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The Moving Images of **Tracey Moffatt**





INTRODUCTION

Tracey Moffatt— Performance Artist

Tracey Moffatt's images always move. Sometimes they move as film or video through the virtual space of a screen. More often though, they appear as photoseries and move through time in our minds as we look and trace the sequences of landscapes, stories, and people that she weaves throughout her photographic images. And Moffatt's images *always* move us to think—about what we are looking at through her images, about the world, and about other pictures and memories that her work refers to. This book is primarily in response to Moffatt's films and videos—a body of work that stands by itself as a significant contribution to the world of experimental film. The book is also about how these films can be located within her whole *opus*. Through exploring the worlds of her time-based art, her cinematically “moving images,” her photoseries become accessible in new ways: as images that move through time in ways that recall the movement of film and which also move us emotionally through their beauty and narrative power. Moffatt is a teller of stories without endings—a storyteller of a world without solutions that nevertheless is always so joyously depicted as to suggest a celebration, and it is this note of celebration that gives her

works a sense of narrative resolution. Her many and varied works are an eclectic celebration of description and recognition of people's dreams and everyday lives. She recognizes and merges the worlds of dreams, memories, and the everyday present. She presents these to us both cinematically and through sequential still images that move and unfold their stories cinematically, recalling the filmic "stills" of imagined and yet to be made films. This book follows the artistic footprints of an important living Australian female artist and filmmaker and explores her films not only as visual art and cinema, but also as a particular kind of performance art.

Acting Myself

Performance means never for the first time; it means: for the second to the nth time; reflexive means to see the self in the self and other.¹

Moffatt is a major international artist whose works command a considerable sums of money and a large amount of notice and critique within the art industry. Her images, however, very often draw stories that come from a popular culture which is drawn in turn from the cultures and societies in which she herself lives or lived. Moffatt uses these images to push through boundaries of many kinds, most particularly those artistic boundaries that conventionally exist between visual art and cinema, between still photography and cinema. Her work also pushes at socially dictated boundaries, especially between opposing stereotypes of "race" and between conventionally accepted differences between indigenous and non-indigenous people in Australia. The cultural politics of Moffatt's work are carefully constructed according to a trope of even-handed observation and wry comment. Historical events and atrocities are not explicitly noted, but the social conditions that give birth to them are commented on with compassion and humor.

In many of her works, Moffatt presents herself in various guises. She puts her body where her art is; she uses it as a model to create her work, thereby irrevocably marking her work as personally hers by leaving her own physical image as an imprint within her images. In her 1993 feature film *beDevil*, she also tells us family stories that were told to her by relatives when she was still a child. Moffatt's work is intricately embedded in the two cultures (Aboriginal and Anglo-Irish Australian) in which she grew up as well as in the cosmopolitan life she now lives in New York. She never loses touch with "popular culture" as it changes over time, and throughout these images of blended, marginal, or mainstream societies she places her own stories and images of her own body. Moffatt's acting out of her own personal stories, as well as her use of her own image to illustrate various other social situations and identities, can well be



Something More, 1989
 photographs numbers one, two, and
 three on view at Galeria Helga de Alvear
 stand, ARCO'99, Madrid, 1999.

described with Michael Taussig's words as he reflects on how mimesis is "becoming" and "behaving like." In her public performances of self, Moffatt does not "behave like" herself; she instead becomes for us an interpretation of her own memories. Her generous use of her own body within her art can be described as setting up a particular kind of theatrical experience that involves

a palpable, sensuous, connection between the very body of the perceiver and the perceived.²

Moffatt is a performance artist: a cultural performer who reflexively confronts her audiences with her own body located in narratives driven by her own historically real life. Performance artists might "act" a part in a fictional story, or explicitly describe with their bodies a segment from their own lives. Whether these stories be fictional or not, these artists invest their own selves in what they show to their audiences in ways that other performers do not. They take images, memories from their own past, and show us what it feels like "to see the self in the self and other,"³ but they do this by "owning" their performance as part of their own histories, their own stories. These kinds of performers are not only actors, but are also people who allow their performances to be associated intimately with their own bodies and lives. We know who they are,

1. Richard Schechner, "Collective Relexivity: Restoration of Behaviour," in Jay Ruby, (ed.), *A Crack in the Mirror. Reflexive Perspectives in Anthropology*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982, p. 40.
 2. Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses*. New York: Routledge, 1993, p. 21.
 3. Ibid.



