



RACEY MOFFAT

Between Dreams and Reality



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Since her appearance towards the end of the 1980s, the young woman in the red dress gazing into the far off distance with a somewhat uncertain expression, heedless of the noisy kids laughing at her, who has put the rude shack and the burly man who collects empty beer bottles behind her, and who has no intention of finding herself there a few years later, leaning against the doorframe like the barefoot blonde in the gold-coloured petticoat, has gradually become an icon for the culture of a young people, the Australians, who still often find themselves grappling with their identity and with their past.

The uniqueness and importance of Tracey Moffatt's work derive partially from her ability to bring out universal themes and issues—racial, social, sexual—from small familiar stories, her own everyday experiences, or those of friends or acquaintances. At other times they are the fruit of an unusual creative process suspended somewhere between dreams and reality whereby people and things regain a place in memory and ideas laboriously assume form and colour and are eventually composed into images.

Tracey Moffatt (Brisbane, 1960) was an aboriginal child raised by a white family. In a nation that was still unsure of whether it wanted to break away from England, a nation which was actually proud of being considered the 'farmland of the empire', Moffatt's generation was perhaps the first to consciously look at themselves in the mirror, to try to get an idea of just who they were, to find their 'soul' as well as their place and 'mission' (the thankless and anachronistic one of the coloniser, or the subdued and desperate one of the colonised). Just over fifty years old at the time, the young nation was gradually developing into something resembling the one which had generated it, more by necessity than choice.

Moffatt belongs to the generation of images, raised on the blurry, shoddy photographs in glossy glamour magazines or tabloids, on the majestic, glitteringly coloured images from films, and on the black and white pictures on the rounded TV screens that did not take on colour until the early 1970s. Together these images created a repository of sentiments and emotions that would become in the following years the main source of that generation's creative thrust. It was the source to turn to when their visions of the world became dreamlike and difficult to interpret. 'Making art is quite therapeutic' affirms the artist. But it is not always easy to distinguish, to find a balance, and so the artist is like a witch who concocts

brews in a sort of self-therapy and as a means for gaining understanding, even if at times the solution appears suddenly and unexpectedly, with no forewarning at all.

It is clear that Moffatt's art cannot be reduced to photography pure and simple; right from the start it also had a natural outlet in cinematography. Hers are never single, isolated images. They are always part of a larger story. They are acts—and not simply fragments—of a tale, the synthesis of an emotional progression originating in the past. The Australian artist often does not take the photographs herself but directs a sort of bona fide movie set that she organises and controls after having pictured it in her mind again and again, meticulously decomposing and recomposing it. She does not photograph but manufactures photographs. 'I often use technicians when I make my pictures. I more or less direct them. I stand back and call the shots.' This approach incorporates the roles of the scenographer and director—as well as the photographer—into a single figure. At times it spills over into a quasi voyeuristic attitude bordering on morbidity, albeit grounded on solid social precepts, as in the disquieting Victorian-style series *Laudanum*, which tells of the mysterious bond between a white mistress and her Asian maid, or like in the video *Heaven*, where the artist spies on surfers in the parking lot at the beach changing out of their wetsuits in a comradely manner that does not admit females.

This approach is embodied in her work method. The genesis of *Invocations* is to be found in the dreams that Moffatt had a full four years prior to beginning the works. After fermenting for all that time they emerged on their own from her subconscious, 'not a nightmare', she says, 'just strange visions'. In order to transform visions into works you have to accept that you are not alone and let yourself be tormented by them. You make pencil sketches of the ideas, then drawings, and then 'you start looking at other art, you start to read, you come across things, and eventually the whole thing just comes together. There's no logic to art-making'.

On more than one occasion Moffatt's works have been seen as allegories—of colonisation especially—as symbolist *tableaux vivants*, where fear, sensuality, sexuality, and even fetishism are merely emblems of a social malaise. They have been seen as evoking a sense of mystery and the supernatural in reference to her aboriginal roots, to her manifest ability to transcend the obvious even when the obvious would have been enough for many, to disturb the gaze and conscience of the beholder by juxtaposing affection and violence, maternal love and sheer brutality, tenderness and care for the weaker—not seen as losers—with acclaim for the winners, the braggarts, and the arrogant. It is no coincidence that Moffatt is much loved and celebrated in Australia more than anywhere else in the world. She represents one of the possible solutions to the difficult issue of racial integration, which entails mixing not only blood but also languages, gestures, attitudes, habits, and ways of being a community, interpreted on the one hand as a culture composed of a virtual infinitude of small (and big) unwritten stories narrated over the centuries that have filled the nights

and dreams of entire generations (as well as Moffatt's), and on the other in terms of a model imported from abroad to be applied—or perhaps imposed.

Scarred for Life, a group of nine events, each captured in a single image, was created five years after the celebrated series *Something More* (1989), referred to in the introduction to this essay. While in the earlier one the sensuality of the poses and the languor of the colours soften the drama that is inexorably played out in the succession of photographs, in *Scarred for Life* the content is explicit, the photographs are blunt. In *Birth Certificate* we read, 'During the fight, her mother threw her birth certificate at her. This is how she found out her father's real name', and see a young woman with her head slumped against the bathroom sink, stricken by the truth. We see a similar look in the eyes of a young aboriginal man in *Job Hunt*. He is leaning back against a wall in his white job-hunting shirt with his tie loosened staring into space: 'After three weeks he still couldn't find a job. His mother said to him, "maybe you're not good enough"'. She gives us life as it is, the harshness and aridity of human relations, adolescence with its fears of not being accepted. She addresses these themes with clarity and power, starting from her identity as an aborigine and a woman yet without ever seeking to judge, much less condemn.

