

# WOMEN ARTISTS

IN THE 20<sup>TH</sup> AND 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

EDITED BY UTA GROSENICK



TASCHEN

# Tracey Moffatt

\* 1960 in Brisbane, Australia; lives and works in Sydney, Australia, and New York (NY), USA

Selected solo exhibitions: 1989 "Something More", Australian Centre of Photography, Sydney, Australia / 1993 Centre for Contemporary Arts, Glasgow, Scotland / 1997 Dia Center for the Arts, New York (NY), USA / 1998 "Free Falling", The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, Chicago (IL), USA / 1999 "Laudanum", Ulmer Museum, Ulm, Germany; Neuer Berliner Kunstverein, Berlin, Germany; Kunstverein Freiburg, Freiburg, Germany

Selected group exhibitions: 1993 "The Boundary Rider", Sydney Biennial, Sydney, Australia / 1995 XLVII Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte, la Biennale di Venezia, Venice, Italy / 1996 Biennale de São Paulo, São Paulo, Brazil / 1999 "Wohin kein Auge reicht", Deichtorhallen, Hamburg, Germany / 2000 "Photography Now", Contemporary Arts Center, New Orleans (LA), USA

## Between reality and fiction

Tracey Moffatt is an Australian photography and film artist who grew up as a half Aborigine with white adoptive parents in a working-class milieu. Until 1982, she studied Visual Communication at Queensland College of Art in Brisbane. It was not long before her work began to address her ethnic origins and the social situation of her formative years. Her first film, *Nice Coloured Girls*, which she made in 1987, looks at young Aborigine women in the city. By blending in historical paintings and using documentary material – including the story of her own grandmother and the arrival of white settlers in the Bay of Sydney – Moffatt explores the history of the Aborigines and the colonisation of their Australian homeland. In her most famous film *Night Cries: A Rural Tragedy*, 1989, Moffatt deals with her experience as an adopted child under the official Australian programme of forced adoption of Aboriginal children. In harrowing scenes of enormous emotional density and psychological depth, the film shows the tragedy of a black girl's hate-filled love for her terminally ill adoptive mother. Three ghost stories from her childhood are the theme of her first 90-minute feature film *Bedevil*, 1993, screened at the Cannes Film Festival in 1993, in which she explores typical Aborigine problems of dual identity and criminality, woven together in surreal images and dreamlike myths of the Aboriginal with the primordial link between man and nature.

In her films and photographic series, Moffatt combines historical facts and the present day, addressing the difficult relationship between black Aborigines and white colonial settlers, and visualising her own dream images in a distinctive merging of reality and fiction, documentation and narrative. Whereas her films occasionally include photographic sequences in which the plot itself seems to develop only slowly, the staged individual images of her various photo series appear like film stills, between which a story seems to develop.









**“I think my works receive attention because I endeavour to create not just something ‘Aboriginal-Australian’, but something ‘universal’.”**

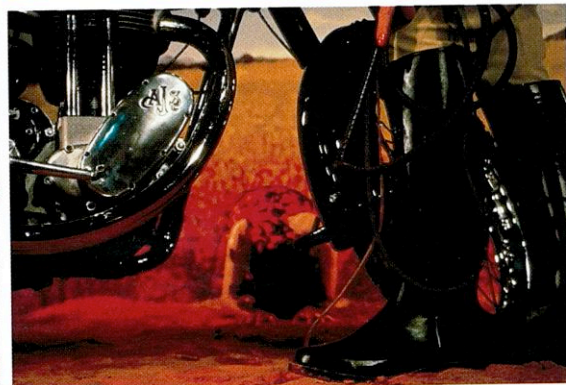
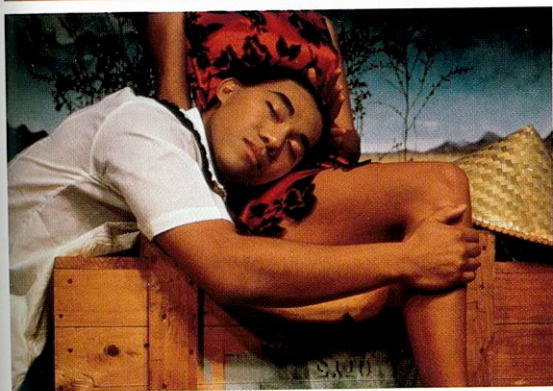
1 *Invocations* (10), 2000. Photographic silkscreen with ultraviolet paint on structured Somerset satin paper, 107 x 99 cm

