

THE TENDER GAZE: a detour down the garden path

Flowers are transient and protean forms. Their life cycle is short lived: the bud blooms and its splendor emerges but then it wilts and dies. The beginning is tethered to the end in a graceful arc. There is sorrow but also beauty in this gesture. A petal falling from its stem retains its elegance. Bruised and faded, it is still beautiful. To photograph a flower as it blossoms is to delay and distill the inevitable. Yet the endpoint – the fade – haunts the image.

Of course – you will no doubt think – we know that death infiltrates all photographs. A photograph prefigures its subject's passing. This is a pedestrian proposition, but in the image of flower we have a symbolic proxy and the point assumes a different (a piercing) poetic force. For here, death is gracefulness itself.

A flower in full bloom is unfixed. It is a fragmentary and fluid figure on the cusp of change. Overwhelmed by resplendent floral motifs, the photographs in Polixeni Papapetrou's series *Eden* celebrate this fact. In these photographs the flower is in flux. It speaks to growth and loss; beginnings and endings. Papapetrou's portraits of young women on the edge of adulthood bear witness to the passing of time and announce the dissolution of childhood and adolescence. Yet her protagonists' passage is far from passive. These young women simultaneously command and counter our gaze. Their gracefulness is charged with strength.

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Each photograph is a controlled study of floral abundance. Papapetrou has turned the generative phenomenon of the bloom (itself a floral gesture) into a compositional strategy. The young women are buried in dense pictorial flowerbeds. Tangled knots of buds and petals consume each scene. Wearing dresses from the 1950s made from floral fabric, the girls stand in front of a backdrop of sympathetically patterned bark cloth, a coarse textile widely used for domestic applications from the 1930s onwards. This cacophony of competing floral motifs is punctuated by the arrangements of living flowers that adorn each subject.

These bouquets are not ornamental – they are performative devices. Shaped into headdresses, wreaths, hearts or masks, the arrangements are poetic incursions within the scene. They structure the portrait and gently choreograph each girl's poise and gesture. Bearing her bouquet, she either hides from view, adopting an oblique and reticent demeanor, or steadfastly faces the camera, her gaze starkly framed by the garland. In this allegorically inflected study of young woman-hood, flowers moderate the oscillation between visibility and invisibility; camouflage and the reveal.

Dramatising the interplay between concealment and revelation, Papapetrou partially unravels the symbolic apparatus that genders the flower and typecasts it as feminine (in spite of the fact that most flowering plants are hermaphrodites and possess both male and female reproductive parts). Each

photograph's transhistorical *mise en scène* references contexts in which the suppression and servitude of women was socially entrenched. In the bold gaze of Olympia, Papapetrou's daughter and the figure that appears in both *Amaranthine* and *Heart*, we witness a gentle agitation and a subtle inversion of conventionally codified gender norms. This agitation also manifests through Papapetrou's eloquent navigation of the metaphoric territory of the garden and its affiliation with a restrictive and reductive conception of the female.

The chaste, pure lily that appears alongside images of the Virgin Mary is bound to the concept of the *hortus conclusus*, or the enclosed garden. Derived from the biblical narrative of the *Song of Solomon*, the term is associated with pious womanhood and the closed womb of the virgin mother. An enclosed garden is a safe haven – paradise with a perimeter. Papapetrou consciously cultivates this theological lineage. Nowhere is the sanctity of the enclosed garden as emphatically reinforced as it is in the story of the Garden of Eden.

In Papapetrou's *Eden* the frame of the photograph is the perimeter and the outer limit of a contained yet profuse burst of floral forms. It is the garden fence. Each photograph is a world unto itself – a focused experiment in floriculture as tableaux – but it is marked by the occasional rupture. When we encounter Olympia's gaze the fence collapses and the enclosed world is transgressed. She looks directly at us across the partition.

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The metaphoric designation of the garden as a feminine space is propelled by patriarchal principles. Architectural theorist Sylvia Lavin unpacks the gendered conceptualisation of the garden in relation to the eighteenth century picturesque landscape architecture tradition that originated in England.ⁱ

Picturesque garden design prioritises visual spectacle in the form of discrete pictorial vignettes that often feature sculptures, fountains and crumbling ruins. The sequential reveal of these small visual scenes is engineered by paths that weave their way through the garden. The picturesque garden is a site of visual display that must be experienced peripatetically. As Lavin affirms, in the eighteenth century this mobile viewer was customarily defined as a man. Lavin bases her argument on the work of Claude-Henri Watelet who built the Moulin Joli near Paris, the first picturesque garden in France from 1754. In his 1774 essay *Essai sur les jardins* Watelet described the garden as if it were a female body. His meandering movement through the space becomes an erotically charged (and acutely gendered) exercise. For Watelet, the garden is a 'penetrable space of pleasures' comprised of 'tissues of desire.'ⁱⁱ During one sojourn, he writes:

