

Eclectic Eye

Tracey Moffatt's images can be lurid, wicked, delicate, sexy, sly, tough, and perversely lovely By Susie Linfield

Tracey Moffatt is a flurry of activity. The 39-year-old photographer-filmmaker-videographer from Australia—who now lives in a sunny floor-through apartment in a renovated tenement in the Chelsea district of Manhattan—excitedly leafs through portfolios of her new photographs, tacks work up on a wall, screens her latest video, and lugs out a tome of Goya prints for perusal. Though she initially resisted an interview, Moffatt, who is dressed in gray wool slacks and a multicolored sweater (think Paul Klee meets Tse cashmere), seems downright cheerful, and frequently responds to questions about her work with peals of delighted laughter or gleeful smiles. Asked about her 1998 mock-historical photo series “Laudanum,” which combined the delicacy of a Lillian Gish film with the sadomasochistic eroticism of *The Story of O*, Moffatt grins and says, “That’s my wicked side.”

Indeed, Moffatt has so many sides—thematic, emotional, and esthetic—that it’s difficult to categorize her work. The creator of an eclectic range of narrative and documentary films, videos, and photographic series over the past decade, she became one of the world’s hottest contemporary artists following the success of her eight-month-long multimedia show at New York’s Dia Center for the Arts in 1997–98. (This year, she’s had 21 solo shows and appeared in 20 group exhibitions throughout the world.) For starters, there’s the tormented mother-child relationship in the film *Night Cries: A Rural Tragedy* (1990) and the photo series “Up in the Sky” (1997); the tough, violent sexiness of the young female roller-derby players in the photo series “Guapa (Goodlooking)” (1995); the banal cruelty of the photo series “Scarred for Life” (1994), an extended riff on adolescent trauma; and the voyeuristic humor of the video *Heaven* (1997), a sly look at Australian surfer boys. “Laudanum” (1998), a perversely lovely series of 19 faded photogravures that was purchased by the Brooklyn Museum, was set on what looked like a dusty 19th-

The artist with camera.



© 1999 LYLE FISHER/COURTESY MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

century plantation and chronicles the charged relationship between a mistress and her (sometimes naked) Asian maid.

Says Russell Ferguson, associate curator of Los Angeles's Museum of Contemporary Art, which exhibited "Scarred for Life," "It's not that easy to pin down one thing that she does. There's a wide range of forms that she employs and a wide range of issues that she explores. She's an idiosyncratic artist with a very strongly defined personal vision." Moffatt says simply, "I don't think I have an identifiable style at all. I really go with my obsessions."

Moffatt's new works, which will be shown in New York this month at the Armory Show art fair and next month at Matthew Marks Gallery, represent no departure from her previous eclecticism. She has blown up some rough snapshots she took in her backyard when she was 13, for which she forced her clearly miserable siblings to pose as stock characters—including Jesus, Mary, and a cheesy rock star. "These pictures are early evidence of my bossiness," Moffatt says. "I was doing then exactly what I do now: dress people up for the picture. Now the German intellectuals are analyzing this work, talking about" — her voice drops to a tone of mock seriousness — "my tableaux." And she has continued the "Scarred for Life" series, because "so many people have come up to me with their own tragic-funny tales of childhood."

But the centerpiece is "Invocations," a series of 13 photos blown up into huge, lurid, color-drenched silk screens that, Moffatt says, she hopes look "like a peeling fresco. The hardness of the photograph is not there anymore." The images tell an oblique, very odd story about a femme fatale, a macho dude, and a little black girl in an enchanted forest. "It's trippy work—very un-New York, isn't it?" Moffatt asks. "It's somewhere between Goya and Disney. My work is not cool, and this series is certainly not cool. When I showed it to Paul Morris [who exhibited the "Laudanum" series at his Chelsea gallery last fall], he said, 'You are really sick.' I can't even comprehend what the reaction is going to be."

