



Tracey Moffatt at the Venice Biennale: memories are made of this

By John Kelly

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“In Photography, as everyone knows, content is 90 percent of the ball game. To get good subject matter, you find it. This makes photography the only art form in which shopping is considered a talent” – Peter Plagen, ‘Fretting About Photos: Four Views’, *Art in America*, November, 1979

The lens and screen are omnipresent in Venice. Not only in Piazza San Marco but for over two decades in the Australian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. In 1995 Bill Henson was the first Australian photographer to exhibit lens-based work, followed by Lyndal Jones in 2001, Patricia Piccinini in 2003, Susan Norrie in 2007 (outside the Pavilion) and Shaun Gladwell in 2009. Tracey Moffatt is exhibiting this year and she follows Fiona Hall (2015), a trained photographer and Simryn Gill (2013), who is best known for her photographs ‘A Small Town at the Turn of the Century’.

Back in the '70s when Susan Sontag wrote the seminal essays on photography in *The New York Review of Books*, collated into ‘On Photography’, she was able to explore the medium’s dualities, contradictions and associations with advertising, war, pornography, propaganda, media, cinema, etc. Back then, before the camera phone, internet and ease of access to ‘video’, the artists using the medium were more easily identifiable for they were small in number and worked at the edges or outside the mainstream, commercial use of the technology – so, for example, Diane Arbus’ images of marginalised people created a glimpse into the shadowlands of society. ‘Art’ photography had an edgy, voyeuristic feel to it and sat outside the commercialism and everyday use of the medium by the public. It’s a little more complicated today.

Alfred Stieglitz, whose work hovers gently over Tracey Moffatt’s new imagery here in Venice, was another whose photographs of clouds endeavoured to find an aesthetic free of commercial imperatives or associations. His importance within the development of Modern Art in America helped bring photography closer to the world of art than possibly any other. However, the medium of the lens has a complex history. Just think of Stalin’s use of photography to ‘airbrush’ people from history, or the Zapruder JFK film, Vietnam and recent news reports from Syria and one realises that lens-based media need to be approached with caution, especially in a post-truth world, one in which automated robotics are just as likely to take great photographs as any human (NASA’s Mars rovers landscape shots, for example). So where do we begin with Tracey Moffatt’s *My Horizon*? How do we approach the lens work of an artist who melds fact with fiction in both still and moving imagery?

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I began by taking the Museum of Modern Art's online course, 'Seeing through Photographs'. For €45 I was enrolled in a six-week course looking at what makes a photograph culturally and artistically important. After all, estimates suggest that there may be as many as 14 trillion photographs taken in 2017 and as many as 5 billion videos watched on YouTube each day. All of which may be considered art, and the skill level needed to take a 'great' photograph is now child's play.

For example, ten-years ago Gladwell was showing a slow-motion video in Venice that anyone can now reproduce on a smartphone in seconds. Or look at the current National Gallery of Victoria's exhibition of Patrick Pound's found photographs. Each 'found' photograph is mesmerising in its own snatched moment in time, and when 'visually merchandised' into sets they are very impressive. I have seen a number of these found photograph /video exhibitions around the world and all are interesting, but again it raises the question of how do we discern what should be considered important and what is not? Is Tracey Moffatt an important artist or simply one of billions of photographers/videographers out there; or does the fact she has access to an art gallery make this artist's work significant and important? What sets Moffatt apart?

From my MOMA course I learnt that it's really the artist's biography that gives the work sufficient gravitas to be considered important by MOMA. Who pressed the shutter button, their place in time, their history, who printed it, who cropped it, who wrote the description, what were the intentions and where was it published exhibited? – these are what they consider. However, this importance can be fluid, such as MOMA's collection of NASA's moon-landing photographs, which have helped change the concept of how we humans view our place in the universe but were taken for altogether non-artistic reasons. They were simply a matter of record, a remarkable one and only entered the art museum when images such as the 'Blue Marble' had such a profound effect.

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So, what's so special about Tracey Moffatt? Well for 30 years Moffatt has been Australia's most visible contemporary artist in this medium. Like Arbus, Moffatt has looked into areas that many Australians are exceedingly uncomfortable with, namely the violent collision between Indigenous culture and colonialism and the resultant violence and alienation this has caused. Moffatt has produced series upon series of poetic imagery that has placed Indigenous Australians at the centre of her art, juxtaposed into contemporary landscapes and histories that are simultaneously fictional and true. And it is that contradictory space that makes her narrative compelling. Along with a number of other contemporary Indigenous artists, such as Destiny Deacon, Brenda Croft, Fiona Foley, Richard Bell and more, Moffatt has given voice to the many who have grown up in a society where to be shunned, ignored and discriminated against is the norm. That they decided to enter the world of art, where it is normal to be shunned, ignored and discriminated against, is an act of defiant bravery.

