

Under my skin
Polixeni Papapetrou



Under my skin

‘deep in the heart of ...’

Under my skin represents a selection of work drawing on four photographic series by Polixeni Papapetrou, one of Australia’s leading contemporary artists who has been exhibiting her photography since 1986 to an ever-growing audience and critical acclaim. The selection focuses on Papapetrou’s ‘masked’ series, i.e., those series in which the human ‘actor’ or actors in her photographs literally wear a mask. Although this would seem to be a more predominant feature of Papapetrou’s photography since 2008, it dates in this exhibition with images from her *Phantomwise* series (2002/03).

The appearance and indeed idea of the ‘mask’ has been central to Papapetrou’s practice which has consistently challenged the norms of representation, namely through portraiture and photography. It is a practice which has also been acutely aware of its own levels of artifice: as photographic/ documentary record, as art, and in the exchange or performance between the photographer and her subjects. These ‘subjects’ have ranged from Elvis Presley worshippers (shot in front of Melbourne’s Elvis Memorial, for *Elvis Immortal*, 1987-2002), drag queens and bodybuilders (*Curated Bodies*, 1996; *Body Building*, 1997-2003; *Searching for Marilyn*, 2002), to various people from her personal networks including her daughter, Olympia, who has regularly featured in Papapetrou’s work since her appearance as an infant in *Olympia’s Clothes* (1999), posed in a white bonnet and dress beside a Mona Lisa print cushion.



Polixeni Papapetrou, *Gatsby Gal*, 2003, from *Phantomwise* series (2002-03), pigment ink print, 85 x 85cm, images courtesy the artist and Stills Gallery, Sydney

Supporting this notion of the mask – the illusory nature of appearance, of worlds within worlds – is the works’ broader reference to canons of art, religion, literature and advertising, and to the mythologies and archetypes underpinning them. In this respect, Papapetrou’s images pose a carefully considered interrogation of such canons while entering into a lively contemporary dialogue with them. A work like *Patent Gender* (from *Curated Bodies*, 1996), with its dual portraits of a glamorous transvestite and glistening bodybuilder, playfully exposes the mythology of masculinity and, in turn, the very performance and fluidity of gender. By presenting masculinity through two extremes: one man disguised as a woman and the other superhero-like, everything in between is thrown into question. This is part of the work’s potency, its capacity to destabilise and ‘unmask’ realities, urging us to reanimate our own identity within the spectrum of what is real, imagined or desired.

Although the idea of the mask in Papapetrou’s work moves well beyond those images which depict a central mask or head/body covering of some description,



Polixeni Papapetrou,
Ocean Man, 2013,
from *The Ghillies*
series, 2013),
pigment ink print,
120 x 120cm

it is interesting to give these images a focus, albeit in a very abridged form through *Under my skin* which shows eleven works from four series which comprise fifty-nine works in total. Each of these series already give focus to the mask as a unifying visual thread and device, and allude to the central thematic and philosophical role of the mask within Papapetrou's overall practice. The selection for *Under my skin* however, largely curated by both myself and the artist, gives new meaning and context to the mask focus, drawing on work from a broader period of practice (2002-2013) while aiming to impart some sense of each series to the viewer. In essence, the power of Papapetrou's photographs takes effect just as well for a single still image as when appreciating the still as part of a particular narrative.

The works *Ocean Man* and *Scrub Man* come from Papapetrou's most recent body of work, *The Ghillies* series (2013), which premiered at Melbourne's Nellie Castan Gallery in 2013.

The title derives from the Gaelic word 'gille', meaning lad or servant, and manifest in contemporary vernacular as the camouflage 'ghillie suit' used in hunting, with the densely stringed mesh of the suit making the wearer appear like a shrub or vegetation in the landscape.

Each figure or figures in the series' fifteen images wears a ghillie suit in various landscape settings which makes it easy to imagine 'The Ghillies' as a place rather than some hybrid species, with each figure identified in the work's title: *Scrub Man* and *Ocean Man* are joined by *Stump Man*, *Hattah Man*, *Hattah Woman*, *Dune Man* and *Mallee Man*, among others. The photographs were largely taken in the Mallee region in Victoria and New South Wales but on many levels *The Ghillies* landscapes take on a more fictional and symbolic character. Even as we may appreciate any identifiable Australian-ness in them, they are part of a deeper, more fundamental imperative: of the earth to its inhabitants, of mortality.

Ocean Man is set on an archetypal shore: incoming tide, distant, flat horizon. A gathering of grey cloud overhead seems to echo the form of Ocean Man who stands centre-foreground, his own form echoing the tide's rippling mass. *Scrub Man* is equally archetypal, a scene shimmering with colour and light and in which Scrub Man appears more frontal, the suggestion of a lone, sad socket for an eye showing through the ghillie suit. The suit has no real camouflage function in *The Ghillies* series (despite the way each form embodies its setting) which ultimately forces the question of what or who is at prey in these images. Under the skin of whatever these truths may be also rests the restorative power of play in *The Ghillies* series, with names such as 'Ocean Man' and 'Scrub Man' reminiscent of childhood game lingo, where camouflage and transformation may just as easily arise from an act of belief, or make-believe, as from visual trickery alone.

