

Polixeni Papapetrou

THE GHILLIES

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Hattah Man and Hattah Woman
120 x 120 cm, pigment ink print



HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT

Ghillie is derived from the Scottish Gaelic word *gille* meaning lad or servant. Historically it was a term used to refer to a man or a boy who, as a minion, attended a Highland chief on hunting or fishing expeditions. Scottish gamekeepers may have developed the *ghillie suit* as a form of hunting camouflage and *A History of the Military Sniper* claims that its martial use can be traced to the *Lovat Scouts*, a Scottish Highland regiment that became the British Army's first sniper unit in 1916. As if that isn't enough, the Australian Army snipers call their camouflage outfits *Yowie suits*, referring to Australia's version of the Yeti or our, *Giants From the Dreamtime*.

So much in a single word! Not content to just offer us these vividly powerful images, even in the title of this exhibition, Polixeni Papapetrou immediately makes us think about land and servitude, masculinity and nature, colonialism and combat.

Boys and men

Sometimes I think that adolescent boys have always had a hard slog through a fraught and focused interregnum of unbecoming boyhood and becoming man. The excitement of newly embodied physicality, of recognition and open futures co-exists so starkly with newly potent threats, responsibilities and opportunities to fail.

The Ghillies are not actually *boys*—beyond their titles they are not self-evidently gendered—but

they might be about boys because Papapetrou came to know of ghillie suits through the younger of her much loved children. Familiar with the suits from the video game *Call of Duty*, when he spotted one in an archery store, Solomon wanted it. The suit promised invisibility and status, and he wanted his mother to photograph him in the suit. In Papapetrou's snapshots of a ghillied-up Solomon in the bush at Studley Park in Melbourne it's being tested to see if it works as he lays down in the grass, crouches by a eucalypt and creeps through some casuarinas.

In *The Ghillies* things become very different. Even though they are about projecting deadly force, here the suits unmake the delineation of both man and human. There is no proud curve of a bicep or the taut outline of quadriceps as there was in Papapetrou's *Body Building* (1997–2003). There's not even a silhouette. *Grasstree Man* seems overshadowed by what are merely *xanthorrhoea*. *Dune Man* appears as almost miniature despite the setting being not in the least bit grand. Why is *Salt Man* rooted to the spot in the bright-pink crust of a dry lake as rain clouds roll in?

Camouflage and character

For some time, Papapetrou's work has featured what might loosely be called characters; often characters who have a strong relationship to performance or theatricality or archetypes.

In *Wonderland* (2004), the character is the literary Alice. In *Between Worlds* (2009) they are humans with the heads of animals. In *The Dreamkeepers* (2012) they are *old people* who are both grotesquely hyper-real and deeply artificial.

We might see all of these images as concerned with and exploring how appearance relates to identity or how dressing up is not only play but about trying on a role for size and fit. But with *The Ghillies* we might equally take a lead from Aristotle who, in writing about the theatre, understood character as always subordinate to the real thing, the plot. Gillie suits are, after all, used by men who want to make things happen even if it's only winning a paint-ball shoot-out on a corporate retreat.

Yet some of Papapetrou's ghillies seem more fixed in place than ready to stalk or pounce. *Ocean Man* looks more like Lot's Wife than a sniper on the move. *Stump Man* appears to be wondering if the axe will swing for him next. Perhaps they are out of place, lost and far from home. Are they sick of hiding and hunting? Have they stood up in order to wonder, 'Where should I go?' Which way are these ghillies looking? Are they confident in their camouflage and returning your gaze or do they have their back to you, gazing instead towards the horizon? What is their story?

Landscape becomes an actor

Over time, the locations of Papapetrou's photography have shifted from pure black (Authority 2000), to panto backdrops (*Fairy Tales* 2004–6) and then, from 2006, to 'real' spaces. Even in these more recent images, and even when iconic and grand locations are used, the landscape plays a traditional supporting role as a backdrop subordinated to Papapetrou's mesmerizing figures.

In *The Ghillies* there is a new strategy. Here both landscape and figure are used differently. These landscapes, mostly in the Mallee region where the states of Victoria, New South Wales and South Australia abut, are familiar rather than picturesque. It's a regular drought-stricken lake, a normal field where hay has just been baled, ordinary dune, and scrub and salt lake country. These are common places.

And in *The Ghillies* the figures are changed too. Susan Bright has noted that Papapetrou's figures are often *hybrid*. One of the features of hybrids such as, say, an animal/human hybrid, is that the two forms exist separately both before and after the creation of the hybrid as a third entity. Here there is a different dynamic, almost as if the figures and the landscape have made each other.

In *Study for Hattah Man and Hattah Woman* the outline of the ghillie suit against the cloud-filled sky is clear and distinct. Look carefully at the suit against the landscape though and the two begin

to merge. Similarly *Magma Man* literally emerges from the rocks; he is magma and the magma is he. The titles give it away too, both man and scrub, both Mallee and man. And of course, how to live as people who can both be in and sustain place is the challenge of a world ravaged beyond its limits; how to become *Hattah Man and Woman*.

