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Tales from Elsewhere

Polixeni Papapetrou



australian centre for photography

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Olympia as Lewis Carroll's Julia Arnold (*Little Vanity*)
2003
type C print

TALES FROM ELSEWHERE

Imagination is a defining trait of the human species. For our hominid ancestors it opened up the concept of past and future, of how it might be from another person's perspective, of weighing the balance of 'what if...?' Yet today it is a commodity about which we have certain ambivalence.

In childhood imagination has free rein. But somewhere on the road to adolescence it becomes tamed, domesticated by reason and shaped by orthodoxy. In an adult, childlike imaginative flights of fancy seem at best eccentric, at worst pathological. The imaginative power of children is rendered charming by their lack of agency, in the wider world at least. At home they exert a certain dominion. That parents take their children seriously is deeply evolved and has ensured the survival of the species. Within the family the imaginative explorations of a child constitute a kind of research: what would it be like if; I want to see why I should not do this or that; why do men react the way they do to woman and vice-versa; what will I be when I grow up; how does it feel to be very old? Parents come to understand this process and, when viewed by others (from a discrete distance), it reflects an amiable glow.

Polixeni Papapetrou is an artist and she is a mother. Unusually she has enfolded the journey of parenthood directly into her art practice. Not only this, she has empowered first her daughter Olympia and later her son Solomon and their friends to be collaborators in this process, and so brings the child's imagination directly into the grown-up world of art. This is a powerful but sometimes misunderstood strategy. In an art world of northern European antecedence, the Kantian dictum of intellectual rigour can all too easily dismiss the child's imagination as naïve and uneducated.

Others, with a more psychological bent, express concern that childish ideas are being made public without informed consent, that a secret is being betrayed. But who is being protected here?

Is it not that the theatre of childhood imagination sees the world afresh, without the prejudice of the conventional structures of knowing? And, as often as not, they see the cosy inconsistencies and inured irrationalities at play in the adult world around them.

It is with resolve and remarkable application that Polixeni Papapetrou has created this work with her family over the past dozen years. She has undertaken this collaborative exploration with an open mind and generous heart, drawing on her experiences as a mother, on the insights of her children and on her understanding of the potential of the field of art. And it is with acuity that Olympia, Solomon and their friends embrace what many adults forget: the importance of play and make-believe.

This exhibition plots a journey that is personal and universal, familial and public. It recounts pictorial fables of childhood perspicacity and of adult frailty; of the light and the dark that make us human. Complex, beguiling and perceptive, these are not scenes from the world of grown-ups, they are tales from elsewhere.

**“It’s a poor
sort of memory
that only works
backwards”**



Olympia's Clothes
1999
type C print

OLYMPIA'S CLOTHES
PHANTOMWISE
DREAM CHILD

Polixeni Papapetrou has always been interested in the idea of acquired personas, of dressing up and reinventing the self. Initially her visual explorations concentrated on the liminal reaches of the adult world: Elvis Presley impersonators, body builders and drag queens. In each she recognised and celebrated the imaginative will to become something new, something other.

When her daughter Olympia was born she, like many parents, became engrossed in the new life that had been made and in the rapidly unfolding transition from infant to individual. With her eye for costume the artist set about documenting every outfit the toddler grew into and, just as rapidly, out of. Thus, meticulously arranged, the outfits become more than a simple catalogue of clothes, they reflect the parental aspirations for the developing toddler.

But children do not remain a blank slate for long (indeed, were they ever?). Growing up with an artist mother and father, Olympia wanted to be a part of what they were doing. It was all too interesting not to be included. Indeed to be centre stage. Together Polixeni and Olympia began their games of make-believe and dress-ups. With the spirited imagination of the young, Olympia experimented with many roles, as her mother introduced her to different historical periods and ethnic contexts.

Polixeni Papapetrou set about researching the history and theory of photographing children. It was not long before she came upon the work of an Anglican deacon, academic mathematician and amateur photographer called Reverend Charles Lutwidge Dodgson (1832-1898), better known to us now under his pen name of Lewis Carroll.

A collection of party masks based on 19th-century designs became the inspiration for the first series of work, *Phantomwise*. The series takes its title from a short poem at the end of *Through the Looking Glass* in which the author remembers Alice Liddell, the real-life inspiration for his adventurous heroine.

The poet is haunted by a shadowy compound of the real Miss Liddell and the fictional protagonist of his stories. The photographs likewise involve an uncanny blend of child and pantomime character that, despite the simplicity of the disguise, remains curiously convincing.

