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HEARTS IN THE PICTURE

With a hot passion for movies and melodrama, Tracey Moffatt compresses worlds into her frames



Brisbane, Australia, 1969

I MADE A CAMERA, 2003

By MICHAEL FITZGERALD

IF TRACEY MOFFATT WEREN'T IN THE business of being Australia's most successful contemporary artist, she could get herself a job in casting. Stroll around the two-and-a-half floors of her retrospective at Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art, opening this week, and you're left haunted by the faces, many of which the magpie-eyed Moffatt plucked from obscurity for her films and photo series. There's the suicidally sullen Aboriginal nurse whose looks could kill her white invalid foster mother in the short film *Night Cries*, which brought Moffatt fame at Cannes in 1989. There's the scrawny man with a chicken, ravaged like the Outback

landscape he is later seen crawling across in the 1997 picture series *Up in the Sky*. Then there's the beatific Chinese boy cradling the siren in a *cheongsam* from the *Something More* series (1989), for which she is most famous (the siren is Moffatt). And did we mention the claw-marked bitch in heat from her 1995 roller-derby series, *Guapa?* Moffatt has an uncanny feel for faces audiences can't help but look at and wonder about.

But it takes a director's hand to turn this looking, these faces, into meaningful art. And more than anything else, "Tracey Moffatt," which runs until Feb. 29, shows the artist to be an arresting holder of our gaze. So strong is that hold throughout the show, which MCA director Elizabeth Ann Macgregor has assembled from the artist's oeuvre of 150 photo-



graphs and seven film and video pieces, that one could be forgiven for thinking it had been curated by Moffatt herself. A new work commissioned for the exhibition, *I Made a Camera* (2003) is particularly instructive. Screen-printed onto the gallery wall, the restaged photo shows an Aboriginal girl rising from the Queensland dust before a tripod camera made of cardboard. To her right, two Aboriginal children say "cheese"; to her left, the girl's white working-class foster family looks on. The year was 1969, and the girl was eight-year-old Tracey Moffatt from Mount Gravatt. "It was the moment," says curator Macgregor, "when she first realized that by performing she could get the attention."

She's got it. Faster than an exploding flashbulb, Moffatt surveys have sprung up in recent years from Wellington, New Zealand, to Washington, D.C. But what makes Sydney's show special is that it's the first to position the photographer equally as a filmmaker—and, more importantly, to show the symbiotic relationship between the two mediums. For if Moffatt's photographs are like film stills, then her films are like slow-moving photographs. With two specially built cinemas at



UP IN THE SKY, 1997

the MCA (but no catalog), the click of the projector drives the show. Always has. At the Queensland College of Art in the late '70s, "I enrolled in the film studies course because I was lazy," Moffatt has said. "And all the course entailed was sitting in a small theaterette and watching the history of cinema roll by. So that was my idea of bliss."

Movies are Moffatt's muse. The interwoven ghost stories of her only feature film, *beDevil* (1993), are an ode to Masaki Kobayashi's classic *Kwaidan* (1964), complete with painted sets, though the campy humor is Moffatt's. Even when she's not making films (which is most of the time), her movie brain is clicking. Like a Leslie Halliwell with a Leica, she has referenced the sexual power play of Joseph Losey's film *The Servant* in her 1998 photo series *Laudanum* and literally used movies as material for her cut-and-paste videos *Lip*, *Artist* and *Love*. (Premiering at the MCA, the latter splices together famous Hollywood scenes of love, betrayal and revenge, showing humanity at the mercy of pop culture's endlessly repeating loop.)

Her epic photo narratives *Something More* and *Up in the Sky* are fragments of a

movie of the viewer's making. In the nine-part *Something More*, the images are arranged like a continuous strip of film, so the saturated colors of this siren's song reach fever pitch. And on the other side of the vaulted gallery, *Up in the Sky* has never loomed so powerfully. In past showings, these loaded images (25 of them) have sometimes canceled each other out. Here, they have room to resonate: two men wrestle semi-naked in the desert; a power pole sizzles crucifix-like above a corrugated-iron shanty town; black nuns hover like blowflies at the bedroom window of a young white mother clasping a black child to her breast. "I'm not a Catholic, so I don't have hang-ups about nuns," Moffatt has said. "I just think they're great shapes. Don't you think they're like mountains?" With Australia still wrestling

with guilt over the "stolen generations," *Up in the Sky* has enough visual gelignite to explode a mountain range.

No wonder that for her next series Moffatt sought the emotional escape of New York City, where she is now based, and *Laudanum*. While technically assured (Moffatt borrowed the early 20th century process of photogravure), this drug-addled struggle between a Victorian mistress and her Asian maid comes across as *Night Cries* in Gothic drag. *Invocations* (2000), which uses silk screening to render a Disney-like world of goblins and ghosts, is similarly slight. It took the Sydney Olympics to bring a return to form—and the face. Here, in a sardonic twist, Moffatt dreamed of photographing the games' losers: those narrowly deprived of a medal. By cunningly coloring TV footage printed on canvas, the series *Fourth* captures that sinking feeling like 26 punches to the stomach.

No doubt audiences will come out in droves for the pleasure. After all, like the whip-wielding dominatrix of *Something More*, Moffatt is an impresario of pain. And nowhere is it rendered more exquisitely here than in her two series of *Scarred for Life* (1994 and 1999). Using the picture-essay technique of LIFE magazine, Moffatt gives suburban tragedies the weight of world events. In one image, an Aboriginal girl slumps by the bathroom sink. "During the fight, her mother threw her birth certificate at her," the caption reads. "This is how she found out her real father's name." In another, two boys scrutinize themselves in the mirror: "His brother said, 'crooked nose and no chin—you'll have to survive on charm alone.'" They are but two of over a dozen perfectly executed melodramas about life's turning points. And an appropriate place to pause and celebrate Tracey Moffatt's own turning point, from artist to art star. ■



SCARRED FOR LIFE, 1994 (DETAIL)

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND ROSALYN OXLEY'S GALLERY, SYDNEY (X3)