

# PSYCHOPOMP



Images of Compassion by **Sam Lloyd**

[www.samlloydart.com](http://www.samlloydart.com)

Ballarat International Foto Biennale  
August 28 - October 24 2021

Irish Murphy's  
36 Sturt Street  
Ballarat

Mon-Sun 11.30am-late

## Artist Statement

Most of my exhibitions culminate a couple of years of work, but this one came quickly. I met my first angel in January 2021 in the Western Districts of Victoria. Based on a couple of images, I made a quick submission to the Ballarat International Foto Biennale, grabbing one of the last available venues. It was risky and I found myself in the position of exploring a new theme while also preparing to exhibit the works.

Luckily, the angels were cooperative, although they did make demands: for example, that I photograph them in their home in the clouds - where they sat for me very patiently while I searched for the right viewpoint or effect of light. They also insisted that I capture all their imperfections - even though angels aren't supposed to have any - offering themselves with the conviction that no corruption could devalue their essence.

As I worked with these delightful beings, I found my commitment to realism slipping away. The images grew as unreal as their subjects; just like their marble cousins, the photographs became manipulations that seek to be profound. Confronted by their artistry, I was lost for words: the angels called the shots. The results may be a little tacky, but if they are bad theatre, they still make us cry.

I hope there is a lot of emotion in these images. The times in which angels proliferated in cemeteries and human minds were ones in which death was common, most pitifully of children. Story telling machines, we humans scribble on cave walls or project on cinema screens (or carve in stone) our hope in guardian creatures who - unlike the callous gods - care about us, pity us, pity our still-born children, cry tears for us, hold the hands of dead infants.

These peaceful-looking angels know *all* that is terrible, that *life* can be terrible; forget the advertising! Life can be cruel, unforgiving, wretched, loathsome: they *know* it. In these images I want to **SHOW** they know it.

These are not statues of angels.

These are not photographs of statues of angels.

These images are evidence of compassion.

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## About the Angels

The photographs were taken in cemeteries in Melbourne and country Victoria. The one that inspired the series is in Casterton, a small town in western Victoria. The largest number are from Melbourne General Cemetery. The angels date from approximately 1880 to 1915, with a few examples into the late 1920s.

From my limited observations, Victorian cemetery angels group into three periods.

**Early angels.** There are occasional examples of angels on graves from the 1850s and 60s. These tend to be amateurish in quality and of smaller size, sometimes carved of stone other than marble. My assumption is that these are locally produced by unexceptional stonemasons.

**High Period.** From the late 1870s there is an explosion of angels in both number and quality. The works consistently use high quality marble and are finely worked. They follow classical modes in their proportions and style. My sources at Heritage Victoria suggest these are imported from Carrara in Italy, where skilled stone-carvers produced fine copies of neo-classical originals using a device called a pointing machine.

**Late angels.** There are a small number of finely sculpted angels on prominent graves, dating from the 1920s and into the 1930s. In contrast to those of the classical 'high period', to my eye these possess a Pre-Raphaelite, anti-academic sensuality and pathos. These include works by well-known Australian sculptor Bertram Mackennal.

It's the angels of the middle period that interest me. Perhaps their popularity was connected to the contemporary taste for the neo-classical; their profusion in the 1880s may reflect the demise of the wealthy and flamboyant gold-rush generation. What I love about them is their blatant Pagan-ness; less Christian symbols than resurrected Greek gods, they express a very human wish for the everlasting.

## Technical

I use a Nikon D600 DSLR, coupled with a vintage manual-focus 35-200 macro/zoom lens. Post-production in Photoshop.