Polixeni and Olympia studied Dodgson's photographs of Alice Liddell and together began to recreate them. Colour was introduced and, while seeking to emulate four of his hand-coloured photographs in which imaginary landscapes had been added around the central figure, scenery was included. In these contemporary images, this was achieved using backdrops painted by the artist's husband, the art historian and critic Robert Nelson.

The resulting works challenge the notion of the child as an innocent passive 'other' as Olympia explores, through the playful theatricality of dressing up, other identities and ways of being. With well over a century between the originals and these reworkings, the images were now situated in a rather different context, one in which the anxieties about childhood imagination and the concern about exploitation can comele and become confused – the one contaminating the other.

It is a reminder that, as adults, we should try to understand images made with children from a childlike perspective. To do so may require us to rediscover the ability to engage wholeheartedly with our own imagination before we can fully engage with that of the child.

“Life, what is it but a dream”



Pilgrim Quilting
 2003
 selenium toned silver gelatin print



Jack Tar
 2002
 selenium toned silver gelatin print



Olympia and Bridget as Lewis Carroll's Alice and Lorina Liddell in Chinese Dress
 2003
 type C print



Olympia as Lewis Carroll's Xie Kitchin as a Chinaman (off duty)
 2003
 type C print



The Encounter
2006
type C print

WONDERLAND FAIRY TALES

The exploration and reinterpretation of the literature of childhood imagination became the central theme of the next two bodies of work. In *Wonderland* Polixeni Papapetrou recreates scenes from Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), specifically the illustrations created by John Tenniel (1820-1914) for the first editions of the book. The photographs are staged and do not involve computer manipulation. Olympia in the role of Alice is situated against a canvas that sweeps from wall to floor. Here Robert Nelson employed trompe l'oeil effects to suggest depth, further 'embedding' the child within the fantasy world.

Lewis Carroll's stories of Alice were in stark contrast to the humourless didactic moralising of the majority of books written for children in 19th-century England. Carroll's stories were comic, absurdist and mocked authority. Most surprisingly, they positioned the child as the rational witness to a crazy dysfunctional adult world, one by which she refused to be bowed.

The images here represent some of the most familiar scenes from the original story while also suggesting more abstract ideas about how a child might perceive and respond to the adult world: curiosity, credulity, generosity, quizzicality, exasperation, stubbornness, defiance...

While the images from *Wonderland* have been widely shown, the exhibition also includes a number of images based on stories by other writers: the *Fairy Tales, Told for Children* of Hans Christian Andersen (1805-1875) and the dark folkish *Household Tales* collected by the Brothers Grimm (Jacob 1785-1863 and Wilhelm 1786-1859). While these are morality tales told by adults they capture the imaginative richness of a child's point of view.

Andersen was an awkwardly nervous man, ill at ease in the adult world. His stories disrupted the notional link between truth and beauty, and it is the misfits and dispossessed in his tales who often speak the truth. In *The Girl Who Trod on a Loaf So as Not to Spoil Her Shoes* a beautiful but cruelly vain young woman is sucked down to the underworld because she puts her fancy footwear above her mother's need for bread. Here she remains entombed for an eternity listening to what being is said about her in the world above, but unable to move a muscle. Only after many years of torment is she released to re-enter the world as a timorous fledgling bird and re-learn the lessons of humility and caring for others.

The tales of Andersen and the Brothers Grimm are from another age, a time of certainties and extremes. Of all the photographic series in this exhibition, these two adhere most closely to their literary sources, but they set the narrative context at a tangent to the original. The contemporary moment offers no such comforting assurance of stability; we are all too aware that the world is in flux. We seek to do what is right while conscious that morality might well be a relative sensibility. We are less certain and more anxious. The child's make-believe world holds a mirror to our own, albeit one that distorts into caricature. If we begin to take seriously what we glimpse in the mirror, what then?

**“Everything's
got a moral,
if only you
can find it”**



Drink Me
2004
type C print



Prize Thimble
2004
type C print



Riddles That Have No Answers
 2004
 type C print



Flying Cards #2
 2004
 type C print



The Witch's House
2003
type C print



The Girl Who Trod on a Loaf So As Not to Spoil Her Shoes
2005
type C print



In the Wimmera 1864 #1
2006
pigment print

HAUNTED COUNTRY
GAMES OF CONSEQUENCE

While the Aboriginal peoples have long established a respect for and understanding of the land, the endless arid interior of the continent was alien and disturbing for the European immigrants who founded their colonies in the late-18th and 19th centuries. It is a disquiet that lingers today.

In *Haunted Country* Polixeni Papapetrou stages scenes from stories of children lost in the bush. Some true, some fictional, these stories constitute a rich settler folklore that reflects upon the uneasy relationship to the harsh, dry wilderness. The children who survived their ordeal returned as local heroes; those that were not so lucky were memorialised as local legends; those who were invented came to life as local myths. The elevation of these lost children to a symbolic status was a way for the new arrivals to come to terms with the enormity of the interior.