Under the Sign of Scorpio, installed at Stefan Stux Gallery, New York, 2007. Photo by Ray Henders.

because in one way or another they introduce themselves to us. They do not obliterate their own identities; in fact, the projection of their identity is a crucial part of their artistic practice.

Tracey Moffatt certainly represents herself and her own stories in many ways. When looking at how she includes her own bodily image in her photoseries and films, it becomes clear that one particular “look” pervades them all. This is literally a “look”: Moffatt looks out beyond the foreground of her visual frames; she is looking for “something more” than the immediately obvious. Her searching gaze is directed outwards at what being in the world means, and this look appears most clearly in her photoseries *Something More* (1989), in her *Self Portrait* (1999), and in her portrayal of the young Ruby Morphett, a character based on her mother in *beDevil*.

One of my favorite quotes from Moffatt herself is found in the 1997 video *Up in the Sky. Tracey Moffatt in New York* by Jane Cole. Moffatt is commenting on the billboard near the Dia Center for the Arts in New York, which was exhibiting four of her works. The image on this billboard is of Moffatt in combat gear with camera—she is a combat photographer. She says:

And it's all about life being a battle. There is a swamp, and I'm carrying everything, and I'm dodging bullets. Life's a battle. Don't you think?

This is a simple comment that, nevertheless, locates her not just as an observer of life and as an image-maker, but also as a “battler” well and truly located inside of life, giving and receiving, a very active performer in society. The fact that she claims her personal heritage from both her

indigenous mother and her non-indigenous, Anglo-Celtic foster family also means that she is a cultural performer in the unusual position of being able to comment from inside both cultures. She does not flinch; and her work, particularly in the nineties, deals with issues that are difficult for any culture to face. She does this without apology or extravagant polemic. Moffatt is an artist who uses her creative work as a means of accessing ways of knowing secrets seldom told within society. In her art, she performs as herself as other fictional characters and, most interestingly, as a cultural figure who is not afraid of presenting new ideas about older, sadder histories. Her art involves staging scenarios that offer many readings and that challenge us with different ways of “looking.” She not so much wants to reflect or interpret reality as to make her own.⁴ In her ways of telling, we find a celebration that breaks through cultural and artistic boundaries as well as through sad secrets that need to be told and released. Her work has a joy, an exuberance. She is a very articulate cultural performer and has a strong power to move us with her images and stories of people and places.

She is also a generous artist in sharing how she creates and talks about her art. In her retrospective at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney (December 2003–February 2004), Moffatt even included draft images of her then work-in-progress, *Adventure Series* (2004). Similarly with her latest photoserries, *Under the Sign of Scorpio* (2005), she offers many images of herself in *Being Under the Sign of Scorpio*, a series of images of herself work-shopping the still cameos of famous Scorpio women which she uses in the former series. But she is generous to her audiences in another, much more unusual way. She continually offers images of herself and explicit suggestions about her own life experience in the stories she tells. In offering her own body as photographic model and filmic actor, Moffatt explicitly claims the “socially inscribed fraught space” of the performance artist. As described by Rebecca Schneider, the theatrical space of a performance artist is:

a space at once exceedingly private, full of located and personal particulars of reading, and radically public, full of socially inscribed dreamscapes . . .⁵

In company with the painter Frida Kahlo, photographer Cindy Sherman, and the experimental filmmaker Maya Deren, Moffatt is a performance artist who works through the elusive and yet sensual theatres of photography and film. To understand the theatrical space that Moffatt’s work inhabits—between the “exceedingly private” and the “radically public”—it is necessary to consider briefly some of her personal history, as told to us by Moffatt herself in the many interviews she has given over the years.