So, what can I possibly say as a privileged, middle-aged, white male Australian of Anglo Irish heritage that can in any way be meaningful? I find it difficult, just as I am reluctant to comment on Jessie Jones' powerful work in the Irish Pavilion that touches on the issue of abortion in a country struggling with its post-Catholic history. In speaking with curator Tessa Giblin, the Irish Pavilion curator, she suggested the common thread between artists such as Moffatt, Jones and Lisa Reihana (New Zealand Pavilion) is the right to self-determination, and I cannot disagree. The three pavilions make this powerful statement in unison, despite the difference in subject matter.



Tracey Moffatt's 'Bedroom' from the 'Body Remembers' series

In Moffatt's case her own well-known personal history distinguishes her from her predecessors like Bill Henson, Lyndal Jones, Gladwell, Hall and Gill, for Moffatt's is an authentic experience of growing up as an Indigenous woman in a colonised Australia, which means she has not needed to go shopping for her subject matter – she has lived it.

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Others might and do take a different view, like the Australian art critic Robert Nelson, who in the past has questioned Moffatt's motives. In 2004 he stated that:

“Moffatt's artistic detachment is confirmed in statements of astonishing coldness. An example was an ABC broadcast where she opined that artists can turn their “tragedies into artworks and therefore money spinners”. You're confounded and mystified, because – as with Moffatt's pictures – you can't determine if the rhetoric is disarming, or ironic, or cynical.”

Given Moffatt's biography, I feel it is perfectly acceptable for the work to be disarming, ironic and cynical, and in my view this is its strength. How could they be anything else? In the video 'The White Ghosts Sailed in' the artist uses a fictional history overlaid on Sydney Heads to express a fundamental truth, one which is then succinctly reflected on the Pavilion's tote-bag,

which reads on one side Indigenous Rights and on the other Refugee Rights – put them together and they scream HUMAN RIGHTS.



Tracey Moffatt's 'Frame with Ghost Stills #1' from 'The White Ghosts Sailed in' series

Her more poetic expressions are in a medium that so effectively colonised the globe, that is the lens, which like western media is both informative and culpable, as in the work 'Vigil' (2017) where images of Elizabeth Taylor and Jimmy Stewart (a reference to the photographer in *Rear Window*) are cut between news footage of refugee boats sinking, while opposite in 'Body Remembers' (2017) a maid returns to an abandoned station house like a refugee returning home after a war – it is both real and imagined, as Moffatt lifts the camera into the glare of the Australian sun. Moffatt may be returning to memories of her family members working in domestic servitude, but she is fully present in the conflict strewn contemporary.



Tracey Moffatt's 'Mad Captain' from the 'Passage' series

The broader question that this exhibition brings forth is that, at a time when a tsunami of lens-based imagery is swamping the blue marble, why has Australia chosen a photographer/video artist to hold a solo exhibition in the Australian Pavilion? The third in a row, even if Hall and Gill work in other media as well. Quite clearly Moffatt should have been selected many years ago. It's an important question to be addressed, for one can easily imagine Moffatt having been selected in 1995 in place of Bill Henson, given that in retrospect Moffatt's work engages far more challenging subject matter to do with Australia's cultural identity than Henson ever has. Look at Nathalie Thomas's recent article, 'Bursting Bill's Bubble', and you might find one reason; Thomas states:

"The Elites and the Poseurs all love Bill. The work is beyond the intellectual understanding of the Plebs or the *Basket of Deplorables*... Where critics see Bill's work as: '*dark, bruised, soft porn starring beautiful youth on the cusp of adulthood for rich collectors*,' that's wrong. Bill's work is really about how life has the potential to go wrong. Morgi calls Bill Henson's work *White Australia Gothic in the imperialist tradition*..."

Or you could look at Australia's 2001 artist Lyndal Jones' ABC interview, marvel at her banality, and wonder how this could be regarded as conceptually superior to Moffatt 16 years ago:

"I took this ultra-close up of the water and then every now and then you would see the side of a boat and you would realise what it was, but in a sense you could see a lot of it, um it becomes like an abstraction."

Or Fiona Hall's "...video of a spider in a Chinese cork-landscape diorama and real spiders weaving webs around a collection of such dioramas...", which is a reworking of the World War One German propaganda poster 'L'Entente Cordiale' and which, when combined with her military-camouflage creations based on African sculpture, seem somewhat culturally insensitive or possibly even racist. Or Simryn Gill, who exhibited slick aerial photos of mines in the desert that complemented Shaun Gladwell's 2009 'Maddestmaximvs', which read like television commercials set in the Australian outback. How could this have taken precedence over Moffatt's sustained body of work that dealt with the issue that is at the core of Australia's modern identity? The exhibition raises this crucial question to our cultural leaders, and they should try and answer it so that this pavilion is never again used to display the 'shopping' of the few at the expense of the many.