

# Arts

## Galleries

# Moffatt: This Dogma Can Bite

By JESSICA DAWSON  
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**A**ustralian photographer and video artist Tracey Moffatt has fashioned a career out of power—who's got it, who doesn't, how much fun it is if you can get it.

Her work caught on in the 1990s, when Politically Correct was the rage. Her misuses on colonialism and gender made their way into the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Tate Gallery in London and a host of other art institutions. But despite having caught the PC wave, Moffatt massages her work with enough deadpan humor and slick presentation to smooth out its dogmatic kinks.

You'll get a good portrait of the artist in two concurrent shows at the Australian Embassy and Conner Contemporary Art. Both shows include selected images from most all of her photo and print series as well as several of her videos.

Both Conner and the embassy are showing mid-career highlights. Conner fleshes those out with her early but unexceptional portraits of young Aboriginal dancers horsing around in front of paint-splattered tarps, along with her recent stills of athletes who finished fourth at the Sydney Olympics. Together, the shows introduce us to Moffatt's world of the dispossessed and disenfranchised and the inversions of power she so relishes.



Tracey Moffatt

**Always the Sheep, 1987**

The smallest boy in class had to be the sheep every night in the production of *Waltzing Matilda*.

CONNOR CONTEMPORARY ART

From the series "Scarred for Life," Tracey Moffatt's lithograph "Always the Sheep."

PAUL MORRIS GALLERY

Moffatt grew up something of an outsider. An Aborigine, she was adopted into a white foster family as a baby. Raised in working-class suburbs of Brisbane, she was the dark-skinned girl in a white-bread world. Out of art school she made films and shot photographs. Now 41, she continues to act out the dynamics of inequality in photos, stills and videos.

Moffatt constructs her images as a director might. Like Cindy Sherman in her "Untitled Film Stills," Moffatt sometimes stars in her own tableaux. She's the nude in "Pet Thang" and the sexy geisha in the saturated color photos in "Something More." Often, her constructed dramas play out against backdrops borrowing from the American films and TV she watched growing up in the 1960s and '70s.

But hers are not the suburban fantasy as lived by the Bradys, or celluloid extravaganzas starring Liz Taylor. Moffatt casts Asians and blacks. Ugly ducklings and outcasts. C-students. These are the stories of the less blessed.

Except that Moffatt's outcasts get even. Her film "Heaven," at Conner, reverses gender in a delicious 28-minute montage of naked and half-naked men—buff surfers and everyday beachcombers—changing their shorts under towels (or not) in seaside parking lots. Some don't know Moffatt is filming them—they glance around to make sure the coast is clear before dropping their pants. Others know Moffatt's watching, and ham it up for her. No matter how macho these exhibitionists play it, though, there's no getting around the anxiety of a woman pointing a camera at your genitals. The message here—about the power of the gaze—is folded into a half-hour romp that's funny, twisted and sexy.

Two other films, "Lip" and "Artist," on view at both locations, show Moffatt careening into didacticism. Both run together snippets from old Hollywood movies to illustrate how clichés of African Americans and artists, respectively, were portrayed on film. "Lip" has more going for it. It surprises the viewer by showing the role of the servant has its own built-in authority. Ultimately, though, both films look like streams of evidence for a media studies dissertation.

Still, Moffatt's photographic and print series—selections from which appear in both exhibitions—have more hits than misses. The humid "Laudanum" details a bodice-ripping master-servant affair; its Goth-meets-film-noir conceit is eye-catching but hardly original. The "Pet Thang" series, about a lamb and a naked woman, is a barnyard treatise on the male gaze that sometimes works and sometimes doesn't.

Hands-down brilliant are Moffatt's two "Scarred for Life" series, both detailing those minor indignities that crush kids to the bone. Captioned in boldface and printed in muted colors like pages out of *Life* magazine, they're a poignant yearbook of childhood pains. Here are the fourth-graders acting the school play against an ill-painted backdrop; some poor Asian kid sweats in a sheep suit, looking put upon. Captioned "Always the Sheep," the text explains that the smallest boy in class got stuck wearing the lamb suit. Who hasn't been that kid, at one time or another?

**Tracey Moffatt, at the Australian Embassy**  
1601 Massachusetts Ave. NW, by appointment only; Tuesday-Friday noon-2 p.m., 202-797-3176, to Oct. 26. At Conner Contemporary Art, 1730 Connecticut Ave. NW, Tuesday-Saturday, 11 a.m.-6 p.m., Sunday noon-5 p.m., 202-588-8750, to Oct. 30.