4. As noted in Celia Prado, “Dolores Clairborne & Cinderella: In between Fairy Tales,” *Exit*, no. 4, November–December 2001, p. 54.

5. Rebecca Schneider, *The Explicit Body in Performance*. London and New York: Routledge, 1997, pp. 52–53.

Some Personal Public History

*I was so lucky to grow up in Australia. I have memories of long summers, running around barefoot on grass and getting into adventures . . . we had to make our own fun.*⁶

Tracey Moffatt was born in Brisbane, Australia, on November 12, 1960. She grew up in the working-class suburb of Mt. Gravatt. Her mother was Aboriginal and, with three of her siblings, she was fostered by Millicent “Peg” Davidson, an Irish-Australian woman who already had a large family. This fostering was an amicable arrangement, according to Moffatt, who is quoted by Sebastian Smee as saying: “My real Mum [Daphne Moffatt] lived in town and would come and visit occasionally. But she wasn’t one for looking after kids, for raising her own kids at all.”⁷ To quote Smee: “She has described both her mothers, however, as strong role models who grounded her in Aboriginal and white culture.”⁸

So Moffatt spent a childhood of ordinary pleasures and violence, reading books, babysitting (often finding books when babysitting in “middle-class” houses).⁹ She had her share of teasing for being “weird”: her day-dreaming and powerful urge to make stories, to act them out and have others act them out under her direction. And as for her teenage years?

I was the eldest girl . . . As a teenager, I never got into trouble because I was bloody working! Every Friday and Saturday night, from age 13 through to 17, I was looking after kids. I’d make them go to bed early, so I [could] stay up late at night and watch lots of great films. And read books. Look for dirty books, mainly.¹⁰

And “adolescence was a hideous repulsive painful time that turned me into an artist.”¹¹

At eighteen, Moffatt backpacked around Europe for nine months: “Can you imagine how fabulous that was for me?”¹² In 1980, she returned to study Visual Communications at the Queensland College of Art, graduating in 1982. She is a film buff, especially for films of the seventies, claiming that: “The seventies were the last era of a brave idiosyncratic cinema.”¹³ She loves books, most particularly these days, biographies. She lives in New York, although she frequently travels back to Australia where she also works, has friends and family, and most recently, a beach house “up north.”

Influences on her work are many and varied, ranging from Disney, children’s *Little Golden Books*, Goya, and filmmakers Nicolas Roeg, Martin Scorsese, Pier Paolo Pasolini, and Masaki Kobayashi. She also lists as



Tracey Moffatt, *Self Portrait*, 1999
handcolored photograph
13 x 8.66 in.

influences Georgia O'Keeffe, Annie Brigman, Albert Namatijira, Mark Rothko, Geoffrey Smart, and Russell Drysdale as well as writers Pauline Reage, Anais Nin, Henry Miller, Tennessee Williams, Truman Capote, Carson McCullers, and Carlos Castaneda, just to name a few. Although some of her influences emerge in my film analyses in this book, her named influences and inspirations are so eclectic and so many that to list them all in one go reduces the word "influence" to banality. Her fascination is with the world around her and is driven by a curiosity about form—about how different media and different styles can be used and how these formal differences can alter the stories she tells. In her own words:

I'm hungry to explore different things and therefore photographic processes. From grainy black and white to glossy color to washed-out color, from found images which I rework to original compositions inspired by classical painting, pop culture, a favorite novelist, or from my own life.¹⁴

