

**Portfolio**  
Tracey Moffatt







# Plantation

INTERVIEW BY DIANE SMYTH

Tracey Moffatt has said that if she wasn't making art, she'd be out slashing car tyres. Through image-making she's adopted a more eloquently provocative approach, splicing together clips of black servants or disaster scenes in Hollywood films (*Lip*, 1999, and *Doomed*, 2007, both in collaboration with Gary Hillberg), or obliquely commenting on Australia's "Stolen Generation" of aboriginal children (*Night Cries, A Rural Tragedy*, 1990, or *Up in the Sky*, 1998). She's won critical acclaim for her filmmaking, and has shown work at the Cannes Festival, but she's also used photography throughout her career, varying her aesthetic with each project and playing with everything from sexuality and celebrity to race and low-pay jobs.

Her latest work, *Plantation*, is deliberately opaque, only hinting at a narrative and leaving the setting unknown. "I don't want to disclose my location because I don't want the work to be 'located' as in a documentary shoot," she explains. "The photos are not a document of a place. I want them to have a dreamlike feel and look like they could have been shot in Australia's tropical





north [where she grew up], or the Caribbean, or the Deep South in the US, or somewhere in South East Asia, or possibly Africa. There is a narrative, but it's in no particular order and not a lot is happening – just sunlight and a hovering tension.”

She hopes viewers are attracted to the prints' look and feel before they consider the narrative or story. Starting with black-and-white negatives she'd shot back in 1997 and left forgotten, she created textured, near-psychedelic prints using an old digital Epson printer, watercolour paints, ripped pieces of paper and glue. She deliberately cracked the surface of the prints, using white Ink Aid paint moved through with a roller. “I had to buy an older model digital Epson printer that was able to take the thickness of the white ink and the paper,” she says. “The fancier, more expensive, newer models wouldn't work because the heads, like the needle on a record player, got clogged.”

She wanted the prints to look like they're falling apart, suggesting they'd been found buried in a rotten suitcase beneath a collapsed colonial house. She was inspired by vintage photographs, but also by childhood memories of play-

ing underneath her bungalow, where she was “never afraid in the dank, dark soil, since above me was the sound of adults moving across the floorboards and chatting away about mundane, ‘safe’ subjects”.

That sense of dislocation in an otherwise safe environment comes across in the project, with a mysterious man, a fire and blinding spots of light streaking across the scene. That's deliberate, she says. The light emulates the sensation of being blinded by the sun, “when it's easy to think you have ‘seen something’, like an apparition, like a possible UFO in the sky beyond”.

“I think the man lingering around is a groundsman, but he is also an ‘alien’,” she says. “He is a ‘visitor’ – another title for my series could have been *The Visitation*.”

“When I see my ‘alien’ male figure brooding outside the colonial house I think of Max Cady, Robert De Niro's character in *Cape Fear* (1991), although Max Cady wasn't in my head when I shot this work. He is an alien, an outsider who is not welcomed into the southern colonial-style mansion house owned by the terrorised white lawyer and his family.” *BJP*





























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