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Tracey Moffatt: one of the  
10 most fascinating people  
in the history of Australian film



tracey moffatt

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Free-falling," Tracey Moffatt's New York debut—also her first large-scale exhibition, mounted recently at the Dia Center in Chelsea—was heralded by a heroic billboard self-portrait erected nearby, on West 22nd Street. The same image on a Dia brochure reads, "Tracey Moffatt, artist at work, 1997." This gesture perfectly portrays the Australian artist's sensibility: Moffatt is a master of open-ended, atmospheric narratives which suggest an engagement with private concerns and cultural preoccupations; at the same time, she is someone who keeps that engagement at arm's length through a usually judicious—but sometimes extravagant—use of irony.

The most immediately entertaining show staged by the Dia in some time, "Free-falling" consisted of four works, two newly commissioned—*Up in the Sky*, a series of 25 offset photographs; and a videotape *Heaven* (both 1997)—and two earlier works, the 35-millimeter film *Night Cries: A Rural Tragedy* (1989); and *GUAPA (Good Looking)* (1995), a series of ten photographs. In three of the four works, Moffatt confronts identifiably Australian issues and types (Aboriginal genocide, rural poverty, surfer boys); in the fourth, her icons (female roller-derby participants) seem less immediately Australian than personal, though, arguably, the street-brawling woman is a local stereotype. Throughout, these individuals inhabit a world of Moffatt's own creation, a world in which pop culture mingles with self-styled reality to create idiosyncratic and surprisingly resonant tableaux.

Given a distinctive soft-focus effect through the use of "pre-flashing" and offset printing, the 25 images of *Up in the Sky*—without a doubt the show's centerpiece—describe a narrative in which a pale-skinned, part-Aboriginal mother living in squalor in the outback seems in danger of losing her (darker) child to a squad of nuns. To this mysterious, non-linear, and unresolved narrative (several images show the nuns to have seized the baby; others portray a crowd, the mother among them, preparing to riot) are added other tableaux which depict tangentially related scenes: an Aborigine and a white man wrestling half-naked in the dirt; women auto wreckers wielding sledgehammers and chains; assorted townspeople crawling, standing or just looking menacing along the roadside of this bleak, dusty, barren desert vista.



The plethora of apparent plots and subplots suggest a novel, play, or feature-length movie. Indeed, Moffatt cites the importance of Pasolini's early film, *Accattone* (1961), noting that at least one sequence of photographs was directly inspired by the film. "The Pasolini film, made with a hand-held camera, is rough, and the hard light of Italy is used very expressively in it," she recalls. Moffatt has aspired to a similarly evocative roughness in both narrative and visual texture, but she relies upon the medium of photography to further fracture things, creating images that imply a narrative, but do not force any particular story line. Each image serves, instead, as a point of departure for what Moffatt describes as "free-falling." The effect, in this particular case, is of a haunting, incomprehensible small-town ritual, as glimpsed, perhaps, from a passing car: a view of a world so impoverished and debauched that one maintains one's distance, never achieving a sense of intimate understanding, as if such a thing were indeed possible.

Along with Pasolini, other inspirations for the *Up in the Sky* shoot—as Moffatt admitted in a candid interview at the Chelsea Hotel, not long after the Dia opening—include the works of Southern writers with a taste for the grotesque, such as Tennessee Williams's *Suddenly, Last Summer* and Carson McCullers's *The Ballad of the Sad Cafe*. In terms of visual style, the tough she-wreckers—with their sexily tattered clothes, muscled physiques, and greasy but artfully arranged hair—could be extras from some *Mad Max* (or other post-apocalyptic) movie; and the tilted camera angles

OPPOSITE: *UP IN THE SKY* NO. 14, 1997, OFFSET PRINT, 61 x 76 CM (IMAGE), 72 x 102 CM (PAPER). COURTESY ROSLYN OXLEY GALLERY, SYDNEY.

