

CREATING ONE'S OWN REALITY

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Tracey Moffatt's photo and film images deal with the fundamental, existential themes of sexuality and power, birth and death, yearnings, dreams and memories. At first glance, her vivid figural imagery appears to trace the outlines of an external reality. Yet it is actually highly stylised and arranged in a pleasurable embrace of artificiality. Even those elements of pictorial content which seem so neat and succinct at first ultimately defy clear interpretation. Thus Moffatt's photographs make a very special kind of impression on the viewer. Sensuality and inner drama go directly to the heart, while the puzzling narrative components and the autonomous power of isolated visual scenarios create a distancing effect.

The thirty-nine-year-old Australian artist began her career in art as a maker of experimental and documentary films and was also involved in the production of music videos. After completing her studies in Visual Communications at the Queensland College of Art in her native city of Brisbane in 1982, she moved to Sydney, where she lives today, while maintaining a second residence in New York.

Moffatt pursues cinematic principles in her photography as well. Her pictures are done exclusively in series developed on the basis of carefully prepared concepts at locations rented for her purposes. The artist, who appears as a performer in some of her earlier photo series and

films,¹ also employs a relatively large staff of people for her photography.

Her alert receptiveness and her desire to transform a wide variety of impressions and experiences into something of her own by tracking them down and capturing them in photographs are already quite evident in three colour photos she made at the age of thirteen and fourteen. In these photographs, reproduced in 1998 as the *Backyard Series*, she had playmates pose as the hero of *Planet of the Apes*, a popular movie at the time, wearing ape masks and a cloak, in a group nativity scene at Christmas and as a rock star on the lawn of her backyard.

The importance of theatrical staging becomes particularly obvious in the two works that first earned Moffatt's recognition outside Australia, the photo series *Something More* and the short film *Night Cries*, both done in 1989, where she uses painted landscapes assembled in the manner of stage sets. The dreamlike series entitled *Pet Thang* (1991) and the vital roller-derby queen series *Guapa*, completed four years later, are played out – albeit in very different ways – against neutral backgrounds and appear detached from space and time. The illusion of documentation apparent in *Scarred for Life* (1994), which is exaggerated in places to the level of the surreal in *Up in the Sky* (1997) and placed in a mock-historical setting in

the new *laudanum* series, is later concentrated into scenes of penetrating immediacy.

The changing colour character of the photographs within a given series generates additional alienating effects. In *Something More*, for example, stark black-and-white appears alongside vigorous coloration dominated by red and yellow, while entire black-and-white series are tinted in various delicate hues.

Yet each photo has the look of a segment of a suspense-filled narrative that seems to be continued in the other pictures, although it is possible to make all the associative links needed to think it through to its conclusion. Moffatt does not define her choice of sequence as the only possible one. She specifies only the visual beginning and end of her stories, leaving the parts in between to stimulate the viewer's imagination as highlights, so to speak. The owner or the curator exhibiting the series is expected to decide upon the remainder of the sequential arrangement and thus to shape its interpretation through the changes he or she makes. "I am not concerned with verisimilitude . . . I am not concerned with capturing reality. I'm concerned with creating it myself."²

Tracey Moffatt develops her themes, as she says herself, on the basis of personal memories conditioned more by her feelings than by her analytical acuity. Her own experience provides a foundation – in *Scarred for Life*, for example – for descriptions of situations presented with laconic immediacy. A prominent role is also played by the artist's ideas and her concern with the world of found visual images drawn from such distinctly different media as television, advertising, film or art history.

"The source for all my pictures is in my subconscious mind, in my dreams. I don't mean the dreams I have in my sleep at night (they are much too strange and bizarre) but the ones I have when I'm awake. You can dream with your eyes open, too."³

"I love creating my own version of reality – the images come from inside, from the things I'm familiar with. Things I've seen or experienced and things I think I've seen or experienced. Perhaps it's also an exaggerated version of my own reality."⁴

Moffatt makes no distinction between so-called high art and entertainment. Instead, she openly accepts the seductive effects of cliché-ridden, emotionally charged images from the realm of popular culture and appropriates their strategies for her own purposes. She accepts the existence and the significance of the everyday myths engendered or represented by these images, myths with which she has grown up and which have become a part of her life. Andy Warhol, the Pop Artists and many others who followed did much the same before her. Today, however, she employs these same images – nearly two generations later – in a much more matter-of-fact manner and with a sense of acceptance and sensuality that has nothing in common with cynical commentary.