As to how she positions herself socio-politically? Moffatt, in her typically enigmatic and epigrammatic style claimed in an interview with Marta Gili: "I'm a socialist who lives for designer clothes . . ."¹⁵ Given Australian society, however, Moffatt would almost certainly also have experienced some insults for being an indigenous, Aboriginal Australian. One of the pleasant things about working and living in New York must be that there are so many people from so many different places and looking so different from each other, that one more beautiful woman with brown skin is not at all remarkable and nobody is really fussed to know about her genealogy. Moffatt has indeed taken her work beyond the constraints of being considered that of an indigenous artist. She has never been afraid to comment on injustices, and it is clear from the content of her work that her art speaks from a position of knowing about being both Aboriginal and a woman. But she will not be "ghettoized," and from the beginning of her public life she has insisted on being an artist who is known internationally as someone who speaks on behalf of the whole human condition—not only from the corner of a particular margin. Moffatt claims a freedom to work her politics through her art in her own way. In her own words:

I was always very—I still am, kind of—political. But I wanted to make my own images, and not work on political documents. I always had my own stories to tell. I remember a few radical Aboriginal leader-types in the early days saying to me, 'Do what you want.' And I just needed to hear that.¹⁶

Moffatt has always claimed the ground of an international artist. In her own words again, in conversation with Gerald Matt:

6. Tracey Moffatt, in conversation with Elizabeth Ann Macgregor, "Tracey Talks . . .," in *Tracey Moffatt*, catalogue for the retrospective exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art. *Tracey Moffatt*, December 17, 2003–February 29, 2004, Sydney: MCA, 2003. This interview is a rich source of information about how Tracey Moffatt works and why.

7. Tracey Moffatt, in Sebastian Smee, "Multiple Exposure. Tracey Moffatt/Visual Artist," *Sydney Morning Herald*, May 9, 1998, p. 3s.

8. *Ibid.*

9. Tracey Moffatt, in Andrea Stretton, "Reading Tracey Moffatt," *Art and Australia*, vol. 43, summer 2005, http://www.artaustralia.com/article.asp?issue_id=1&article_id=52, accessed January 16, 2006.

10. Tracey Moffatt, in Sebastian Smee, "Just Don't Call Me an Aboriginal Artist. Tracey Moffatt's Roots Play a Big Part in Her Spellbinding New Work," *European Network for Indigenous Australian Rights: News*, 2001, <http://www.eniar.org/news/moffatt1.htm>, accessed January 16, 2006.

11. Tracey Moffatt, in Celia Prado, "Delores Clairborne & Cinderella: In between Fairy Tales," *Op. cit.*, p. 54 and pp. 52–56.

12. Tracey Moffatt, in Elizabeth Ann Macgregor, "Tracey Talks . . .," *Op. cit.*

13. *Ibid.*

14. *Ibid.*

15. Tracey Moffatt, in Marta Gili, "An Interview with Tracey Moffatt," in exhibition catalogue, La Fundacio "la Caixa," Barcelona, and Centre National de la Photographie, Paris, 1999.

16. Tracey Moffatt, in Sebastian Smee, "Multiple Exposure. Tracey Moffatt/Visual Artist," *Op. cit.*, p. 3s.

Within all my work I want to create a world, a general world . . . I don't want to make some grand statement on race—it isn't about wanting to be politically correct, perhaps it's about always striving for an 'international' look to my work.¹⁷

During this conversation, she goes on to describe a very bad experience when making “political films”:

. . . in 1983, I worked on a documentary about an Aboriginal land rights protest which was both exhilarating and a nightmare. Some members of the group or rather the 'collective' I made it with didn't agree with the film, so they destroyed it (literally with scissors—on the night of the film's premiere they chopped up nine months of hard work) and it was never seen.¹⁸

In this sense, Moffatt has abandoned the explicitly political for complex meditations on people and society—statements over which she has final control.

A Vision

When Elizabeth Ann Macgregor, Director of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney, asked her about her lack of “one signature style,” Moffatt gave a quite long and very interesting reply. She agreed with Macgregor and said that “this represents the state of my mind.” She went on to say the following:

The clever writers who are saying that I am making the 'same picture' are probably inferring that I'm saying the same thing about the human condition, which is something about desperation and longing, I think.¹⁹

Although in her interviews Moffatt has shared much of her personal history with the general public, and in spite of offering her own comparisons between her autobiographical stories and her art, there runs through the written descriptions and interviews which she undertakes a sense that Moffatt is also a very private person. It is as if she gives us so many carefully chosen words on her art and how she makes it that it would somehow be crass to further interrogate her on her own family, friendship circle, and history. When people claim “the author is dead” in these text-saturated times, shouldn't we be concentrating on the art and its context, artistic and social? Moffatt's art certainly speaks for itself in terms of social comment, and her development as a significant international artist is sufficient to glimpse the enigmatic person behind the art.

