

Polixeni Papapetrou, Photographer With an Eerie Eye, Dies at 57

April 27, 2018

In "I Once Was," from her 2018 series, "My Heart," Ms. Papapetrou placed herself in a series for the first time with this photograph.

Polixeni Papapetrou, a photographer known for whimsical, eerie, somewhat disturbing pictures that often featured her children and their friends in odd costumes, died on April 11 in Fitzroy, Australia, near Melbourne. She was 57.

The cause was breast cancer, said her husband, Robert Nelson, an art critic and professor at Monash University in Melbourne, Australia.

"Study for Hattah Man and Hattah Woman" (2013), from the series "The Ghillies."

Ms. Papapetrou put three children in pigs' heads and pink outfits for a 2009 work called "The Harvesters," an interpretation of the 1857 Jean-François Millet painting "The Gleaners." She put her son, Solomon, in camouflage gear used by the Australian military and in military-themed video games for a 2013 series called "The Ghillies." (The title referred to a specific type of camouflage suit.)

But perhaps her most attention-getting picture was of her daughter, Olympia, at age 5 or 6 (news accounts differ), sitting on a rock naked; it ran on the cover of Art Monthly Australia magazine in July 2008 and fueled a controversy that was already underway over whether such imagery sexualized young children.

The furor died down, and Ms. Papapetrou continued to make her distinctive photographs, exhibiting regularly in Australia as well as in New York, New Jersey, China, Greece, Germany and elsewhere. Her works were

striking in their strange simplicity yet evoked deep emotions and archetypes.

Ms. Papapetrou's daughter, Olympia, from a 2002 series titled "Dreamchild." Here Ms. Papapetrou evoked a favorite photographic subject of Lewis Carroll's: Alexandra Kitchin, who was known as Xie (pronounced ECK-see). Its full title is "Olympia as Lewis Carroll's Xie Kitchin as Chinaman on tea boxes (on duty)."

"Highly staged, theatrically costumed, posed and lit, they are chockers with cool ironies and arty in-jokes," [Gina McColl wrote](#) in The Sydney Morning Herald in 2013, "but they also seem oddly familiar, with spooky psychological overtones, like a half-forgotten film or dream."

[Polixeni Papapetrou](#) (her full name is pronounced poh-leek-SEE-nee pah-pah-PET-roo) was born on Nov. 21, 1960, in Melbourne. Her father, Andreas, was a real estate agent, and her mother, the former Eftihiya Xilinakis, was a seamstress. Her parents were Greek immigrants, something that she said made her feel different as a child growing up in Australia. The way she looked, the food the family ate and other things set her apart.

"Difference and identity is a theme that has always been present in my work and led me to photograph alternative subcultures," she told The Age of Melbourne in 2009. Her subjects included drag queens and Elvis impersonators.

"The Visitor" (2012), from the series "Between Worlds."

At first her career took an entirely different direction. After graduating from Melbourne University in 1984, she became a lawyer for a time.

"I worked as a corporate lawyer and really enjoyed this environment," she explained, "but the desire to be an artist was stronger."

Taking her inspiration from Diane Arbus's photographs, she began taking pictures in the mid-1980s, at first focusing on those subcultures. In addition to Elvis impersonators and drag queens, she shot professional wrestlers and body builders. But by the turn of the century, the fairy-tale-

like images featuring costumed or masked children began to dominate.

"Amaryllis" (2016), from the series "Eden."

"Normally, the conceit goes that we make children," her husband wrote in a eulogy, "but Poli used to say that the children made her: They made her as a person and made her as an artist."

Many of these images were not simple exercises in dress-up; they invoked other artworks or literature and addressed environmental, social, psychological and other themes. One series reworked Lewis Carroll's photographs of Alice Liddell. Other images were taken at Hanging Rock, the formation made famous by the novel and film "Picnic at Hanging Rock."

The 2008 magazine cover became entangled in a debate that had been stirred up by an exhibition by another Australian photographer, Bill Henson, which included images of bare-chested young teenage girls.

"The Wanderer" (2012), from the series "The Dreamkeepers."

Ms. Papapetrou's photograph had actually been taken years earlier and had been previously exhibited; by the time it landed on the magazine cover, Olympia was 11 and defended the image, saying that of the many she had made with her mother it was among her favorites.

The photograph drew condemnation, including from Australia's prime minister at the time, Kevin Rudd. The controversy came at a particularly bad time for Ms. Papapetrou: A few months before, she had received her initial cancer diagnosis.

She eventually seemed to beat the disease, but it recurred in 2012, and her doctors told her she might have only weeks to live. More than five years later, she was still working. Her husband said she had organized her current exhibition, at the Michael Reid Gallery in Sydney, from her bed.

Ms. Papapetrou in an undated family photograph. As the daughter of Greek immigrants, she felt alienated growing up in Australia. "Difference and identity is a theme that has always been present in my work and led

me to photograph alternative subcultures," she said.

Ms. Papapetrou studied art after taking it up as a career, receiving a master of arts degree at RMIT University in Melbourne in 1997 and a Ph.D. at Monash University in 2007.

In addition to her husband and her children, Olympia and Solomon Nelson, she is survived by her mother and father.

As for the kerfuffle over the magazine cover, Ms. Papapetrou put it behind her and had no regrets about using her children in her work.

“I know that when I am not here I have left behind a record of our journey together,” she told The Sydney Morning Herald in 2012. “They will remember that we had a lot of fun doing this.”

A version of this article appears in print on **April 28, 2018**, on Page B8 of the New York edition with the headline: Polixeni Papapetrou, 57, A Whimsical Photographer. [Order Reprints](#) | [Today's Paper](#) | [Subscribe](#)

Subscribe to debate, not division. Get The New York Times for just \$1 a week.