I notice some exterior footpaths. I see greenery, trees, and flowers. They are feminine charms to entice me toward the different paths.... These routes penetrate the fields,... [and] they seem, by exciting my curiosity, to be disputing amongst themselves which will have the advantage in determining my choice.ⁱⁱⁱ

In Lavin's reading of this passage, the garden is 'a reclining female body who offers herself to the observer and entices him to enter her.'^{iv} She is 'assimilated into the landscape: she accepts the inscription of the plan view of the garden onto her body and so acts out a spectacle of sexual receptivity.'^v

An undercurrent of violence and violation permeates this metaphoric framework. The male visitor on his promenade possesses agency while the feminised garden is passive and immobile. Here, the allegory is used to subjugate and suppress the feminine. As Lavin asserts, 'the French picturesque garden, then, is a space that both relies on a notion of the feminine for its definition and uses this definition as a strategy of containment.'^{vi}

It is fitting, then, that in this context the people responsible for the upkeep of the garden – the people who shaped its paths and manicured its hedges – were primarily identified as male. Until the nineteenth century, gardening manuals were invariably pitched at an exclusively male readership. While women pursued ornamental horticulture from the late sixteenth century, it was not until the 1840s that instruction manuals overtly catered to a female audience. As Robin Veder observes, these instructional texts are imbued with a domestic sentimentality and associate gardening with maternal care. Many of these texts insinuate that 'the successful woman gardener sympathised with plants in the same way that mothers should with their children.'^{vii} While the categorisation of women's gardening as 'pure emotional effusion'^{viii} was often inflected with a patronising tone, this notion of horticultural 'care' offers a vital alternative to the sexual power play that unfolded in the picturesque landscape.

The sentimental gardener does not treat her territory as site of seductive potential that must be vanquished and penetrated. She looks upon her plants with a different type of gaze. The garden in her care is not a space to be conquered; it is a space to be nurtured. It is this mode of address that Papapetrou conveys in her work. The gaze her photographs cultivate and command is that of the caregiver, not the voyeuristic Lothario.

The young women in these portraits are blossoming into their own adulthood. We look on as they grow. Those that do return our stare – those who appear ready to leave Eden and forge their own pathways – assert their agency within this space. They become active participants in a loop of tender spectatorship. They receive and sustain the nurturing gaze.

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Subverting Watelet's testosterone fueled topography, art and architectural theorist Giuliana Bruno affirms the presence and vitality of female spectatorship and agency in the picturesque garden. In her analysis, the picturesque garden can be rethought as a site of feminine subjectivity and mobilisation.

By way of garden strolling, the picturesque opened the emotion of traveling cultures to women. As it participated in the formation of a tactile knowledge of space – of haptic epistemologies – the sense and sensibility of the picturesque paved the road to a new form of spatiality in which the female body was not just a penetrable object but the very subject of an intersubjective spatial mobilisation.^{ix}

According to Bruno, the garden is both a ‘geopsychic viewing space’^x and a ‘sensuous space of emotion’^{xi} that women could traverse freely. Their movement through this space constituted a form of emotional cartography and prefigures the expansion of their mobility in broader socio-political terms.

In *Eden* Papapetrou maps her own sensuous space of emotion. The contours of this cartography delineate the life cycle of the flower but also of the female subjects in the centre of the frame. We look on as these young women bloom but know that change is just around the corner. The path bends and time passes. In the tender gaze that these photographs solicit (in the gaze that extends from Papapetrou to her subjects before it ricochets and ensnares the viewer) we find a tacit acknowledgement of this inevitability. This is a knowing and nurturing gaze, for it is with both courage and care that Papapetrou captures these young women as they leave the shelter of childhood – their Eden.

ⁱ Lavin, Sylvia. ‘Sacrifice and the Garden: Watelet’s ‘Essai sur les jardins’ and the Space of the Picturesque’. *Assemblage* no. 28. 1995 pp. 16-33

ⁱⁱ Ibid p. 22

ⁱⁱⁱ Quoted in: Ibid p. 23

^{iv} Ibid p. 23

^v Ibid p. 23

^{vi} Ibid p. 25

^{vii} Veder, Robin. ‘Mother-Love for Plant-Children: Sentimental Pastoralism and Nineteenth-Century Parlour Gardening’. *Australasian Journal of American Studies* vol. 26 no. 2. 2007 pp. 20-34 p. 27

^{viii} Ibid p. 30

^{ix} Bruno, Giuliana, *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture, and Film*, Verso, New York p. 200

^x Ibid p. 199

^{xi} Ibid p. 203