

World of Dreamings

Traditional and modern art of Australia

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The memory theatre of Tracey Moffatt

In her art Tracey Moffatt draws on her background as an Aboriginal child growing up in Brisbane in a foster family which included her sister, and as a highly receptive child of the sixties, avidly consuming images from magazines, films and television. Her education was not of the old sense, a carefully planned sequence of acquired skills and knowledge; it was, through the media that fascinated her, random and emotional - images of fantasy and other realities from across the world mixed with the evening news. Film sequences were filed in her personal 'memory theatre', and are still instantly recalled and associated with particular emotions. But Moffatt did not dream of being the helpless object of the hero's gaze - she wanted to direct the film.

In 1986 Moffatt, then a young photographer and film-maker, was the driving force behind the first contemporary exhibition by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander photographers. The exhibition, held in Sydney during National Aborigines Week in September, featured the work of 10 photographers.

The exhibition's invitation card featured a Hollywood-style head and shoulders study by Michael Riley of Kristina, a Sydney Koori [Aboriginal person], in fashionable sunglasses. Kristina's glamour removed the image from the overt political and social commentary expected in the representation of Aboriginal subjects, but that was the point - indigenous artists had the right to affirm their identity but also to present 'normalising' or glamorous images of Aboriginal people. One commentator described Riley's image as 'very political, black girls weren't meant to be seriously chic'. More than a decade later Australian fashion magazines have yet to star any Aboriginal models.

The Aboriginal photographers' exhibition was clearly breaking new ground but received little press coverage; Tracey Moffatt, who had already attracted attention for her short, stylised documentary films, was the only artist interviewed. Moffatt was a graduate of the kind of art schools that had introduced non-traditional fine art mediums such as photography and video as serious disciplines during the 1970s. Their curricula included introductions to new art, social theories of feminism, post-modernism and multiculturalism, as well as some awareness of Aboriginal issues. The Aboriginal students of the era, however, report that they were not then encouraged to express their identity.

Other exhibitions by indigenous photographers followed over the next five years, aided by the establishment of venues dedicated to Aboriginal art, such as the Boomalli artists co-operative formed in 1987.

In 1988, the events and symbolism of the bicentenary of European settlement in Australia energised Aboriginal communities across the country. Aboriginal people were very aware of what was at stake: in the flurry of celebration and media hype surrounding this moment in white history, they would continue to be marginalised and presented as stereotypes, perhaps setting the pattern for the next 100 years. In the face of this, art took on new importance in the political process towards gaining recognition and reform; and Aboriginal artists took the camera into their own hands.

Despite the wealth of images created, there was no real sense at the time of how hugely important and creative the indigenous photographers would become over the next decade. Now, at the close of the millennium, the role and presence of indigenous photographers is one of the most vital aspects of contemporary Australian art. Of 1986 exhibitors, Bishop, Croft, José, Maynard, Riley and Moffatt remain active and prominent nationally in photography, film or video work. All have considerable international experience and profile and Moffatt, now based in New York, has had strong and sustained international recognition.

It could be argued that post-modernism in the contemporary art of the 1980s, with its faith in appropriation and disruption of the original pure canon, greatly favoured the work of artists that had previously been excluded from the mainstream - especially women and ethnic 'others' of all kinds. One of the most noticeable features of Moffatt's work of the period is the issue of dress and identity, a filter through which 'the native' is seen and not seen. Confrontation with the type of mass media images which have defined - and confined - indigenous peoples is also a nexus around which much indigenous photographers' work turns and returns.

In her photographic art Moffatt has consistently worked in ways most analogous to film-making in that she sets up clearly staged tableaux images which have a narrative thread. But like the world of modern media, everything is happening at once and many stories are being told. Themes with violence and sentiment mingle, past and present times are shown in flashbacks, and the supernatural forever invades the familiar world. To this mix Moffatt brings her perspective on identity in local terms of her Aboriginality and femininity, but she also carefully styles her narratives to allow multiple readings beyond the specific politics of Australian identity.

Her first major series, the lushly coloured *Something more* 1989, has the style of a set of stills for a film about the trials of a poor but restless coloured girl in rural Australia who wants 'something more' out of life than her lot in the back-blocks. In the opening shot the would-be heroine wears an exotic Asian dress and later steals an old

evening gown in her quest for a new identity. After various fragmented images of her encounters and adventures, the heroine's ambitions to cross into the world of glamour and luxury are thwarted and she dies on the road which promised escape from her origins. In Moffatt's highly stylised short feature film *Night Cries - A rural tragedy* 1990, the setting is a property in central Australia and the chief character is a middle-aged coloured woman who appears enslaved by her white mother or mistress. The violence and psychological sub-plot of *Something more* here becomes the terror of a kind found in Surrealist-inspired art films. *Bedevil*, a longer feature made in 1993, followed the same pattern of isolated places and towns and stories of ghosts.

In *Up in the sky* 1997, a series of twenty-five monochrome and soft focus photogravures, the setting is a vast desert in which a tale of biblical complexity and contradiction unfolds. There is a poor white mother/madonna, a precious Aboriginal child clutched by nuns who seem more like witches, and a complex cast of white and black men and women in images of wrestling, expulsion and displaced people. Is this Exodus set in Australia, the promised land which has not been reached? As we fast forward to an image in which the Saviour, now grown up, dies alone and unheard in the desert, is this the meaning of the poignant last frame? No tale by Moffatt is simply the sum of its parts as the titles and varying formats bring other non-visual associations and elements to the viewer's response. Each image also resounds with familiarity recalling Visconti's *Zabriskie Point*, the apocalyptic film *Mad Max*, and the now classic images of the Australian photographer Max Dupain (1911-1992).

Moffatt's most recent sequence, *Laudanum* 1998, is set not in the rural areas but largely inside a grand colonial mansion. The setting suggests the plantations of nineteenth-century colonial slavery in America or the far flung colonies of white imperial powers. A relationship of sexual slavery and violence appears to exist between the mistress and a young Asian woman. The final image is again one of abjection, with the young woman crawling up the stairs not unlike the abandonment of the central character of *Something more* on the road to the big city.

An important part of Tracey Moffatt's path as an artist has been to challenge and refuse ghettoisation as a 'black' artist within the art world. Her concerns have continued to work and be interpreted as issue-based in regard to the strangehold words and images have in defining identity by race, sex and normality. From a social history perspective specific to the disadvantaged or oppressed indigenous people in Australia or indeed world-wide, Moffatt's photo-narratives suggest there is no progress. Somewhat like lost souls, her characters act out plays for which the script is incomplete. The narratives are made by a modern artist and a woman of the world, in all that that means, at the close of the millennium when, through media, we are global citizens as much as nationalities. Her history is not just her own, but the shared histories of many peoples and individuals. Her narratives have the character of Greek tragedy which might also be interpreted from a very twentieth century view as concerning the unconscious and the realm of dreams, fantasies and possession.

In her first media interview in 1986, while referring to an image of Aboriginal dancer David Gulpilil at the beach holding a ghetto-blaster and with sun cream on his face, Moffatt demanded: 'Why shouldn't Aboriginal people go to the beach like anyone else?' While her photo-narratives continue to issue such challenges, ultimately, on a universal level, they also connect the social world and memory with the inner world of the mind and imagination. Today Moffatt might demand: 'Why shouldn't an Aboriginal artist do all that and more?'

Gael Newton

Reference

Taylor, P., *After 200 Years: Photographic essays of Aboriginal and Islander Australia today*, Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1988.