



Polixeni Papapetrou: *MY HEART – still full of her*

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*My heart, still full of her,
Traveled over her face, and found her there no more...
I thought to myself that a woman unknown
Had adopted by chance that voice and those eyes
And I let the chilly statue pass
Looking at the skies.*

In 1833 the younger poet and dandy Alfred de Musset met the novelist George Sand and both fall passionately in love. On seeing Sand, *the nom de plume* of Amandine-Aurore-Lucile Dudevant, long after their love affair ended, he writes a fervent poem of loss, longing and yearning, remembering their tumultuous relationship and epistolary liaison. *My heart, still full of her* is the title of Polixeni Papapetrou's new series of silkscreen photographs with their glowing halo of gold and silver. These images disavow history, mysteriously halting time, while closely observing a familiar subject matter over an extended period: the artist and her daughter Olympia. Papapetrou conjugates the photographic with the maternal in a suite of sombre yet luminous silkscreened portrait depictions. Here, mother and daughter are almost interchangeable revealing their profoundly intimate relationship. Highly attuned and watchful, Papapetrou's unembellished style possesses an unequivocal intensity and familiarity.

While cataloguing her archive, Papapetrou came across negatives from her early practice, produced by an analogue process that she decided to retrieve and modify. Three images – *Curtain*, *I am a camera* and *I once was* – are self-portraits taken thirty years ago by the artist. Influenced by the aloof strangeness and mundane beauty of Diane Arbus, Papapetrou recasts herself decades later, memorialising and remembering her former self. Photography has the unique capacity to freeze time, look backwards and forwards in the same instance. In *Curtain*, the artist appears as a formally composed three-quarter portrait holding a small doll. The artist-sitter is wearing an ivory lace dress, standing before a window draped in a lace curtain. Foreground and background are enmeshed with textured fabric as are mother and daughter, photographer and subject throughout this series. In *My ghost*, the artist's daughter dressed in lace casts her eyes downward in a pensive state of reflection and forlorn contemplation in a way that is compositionally and inextricably linked to her mother in *Curtain*.

Papapetrou reflects on mortality prompted by her own direct experience of terminal illness. Overwhelmingly personal, her desire to deal visually with profound aspects of human experience of motherhood and its enduring relationship. In 2013, I conducted an extended interview with Papapetrou and we reflected on her driving force: 'The connection between life and death has been a driving force in my life and looking back now, this feeling was prescient. In 1997, when I gave birth to my daughter Olympia, a feeling of profound sadness swept over me. I realized that with birth comes death; the one cannot exist without the other. The sadness in life has to be the end of life, but it is not something that we want to dwell on. I have felt an urgency about this life which unconsciously drove me to photograph the children and record their lives.'

Papapetrou fuses photographer-sitter-camera in a triad based on revelation and concealment. In *I am a camera*, Papapetrou has obscured her face behind a camera on a tripod outside a tiny cottage in Melbourne while a depth of field is achieved with a dilapidated laneway. Glowing sunlight hits the house's façade, drawing attention to its mysterious occupancy and curtained window. Importantly, Papapetrou has experimented with her medium by overlaying gold and silver pigments. This process recalls vintage photography such as the luminous hue of silver gelatin photographs and daguerreotypes with their silvery surface and shaded contrasts. By expanding the capacity of photography with metallic foil, Papapetrou imbues her images with an otherworldliness. We don't know if these images depict here, now, before or after but they certainly celebrate, reflect, refract and exalt the maternal and photographer's taut gaze upon herself and her daughter.

Together and *The gaze* are a diptych comprising antique dolls tightly bound with bandages, conjoined like an umbilical cord or propped before a miniature camera and tripod. These staged scenarios allude to wounded figures, medical accoutrements, shrouds and coverings. The dolls are sourced from Papapetrou's vast collection while her husband, Robert Nelson, paints these backdrops with specific instructions to compose a neutral setting with hot and cold colours in contention upon which the figures literally stand. Set against an abstracted yet neutral setting, the dolls are tethered as are familial bonds, mother and daughter, artist and camera.

Giving birth to myself is direct, grave and knowing, fully conscious of the cycle of life and mortality. Unlike Papapetrou's previous, elaborate landscape photographs or studio scenography, the external world of this new series has been emptied out and mostly directed inwards. The effect of interiority depicted at a relatively close vantage point with the dominant composition of a single or double figure formed by the mother and her child provides a distinctive emotional intensity. Papapetrou captures the profundity of the maternal bond, reminding me of Sylvia Plath's late poem about her mother:

*In any case, you are always there,
Tremulous breath at the end of my line,
Curve of water upleaping
To my water rod, dazzling and grateful,
Touching and sucking.*

Sylvia Plath, *Medusa*, 1962.

Photography and mortality, darkness and worry, fear and sadness are the substance of these new photographic ruminations. With exacting detail, Papapetrou constructs her world through her lens, a mode of address to the camera and her family. The Pietà is a classic image of maternal suffering in which the Virgin Mary holds Christ alluded to in *Thousand yard stare* whereas the title references the blank, unfocussed stare of soldiers who have become emotionally detached from

the horrors around them resulting in a look of dissociation. Ultimately, the light emanating from each photograph, a spangle of gold or silver, is an insistent presence, heightening our awareness of the rituals of photography in ordering, apprehending and holding onto ourselves and loved ones.

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