Her vision becomes evident as you travel through her work; it is a process of vision rather than some *motif* or style that she continually returns to and explores for its own sake. Her vision is ongoing: “I don’t believe I have an identifiable style, because I don’t do the same thing twice.”²⁰

In Her Own Words

It is the process of direct communication with us, the audience, that is the focus of all her work. In her 2005 interview with Moffatt, Samantha Selinger-Morris makes this comment on how Moffatt works:

She is a storyteller, and she wants us to watch and listen. Moffatt is an artist who is highly engaged with her audience, she is a humorist, a performer again in the sense that her work needs to be shown and she needs to talk about it with us so that we can better understand her stories and the art within which she sets them.²¹

Moffatt is happy to talk about her work, and her words certainly contextualize her art, but the art stands for itself, and for her. Moffatt is a performer of self, a performance artist, and her spoken and written words about herself and her art become part of the performance. One of the most curious and tantalizing aspects of her work is her quite frequent use of her own image, and of course people ask her why. She has claimed that she has done this from necessity when she has been unable to find any actor more suitable for a particular work (or within her budget!), but her most definitive answer appears in her conversation with Macgregor:

Every art piece I have ever made, be it film or photographs, is in some way autobiographical. Each work depicts a mood or a current obsession and my occasional appearance is something that felt completely right at the time.²²

The Moving Images of Tracey Moffatt traces a chronological story of Moffatt’s artistic vision as it is imaged in her films and photographic art. The forging of this vision through such an iconoclastic and experimental path via form, medium, and content that her work is still debated in terms of reference to such categories as art, film, photography, indigenous and colonial history, gender, autobiography and popular culture. Moffatt’s work addresses all these categories. She is an artist who pushes at the boundaries of form and narrative—indeed, she pushes so hard that sometimes these boundaries disappear, leaving the viewer to wonder when contemplating her audiovisual work just what it is they are looking at: “Is it film? Is it art?” or “How does the story end?” For



Tracey Moffatt preparing for her Shere Hite *Under the Sign of Scorpio* shoot, New York, 2005. Photo by Miyuki Tsushima.

17. Tracey Moffatt, in Gerald Matt, “An Interview with Tracey Moffatt,” in exhibition catalogue, *Tracey Moffatt*, City Gallery, Wellington, New Zealand, March 2002.

18. *Ibid.*

19. Tracey Moffatt, in Elizabeth Ann Macgregor, “Tracey Talks . . .,” *Op. cit.*

20. *Ibid.*

21. See Samantha Selinger-Morris, “The Secret Lives of Tracey Moffatt,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, July 30, 2005, <http://www.smh.com.au/news/arts/the-secret-lives-of-tracey-moffatt/2005/07/29/1122144006147.html>, accessed February 22, 2006.

22. Tracey Moffatt, in Elizabeth Ann Macgregor, “Tracey Talks . . .,” *Op. cit.*

example, film theorist Jean-Louis Comolli's words are particularly apt in the context of her film *beDevil*:

It is what resists cinematic representation, limiting it on all sides and from within, which constitutes equally its force; what makes it falter makes it go.²³

Moffatt demands an active, questioning audience that must also be flexible when interpreting the several stories that she often weaves throughout one work. For example, in her photoseries *Invocations*, she interlaces the story of a small black girl tripping lightly through a forest or "wood" that seems to be straight out of the animation world of Disney. At the edge of the wood, this little girl looks out at the world on the other side of the wood, but appears to withdraw again into the menacing but known world she has so far traveled through. The other images interspersed in this series tell another story that is punctuated by these childhood scenes, and I suggest that this story drives the primary narrative. We see pastel, sometimes hard-to-see images of two black lovers, and although these images tell of violence and submission, they are resolved in the final image of the series: a pale and gentle image of the ethereal lovers embracing. Here in this series, two seemingly quite different stories are juxtaposed to tell another one: of fear, unhappiness, passion, and quiet resolution. These still images seem "stills" from an unmade or long forgotten film.

