

Venice Biennale: Fog lifts on Tracey Moffatt's *My Horizon*



Cop and Baby, from Tracey Moffatt's *Passage*, part of her *My Horizon* exhibition at the Venice Biennale.

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The thick fog of secrecy that has shrouded Tracey Moffatt's Venice Biennale exhibition has lifted at last, revealing a show that makes powerful statements about race, refugees and indigenous dispossession.

The exhibition unveiled at the Australian Pavilion on Wednesday morning, Venice time, comprises two series of large-format photographs and two short films, including a montage that uses footage of the wreck of an asylum-seeker vessel at Christmas Island in 2010.

Moffatt appears in one of the photographic series, dressed in a maid's uniform and standing amid a ruined homestead, in what is intended to evoke the "domestic and emotional labour" of generations of women.

Moffatt is the first indigenous artist to have a solo exhibition at the Venice Biennale, after earlier group exhibitions that included paintings by Emily Kame Kng-warre and Rover Thomas.

Moffatt also was selected for the international exhibition at the 1997 Biennale curated by Germano Celant. She is only the second artist to show in the new Australian Pavilion, the black granite-clad structure designed by Denton Corker Marshall that opened with Fiona Hall's exhibition in 2015 and that hosted *The Pool*, Australia's contribution to the Venice Biennale of Architecture last year.

My Horizon was opened by *Mad Max: Fury Road* director -George Miller at the invitation of commissioner Naomi Milgrom. Miller first met Moffatt in the early 1990s and says he admires the mythological dimension of her work.

“When you see her work, it’s unmistakably Tracey Moffatt,” he says from Venice. “When you see her work, you experience it with the entire self, the entire human being. You feel it in the viscera, you feel it emotionally, intellectually ... and it ultimately sits somewhere in mythology. It hits you spiritually as well.”

Before the opening Moffatt had released just one image from the photo drama series, called *Passage*, and an artist statement that referred to themes including legal and illegal journeys, race, gender, sexuality and human relationships. A fuller picture has emerged with the publication of additional, but not all, images from the installation in Venice.

A series of 12 large-scale photographs, *Passage* is a photo drama of four characters: a mother, her baby, a policeman and a shadowy “middleman”. Set around an unidentified port, and photographed in hazy, late-afternoon light, the pictures may suggest a story about people-smuggling or refugees.

But the narrative is ambiguous: a statement about the series says it is not clear whether the policeman, holding the baby in a heroic pose, is “a saviour or a snatcher”.

“I wanted the 40s-era, film noir images to read as being ‘of the past’, but the storyline speaks about what is happening in the world today, with asylum-seekers crossing borders,” Moffatt says of the series. “*Passage* is a story as old as time itself. People throughout history and across cultures have always escaped across borders to seek new lives.”

A short video montage called *Vigil* makes the story about refugees explicit.

Moffatt has juxtaposed news footage of the 2010 Christmas Island sea disaster — when 35 adults and 15 children drowned — with borrowed clips from Hollywood films in which Elizabeth Taylor, Kathleen Turner, Julie Christie and Donald Sutherland peer out of windows. The implication, in Moffatt’s words, is of “white people gawking at desperate poor brown people in boats”.

A second two-minute video work, *The White Ghosts Sailed In*, appears to have been shot at Sydney’s Middle Head, where Moffatt used a cottage as her studio during her work on the Venice exhibition.

The video shows a view of Sydney Heads, and purports to be archival film showing the arrival of the First Fleet in 1788 from the perspective of Sydney’s original inhabitants.

The final work in the exhibition is called *Body Remembers*, a series of 10 ochre-toned photographs on rag paper in which Moffatt is dressed as a maid: the outback setting and self-portraiture may recall her early photographic series *Something More*. “We don’t know if my maid character projects her life into the future, where the house she works in has become a ruin,” Moffatt says. “Or is it that my maid character returns to the ruin to relive a strong memory, perhaps of someone she knew in the house?”

Miller, who had not seen the exhibition before the opening, says Moffatt puts herself in the picture, literally and figuratively. “She’s putting herself in her art,” he says. “She reveals a lot about who she is, what forms her and what she believes. And that’s very available to anyone watching. At the same time, all these deeper currents go through (the work), and they are often hard to grasp, but they follow you out of the exhibition. Sometimes when you see her stuff, you just can’t forget it.”

Australia’s presence in Venice this year has been supported with \$1.7 million raised from philanthropic foundations, corporate partners and more than 200 individual donations. It includes support for the Australia Council’s development program for visual arts practitioners and the First Nations Curators Program.