

Polixeni Papapetrou, photographer dies at age 57

By [Joanna Murray-Smith](#) April 12, 2018

Melbourne photographer, Polixeni Papapetrou died yesterday after a five year illness. Her friend remembers her.

Poli died yesterday from breast cancer. The last few days, she was in a coma, but at home in her own bed surrounded by books and works of art including a wonderful, small painting instructing the viewer: “Fuck cancer!”. For months, perhaps more than a year, her small adoring family ran around tending to her and following instructions to make visitors tea, put flowers in vases or retrieve items of clothing from wardrobes. In more recent weeks, instructions included the supply of pain relief from diabolical headaches and nausea. She was brilliant, funny, insightful, erudite and impossibly strong and until a week ago was still match-making friends, setting up visits between women she knew who might like each other – a prophecy she seemingly always got right.

She had an endless supply of exquisite gifts she enjoyed buying online for pals, always perfectly chosen and in recent weeks gave me sparkly Missoni socks and *New York Review of Books* napkins, printed with famous literary love letters. These gifts were, like all her gifts, perfectly curated.

I talked to Poli a lot in the last year. She called me Jo-Jo, which no-one else has since my childhood. We were excellent texters but even better conversational ramblers as I sat bedside, switching from quite profound questions of creativity to utterly shallow dissections of Oscar gowns or good knickers. We found common ground in our children, the anxieties they provoke, but mostly as the source of love and inspiration. We sometimes gossiped about people we knew in common (she was intolerant of pretention) but mostly Poli extolled people’s virtues, particularly

women's. She was forever telling me about friends I didn't know but should and why. Sometime in the last couple of weeks I told her that one of things I admired most about her was her extraordinary collection of female friends, this endless source of women who peopled her texts and emails and turned up at the door. Her friends invariably were smart and liked clothes, but as she observed to me: "I kept the friends who were authentic".

Authenticity was key to even the most casual conversation with Poli. She didn't mince words or observe meaningless niceties. There wasn't time. Instead, she seemed to draw on her experience and history to find deeply salient and perceptive perspectives on the smallest things and the biggest. Some of this may have come from wide reading – at one point she was a Buddhist as well as a lawyer and prize-winning photographer – but also from having crossed the cultural barriers of so many different worlds, each influencing the other.

She was profoundly sensitive to beauty and valued it in an old-fashioned way, as well as glamour. She was ferociously female, both feminine and feminist. She spoke the different languages of different worlds: the microscopic detail of motherhood and the complex philosophical language of art. She was very Greek, especially in how she looked, with impeccable, invariably black designer clothes and gold jewellery, her striking long dark hair and classical features. But also, despite her high-pitched giggle and mischievous humour, in her mystical dimension and attraction to the dark. My last glimpse of her was in bed, her eyes directed to a small framed saint and a childhood toy. She understood the deeper, higher questions to which there are many or no answers, but she was also wonderfully grounded in ordinary life, physical states, domesticity and children.

Other people can write about Poli's art and her grand achievements much better than I can. I will miss her as a friend every day for a long time as I thought of her every day for the past few years, trying to reconcile her vivacity with her prognosis. I could never quite believe it. I told her often that the life she lived had more in its 57 years than many have in much longer lives, with her wisdom and her travels and her art and her

friendships.

But mostly what I meant was the love she gave and received. In recent years that love filled the house with the comings and goings of Solomon and Olympia and Robert, as Poli lay there contemplating both her unjust destiny and the bountiful joys she had given birth to or nurtured, in so many forms.

Photo of Polixeni Papapetrou via her [website](#)