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**Moments of fantasy and grace**

June 1, 2004

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A Mediterranean Alice ... Papapetrou's Prize Thimble.

**Sydney is a maturing metropolis, and this is reflected in photographs of the city. Robert McFarlane finds the changes curiouser and curiouser.**

During the five decades in which John Williams has been photographing Sydney, he has observed a city evolving from a core of slowly dissolving monoculturalism - a town where Paddington and Balmain were once working-class suburbs and serious Celtic-faced men wore felt hats and drank beer while they contemplated the daily double, studying their Form Guide as if it had just arrived from the oracle at Delphi.


Williams's images calibrate Sydney's journey towards becoming a maturing, turbulent, more youth-orientated, multicultural metropolis.

Williams's *Sydney Diary* exhibition at the Museum of Sydney successfully takes the warming temperature of a ripening city from that most defining arena of any society - the street. These are gritty, wry observations of a populace at work, play and during the moments of mystery that lie somewhere in between.


There is a sense in some of Williams's subjects' faces, especially men, that they can't quite believe their luck to be living in a soporific, sensual city that asks so little of them. A sense of abandon also prevails, particularly in images Williams made during a Rocks Festival in 1973. One defining moment shows a disorientated reveller, partly dressed in women's clothes, blithely exposing his sex, as they used to say, for Williams's Leica. Gender confusion radiates from within the man's addled stance, eccentric garb and beatific smile. Williams records the moment with unblinking candour.


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
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**GOOD LIVING**

John Williams's visual grammar is similar to that of Henri Cartier-Bresson and, more locally, Roger Scott. The moment observed appears paramount to this photographer but Williams applies less of the extreme precision of composition for which both Cartier-Bresson and Scott are well known. Williams practises a simpler form of observation, more about economy than the elegant street geometry of Cartier-Bresson.

This is well expressed in his touching image of a young girl unable to stay awake at a Greek wedding in Newtown in 1971. He also shows an early fascination with ceremony in his 1964 photograph of a young girl mimicking soldiers marching through Hyde Park. This image, like the wedding picture, is an honest response to a moment of human grace.

Many of the photographs in this exhibition appear in a recently published monograph of Williams's work, *Line Zero* (UNSW Press, 2004), available at the Museum of Sydney bookshop.

*Sydney Diary* is yet another example of successful documentation of a segment of Australian society, over a long period, by a dedicated, self-motivated individual. It is nevertheless time to consider a more concerted approach to recording for posterity, an even more rapidly changing society.

Justine Klevansky's *Dykelicious*, despite its ungainly title, is a concise exhibition of black and white photographs of gay women in Sydney.

Her images capture women relating to each other with tenderness and occasional sensuality. The most obvious characteristic in her photographs is a clear affection for her subjects with the well-known performers at the Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras, Dykes on Bikes, presented in a surprisingly restrained tableau.

Where this photographer appears strongest is in direct portraiture. Her striking image of Erin, with skateboard, carries contemporary echoes of American visual pioneer Lisette Model. Klevansky says she would like to create a larger project, in book form, of her community. Should this occur, she might be advised to investigate a wider approach to her documentary photography.

As appealing as many photographs here are, there is a lack of strong, objective photojournalistic observation in *Dykelicious*. If Klevansky is to explore her community with real depth, she could learn much from the documentary approaches used by photojournalists such as Mary Ellen Mark and Susan Meiselas to enter and record equally sensitive communities.

I was disappointed that Klevansky's prints, made by inkjet printer on to canvas, do neither her subjects nor her vision justice. Archival inkjet printing has now reached standards of permanence and quality comparable with traditional photographic processes. Some of the newer seven- and eight-colour inkjet printers are capable of genuine black and white print quality. Failing this, there is always the darkroom.

At Stills Gallery, Polixeni Papapetrou's *Mystical Places* continues to mine the motherlode of mythology created by Lewis Carroll. These are large, impeccably photographed and printed images of the photographer's daughter playing the role of Alice in Wonderland - against vivid, painted backgrounds by Robert Nelson.

As contemporary photo-illustrations, these images work quite wonderfully. I have come to accept Papapetrou's daughter Olympia as a fine, if darker and more Mediterranean Alice. Robert Nelson's painted backdrops, inspired by Sir John Tenniel's original book illustrations, remain essentially true to the spirit of the Reverend Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, now known forever as Lewis Carroll. One of the more triumphant aspects of this collaboration between optics and artifice is the ease with which I found myself accepting the perspective offered by placing Olympia against Nelson's paintings.

In *Prize Thimble* and *Poor Little Thing*, Papapetrou's Alice appears suspended within the Rousseau-like lushness of Nelson's brushwork, surely no mean feat, considering the consciously rustic vigour of these paintings.

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Some images work better than others, however. The image of Olympia as Alice, offering a stick to a vast brown dog, seemed to fall precisely within the spirit of both Carroll and Tenniel. *Flying Cards*, which showed Alice sheltering beneath an aerial arc of playing cards, didn't provoke my usual instant acceptance of Papapetrou's (and Green's) vision.

Olympia's role as the archetypal female voyager into a "curiouser and curiouser" world seems yet again fruitful for Polixeni Papapetrou - but I found myself thinking about the absence of Lewis Carroll's text. These images are so completely married to Carroll's imagination that it seems a pity to not embrace this link in a direct way.


Of Papapetrou's other images, her photograph of her daughter with a violin - after Carroll's portrait of Xie Kitchin - allowed the viewer to see, for the first time, Olympia closer to her own identity.

For a brief moment the sweet opacity of Alice Liddell cleared and the true child was glimpsed.

***Sydney Diary 1958-2003*, Museum of Sydney, until November 28.**

***Dykelicious* at Gallery Xposure, Darling Street, Rozelle, until June 22nd.**

***Mystical Places* at Stills Gallery, Paddington, until June 26.**

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