Movies have always fascinated Tracey Moffatt, as she confesses herself. They have shaped and inspired the world of her imagination. The medium of film offers her an important starting point for aesthetic and intellectual activity. The artist cites popular Australian films such as Charles Chauvel's *Jedda* (1955), a melodramatic treatment of the conflict between white colonists and the sup-

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Tracey Moffatt, quoted in *Tracey Moffatt: Free-Falling*, Centre for the Arts (1998), p. 23.

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Tracey Moffatt, exh. cat. *Tracey Moffatt*, Stuttgart, Bozen, Bremen (1998), p. 16.

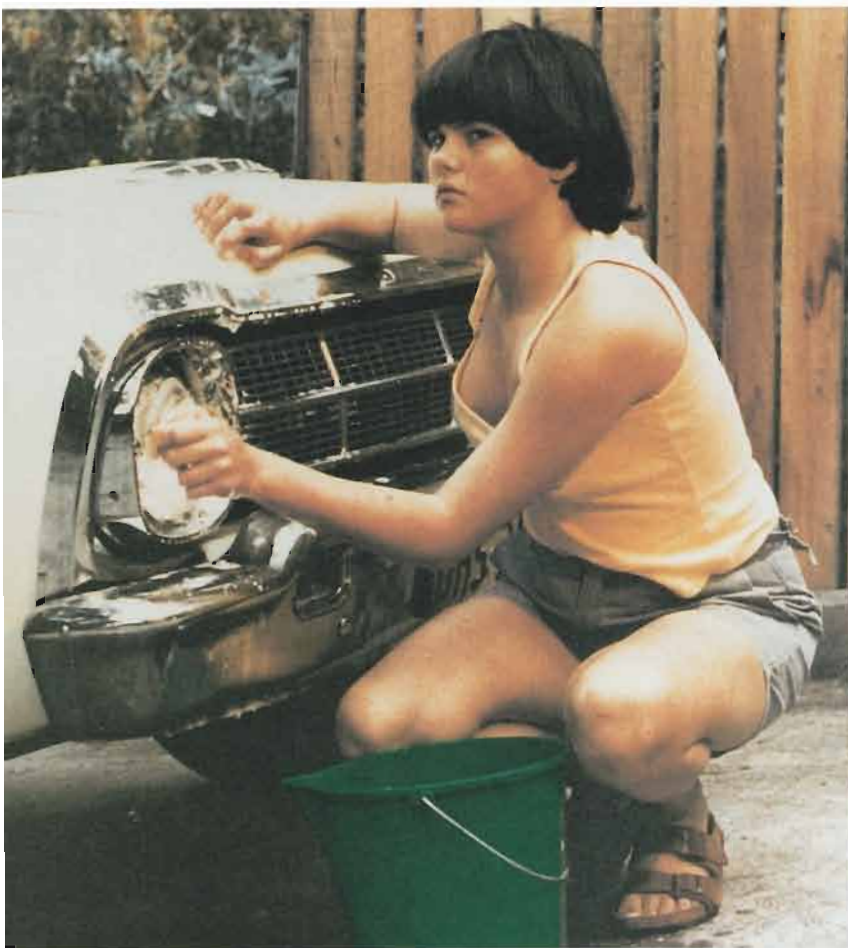
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op. cit. (Stuttgart, 1998).

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op. cit. (Stuttgart, 1998).

Scarred for Life, 1998.



Tracey Moffatt

Useless, 1974

Her father's nickname for her was 'useless'.

pressed native population told as the story of an aborigine child, the *Mad Max* series, films by Pier Paolo Pasolini and Martin Scorsese. And she professes a "special passion for everything European – for things filmed before 1970 in black-and-white, like the dream films of Jean Cocteau."⁵

Moffatt gives each new photo series and every new film a character of its own, exposing herself in the process to a succession of new aesthetic and technical challenges. Each work is shaped by her richly associative, vital mode of vision, and accent-setting stylistic means, such as the juxtaposition of extreme close-up details with view of broader expanses of space, appear again and again.

