

Polixeni Papapetrou 1960–2018

Natalie King

Polixeni Papapetrou was immeasurably creative, remarkably indefatigable and unstintingly focused on her photographic practice. Poli skilfully melded her family life with her artistic output by casting her beloved children, Olympia and Solomon, in her photographs as a way to cherish and conjoin both spheres, while her husband, art critic Robert Nelson, painted her backdrops under strict instruction, and her seamstress mother Eftihiya sewed costumes.

Poli was born to Greek immigrant parents and grew up in Port Melbourne. She recalled pushing her younger brother around in a pram, feeling like an outsider. Initially, she became a lawyer graduating from the University of Melbourne, but she also studied Australian history with Geoffrey Blainey. In 1984 she started to pursue photography, resulting in a vast opus of wondrous, precise and uncanny images. She was curious about those on the outskirts of society and developed an early preoccupation with the work of Diane Arbus, leading to her own forays into photographing drag queens at the Calypso Cabaret in Bangkok, children, and holy men in Nepal.

Closer to home Poli depicted body builders, Elvis fans and homeless men who lived in a city shelter. In the late 1980s she photographed clowns at the Ashton and Silvers circuses, intrigued by how the masked face can reveal rather than conceal emotions, evolving into the series 'Melancholia' which she made for the 2014 TarraWarra Biennial that I curated with Djon Mundine. For her, the clown was an archetype for hidden emotions such as grief, despair and loneliness. She also had a large collection of vintage clown masks sourced on eBay. Moreover, she was inspired by the tableau-vivant tradition of nineteenth-century photographers, especially Julia Margaret Cameron, Charles Dodgson (Lewis Carroll) and Oscar Rejlander.

She avidly consumed literature, poetry, philosophy, popular culture and fashion as sources for her artworks. Whether producing carefully configured landscape scenarios ('The Ghillies'), masked portraits ('Between Worlds') or emotive mises en scène ('The Dreamkeepers'), she flexed her lens on the human dimension of loss, longing, love and the unknown. Her photographs depict ambiguous narratives or stories without endings, revealed in her prescient remark that 'the tragedy that is the end is present in the beginning'.¹ In July 2008, a furor erupted when her photograph of a young Olympia sitting naked on a rock appeared on the cover of this publication, fuelling a national controversy. Poli was undeterred by the media fracas and continued to make work with increasing tenacity.

Poli was an inspirational friend, generous colleague and talented artist. Even though she was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2007, she had a reservoir of stamina, rising at dawn to walk her dogs in the Carlton Gardens to savour the transition from dawn to daybreak. She was a keen observer of transitions, especially childhood to adolescence and adulthood. Her artistic output was prodigious, making work until the very end including her final, solemn series of luminous silk-screens printed by Stewart Russell, 'MY HEART – still full of her', in April 2018. With limited mobility, she used her confinement over the past 18 months to review her archive, making sure her photographs were in order and reflecting on her creative impetus. As a result, she came across negatives from 30 years ago, coming full circle with the origins of her work and her artistic cycle.

Poli exhibited extensively internationally and has had an enormous impact on the photography scene in Australia and abroad, most notably as a founder of Melbourne's Centre for Contemporary Photography (CCP), where she held a survey in 2013. In the past year alone, she exhibited in Düsseldorf, Kobe, Nanjing and Thessaloniki.

Poli was a deep listener; wise, kind and super-stylish with her glossy black hair, impeccable grooming and jewellery. As Joanna Murray-Smith wrote recently, she was 'both feminine and feminist'.² In her final months, she gathered her coveted friends around her, along with piles of books from Luce Irigaray to Irvin Yalom, and the defiant painting 'Fuck you cancer' above her bed.

Poli faced the unknown with grace and equanimity, while her photographs allowed her to freeze time, apprehending and holding onto ourselves and loved ones. As she said to me in 2013: 'my work has felt like an act of love.' Many of us were recipients of her radiant love.



1. See 'Polixeni Papapetrou in conversation with Natalie King', *Eyeline*, no. 80, 2014, pp. 44–56; www.polixenipapapetrou.net/essay/polixeni-papapetrou-conversation-natalie-king/, accessed 1 July 2018.

2. See dailyreview.com.au/poli-papetreou-photographer-dies-age-57/73611/, accessed 1 July 2018.

This is a version of the eulogy the author delivered at the wake for Polixeni Papapetrou at Melbourne's CCP on 17 April 2018.