The stories on which these photographs are based are not limited to the 19th century but reach forward into living memory. That said, the culprit in 19th-century tales of lost children was always an obdurate Nature against which the community must continually struggle, while 20th-century accounts are more equivocal as to whether the guilt rests with environmental or human agency, and they are consequently more divisive.

Polixeni Papapetrou renders these scenes with a sweeping cinematic ambience, using sophisticated lighting and framing to elevate the scenes to the exemplary. Despite their terrifying ordeal, these children appear calm, somewhat removed from their immediate misfortunes. It is a distancing that suggests the ability of a child to disconnect from the ‘here and now’ into other sensual and imaginative worlds.

But it also evokes that unspoken gulf that separates a child’s experience of the world from that of adults, echoing once again the underlying concern of the artist with the child perceived as ‘other.’

The Australian landscape is the backdrop for the next series of works, *Games of Consequence*. But here the disquieting psychological drama arises from the ambivalent relationship of the children to each other rather than with the external world, be it that of Nature or the grownups.

In *The Fall*, a girl who has stumbled in the grass turns to discover she has also suffered a fall from grace with her companions, who are whispering behind her back. Adolescence can be a disconsolate time when childhood confidence begins to crack. It brings an awkward sense of isolation and this is captured here in the dramatically posed image *Wild World* in which a young woman sits alone with her thoughts in the desert.

In the early works the children inhabit a fantasy space. The children’s view is normalised and the world around them is made strange. In these two series the young people are situated within a natural (but otherwise depopulated) landscape. They become the stuff of legend and symbology. But these vast natural landscapes also signify what Polixeni has described as “a metaphorical shelter, an arcane place where children can make discoveries about themselves and where their imagination can flourish.”¹

“Be What
You Would
Seem to Be”



