



## MELANCHOLIA

*Melancholia* (2014) represents an exploration of a time in my life when sadness and grief were hanging over me and I was searching for a way to express it. Diagnosed with advanced metastatic cancer in November 2012 and already facing organ-failure, the only treatment that could be offered at the time was palliative pain relief. It was a devastating time as I was preparing to farewell my family and coming to terms with letting go of my identity and work as an artist, my friendships, my home and this world. I was preparing for another type of world, that of the unknown.

Before I became ill I came across some vintage clown costumes and wigs. I had thought about photographing my children as clowns to express ideas about constructed personas, otherness, disguise and fear. I was troubled now that I would not be able to do this and further because I had just acquired a new camera, marking a switch from analogue to digital photography. As sick as I was, I was determined to photograph my teenage daughter Olympia dressed as a clown to express something close to me

about our feelings of sadness, horror and fear in the face of the unknown. I wondered if I could draw a parallel between the transformation in the public imagination of the clown's persona and the changed attitudes towards death and dying, both seemingly weighed down by a fear and anxiety of the unknown.

The clown, joker, trickster, entertainer and jester has been a complex figure in cultural history. Being interested in the clown's transformation from a sage to entertainer to freak, I was curious to explore why the clown has become a character beset by darkness, sadness, repulsion and fear in contemporary consciousness. Even though the modern institution of the clown is designed to amuse and death is not, there is an uncanny coming together of the two. Clowns do not reveal anything other than what we already know about the heavily-painted archetype as a vehicle for hidden sad emotions such as grief, despair and loneliness. The works are titled to evoke the sad emotions often connected with the clown character and also death. In a similar way death does not reveal anything about itself. In drawing a parallel between perceptions of the clown and the ontology of dying, it occurred to me that neither wears its true face and both are imbued by sadness and fear. I wanted to put aside all sad and happy constructs and look beyond the physical to question our understanding.

POLIXENI PAPAPETROU

*Works, inside from left to right: Sorrow, Pathos, Decrepitude, Grief, Despondency, Somberness. Outside: Melancholia — all works: 2014, 150 x 100 cm, pigment ink prints*



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MELANCHOLIA  
2014

Polixeni Papapetrou



## Mourning and Melancholia the clown photographs of Polixeni Papapetrou

*Life is only on earth, and not for long*  
Kirsten Dunst in Lars Von Trier's film *Melancholia*.

In Sigmund Freud's essay 'Mourning and Melancholia' (1914-1916)<sup>1</sup>, written in collaboration with his daughter Anna Freud, he charts a correlation between these two pathological dispositions with analogous emotional traits. Mourning and melancholia are intertwined with profoundly similar features such as the loss of a loved object and dwelling on loss. The lugubriousness of melancholia resides in a doleful and wistful disposition. In 2011, Danish director Lars Von Trier released his film *Melancholia*. The idea of the film originated during a therapy session Lars von Trier attended to treat his depression as a way to examine the human psyche during a disaster. Highly stylized, the film narrates two sisters (Kirsten Dunst and Charlotte Gainsbourg) whose relationships unravel as a nearby planet threatens to collide with the Earth. Both sisters suffer psychic crisis at the prospect of annihilation. Imagining Armageddon, the sisters narrate a nihilism and acceptance of the finality of things. With a state of mind as the starting point, Von Trier's film is haunted by the anxieties of melancholiacs, illuminated by Saturn, the planet for melancholia and Richard Wagner's tumultuous overtures.

Polixeni Papapetrou's photographic series furthers the notion of *Melancholia* in a suite of seven colour photographs of her teenage daughter, Olympia. Dressed in vintage clown costumes, Papapetrou returns to her domestic studio to produce tauntly composed images of seated figures against densely black, velvety backgrounds. Individual titles allude to forlorn emotional states: *Decrepitude*, *Despondency*, *Grief*, *Melancholia*, *Pathos*, *Somberness* and *Sorrow*. By casting her daughter as a clown, Papapetrou moves beyond the roles and codified types generally assigned to clowns to reveal the persona underneath. Her lone clown is in some kind of somatic stupor with downcast head and eyes averted. Papapetrou skillfully elicits an emotional connection from inanimate disguises with masks that have been altered and modified to induce a melancholic affect.

In the late 80s and early 90s, Papapetrou had spent time at Ashton and Silver's Circuses photographing clowns and performers. She returned to this subject in late 2012 when she had accumulated vintage costumes,

masks and wigs. Armed with a wardrobe repertoire of props, she deftly alters her teenage daughter into intriguing tableaux and characters, investigating the construction of identity and its counterpart, disguise. This is a makeover gone awry. Papapetrou's scenarios address the anxieties of the status of the self with pictures that are at once frightening and revealing: 'I want to portray the clown both as an historical figure and an element of the unconscious, rather than as a more frenzied figure who disorients the audience.'<sup>2</sup>

Papapetrou deploys props such as synthetic wigs in lurid colours, peaked hats, pompoms, sequins and neck frills as well as a white, woven handbag. These carefully sourced accouterments heighten her despondent clown who sits with clasped hands. Highly staged and adorned with garish costumes, Papapetrou invokes the transformative quality of masks to style personas in glittery yet tawdry costumes from bygone times. Unlike court jesters, clowns have traditionally performed a psychological role by interacting with audiences yet retaining the demeanor of outsiders,

concealed with makeup and masquerade. While pantomime and harlequins usually perform the role of the fool whose everyday actions and tasks become farcical, Papapetrou performs a psychological portraiture with a hidden self that alludes to a universal archetype. Stripped of her signature landscape backdrops, Papapetrou returns to private, intimate moments that narrate the pathos and sadness of clowns. Lost in thought, her clown's exaggerated appearance verges on grotesque, miserably waiting for the next unknown performance.

Polixeni showed me these clown photographs during a hospital visit when she was acutely ill. She revealed these new, private photographs that expressed intense sorrow and fear as well as the profoundly intimate relationship between mother and daughter. These photographs were produced during a period of urgency and subsequently included in the exhibition *Whisper in My Mask: 2014 TarraWarra Biennial*. Alluding to the seven stages of grief and the weekly cycle of days, Papapetrou reminds us of the finality of life and the eternal enigma of being.

NATALIE KING  
Senior Research Fellow, VCA, University of Melbourne  
& Senior Curator, MPavilion.

ENDNOTES  
1 'The complex of melancholia behaves like an open wound, drawing to itself cathectic energies...from all directions, and emptying the ego until it is totally impoverished. It can easily prove resistant to the ego's wish to sleep.' Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, The Hogarth Press, London, p. 253.  
[http://www.english.upenn.edu/~cavitch/pdf-library/Freud\\_MourningAndMelancholia.pdf](http://www.english.upenn.edu/~cavitch/pdf-library/Freud_MourningAndMelancholia.pdf) (accessed September 2015)

2 Natalie King, 'The Second Biggest Love Affair: Polixeni Papapetrou in conversation with Natalie King', December 2012-February 2013, *A Performative Paradox*, Centre for Contemporary Photography, Melbourne, 2013, p. 9.