papapetrou promises and proves that they can still be poetically contacted.

**Robert Nelson**

Robert Nelson teaches at Monash University, Melbourne and is art critic for *The Age*. He is married to the artist.















































## List of works

**series: *Lost Psyche*, 2014**

*The Day Dreamer*

100 x 150cm

*The Immigrant*

100 x 150cm

*The Summer Clown*

150 x 100cm

*The Poet*

100 x 150cm

*The Orientalist*

100 x 150cm

*The Troubadour*

150 x 100cm

*The Storyteller*

100 x 150cm

*The Antiquarian*

150 x 100cm

*The Merchant*

100 x 150cm

*The Duchess*

150 x 100cm

pigment prints

editions of 6 + 2AP

An abstract painting with a textured, layered appearance. The colors are primarily light blues, yellows, and purples, with some darker blue and green tones. The brushstrokes are visible and expressive, creating a sense of movement and depth. The overall effect is ethereal and dreamlike.

# STILLS

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