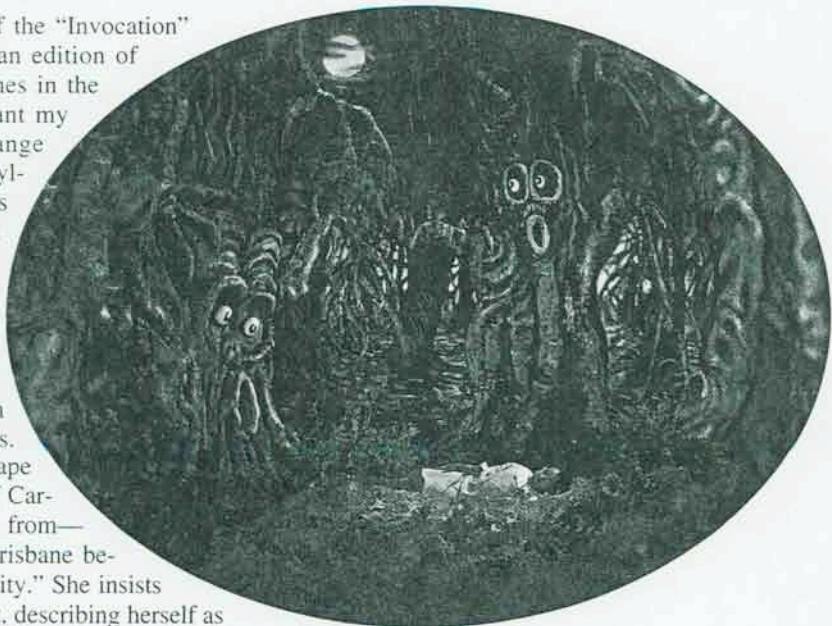
Moffatt says she intends to produce 60 prints of the "Invocation" series: "I'm not into this elitist thing of making an edition of four—why should four rich people be the only ones in the world to get to buy your work? And really, I want my work everywhere." Prices for Moffatt's work range from \$20,000, for *Something More #1*, a highly stylized photo that Morris calls her "single most famous image" (and in which Moffatt, dressed in a bright red dress, is the key figure), to \$500, for a "Backyard Series" print.

The daughter of an Aboriginal woman (she never knew her father), Moffatt was adopted into a white, working-class family in the drab northern city of Brisbane when she was three. "In Australia, the north is tropical and harsh and backward," Moffatt explains. "If you want to do anything with your life, you escape to Sydney or Melbourne. When I read the stories of Carson McCullers, it makes me think about where I'm from—the heat, the racism." She attended art school in Brisbane because, she says, she was "too dumb to go to university." She insists that as an art student she showed absolutely no talent, describing herself as



ALL PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

ABOVE An image from "Laudanum," 1998, a series of photogravures that combine the delicacy of a Lillian Gish film with the sado-masochistic eroticism of *The Story of O*. BELOW A silk screen from "Invocations," 2000, which takes place in an enchanted forest.





ABOVE *Guapa (Goodlooking)*, 6, a Cibachrome from 1995 that features female roller-derby players. BELOW *Up in the Sky* #16, from a 1997 photo series.

think it's all about control: when you take the camera outside, you're at the mercy of others. I love documentary photography. I find it very beautiful. I just don't have the patience to do it myself. It's too much work, and I'm too lazy. You see someone like Nan Goldin around town—she's always got the camera on her. I'm not like that; I'm not a shutterbug. But just because I'm not setting out to literally capture truth doesn't mean that there isn't any truth in my imagery—or so I would hope."

And like many of her contemporaries, Moffatt grew up drenched in American pop culture, but she also immersed herself in the classic canon of Western painting, film, and, especially, literature. Thus she describes *Mary Poppins* as "a cinematic masterpiece" and in the next breath compares it to the Pasolini film *Teorema*, because they are both about "the intruder entering the family." She says that "Scarred for Life" deliberately copies the "plain, ordinary, washed-out color" of 1960s *Life* magazine photos, but that it was equally inspired by *Great Expectations* and *Oliver Twist*, with their casts of horrid, child-hating adults.

Moffatt moved to New York after the Dia show to fulfill a childhood fantasy: "Since I was ten,



"terrible, the worst, always,"—and that she became a photographer simply because she can't paint. Indeed, she describes the inability to draw as a kind of primal wound: "As soon as we can sit still as a toddler on the floor, we're handed a pencil and a piece of paper, and we're told to draw. And most of us can't. It's the first inadequate thing we find out about ourselves. Oh, how I wish I could paint."

Like the work of her contemporaries from Cindy Sherman to Vik Muniz, Moffatt's photographs are highly stylized constructs and just about as far from a candid-camera aesthetic as possible. "This thing about capturing realism—I've never gone after that," Moffatt says. "I

it's been my dream to live here as an artist." But she insists, "I don't think the city is going to rub off on me in any way, in the same way that I don't think Australia has, either. I can produce art anywhere." (Asked what she does when not making art, Moffatt laughs and says, "I sit in baths and drink. I gossip on the telephone. I mooch around bookshops. I hang out with my hundreds—hundreds and hundreds!—of friends.") Indeed, it is process—preferably an ever changing one—not place, that interests Moffatt the most. She explains, "I'm loving my work while I'm doing it, but once it's on the wall and the show has opened, I really don't want to have anything to do with it again. I cringe when I see it. It represents an old self that I don't want to know about anymore. As an artist, I need to do something new." ■

Susie Linfield teaches in the cultural reporting program at New York University and is a book critic for the Los Angeles Times.