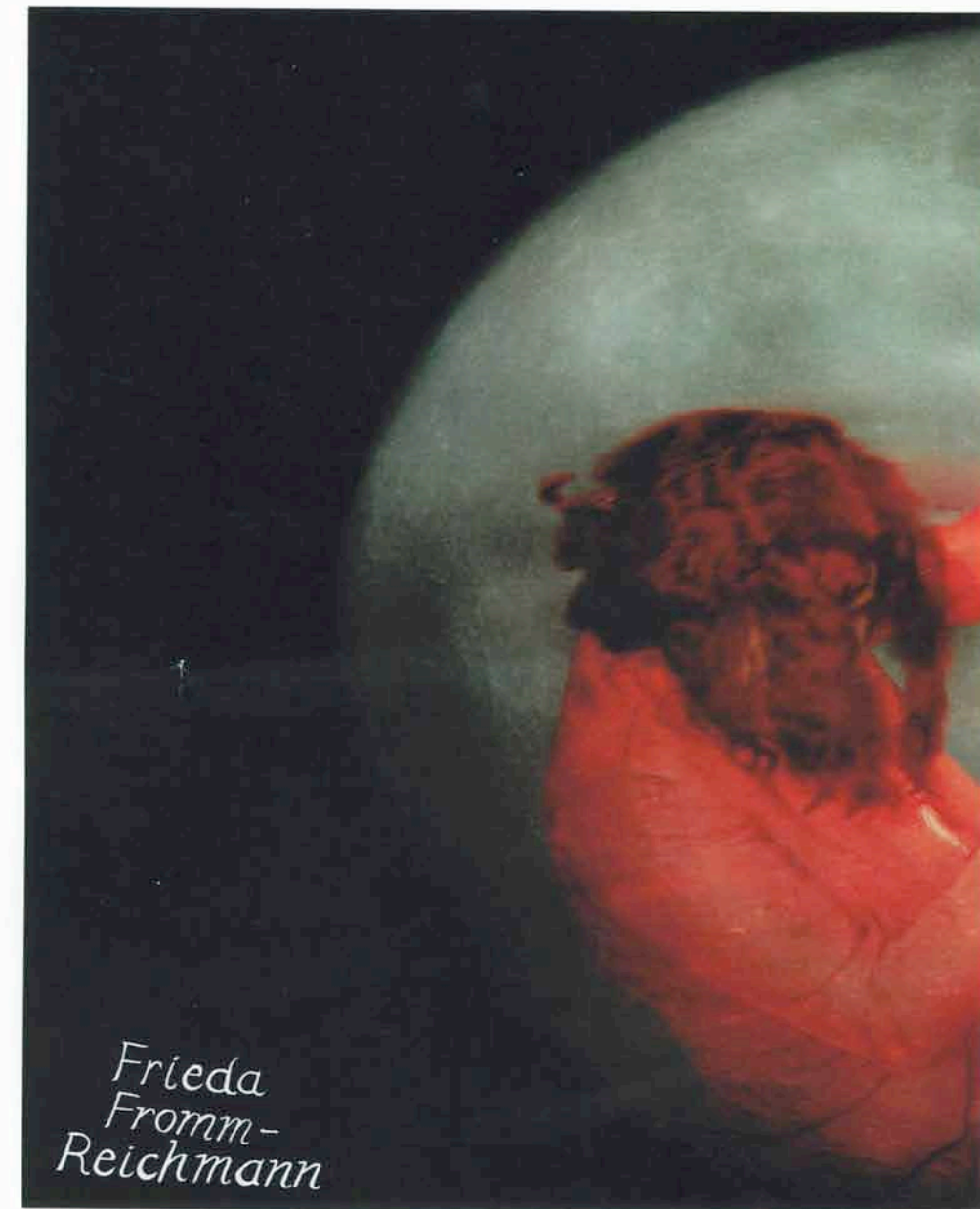


"Under the sign of Scorpio"

Australian-born photographer and video artist Tracey Moffatt, whose work often deals with racial and gender themes (she herself is Aboriginal), tackles the signs of the zodiac in her parallel series *Under the Sign of Scorpio* and *Being Under the Sign of Scorpio*. In these images – the latter series serves as a behind-the-scenes of the former – Moffatt assumes the identity of 40 different renowned women who share her birth sign. They represent a broad spectrum, from political trail-blazers (Indira Gandhi) to comedic sex kittens (Goldie Hawn) to fellow artists who have firmly stood by own choices (Georgia O'Keeffe), and the list includes women of varying ethnicities, looks, and body types. In each of the painterly scenarios – which share a luminous and strange, otherworldly quality – Moffatt psychically leaves her own body and "becomes" these various sisters of Scorpio, entering into their personas through costume, gesture, and meticulously intentional framing. In many cases, the postural inflections are so subtle and personal that it would be impossible for the viewer to decipher who is being portrayed – were it not for the subscript on each image bearing the subject's name. Once the identity is known, however, one's own preconceptions about the subject combine with the artist's personal vision and her transcendental transformation into these 40 women. The result is an ephemeral, flickering glimpse of some essence that actually resembles these iconic Scorpios. Moffatt has said that, while the photographs took only minutes to shoot, the process of getting into character and planning each detail of clothing and placement could take weeks of research and thought. Approaching the project as a photographic performance piece, Moffatt prepared as a method actor rehearsing for 40 different roles.