2 *Laudanum* (2), 1998. Photogravure, 76 x 58 cm

3 *Something More*, 1989. Series of 6 cibachromes and 3 black-and-white photographs, each 99 x 130 cm. Clockwise from top left: *Something More* 1, 3, 5, 7, 8, 1989. Cibachrome, each 99 x 130 cm

4 *Up in the Sky*, 1997. Offset prints on paper, each 78 x 102 cm. Clockwise from top left: *Up in the Sky* 1, 8, 9, 13, 14, 23, 1997.











Her 1989 photo series *Something More* catapulted her to international fame. In these six colour and three black-and-white photos of strikingly simple composition, the main protagonist is always a woman in a red dress with a black rose pattern, whose relationship to the other persons remains enigmatic. Out-of-focus shots, cropped decontextualised details, and a shift between real background and painted backdrop defy unequivocal interpretation. The story remains fragmentary, yet at the same time these are emotionally emphatic images that blend reality and fiction with a striking visual approach.

## Image-maker

Moffatt, who describes herself as an image-maker, makes references to American feature films, television and theatre as well as to comics, art history and the world of advertising in a very personal blend that blurs the boundaries between high and low culture. Each series of photographs is distinct. Her skilful handling of styles, methods and media make it difficult to classify her work. Her six-part photo series *Pet Thang*, 1991, features a naked woman with eyes closed in a dream-like rapport with a woolly sheep. Set against a black ground, their bodies radiate in a cold and unreal green or magenta. The series of nine offset prints *Scarred for Life*, 1994, shows different people, alone or with others, in snapshot-style images with captions that tell of violence, sexuality, power and trauma. The way the images are dated from 1956 to 1977 gives them a pretend documentary character, as does the layout, which is reminiscent of the layout of the US magazine *Life* in the 1960s.

## The loss of narrative

In *Guapa*, Moffatt turns her attention to the tough roller-skating world of the Roller Derby Queens. The bodies of the young women, both black and white, seem to float against the white background. This ten-part series, shot in the studio in 1995, is more cohesive than her other series and appears as a choreography of sporting rivalry and aggression somewhere between dream and reality. The 25 offset prints in Moffatt's hitherto biggest series *Up in the Sky*, 1997, recall film stills between which a multifaceted plot unfolds with repetitions but no linear structure. *Laudanum*, 1998, comprises 19 photogravures in the style of historic photographs illustrating the power-based relationship of a white woman and her black servant, oscillating between eroticism and violence. The 13 images of different sizes that make up *Invocations*, 2000, printed with ultraviolet ink, have distinctly painterly traits, citing Symbolism, Goya, Hitchcock and even Disney. In *Video Artists*, 2000, Moffatt aligns different film scenes with artists, culminating in the destruction of the artworks.

Tracey Moffatt always uses actors as her models. Sometimes she herself also stands in front of the camera. The photo sequences, oriented towards films and literature, simulate a plot or story, and while they may trigger any number of associations in the mind of the spectator, the narrative is too fragmentary and the images too separate for a coherent whole to emerge. Thus, Moffatt's works document the post-modern loss of narrative described by Jean Baudrillard, while at the same time their narrative imagery satisfies a collective desire for storytelling.

Ulrike Lehmann

Tracey Moffatt