Disappearing from site

This time, it's no exaggeration to say that Papapetrou's work has engaged deeply with major cultural themes both ancient and modern. I know this too in personal ways because I first met Polixeni in a beautiful urban public garden, an artificial and natural space fashioned by forces as varied as horticulture and hydrology. She greeted everybody in that park with such warmth. To talk with her there of rain and red sunrises, of family and art, of birdsongs and dogs and blossoms, was to be in a place that was animated by her vitality as she was animated by a sparkling joy of being in the world. For those times and these remarkable images that vibrate with intensity and thought, thank you Polixeni Papapetrou.

Chris Healy
Associate Professor
Cultural Studies
The University of Melbourne
December 2012

Dune Man
120 x 120 cm, pigment ink print



Grasstree Man
120 x 120 cm, pigment ink print



Study for the Ghillies
70 x 105 cm, pigment ink print



Magma Man
120 x 120 cm, pigment ink print



Mallee Man
120 x 120 cm, pigment ink print



Ocean Man
120 x 120 cm, pigment ink print



Cloud Man
120 x 120 cm, pigment ink print



Scrub Man
120 x 120 cm, pigment ink print



Study for Hattah Man and Hattah Woman
70 x 105 cm, pigment ink print



Stump Man
120 x 120 cm, pigment ink print



Salt Man
120 x 120 cm, pigment ink print



Desert Man
120 x 120 cm, pigment ink print



Polixeni Papapetrou is an Australian photo-media artist who explores relationships between history, contemporary culture, landscape, identity and childhood. Her subject matter has included Elvis Presley fans, Marilyn Monroe impersonators, drag queens, circus performers, wrestlers and body builders. Since 2002, Papapetrou has turned her focus to childhood. She reflects upon numerous interlocking facets of growing up, drawing upon ideas of childhood from nineteenth-century photography and literature (*Dreamchild* 2003 and *Wonderland* 2004); exploring the power of dress-ups (*Phantomwise* 2002); revisiting the experience of childhood and loss in colonial Australia (*Haunted Country* 2006); reflecting upon a lost freedom and the regulated lives of children today (*Games of Consequence* 2008); looking at the magical affinity that children have with animals and their social connotations (*Between Worlds* 2009–2012); pondering the roles that children mimic in older people (*The Dreamkeepers* 2012) or the psychoanalytical puzzle of a child who disappears through disguise, only to rear up uncannily, like the return of the repressed (*The Ghillies* 2013).

Papapetrou holds a PhD from Monash University (2007), an MA Media Arts from RMIT University (1997) and an LLB/ BA from the University of Melbourne (1984). She has held fifty solo exhibitions in Australia and internationally, and in 2011 the Australian Centre for Photography, Sydney, held her first retrospective. Papapetrou has participated at major international photographic festivals including Fotográfica Bogotá, Columbia, 2013; Photofestival Noorderlicht, The Netherlands, 2012; 3rd Biennale Photoquai at Le musée du quai Branly, Paris, 2011; Pingyao International Photography Festival, Pingyao, China, 2010; Mesaic Fotografie, Bratislava, 2010; Athens Festival of Photography, Athens, 2010; Seoul International Photography Festival, Seoul, 2008 and ‘Le Mois de la Photo’, Montreal, 2005. Papapetrou has participated in over 70 group exhibitions, including the National Arts Center, Tokyo; Hanmi Museum of Photography, Seoul; Kuandu Museum of Fine Arts, Taipei National University of the Arts, Taipei; De Cordova Museum and Sculpture Park, Massachusetts; Museum of Photographic Arts, San Diego and Aperture Gallery, New York.

Papapetrou’s work is held in public collections in Australia and the USA, corporate collections and private collections in Australia, England, France, Italy, The Netherlands, Belgium and the USA.

Her work appears in over 180 articles, citations and essays including Naomi Rosenblum, *A History of Women Photographers*, Abbeville Press, New York, 2010; Anne Marsh, *Look: Australian Photography Now*, MacMillan Publishers, Australia, 2010; Anne Higonnet, *Presumed Innocence: Photographic Perspectives of Children*, De Cordova Museum, Massachusetts, 2008 and Susan McCulloch, *The New McCulloch’s Encyclopedia of Australian Art*, 2006.

Papapetrou has received five grants from the Australia Council for new work and three grants from Arts Victoria for international touring and professional development. She was awarded an Australian Post-Graduate Research Award for her doctorate and in 2009 received the Josephine Ulrick & Win Schubert Photography Award.

On location making *Malle Man*,
Perry Sand Hills, NSW.
Photograph: Olympia Nelson



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www.polixenipapapetrou.net



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