The portraits were taken with a simple digital camera in the artist's New York apartment, and then background images were inserted. The digitally manipulated backdrops all share similar properties, bringing the viewer into an abstract, magical place where the spirits of these women – rather than their physical speci-



fities – are brought to the fore. The artist has said that she was striving for a Pop art quality, referring to the place her subjects hold in popular culture. The supernatural aspect to the images speaks of Moffatt's belief in innate talent as a mystical power, and in the mysterious truths behind the Zodiac.

Anna Holtzman: Why are the faces obscured in most of the *Under the Sign* images? Only a small number of photographs – such as in the Lee Krasner image – show your face. Did these choices have to do with the particular women you were portraying?

Tracey Moffatt: Because *Under the Sign of Scorpio* is in a sense a photographic performance piece. I appear dressed as 40 different Scorpio women from history and Pop culture. I simply couldn't show my face all of the time because I don't look like all of them. For example, I don't resemble pale Joni Mitchell

with her long blond hair. In most cases I could only get away with *suggesting* the women in pose and dress and wigs. In facing away from the camera and taking on "attitudes", I was able to channel each woman. It was a very mysterious process to perform like this, often I think I really "got" them in the tiniest of gestures. It was a supernatural experience in a way and took a lot of strength. It took me six months to complete the work because I could never figure out how to "perform" each woman. Performance ideas didn't just come, I had to work at them and try things out. Some women I did resemble because I had their coloring, such as Indira Gandhi and Mahalia Jackson.

AH: What was the criteria for choosing the women you chose, aside from their all being Scorpios? Were the reasons connected to personal experiences or memories of these women? Or did the reasons have



to do with broader cultural connotations connected with these women?

TM: I wanted to make an art series about the Zodiac because I've always been fascinated by it and I believe there are "types" – for example, there is a "Gemini type" of personality (all over the place, but great fun) and a "Taurus type" (pushy and fabulous). There is some truth in birthdates and destiny. All of the 40 women I selected I am absolute fans of. For example, Anne Sexton, Hillary Clinton, Lauren Hutton, Vivien Leigh. These women are extreme examples of the Scorpio character: Like me, very intense and absolute go-getters in this world. Ready to go to HELL and cross to the "dark side" to come out into the light. Believe me, Hillary WILL be President.

AH: How were the background images created? Are they your photographs as well, or are they digitally

created? What process did you use to insert the background images into the portraits?

TM: The background images came from stock photography libraries, where I paid for the use of these royalty-free images. I spent a long time searching and reworked the images on the computer and slipped them in behind the women figures.

AH: The background images have a fantasy-world quality. Some make me think of new-wave music videos. What was the intention behind this aesthetic?

TM: I wanted each of the background scenes to feel "otherworldly", and often they are actual images of outer space, or extreme landscapes and weather, volcanoes and storms. There is nothing placid about the backgrounds... just like the Scorpio character.

AH: What is the intention in showing the *Under the Sign* series alongside the *Being Under the Sign* series? In the latter, are we looking at the process behind the *Under* series?

TM: I want to exhibit the making of the work, so the *Being Under the Sign of Scorpio* pictures show the contact sheets and pathetic yet raw, simple way I performed each of the women. Usually in front of sheet curtain backdrop or in my bathroom in my studio apartment in New York. You can see my hammy acting and the way I was really striving to get it right.

AH: How did you get into character? In the Sally Field image, your face actually looks strikingly like Sally Field to me, but do you actually bear a resemblance to her? Or do you think this is a function of getting into character?

TM: I simply tried to radiate each woman. And I do look a little like Sally Field around the eyes. We have a similar smile and rabbit cheeks. My large nose seen from the side was conveniently covered up and I made my skin white on the computer in Photoshop. It's all tricks of the trade, anyone can do it. You only have to WANT to do it and be as happily obsessive as I am.

TEXT BY ANNA HOLTZMAN

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Tracey Moffat

Under the Sign of Scorpio, 2005

40 images, archival pigment ink on rag paper, 43x58 cm, Ed 21

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