



Tracey Moffatt: 'If it becomes a little terrifying then I'm interested'

The first Indigenous Australian to exhibit a solo show at the Venice Biennale on her film noir obsession – and why she's happy to be a 'meanie' at work



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“They weren’t allowed to talk to me, except when we had lunch,” Tracey Moffatt tells the gaggle of surrounding reporters. She is talking about her interns.

“I’m real strict when I go to work. When you enter the studio, it’s like a temple and you have to respect my silence. Just because I’m not talking doesn’t mean I’m a grump. It means I’m concentrating.”

At this moment, wearing a bright shirt and an even brighter expression, it’s hard to imagine Moffatt being a grump. We are at her temporary studio, waiting for a preview of the work she will be unveiling in May at the 57th [Venice Biennale](#). In an email earlier this week, Moffatt says she has been “cleaning and cooking for days!” anticipating our arrival. (It may be at least half true – the studio is certainly spotless.)

For the past 12 months Moffatt has been working on her show in one of the old military cottages in Mosman’s Middle Head national park in Sydney. The residency, arranged by Mosman Art Gallery, is not only in a picturesque location with breathtaking views of [Sydney](#) Harbour’s North and South heads, but is a significant site for Indigenous people – particularly in relation to the story of Bungaree, the Aboriginal man who circumnavigated Australia with Matthew Flinders.

The park is muddy and the sky threatens rain as we traipse down the point, near the old fortifications, where a handful of artists are sketching and painting – an intriguingly convenient addition to the atmosphere. Moffatt is far from the shy, retiring type; she is warm and engaging and clearly at home in front of a crowd. She takes questions and poses for photos in front of the spectacular scenery and the event feels rather like theatre, with Moffatt, its star, at the centre.

But the theatrical is, perhaps, not so out of place. Moffatt's photography and cinematography is renowned for its storytelling, its drama. From [the influential *Something More suite* \(1989\)](#), with its fusion of glamour and gaudiness and its sinister underscore, to [the harrowing *Laudanum* \(1998\)](#), the strength of Moffatt's work is in its implied narrative. Even her 2001 series, *Fourth* – a collection of portraits of Olympic athletes who just missed out on winning a bronze medal – suggests a contained narrative arc within each image.

Moffatt's work has been shown in Milan, Paris, Prague; at the Guggenheim and the Museum of Modern [Art](#) in New York, the Moderna Museet in Stockholm and the Tate Gallery in London. Her CV is about to become more impressive still: she will be the 39th Australian artist, and the first Indigenous artist, to exhibit a solo show at the Venice Biennale this year. She will also be the second artist to exhibit in the new Australian pavilion, after Fiona Hall's haunting *Wrong Way Time* installation in 2015.



Hell (Passage Series), a photograph by Tracey Moffatt that will form part of her exhibition at the 2017 Venice Biennale

Moffatt's exhibition, titled *My Horizon*, will feature two new large-scale photographic suites and two films. Commissioned by Naomi Milgrom and curated by Natalie King, the exact nature of the works in this exhibition is still a tightly guarded secret, but Moffatt says she used a lot of natural light – often shooting directly into the sun – and that her inspirations came primarily from 1940s-era imagery.

"I draw on cinema, old movies, particularly film noir, late 40s film noir," she says. "It's before the 50s started, so it's not that sharp or stylish; it's sort of poor film noir."

A fascination with the history of photography has always infused Moffatt's work. The vintage inspiration is clear, even in the single image from the exhibition that has been released to the press so far, titled *Hell*.

"I love a dirty old glass plate image that you'd find in an antique shop, or daguerrotypes," she says. "I love vintage because often they were capturing something that wasn't intended. So I scan the images for that, the unintentional moment."

There is an intriguing tension in this admission, particularly for an artist whose photography and film is all about constructed, composed scenes rather than capturing the fleeting, the momentary.



Tracey Moffatt (centre), with Natalie King (left) and Naomi Milgrom. Photograph: Maja Baska

Moffatt explains that she often works by finding a location that inspires her in some aesthetic sense, then spinning a story around it. “It’s location first and then the story comes. When I work like that, it’s been described as cinematic.”

My Horizon, she says, is to do with “retreating into the realm of imagination. My work is often based on fact or personal family history but it never stays there.”

The exhibition will be accompanied by the publication of a companion book, which includes a new novella from the Miles Franklin award winner Alexis Wright, and the republication of Camille Paglia’s 1992 Penthouse essay, Elizabeth Taylor: Hollywood’s Pagan Queen. Moffatt won’t confirm whether Taylor herself actually features in the coming exhibition.

While the new work plays with narration and experiments with colour palettes – tendencies that feature strongly throughout her body of work so far – Moffatt dismisses the idea that the installation will resemble her previous work in any significant way.

“I’m not interested in repeating myself, in creating the same sort of works I made 15 years ago. I’m not that sort of artist. Every body of work I make, it looks like another artist made it. I don’t have a signature style.”

Moffatt admits this may be partly due to the fact that she has a short attention span. “If it becomes a little terrifying then I’m interested.”

The art comes – “appears”, she says – after a lot of hard work and equally as much failure. Perhaps that’s partly why she requires her apprentices to maintain absolute silence.

“I don’t mind being a meanie,” she tells me later. “But that’s how I learnt to be an artist, by working with artists. And part of it is watching me be quiet and watching me be unhappy.”

“Because it’s not a laugh, and it’s not fun to make art. It’s serious business and I’m gonna be unhappy. Sorry, you’re going to see it.”