

STATE OF THE ARTS

Indigenous artists have made a huge impact in the art world. Here are some of their stories.

A conversation with Tracey

When Tracey Moffatt appeared at the MCA recently to talk about her new show, she was mobbed by journalists and photographers wanting some time with her. She sat herself down on the floor to chat with *Deadly Vibe*.



You grew up in Mt Gravatt in Brisbane. What was that like?

When you grow up in an oppressed society, it gives you such an edge - I always felt like growing up in Queensland was being in the deep South.

So when I watched Tennessee Williams films or read Truman Capote, the larger-than-life characters in those stories reflected my upbringing. And the heat and the racism and the redneck attitudes, I felt, were very like the deep South. So when I'm in America, I meet people who say 'There's something really southern about you.' They think I'm southern, not only to do with stuff like that but the way I am - the way I throw parties, the way I'm a hostess. I know how to serve a drink and make people feel at home. I think that's quite southern and therefore quite Queensland. We were taught manners and we had to wait on the adults who would come to visit, with cups of tea and serving them. Also, as the eldest girl, you had to do all the work - help with the kids and help with the housework.

There were four Moffatt children and we were fostered into a larger family with five children, but they were older and had left home.

When you grow up with such a strict, old-fashioned upbringing, it leaves room for fantasy and make-believe. Those long, boring summer days, those endless Brisbane summers that would stretch on only fuelled imagination. I think kids these days are too stimulated. Entertainment is constantly provided. In a way I'm half-jealous but something in me isn't envious at all. I think my boring upbringing led

me towards art because you have to look for escape - you find it yourself or create it yourself.

So the early photograph I made for the show called *Made a Camera* is about childhood creativity. When you didn't have something, you made it, and I like that. I think some kids still do that, don't they?

What do you think of Brisbane these days?

Oh, it's changed so much. It's so groovy now. It's very café society. Oh my God - I don't recall one place where you could get a cappuccino [when I grew up there]. I remember my first demonstration was a right to life march in 1977 and it was pure anarchy on the street. There were the Commonwealth Games in '82 and I was involved in those demonstrations and there was just nothing more exciting. There's nothing to protest any more, is there? Students don't know the fun they're missing out on.

What does your family think of your success?

I've always been the eccentric in the family and I always got teased about it and it used to upset me. But now, I have no regrets because I think that's quite normal - when you are the weird artist in the family you're always going to be teased. I guess it prepares you for later on in life - it prepares you for the bad reviews you're going to get. So I am the eccentric but they're very happy for my success. My dear old mother, before she went and passed away, was just happy I was making a living. She wasn't particularly into what I was doing, but as long as the rent was paid she thought that was great.

When you think of 'home', do you think of Brisbane or New York?

I don't know where home is any more. Brisbane is where I'm from; New York is my base. I think home is where you're happy at the time and I don't have great memories of growing up in redneck Brissie. You know, I don't! I'm not nostalgic - part of me wants to forget it forever

In the art world, Brisbane-born photographer Tracey Moffatt is an international superstar. Nowadays, she calls New York home but recently she spent time in Brisbane working and catching up with loved ones. She also travelled to Sydney to open a major retrospective of her work at the Museum of Contemporary Art.

