Photographic artist Polixeni Papapetrou dies aged 57

Debbie Cuthbertson   11 April 2018 — 5:11pm

In late 2012, doctors told Melbourne photographic artist Polixeni Papapetrou she had but days, maybe weeks, left to live.

Just three months earlier, they had discovered that the breast cancer she was diagnosed with in 2007 had returned, and spread. She had just celebrated five years all-clear of cancer.

Polixeni Papapetrou pictured with her works at a 2012 show at Melbourne's Nellie Castan Gallery.

Photo: Wayne Taylor

The fact that she lived for another five years, in that time creating critically acclaimed works shown around the world, is a testament to her fierce will.

The death of Papapetrou, 57, was announced on Wednesday by her husband Robert Nelson, a Monash University professor and *The Age*'s visual arts critic.

"Polixeni left, nothing to do or be said, but a sorrowful emptiness now that

she's dead," Nelson wrote on social media. "Please, no flowers to the house," he added.

The couple met after Nelson reviewed one of her shows, and they married in 1996. They have two children, Olympia and Solomon.

Naomi Cass, director for Melbourne's Centre for Contemporary Photography (of which Papapetrou was a founding member), said she "lived an important and magnificent life as an artist, as a feminist, as a mother, as a wife, as a daughter, and a very significant member of the Australian arts community".

Papapetrou with daughter Olympia in 2013.

Photo: Justin McManus

Cass said she had known Papapetrou all her adult life, and had talked to her as recently as last week.

"She was intellectually very robust and clear to the very end ... she had both an extraordinary will to live and a capacity to meet suffering and death in the eye, really," she said.

"She really held on for her children to see them to young adulthood."

Cass described her friend as "a very gutsy person".

"When I first met her she was a lawyer and an artist, and she had such a sense of joy of life, but she didn't look away from difficult issues, personal or political or artistic."

Papapetrou was the firstborn daughter of Greek immigrants who came to Australia in the 1950s.

"I was the wog," she told the ABC in 2013. "I looked different, my food smelt different, I became very conscious of who I was. So I grew up with this sense of not being good enough, not fitting in, of feeling different, and I had this unpronounceable name."

She studied law at the University of Melbourne and worked for a time as a commercial lawyer, but bought a camera and started taking pictures after seeing photographs by Diane Arbus, she said in an interview with her friend, the curator and academic Natalie King.

Childhood was a major focus of Papapetrou's work for much of her career, and her two children were present in many of her photographs, often as shape-shifting creatures wearing animal masks, or figures shrouded in materials mirroring the stunning landscapes in which they stood.

One of her photographs of a nude Olympia, aged five, became embroiled in controversy in 2008 amid the furore over Melbourne photographer Bill Henson's images of naked children, which were removed by police from a Sydney exhibition.

Then prime minister Kevin Rudd criticised Papapetrou's photograph, to which Olympia, then 11, retorted that it was one of her favourites.

Last week Michael Reid's Sydney gallery opened an exhibition of Papapetrou's most recent works.

The show's title, *MY HEART – still full of her*, is borrowed from a poem by 19th century French writer Alfred de Musset: "My heart, still full of her, travelled over her face, and found her there no more … I had 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."

The silkscreened photographs, which include a 1986 self-portrait and portraits of Olympia, are darker and more solemn than her previous series.

Toby Meagher, director of Reid's Sydney and Berlin galleries, described Papapetrou as a "towering figure" in contemporary photography.

"Her current exhibition … is a profound body of work fearlessly engaged with the reality of Poli's own illness, looking closely at her relationship with her muse Olympia and the relationship between the photographer and the sitter," he said.

Last year Papapetrou won one of Australia's most prestigious photographic awards, the $30,000 William and Winifred Bowness Photography Prize, with her work *Delphi* from her 2016 Eden series. She said she was "totally surprised and delighted" after learning she had won the award.

Papapetrou's photographs are currently on display in exhibitions in China and the US, as well as at Gippsland Regional Gallery. She is a headline artist in a show at Melbourne's RMIT Gallery opening on Friday.

Her works have featured in recent exhibitions in Japan, France, Germany, Italy and the Netherlands, and are held by a number of Australian

institutions.