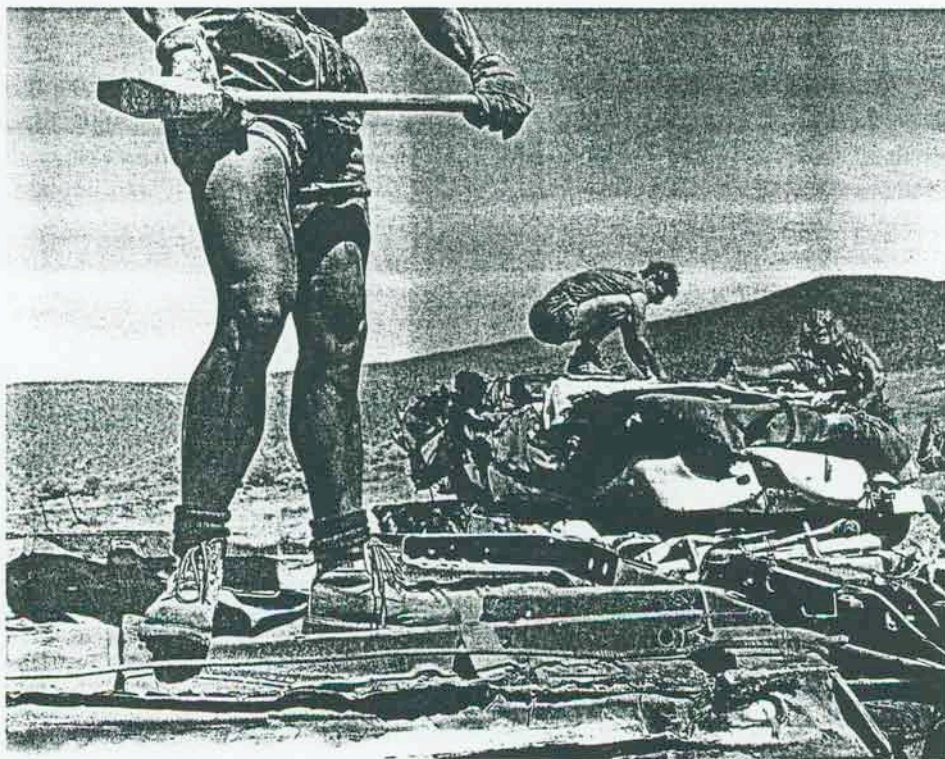
ABOVE: *HEAVEN*, 1997, STILL FROM VIDEO, 28 MINS. COURTESY ROSLYN OXLEY GALLERY, SYDNEY.



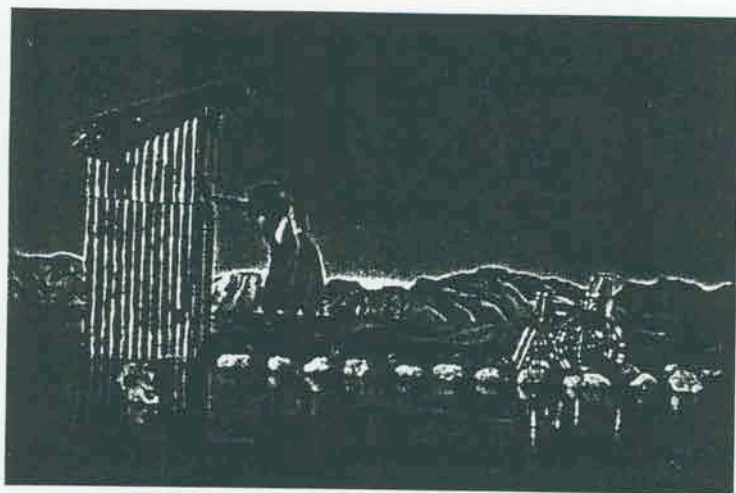


(CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT) *UP IN THE SKY NOS. 13, 6, 15 & 18*, 1997, OFFSET PRINT, 61 x 76 CM (IMAGE), 72 x 102 CM (PAPER). COURTESY ROSLYN OXLEY9 GALLERY, SYDNEY.









and exotic locales are familiar tropes from a host of contemporary rock videos (David Bowie's *Let's Dance* among them). Moffatt herself lists three music videos on her curriculum vitae, and hopes to do more; her work in general is closely allied with this kind of sensibility, insofar as her narratives are free-associative and poetic rather than linear.

Moffatt does remain firmly noncommittal about the precise circumstances surrounding the shoot ("Some of it was set up, and some of it wasn't"), as well as the specific location used, partly because she feels that the condition her photographs describe is more universal than regional. She will freely admit that she comes from Queensland, which she describes as the "deep north" of Australia, a place which roughly correlates in the American consciousness to the deep South, a place of isolation, poverty, mystery, and, as she puts it, a "boredom" that is the source of her inspiration. Moffatt's evocation of Queensland is colored in shades of superstition, cruelty, ignorance and violence, and filtered through a starkly beautiful landscape, memorable for its wide skies, simple horizons, and blinding desert light. The desert sky, in particular, plays a distinctive role here, its clarity existing in stark contrast to the squalid drama being played out on the dusty streets below.

The second of Moffatt's commissioned works, *Heaven*, is a video of Australian surfers changing out of their bathing suits in a series of beach-side parking lots. This impromptu daily striptease, which Moffatt first took note of while attempting to write a film script at a beach-front home in Sydney, was actually shot at seashores all over

Australia not only by Moffatt, but also by several of her women friends. Scantily clad men being such a commonplace in Australian parking lots, these women were all too happy to document them at Moffatt's request. Many shot their footage from inside their parked cars, and reportedly found the whole project winningly absurd.

At first, *Heaven* seems a bit simple-minded: we've all seen handsome men change out of their bathing suits, and found it sexy. But Moffatt's treatment of the subject lends it a certain edge. While *Heaven* is less viscerally affecting than *Up in the Sky*, it is nonetheless more than it seems. Here, Moffatt stalks handsome men as if they were big game, wielding a hand-held video camera instead of an elephant gun. As the work begins, she keeps a discreet distance; as time passes, she moves in closer and closer, getting out of the car and even approaching the surfers with her camera running in order to chat them up. The goal is apparently an up-close assessment of each surfer's masculine prowess: to capture these handsome young men in moments of clandestine nakedness, hopefully catching a view of their exposed genitalia as they wipe the sand from their butts. By watching the video to its conclusion the viewer participates in this act of gleeful, shameless, and at times hysterically funny voyeurism.

