

# Let me tell you a story

Christopher Allen

**Tracey Moffatt: Narratives**  
Art Gallery of South Australia,  
until March 20

**F**ROM the Renaissance until the 19th century, history painting was the most highly esteemed genre in the Western tradition. It did not necessarily mean the representation of a specifically historical subject; as first defined by Leon Battista Alberti in 1435, the Latin *historia* or the Italian *storia* simply meant a story, a narrative. In practice, most were scriptural at first, and later literary or mythological as well. Others might be drawn from history in the narrower sense of the word.

The idea was that the highest genre of art told stories that had a shared meaning within the community for which they were made. Stories are told with human figures, and this explains the primacy of drawing the figure in the Western tradition of practice and of art pedagogy; natural settings and details of interiors were included to add to the evocation of time and place, and in due course these emerged as genres in their own right, landscape and still life. The development of Chinese art, in which landscape always held first place, was completely different, driven by fundamentally different cultural assumptions.

The telling of stories in paintings went through a crisis in the 19th century and became almost extinct in the 20th. As a result its basic principles are poorly understood today. One of these is that if a painting is to tell a story, it should usually be one we already know. The painter must give us enough clues to recognise which story it is, then concentrate on selecting the most telling moment — climax, turning point, resolution — and expressing the meaning of the story through the composition of figures and setting and the choice of tone and colour.

There is also another category of figural composition — confusingly known as genre painting — in which the artist is not telling any particular story but simply presenting a picture of everyday life and typical individuals, usually of the lower classes. Here the actions of the figures are incidental and anecdotal, although Victorian painters tended to load such pictures with moralistic significance in an attempt to raise them to a higher degree of seriousness. It is before such works, as we scramble for clues, that we realise painting is not a very good medium for telling an otherwise unknown story.

During the past century many of these concerns have migrated to a new medium, cinema, and the whole tradition of early modern theory of painting can be considered, among other things, as the precursor to film theory. Film has become the contemporary narrative art form and filmmakers encounter the same questions about the use of existing stories from the common stock of myth or literature, of archetypal story-models and of anonymous genre-stories, rehearsing yet again the events of everyday life, with or without a moral or political



twist. From the narrative point of view, cinema is much better than painting at introducing an unfamiliar story but correspondingly unable to dwell on a single, definitive moment.

Such reflections are not only relevant to cinema, but fundamental to understanding the work of Tracey Moffatt, whose retrospective at the Art Gallery of South Australia is appropriately titled *Narratives*. Every press release points out that Moffatt's work mimics the effect of film stills, and even that in isolation from their context they produce an enigmatic effect. But if we consider the historical and theoretical context more carefully, we will appreciate she is also playing with the difference between the randomness of the cinematic still, lifted from a sequence of action and never truly autonomous, and the resonance of the painter's artificial moment, lifted out of time.

Probably the best-known of her photographic series is the early *Something More* (1989), and the most often-reproduced image of the set is the one in which Moffatt herself is posed in a red Chinese dress in front of an outback hut. The image is a kind of homage to Arthur Boyd's *Half-Caste Child* (1957), the beginning of his *Bride* series, in which the girl, with white face and black legs, clings to her angry father, while her mother, who has evidently conceived her with a white lover, crouches in the background. In Moffatt's version, the girl stands in the foreground while a black man sits drinking in the hut and a slatternly white

woman slouches in the doorway. The image appeals because of its suggestion of beauty and hope emerging from degradation.

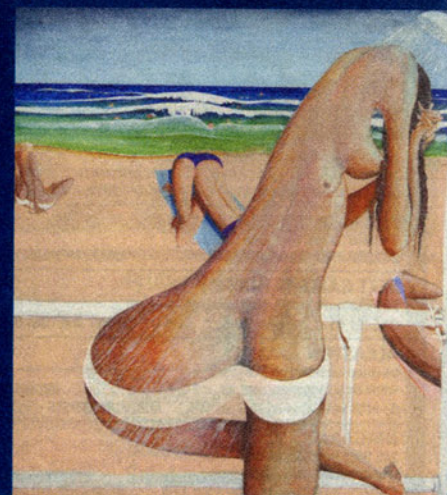
Moffatt's work stands out because it avoids the moralistic complaints, self-pity and resentment that so often spoil the art of those who feel they have been hard done by. Her perspective is wider, and it allows her

*Something More (No 5)* from the series of nine photographs *Something More* (1989) by Tracey Moffatt

Continued on Page 12

## MENZIES

AUSTRALIAN & INTERNATIONAL FINE ART AUCTION



**SYDNEY 24 MARCH 2011**

**MELBOURNE NOW VIEWING :**

12 – 13 MARCH 11AM – 6PM 1 DARLING ST, SOUTH YARRA VIC

CATALOGUE ONLINE AT [WWW.MENZIESARTBRANDS.COM](http://WWW.MENZIESARTBRANDS.COM)

**CONTACT :** MELBOURNE 03 9832 8700 SYDNEY 02 8344 5404

ON NOW

BRETT WHITELEY *Washing the Salt Off* / 1985 \$1,250,000 - \$1,750,000



Continued from Page 11

to deal with underlying social and political questions without being obvious and ideological. There is a recollection of Hogarth's "modern moral pictures" in the girl's progress from hope to tragedy. The second most familiar image in the series, in which the protagonist cowers before an apparently white woman wearing boots and carrying a stockwhip, introduces further complexities of sexual fantasy and role-playing, but also reveals a point of weakness: a tendency to slip into camp, with its over-the-top scenarios and lurid chromatic saturation.