In nine colour and black-and-white photos, *Something More* (1989) alludes to the story of the a beautiful young woman of modest circumstances who ventures forth with great hopes for a "better life" in the distant big city and ultimately fails in her quest. In staging her photos, Moffatt makes direct use of such visual appeals of advertising as stereotyping and provocative pictorial composition. The material qualities of the individual subjects are emphasised with brilliant precision – the shimmering texture of the softly flowing silk slip against the rough, bleached board wall, for example. The effect of materiality is intensified through the use of extreme close-up, as in the view of the still-life-style arrangement of the protagonist's festive red dress with its embroidered black roses and the lustrous fabrics interwoven with gold threads. A shiny motorcycle engine and polished black riding boots – symbols of macho-masculinity – sparkle alongside freshly polished fingernails that identify the person holding the whip as a woman.

The six earth-toned colour photographs from the *Pet Thang* series, done two years later, call to mind a dream fantasy. Appearing to float in the air next to one another in an unreal vision, the face and the body of a young woman and a sheep or lamb emerge from deep darkness. Smooth, naked skin is presented next to a curly, soft coat of wool. The aura of different forms of haptic sensuality and the tension created in the alternation between proximity and isolation suggest a somnambulant eroticism full of mystery.

The colour photos in *Scarred for Life*, on the other hand, could be taken at first glance for snapshots from a family album. Moffatt places brief texts alongside the small photos in an approach reminiscent of the layout of the American magazine *Life* during the sixties.⁶ The series was published in offset in 1994. Its pretence of documentary character is underscored by the numbers representing the years between 1956 and 1977 that appear with the captions. They simulate an early dating of the photos that is in keeping with their respective atmospheres and narrative contexts. The Australian TV series *Telecam Guys* reached the height of its popularity in 1977, for example. The motifs are captured from the viewpoint of a random observer. Presented alongside the written commentaries, they allude to everyday injuries which, although often inadvertently inflicted, leave behind traces that may last a lifetime.

In contrast, *Guapa*, a series of ten photographs of competing roller-derby queens, resembles a choreography of movement, concentration and isolation in open space. Using extreme perspectives, Moffatt shows the powerful



young women entering the arena together, crashing into one another and then going their separate ways again. Here as well, what we witness is not a real sports event but a staged studio production undertaken by the artist while working on a grant in San Antonio, Texas in 1994. The competition is rough, the women's expressions show determination, aggressiveness, ultimately exhaustion, yet the pastel tones and effect of soft-focus against a light background gives its presentation a sense of weightlessness and abstraction.

Moffatt's largest series, *Up in the Sky*, published as offset prints in 1997, is also the most richly referential and obscure of her serial works. Here, she has included photos taken at random amongst her stages images – although the viewer cannot tell the difference.⁷ The perspective is now broader and leads into the sere, sparsely populated Outback on the fringe of Australia's hot desert landscape, where Aborigines and poor white people live together on the edge of civilisation.

Several different plot sequences emerge together but remain fragmentary. The underlying theme is the hard

⁶ op. cit. (Stuttgart, 1998), p. 2.

⁷ op. cit. (Stuttgart, 1998), p. 17.





struggle for survival, the internal and external threats it poses, its rituals and the often obsessive yearnings it engenders, but also the primal experience of nature and existence. The image of the blonde white woman with the coloured baby signals Moffatt's returns to the mother-and-child theme with which she had dealt ten years before in her film *Night Cries*. Are the nuns seen approaching like birds of prey in their black habits, who later lift the child up into the air, an allusion to the influence of the Christian missionaries – an influence viewed by the Aborigines with great ambivalence? In the manner of social-realist films of the sixties, Moffatt monumentalises and eroticises the image of proletarian physical labour, seen here in the muscular men and women dismantling wrecked cars. Scenes like that of the girl playfully tossing rings or men wrestling on the ground have the appearance of freeze frames – calling to mind the works of Jeff Wall – and thus seem entirely removed from the realm of time.

