

Tracey Moffatt

Portrait of Eubena Nampitjin

Tracey Moffatt remains Australia's most famous photomedia artist.

Now living between New York and Brisbane her latest series, *Portraits*, explores the world of celebrity by presenting her circle of friends and relations in highly glamorised images that all follow the same precise format. The dark, melodramatic undertones of her early work have gone and here a sunny good-humour shines out. *Photofile* asked the artist, a curator of portraiture, a street artist and a happiness expert for their opinion.

TRACEY MOFFATT

The Artist

Lately I've been making portraits. I really like making them. I shot the portraits paparazzi-style straight-on with a simple digital flash camera at art exhibition openings, book launches, fashion shows and glamorous parties. The idea was to capture people at their very best, at public events. At parties everyone's energy is high and everyone is dressed up and polished and willing to pose. To shoot such luminous portraits I need the buzz of a social event around me. I mysteriously pick up on the buzz and transfer my energy to the subject. It is really very interesting. These portraits are in a way a mirror of myself, because the gleam in the eye you see here is my gleam reflected back at me.

I've discovered that this three-quarter cropping is in fact everyone's most flattering angle. I've tilted each person to the right as if they are peeking playfully around a doorway at me. In some cases I played god and digitally flipped a face over to the person's happier side. On the computer I added brightly coloured paint splatters in the background because I wanted the visual feel to be like when one of those confetti guns goes off at a party. I can't wait to make more portraits and to continue my journey into the mysteries of the beautiful human face.

MICHAEL DESMOND

Curator

The portrait of Eubena Nampitjin reminds me more of Moffatt's conceptual series *Under the Sign of Scorpio* (2005) than the wonderful early suite of singular portraits *Some Lads* (1986). That is to say the portrait *looks* very individualistic, but is not exactly so since the artist has used the same compositional and framing devices across all 12 images in this series.

Seen in isolation, this image might prompt the thought that the colourful background enveloping the sitter represents a metaphor for the kind of paintwork associated with the artist. In fact versions of this computer-generated background appear in all of Moffatt's recent portraits. It does, however, successfully throw the photographic element of the face into relief.

Each portrait in this series fits a template - physical and conceptual - created by the artist. This makes the subjects look more like variations on a theme, than unique individuals - something reinforced by the smiles that uniformly adorn each face. There is no variation in emotional expression that might be peculiar to any individual. Nonetheless, the informality of the paparazzi style of portraiture evoked by the grins is very attractive, suggesting a familiarity and intimacy with the subject. While the similarities and common features of the group homogenises, it simultaneously also highlights differences. The portrait of Eubena Nampitjin speaks of the sitter's happy disposition as well as the Moffatt's own preoccupations

TRIPS

Street Artist

The thing that immediately struck me about Tracey's image was how much I relate to the medium of paint in a physical sense. Each and every time I paint there is the inevitable session with the scrubbing brush, hot water and soap. It's a ritual I have come to really enjoy. It's kind of like the calm after the storm. Even though I most probably should have, I've avoided using a face mask when I paint and it's really because that smell to me of fresh *belton* or *montana gold* is like home. It's an old friend. I've known it for over half of my life.

I think it's fair to say that most folks who use some kind of aerosol paint to make pictures probably feel the same way. It's that full-on sensory experience that got me excited as a young boy. My first memory is to do with touch, with the feeling of paint - but with aerosol paint it is very much related to 'catching vapours' or the individual smell and quality of different paints. Inadvertently Tracey made me feel at home in the way she portrays this woman immersed in the medium she uses to channel what she uniquely sees and feels - it is the reason why, day after day, I pick up a brush, or a can - to release all the colours that flow through me.

Trips is a graffiti artist based in Sydney

TIMOTHY SHARP

Happiness Expert

When I look at this image I see the purist form of happiness. I see a real, genuine 'Duchenne smile' in which the corners of the mouth turn up and the skin around the eyes crinkles into crows' feet (which contrasts, for example, with the pretend smiles many people enact daily). This sort of authentic happiness cannot be faked but, reflects an inner emotion that typically also reflects joy and pride.

Obviously, I don't know anything about the subject's life, her loves or her pains. But during the taking of this picture, there seems little doubt that she's enjoying herself and the moment. She also seems to be connecting with the photographer in a way that we should all aim to connect and engage with others.

All of this would seem to represent what we know about happiness - that it comes not from wealth or the possession of many objects but rather, that it begins in and grows from the inside as a result of living life with purpose, focusing on positives, relating well to others (in this context the photographer) as well as living in, and enjoying, the here and now.

Dr Timothy Sharp is head of the Happiness Institute, Sydney