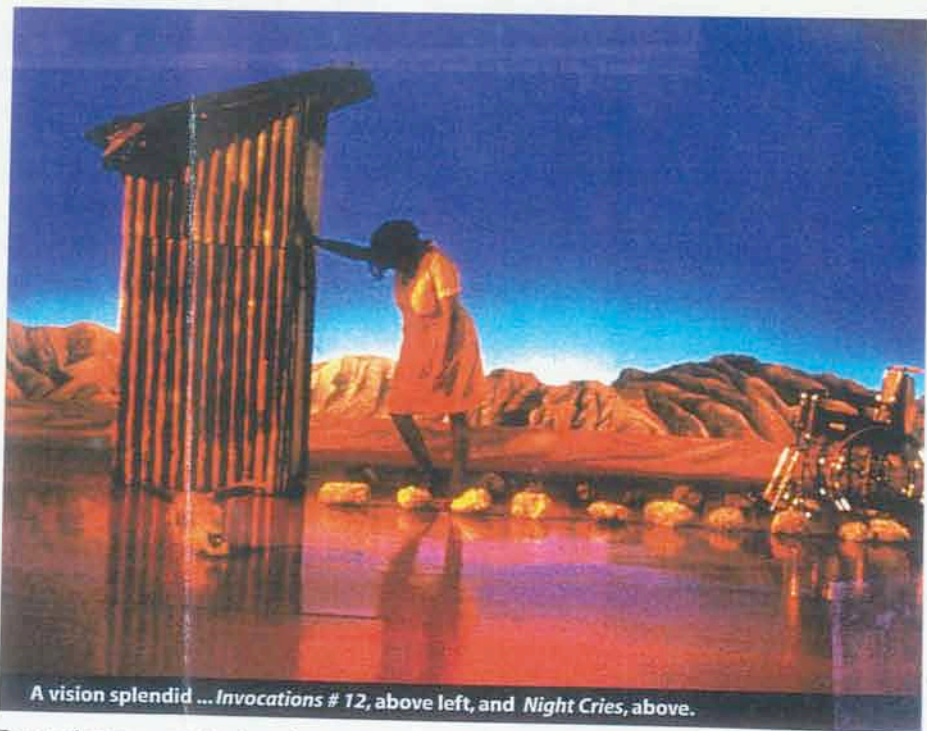


Tracey Moffatt

but you can work through things in your art. If you're producing art, it's better than seeing a therapist! And the fact that I live in New York, as far away from Brisbane as possible ... maybe there's something in that. There's something in that I don't want to revisit the past, it's too painful, a lot of it.

What is day-to-day life like in New York?

Oh, unbelievable. It's theatre on the street. I go out to do two chores and I come home exhausted. I have to have an afternoon nap, even if it's just down to the post office. There are these mean bitches who work at the Chelsea Post Office – they're always ticking me off about putting my elbows on the counter and things like that. But there are always the most amazing things going on. It's so cultural – people from all over the world pass through or live there. So it's my adolescent fantasy about living amid the New York intelligentsia and being a part of that – it has come true. Living in New York is like being in a movie – you think you're in a Martin Scorsese film every day. Living in Sydney is like living in Club Med, which isn't a bad thing at all.



A vision splendid ... *Invocations # 12*, above left, and *Night Cries*, above.

Do you have any advice for other artists?

I just can't believe Australian artists moaning and whingeing – what is there to complain about? I say just get on with it. But what they need to do is show their work in other places. I wish they would. It's not hard. I think Australians are shy. New Yorkers think New York is the centre of the universe, that nothing else exists. If you want to make it there, you've got to pretend that you live there. Australian artists should go there and meet art dealers and pretend that they're around a lot, then come back six months later and say hello as if they've never left.

How does your Aboriginal background influence your work?

It's difficult to answer. I look at my work and I say, 'What is Aboriginal about my work?' I think of the great desert painters like Clifford Possum or Emily Kngwarreye and what do I have in common? I don't know. I know all those great artists had a mischievous quality. The great

Rover Thomas – he was funny. That may be one quality I have in my personality but in my art ... I know it's always baffled me. I would like to think that what I'm saying in my images – in film and photography – is that I'm trying to say something about the human condition.

Do you consider yourself a role model for other Aboriginal artists?

Of course! My work is studied in universities – in film departments, media studies, art theory – and often Aboriginal students come up to me and say, 'I wrote a paper on your work and I got a good grade,' and I love that! What I want to say to other Aboriginal artists is that I'd like to think they can go off and make art about anything. I'd love some kid from the desert, from central Australia, to go off to Antarctica and make images of icebergs and say in a press statement, 'Oh, I went there to explore form.' That would be just the ultimate. I just think that'd be wild. That would blow my mind. I'm exploring form.' Wow.



The *Something More* series is among Tracey's best-known work.



Piss Bags ... from Tracey's series about embarrassing childhood moments.