Five years later, Moffatt produced a new *Scarred for Life* series based on stories told to her by people she has met. 'I think it's because everyone has a tragic tale to tell. And over the years people have come up to me. They couldn't wait to tell me their tragic story'. This second group is less aggressive than the first both in its images and in the accompanying texts, but it is every bit as effective, and perhaps even more universal. All can find something of their own adolescence in these images. In *Homemade Hand-Knit* a young lad is walking glumly off the rugby field while his team mates smirk around him. The text reads: 'He knew his team mates were chuckling over his mother's hand-knitted rugby uniform'. *He knew*, writes Moffatt. Like all her characters, he is a solitary hero who endures the world around him, redeeming with his dignity and suffering the effrontery and arrogance of those near him.

The series *Guapa (Good Looking)*, created in 1995 during a sojourn in San Antonio, Texas, originates in childhood memories, in the televised roller derbies broadcast in Australia and devoured by the adolescent Moffatt when she was living in Mt. Gravatt, a low-income housing development on the outskirts of Brisbane. It is a group of ten extreme images; there is not much sport in the fake pushing and aggression, in the swollen faces and low blows in a surreal context dramatising the rivalry among the women skaters. The background has been eliminated and the figures come and go in their improbable costumes like apparitions: what is left is the need to prevail over the others in an atmosphere where violence repeatedly brushes with eroticism and vice versa, as often happens in real life.

Up in the Sky with the video *Heaven* was produced by Moffatt specially for her personal exhibition at the New York Dia Center for the Arts in 1997.

It is without question her most cinematographic series, starting with her choice

to work outdoors in a location near Broken Hill, in the Australian heartland. It reminds us of the 1985 film *Mad Max* and the desert exploits of the post-atomic warrior played by Mel Gibson. But Moffatt's characters have little in common with the sinewy actor: the heroine is a Caucasian woman and instead of the post-atomic ruins we have sad prefab houses and the crumpled wrecks of cars, emaciated men vying for the love of a woman, or perhaps just to have her, and an uncertain paternity. Some of the images are worthy of the best Italian neorealist cinema, something Moffatt achieves through her openly documentary style in narrating a tale of minor outrages and distress, of fear and bravery, dominated by the glaring light that unites and unifies all people when they raise their eyes and look at the sky.

The collection of twenty-six photographs on canvas that make up the series *Fourth* was created in 2000 during the Olympic Games in Sydney. Initially it appeared that the Olympic Committee wanted Moffatt as the official photographer, but the job ended up being given to someone else. However, this stimulated her imagination and got her thinking about the Games, about the idea of competition which had been explored in other works (the *Guapa* series, the video *Heaven*). As she watched the Olympics on television her interest was drawn to the fourth-place finishers: 'It's sadder than coming last because when you come Fourth you have just missed out on a medal. You almost made it, but you just missed out. Fourth means that you are almost good. Not the worst (which has it's own perverted glamour) but almost. Almost a star!'. Many of the photos were taken right after the event, seeking to capture the first expressions on the athlete's face as they turn or look to see the outcome: 'Most of the time the expression is expressionless'. Once again Moffatt sides with the loser, the victim. And once again she raises them to the role of protagonist, forcing us to take a second look and reconsider their real meaning, their story, their identity.

In July 2003 Tracey returned to Brisbane as artist-in-residence at the Institute of Modern Art. The understanding was that she would create a new body of works inspired by the *Flying Doctor* comic strip series that was published in Brisbane newspapers in the 1970s. These new works, *Adventure Series*, immediately proved difficult and complex. After a series of sketches, Moffatt commissioned the backgrounds to a graphic artist in Brisbane and began a long search process. She had to find the right models—the eye-catching blonde, the dark-skinned doctor—as well as animals: kangaroos, eagles, snakes, crocodiles. She also needed a model airplane that only a collector could build for her, original scuba suits, and fake rocks for the sea bottom. She spent entire weeks seeking these things and in the end, failing to find the right person to interpret the old lady, she decided that she would play the part, going against the working principle she had adhered to for the last few years: that of using only professional models.

With this series Moffatt shifted her focus from society to lifestyles, aware of the extent to which topics that appear light and unburdened with meaning can spark preconceptions and prejudices. This is also seen in her more recent series *Under the Sign of Scorpio* (2005), where the artist impersonates women born

under the sign of Scorpio—from Georgia O’Keeffe to Indira Gandhi, from Whoopi Goldberg to Hillary Rodham Clinton, from Goldie Hawn to Billie Jean King, and from Marie Curie to Frieda Fromm-Reichmann. A Warholian approach (as she terms it) penetrates more readily into people’s minds than a direct attack: ‘I wanted a very pop, almost comic book quality. I propose that all of these women are “pop figures”, they are a part of the landscape of popular western culture’. It is not so much the shift from analogue to digital, much less the use of programs like Photoshop to recompose and re-elaborate the panels of *The Flying Doctor*, that determines the qualities of Moffatt’s recent works. It is the awareness of the destabilising power of a message conveyed with a subtle but insinuating irony, like the forty portraits of famous women, each one designed and organised to surprise.

There is no question as to the need for Moffatt’s images—and they are certainly images more than photographs—and not just for contemporary Australia and the meaningful impact they can have on its cultural and social redemption. But it is certainly striking to see to what extent, in the interpretation of a culture with such pure and primitive roots as that of the aborigines, Moffatt has succeeded in making its content contemporary, visible, tangible, extending it well beyond the limits of the Oceania continent, into that realm where the gaze of the woman in the red dress also seems to be absorbed.