The later *Adventure* series (2004) represents a complete collapse into camp and parody, in which superficial cleverness and occasional witty touches are not enough to save the images from banality.

Earlier, however, as though conscious of the dangers of falling into such traps, Moffatt adopted a very different approach in the two *Scarred for Life* series (1994 and 1999). The first of these was inspired mainly by abusive relationships within the Aboriginal community, while the second includes examples from society at large.

In each case, she has taken a single episode in which a child recalls something terrible done or said to them, then reconstructed it with performers and a period setting, and taken photographic images that imitate the pale (undersaturated) and grainy look of old colour photographs in a family album. The stories include an Aboriginal girl whose mother throws her birth certificate at her so she learns for the first time who her real father is; an Aboriginal boy whose mother tells him he can't get a job because he's not good enough; and a white boy whose father is angry with him for being too eager to dress up for his role as Dorothy in the school play of *The Wizard of Oz*.

*Up in the Sky* (1997), which evokes the removal by nuns of a part-Aboriginal child from a white mother, is less successful, not because Moffatt takes a simplistic view of the subject but because some of the images are too obvious while others, perhaps in an attempt at compensation, are too obscure. The series contains memorable individual pictures, such as the haunting view of a back



Tracey Moffatt's *Job Hunt*, 1976, above, and *Laudanum* (No 1), right

lane filled with women in nightdresses, but in the end it fails to cohere as a whole. In general, it is a reminder that subjects on which people have absolute, emotional and highly polarised views are almost no-go zones for artists, who have to entertain the possibility of moral complexities and be capable of sympathetic understanding of those that the self-righteous consider merely as antagonists or villains.

*Laudanum* (1998) takes a subject that has important moral implications but can be treated without compulsory political correctness. It evokes what is indeed an unequal relationship between a white woman and her Asian maidservant, but the fictitious distance created by its imaginary setting in some colony in the 19th century helps to suspend moralistic conclusions while providing space to explore the intense though opiate-blurred erotic relationship between the two women. As always, the artist borrows a form suited to her subject, imitating the effect of photography in the Victorian period.

In recent years, Moffatt, who is also known for short films such as *Night Cries: A Rural Tragedy* (1989) and *Bedevil* (1993), has made a series of video compilations with Gary Hillberg. Among the earliest of these is *Artist* (2000), which cuts and reassembles scenes from famous Hollywood films about



Michelangelo, van Gogh, Toulouse-Lautrec and others. The idea is clever but simple: all the scenes celebrating inspiration and creation from the different films are joined together, then those dealing with the struggle of creation, then criticism, then destruction and finally exhaustion.

This particular pattern, of building to a crescendo and then a climactic conclusion, is repeated in *Other* (2010), which is about sexual attraction between different races. Once again scenes of eyes meeting are clipped from classics such as the 1962 version of *Mutiny on the Bounty* with Marlon

Brando's Fletcher Christian and beautiful Tahitian girls, but also other films in which white women meet exotically dark men or are fascinated by the muscular physique of black Africans, or indeed various male or female homosexual encounters. All of this builds in intensity until climax is evoked, in a way at once corny but humorously effective, through a series of volcanic eruptions.

In the earlier *Love* (2003) there is a different structure: we start with scenes of closeness and intimacy, then suddenly pass into tension and recrimination and breaking up; there follows a long series of scenes of women slapping men, then of men slapping women, finally of women handling guns and then shooting men. The video concludes wittily with Olivia Newton-John and John Travolta in a scene from *Grease* (1978): she says, "Is this the end?" and he replies, "Of course not. It's only the beginning."

This cyclical rhythm — which naturally matches the way videos tend to be projected on a loop — also characterises *Revolution* (2008). It begins with a series of coronation sequences, crowns being placed on the heads of monarchs to the acclamation of crowds; then there are scenes of celebration in which prosperity gradually turns to unease and then to dread; mobs begin to attack palaces and public buildings, violence increases and people are killed, buildings are destroyed. All that is left is a wasteland; and then there is a baby, a new prince who is held up to the cries of the adoring masses; he is crowned; and the whole thing is set to start again.

These collaged sequences are interesting and, for movie buffs, fascinating, as one recognises scenes from popular, classic or long-forgotten films appearing in unfamiliar juxtapositions. What is artistically effective is the way the splicing brings out the general and impersonal aspects of the experience; for example, in the growing apprehension that precedes the outbreak of revolution.

On the negative side, though, this approach eliminates the specific historical reality of each event, including moral assessment on either side, as well as the deeper personal experience of singular individuals. Once again the note of camp predominates, but then these videos are really a kind of sophisticated entertainment.