The land, or landscape, has become a more central engagement in Papapetrou's work over the past decade, moving from painted/constructed tableaux to outdoor rural-like settings with her *Haunted Country* series from 2006 set in various regional Victorian locations. Born out of the artist's own traumatic experience

as a child lost in the Australian bush, the series reflects a turning point in her own readiness and desire to experience this bush again. 'Between 1977 and 2004', Papapetrou writes, 'I successfully shut the land out of my life, but it came back to haunt me'.

The land clearly haunts in *The Ghillies* though less so in the two other landscape-based series informing this exhibition, *The Dreamkeepers* (2012), and *Between Worlds* (2009-12). The three works from *Between Worlds* in *Under my skin* share a haunted legacy with their bushfire-blackened, gothic-style settings but they are not typical of the overall series which also registers scenes of fantastical delight and intrigue.

In *Between Worlds* the figures all wear animal masks while in *The Dreamkeepers* they wear masks which resemble old folk and which are decidedly eerie and absurd in their artifice. In both series the 'actors' are played by adolescents and children, including Papapetrou's two children, Olympia and Solomon.



Polixeni Papapetrou, *The Lighthouse Keepers*, 2011, from *The Dreamkeepers* series, 2012, pigment ink print, 105 x 105cm



Polixeni Papapetrou, *The Digger*, 2009, from *Between Worlds* series (2009-2012), pigment ink print, 105 x 105cm

Despite the barrage of negative attention surrounding her work and its childhood themes in the wake of the so-called (Bill) Henson controversy in 2008, Papapetrou has continued to explore childhood and adolescence as a valid subject of art and critical enquiry. It is tempting to read her masked figures post-2008 as a kind of retreat from this controversy. Whether animal or geriatric, the masks effectively obscure the face of the wearer, affording the protection of anonymity while making the wearer's participation in constructing the image more about the imaginary potential of identity per se rather than individual expression. Both series continue to push this imaginary in challenging ways but the fictive element, the lines drawn between nature and culture, are more pronounced and less prone, perhaps, to misinterpretation.

grown-up and infant, representational and real, dispels simplistic notions of human development where childhood is understood as a sanctified ideal rather than a dynamic interplay of numerous competing influences – personal, parental, and cultural, for example.

Phantomwise attests to a more innocent and self-contained time in the Polixeni/Olympia-mother/daughter relationship, to a time when Papapetrou the artist was less troubled perhaps about portraying this intimacy or blurring its modes of enquiry. Needless to say the actors and stakes and indeed the entire landscape have changed since then, with Papapetrou's work continuing to get at and under the skin of deep-seated creative and ethical issues of our times.

Maurice O'Riordan

Director, Northern Centre for Contemporary Art,
Darwin, June 2014

Papapetrou's *Phantomwise* series from 2002-03 appears to reflect a more innocent age. Olympia, the subject throughout, is younger, maybe four or five years old. In spare studio interiors, she is photographed in black-and-white playing a wide cast of characters and types: *The Gypsy Queen* (2003), *Chef* (2002), *Indian Brave*, and *Court Beauty* (2002), among others. The masks she wears all sit above her nose, morphing into painted head-wear such as feathers (for *Indian Brave*) and an Oriental coiffeur for *Chinese Lady* (2002), and with painted, cut-out eyes concealing her own. The effect is unsettling: the grafting of



Polixeni Papapetrou, *The Caretaker*, 2009 from *Between Worlds* series, 2009-2012, pigment ink print, 105 x 105cm

Under my skin is showing at the Northern Centre for Contemporary Art, Darwin, Gallery 1, 7 June to 5 July 2014: nccart.com.au

Curated by Maurice O’Riordan and Polixeni Papapetrou, the exhibition draws on work from four series by Papapetrou: *Phantomwise* (2002-2003), *Between Worlds* (2009-2012), *The Dreamkeepers* (2012), and *The Ghillies* (2013).

Polixeni Papapetrou is a Melbourne-based artist with a Master of Arts (Media Arts) from RMIT University, Melbourne (1997), and a PhD, Monash University, Melbourne (2007). She has held over 50 solo exhibitions in Australia and internationally, and participated in over 80 group exhibitions including the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney touring exhibition *Remain in Light: Photography from the MCA Collection* (29 March to 4 October 2014), and the forthcoming exhibitions *Episodes: Australia Photography Now*, Dong Gang Museum of Photography, South Korea, 18 July to 21 September 2014, and the 2014 TarraWarra Biennial (*‘Whisper in my Mask’*), 9 August to 15 November 2014: polixenipapapetrou.net

Under my skin is presented in association with Neville Pantazis, Parap Fine Foods, Darwin.

Cover image: Polixeni Papapetrou, *The Photographer* (detail), 2012, from *The Dreamkeepers* series, 2012, pigment ink print, 105 x 105cm
All images in this catalogue courtesy the artist and Stills Gallery, Sydney



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