Moffatt's photoseries are so full of complex and carefully staged images that they demand more than one viewing to be understood, as do her films. In her own words:

I am constantly thinking composition in a photographic sense, and framing and photographic textures are very important in my movies.²⁴

Similarly to her photoseries, Moffatt's films and videos also need to be viewed as visual art. We need to pause and go back to understand and appreciate her complex imagery and sounds, just as the viewer in an art gallery returns again and again to favorite works. And yet in the context of her photographic process, she is adamant that there is no relationship between her photographic work and her time-based art:

There isn't any relationship between the two. My photographs must hold their own, as strong still images. Hopefully the picture can be read in many ways and yet breathe as photographs in their own right. I like the pulling and tugging, going off in one direction or another. Film, too, must be structured according to the rules of filmmaking.²⁵



Invocations No. 11, 2000
photo silkscreen, 42 x 37 in.

Moffatt is a unique cultural performer employing a broad range of media—a range that includes her own personal statements and descriptions of her work, many of which appear in this book. Rather than drawing on the conventions of art history, I use a film-cultural studies approach that addresses both Moffatt and her art more in the context of her cultural position in the various communities in which she works and lives and which focuses on her work as a filmmaker raising the important questions: “When is film art?” and “When is art film?”

These are puzzling and yet increasingly important questions in our currently image-obsessed age that is constantly merging and/or confusing perceptual boundaries between cinema and visual art. *The Moving Images of Tracey Moffatt* explores the perceptual dilemmas arising from these questions. Chapter 1 presents a brief background to Moffatt’s early work, covering the period from her childhood to when she made her experimental film *Nice Coloured Girls* (1987). In Chapter 2, we follow Moffatt’s emergence as an international artist. During that period to 1992, she produced both the photoseries *Something More* and her much acclaimed and possibly best known film, *Night Cries: A Rural Tragedy* (1989). Chapters 3 and 4 analyze in close detail her feature film *beDevil* (1993), locating the stories and images from this film in the context of her photographic work. Chapter 5 focuses on her exhibition *Free Falling* at the Dia Center for the Arts in New York (October 9, 1997–June 14, 1998). Her filmic works over the time frame dominated by this exhibition include the video *Heaven* (1997), commissioned by the Dia Center for the Arts for this exhibition, and the first of the collage-videos made in collaboration with Gary Hillberg. In Chapter 6, I particularly discuss the thirteen silk-screened images of the photoseries *Invocations* (2000) as a template for understanding the ways in which Moffatt weaves her stories through her films. Finally, Chapter 7 discusses her most recent work, *Under the Sign of Scorpio*, and contextualizes her current work, including her new collage-video *Doomed*, within her overall oeuvre. Chapter 7 concludes this journey through Moffatt’s art, from the perspective of film. In summary, this book is not only a critique of Moffatt’s filmic art. It is intended rather as a celebration of this brave, generous, passionate, highly self-disciplined Australian artist and her visions—remembering always that it is one installment of a continuing journey.

23. Jean-Louis Comolli, “Machine of the Visible,” in T. De Lauretis and Stephen Heath, (eds.), *The Cinematic Apparatus*. London: Macmillan, 1980, p. 141.

24. Tracey Moffatt, in John Conomos and Raffaele Caputo, “BEDEVIL. Tracey Moffatt,” *Cinema Papers*, vol. 93, May 1993, p. 31.

25. Tracey Moffatt, in Elizabeth Ann Macgregor, “Tracey Talks . . .,” *Op. cit.*