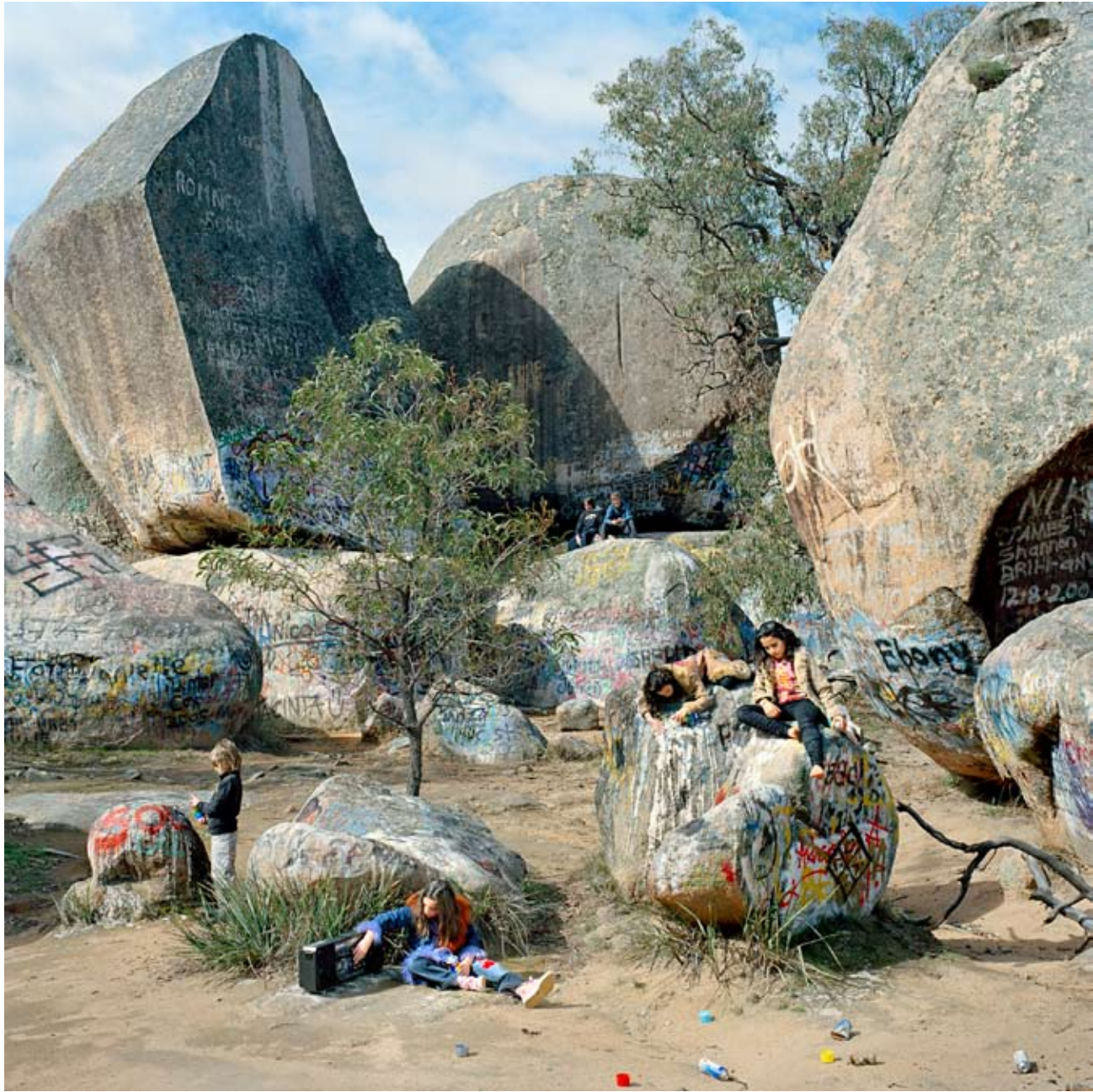
Hanging Rock 1900 #3
2006
pigment print



Daylesford 1867 #2
2006
pigment print



The Fall
2008
pigment print



Sister's Rocks
2008
pigment print



Wild World
2008
pigment print



Miles from Nowhere
2008
pigment print



The Philosopher
2011
pigment print

BETWEEN WORLDS THE DREAM KEEPERS

In her recent series, *Between Worlds*, Polixeni Papapetrou uses animal masks to create curious tableaux that are at once familiar and strange.

She considers childhood as a transitional space between infancy and the adult world. Children are between states, just as these animal-person hybrids exist in an imaginative space between human and non-human. They are the ‘other’ in contrast to which the adult human world defines itself.

While this series continues the exploration of ideas addressed in earlier work, these images have no literary prototype or community provenance. They spring directly from the artist’s imagination and from the process of working with the children. However, for many cultures, animals come to symbolise more universal human qualities. We project ourselves onto other creatures and we anthropomorphise their behaviour as though it were humanly motivated. Consequently, her images are simultaneously impossible and interpretable, unnatural and familiar.

These pictures invite speculation. Just as one can read social satire beneath the whimsy of Lewis Carroll’s stories of Alice, so one senses a deeper meaning underlying the charming and dignified pursuits of these latter-day chimeras. The crippled rabbits who struggle along the cliff-top path have become ‘loners,’ perhaps ostracised by an able-bodied world that no longer has time for them.

A common thread weaves back and forth through Polixeni Papapetrou’s work: the ability of an absurdist strategy to reveal the inconsistencies harboured deep within the normalised world of adults. Otherness is not simply the alienation forced upon the weak by the strong, but a vantage from which to see with a fresh perspective.

The most recent images in the exhibition are drawn from a work-in-progress called *The Dreamkeepers*. Here, a troupe of grotesques journeys through the landscape.

However, these characters are nonetheless affecting and remind us, just as Andersen’s tales do, not to judge character by appearance but by the inner qualities of the individual.

The work grows out of the continuing collaborative exploration of the artist with her children as they stand on the brink of adolescence. Teenage is a time of turmoil and inner conflict as the individual takes the turbulent journey from the land of childhood to the continent of the adults. Like Janus they see the past and the future and comprehend their immiscibility.

Polixeni Papapetrou suggests that the individuals portrayed in *The Dreamkeepers* “live in a world of their own, where everything seems normal to them, but may appear nonsense to other people. This may be a metaphor for the world that many artists work in, as well as having comic echoes among the ambiguities of adolescence.”²

Perhaps we all share this experience to some extent, but for many becoming adult is to build a wall of rationality around the imagination in order to shut out that very insight. When we peek at childhood games through chinks in the barricade, we are charmed by the magical world beyond because we know we can turn away. For the adolescent building the wall, a question is ever present: is this a bastion or a prison?

It is perhaps only in old age and in the transformative experiences of art that we, like the Dreamkeepers, find a doorway in the wall and achieve our own rapprochement between these two worlds.

**“Why,
sometimes
I’ve believed
as many as
six impossible
things before
breakfast”**



The Caretaker
2009
pigment print



The Harvesters
2009
pigment print



The Watcher
2009
pigment print



The Loners
2009
pigment print



The Lighthouse Keepers
 2011
 pigment print



The Wave Counter
 2011
 pigment print



The Wind Watcher
2011
pigment print



The Joy Peddler
2011
pigment print

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