With her new, nineteen-part series *laudanum*, Moffatt returns to a more internally cohesive scenario. As in *Some-*

thing More, the protagonists are two women – in this case a white woman and her young Aborigine servant. The two appear to be joined in an erotic relationship, a power struggle that is embedded in both narrative and atmospheric terms in the historical ambience of a turn-of-the-century colonial mansion. The beginning and closing scenes are set in the imposing banquet hall. The elegant “mistress”, before whom the “servant” lies on the floor next to a mop bucket in a posture of subjection, is later seen crouching half-naked on the stairs – the servant’s place occupied by a tightly bound bundle. Sandwiched between these two scenes are momentary images of the two women, alone, standing side by side in a room or superimposed one upon the other in various stages of nudity, immersed in sensual reverie or in the throes of obsessive ecstasy, tormenting and subjugating one another.

Moffatt's expressive atmospheric portrait of a morbid fin-de-siècle society, whose hysterical manifestations, whose sado-masochistic lust and whose decline is closely related to the narcotic laudanum – opium, was inspired by



an erotic tale.⁸ The staged photos were made in buildings under protection as historical monuments in Sydney. The artist makes lavish use of the nostalgic appeal of old photographs, intensifying the effect of mysticism to the point of melodrama with the extreme, expressionistic tools of the Expressionists. The shadowy distortions call to mind F.M. Murnau's classic German film *Nosferatu* of 1921, the model for numerous horror movies in later years. Areas of poor focus, scratches, flaws and the superimposed images of the two women – suggestive of double-exposure – heighten the impression that these are historical photographs. Accordingly, the images are reproduced in the traditional photogravure technique, which gives the photos their dull tones and thus contributes further to their appearance as old, precious pictures.

While varying the thematic-atmospheric messages and their corresponding external forms, Moffatt also alternates between rather more closed and relatively loosely associative narrative structures. The theme of sex and power, articulated in situations focused upon woman-

hood and racial conflicts in her native Australia, is a thread that links all of the sequences together. It is a concern that has an even greater influence upon the themes that underlie her films.

In *Night Cries: A Rural Tragedy*, Moffatt's best-known short feature, the artist looks back upon her own history from her vantage point at the age of twenty-nine. Born half white, half Aborigine, she was offered for adoption by a white family in compliance with the laws in force at the time. In the movie, an adult Aborigine woman nurses her terminally ill adoptive mother, struggling with feelings of hate and reluctant affection, until her death. Moffatt directs the laconic account with extreme artifice as a "tragedy" of great emotional intensity and strikingly evocative moods.

Earlier in her career she had made documentary films about the living conditions and the political concerns of the Aborigines. *Nice Colored Girls* (1987), her first short feature, and *Bedevil*, her first full-length film (completed five years later), reflect upon the fate and the myths of this



socially disadvantaged minority. The story of the Aborigine girls who rob a drunken white man during a night on the town and are then confronted in brief flashbacks with the faces of their great grandmothers during the era of colonial rule is set in the present, in a modern city. In contrast, the eerie atmosphere of the shifting, swampy landscape in *Bedevil* seems to conjure up the mysterious myths of the original natives of Australia, with which the encounters between white and coloured children are closely bound together.

Yet Moffatt does not accuse in her films or photo series. Her aim is not political agitation on behalf of feminist goals or racial equality. Her view of the opposite sex is relaxed and self-assured, as is evident, for example, in her *Some Lads* series, photos published in 1998 in which she (at age 26) showed coloured dancer-friends playfully displaying their bodies, or in *Heaven*, a film done eleven years later in which she transformed the video camera into a female eye that observes and provokes with a mixture of tolerance and scorn as it watches surfers modestly or less modestly changing their clothes in their cars. Her knowledge and her own experience of social problems and inequalities are always present. Yet they are incorporated into images whose poetry, ironic inventiveness and aesthetic power create truly new and independent realities.



Up in the Sky, 1997