The adventure, however, adds up to more than merely "sneaking a peek": Moffatt eventually seems as interested in baiting and humiliating these preening, cocksure fellows as in getting a good look at what they're keeping under wraps. The men are at first all too delighted to stand and pose before an appreciative female with camera, until, that is, the extent of the exploitation and manipulation becomes clear. When coaxed and cajoled by Moffatt (alas, the conversational exchanges have been obliterated, replaced by a soundtrack of lapping waves), the surfers sometimes oblige her, but more often shoo her away with menacing gestures and swear words.

The 28-minute videotape comes to a climax as Moffatt reaches out from behind her camera and attempts to snatch the towel from one young man's waist. The "snatching" sequence is then replayed in slow-motion to the sound of Tibetan chanting. Two other key moments are accompanied by music: a Cree Indian "love powwow

ABOVE: *NIGHT CRIES: A RURAL TRAGEDY*, 1989, FILM STILL, 35 MM. COURTESY ROSLYN OXLEY9 GALLERY, SYDNEY.

OPPOSITE: *GUAPA (GOOD LOOKING)*, 1995, PHOTOGRAPH, 30 x 40 INCHES. COURTESY ROSLYN OXLEY9 GALLERY, SYDNEY.



dance"; and the rhythms of 40 drummers from Africa. The overall effect is sometimes humorous, sometimes sexy, sometimes creepy, sometimes anxiety-producing. Nonetheless, it is consistently riveting. Watching it, I couldn't help thinking that any man who attempted the same sort of project would probably have been beaten to a pulp.

Here, once again, Moffatt works in an already well-known format: amateur video. Amateur videotapes of mostly naked men at the beach are now almost a commonplace entertainment at gay bars in the U.S.; usually, these videos are shot at open-air gatherings of gay men at gay resorts. Moffatt, however, takes this now-clichéd practice as a point of departure. She videotapes male Australian surfers (of unknown sexuality), and her work seems more about (literally) exposing the frailty of that well-known Australian icon, the godlike young man in his clingy nylon bathing suit than in ogling his goodies. By baiting him, she diminishes his iconic stature; and within the precincts of the gallery, at least, his physical magnificence is diminished.

Two other works finished off the exhibition. *Night Cries: A Rural Tragedy* describes a mother-daughter relationship in the wake of Aboriginal genocide. A dark-skinned daughter seeks and finds her crippled white mother living in the desolate outback against a vividly painted backdrop which recalls the work of neglected Aboriginal landscape painters. Scenes of the ambivalent reunion are interspersed with images of an Aboriginal entertainer, Jimmy Little, lip-synching hit songs from the 1950s. (The short film has been screened at numerous film festivals, though in making the transition to laser-disc format the colors take on an unfortunately grainy and bleeding quality.) The work is more didactic and less evocative than Moffatt's later feature film *Bedevil* (1993), but it is nonetheless interesting to see how she handles a more linear format.

In *GUAPA (Good-Looking)*, ten dreamlike photos chronicle an all-female roller derby staged in what appears to be a brilliant white cloud of light. Filmed during a residency at ArtPace in San Antonio, Texas, these works are printed in a soft magenta, lending them a greeting-card softness and pseudo-feminine air. The series plays out no narrative, other than the imagined drama of the roller derby itself. A manufactured spectacle in which both competition and confrontation are faked, the suspense generated by the roller derby boils down to the rather banal question of who will be knocked down, and later, who will win.

Yet as with the images of the female car wreckers of *Up in the Sky*, Moffatt once again presents the not inestimable spectacle of powerful, sexy women. This time they are notably of differing ethnic backgrounds, and are rendered even more sexual by their willfully provocative clothing, as well as their violent physical confrontation with one another. One surmises that Moffatt herself finds these women deeply exciting as sexual icons, and that her appropriation of this traditionally male-oriented spectacle of sexual titillation and ritualized aggression is performed less out of a spirit of protest than one of winking complicity.

Moffatt's billboard self-portrait, in which she appears as a bushwhacking photographer-adventurer, was not a part of her show. Nonetheless, it is an apt emblem, suggesting that the artist, like the traditionally macho war photographer, must constantly strive to capture something outside of mere personal experience to reflect the goings-on of a violent, corrupt, and unforgiving world. This is something the artist shares with all manner of visionaries. Here, the role of the visionary is recast. The name itself no longer suggests a passive state, but rather an aggressive and occasionally piratical one, in which supplies must be commandeered, subjects captured, hopes ransacked and experience plundered for bits of usable treasure. ■

JUSTIN SPRING is a novelist and art historian who has just completed a biography of the American artist Fairfield Porter. He is currently working on a novel of intrigue set in the New York art world of 1957. Tracey Moffatt's exhibition "Free-falling" runs from October 9, 1997 to June 14, 1998 at the Dia Center for the Arts, New York.

