

Artlink

The Masque Ball of Tracey Moffatt

On Tracey Moffatt's My Horizon for the Australian Pavilion at the 57th Venice Biennale

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Tracey Moffatt, *Hell*, from the series *Passage*, 2017, type C photograph on gloss paper.
Courtesy the artist, Roslyn Oxley9, Sydney and Tyler Rollins Fine Art, New York

Digna Petamus—seek worthy things
Mount Gravatt School motto

One of Tracey Moffatt's lasting cinematographic memories, as she told me, is of films with harbour scenes, of working ports, rough workmen, the coming and going of exotic people, fogs, and foghorns. Tracey Moffatt's photographic and film work commissioned for the Australian Pavilion in Venice responds to this landscape of cinematic time.

Two specific images of little people come to my mind. The first is the short red-coated figure pursued by Donald Sutherland through the Venetian fog in Nicolas Roeg's 1973 film *Don't Look Now*, a story of the loss of a child and of grief, a fleeting form pursued through the maze of

canals and darkness that represents a potent emotional register of regret and desire, obsession and fantasy.

Roeg cleverly describes Venice as a city of beauty but also as somewhat banal and ugly in its decay, an eerie place of foreboding. As a resident colleague said, it was formerly, if not currently, a place that demanded constant circulation of the waters to avoid the stench of canals full of old washing machines and dead dogs.

Roeg was an inspiration for Tracey Moffatt in her early career. “You know I met him [Nicolas Roeg] in London. He’s my hero. Meeting him was like meeting Picasso. And I told him so. I didn’t like the ending of *Walkabout* (1971)—the inferred death of culture [Aboriginal]. But I loved Roeg’s non-linear narrative, seeing past, present, and future disjointed, as in *Don’t look Now* (1973).”

Roeg’s editing technique, mixing past, present, and future parts of the plot, and employing dramatic colours and image metaphors, was of particular notice in both films and has influenced her own work. In nearly all of her photographic series and even in her moving image work, Moffatt has created sets of images without plot or with ambiguous storyboard sequences, composed of individual, posed still scenes



Tracey Moffatt, *Up In The Sky #1*, 1997, offset print. Courtesy of the artist and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney

They are also often “hand-coloured” or tinted in monochrome hues, as in Moffatt’s *Up In The Sky* (1997) photographic series in hues of blue or green. Roeg worked as cinematographer on Roger Corman’s *The Masque of the Red Death* (1964) after the horror tale by Edgar Allen Poe

(1842). In Poe's story, a medieval nobleman holds a masked ball for his guests, all hiding from the "red plague" ravaging the countryside. Here, seven rooms are coloured by using blue, purple, green, orange, white, and violet windows like camera lens filters or frames of a film. The final room, representing death, is coloured in dark blood red.

These masks were worn for play and fun, but also as a form of protection. Even in the current time of the celebrity persona, not all contemporary artists strive for this status, their struggle appearing in the form of Joni Mitchell's "boho" dance. It must be irritating for some artists who want the focus to be on their artwork and less on their private lives. So the mask is a device like a shield. Moffatt has stated from 1987 that she wants to be judged as a contemporary artist and not stereotyped solely as an Aboriginal artist. The masque or masquerade as a dramatic device in role-playing enriches and problematises the persona of her work.

A number of themes run through Moffatt's current and past artwork: the talented outsider, often a misunderstood lonely individual; the relationship of contemporary women to their mothers and the relationship of women to other women; stories of childhood, loss and displacement; ideas of otherness, the exotic, the transsexual, the transcultural, the transracial; and the tensions, power domination, excitement, adventure and creativity that are in part a response to the challenges.

Moffatt was born in Brisbane in 1960 and attended Mount Gravatt school, a working-class, outer suburb of Brisbane (that opened in the year of her birth). The school specialised in the use of technology: "Mount Gravatt State School offers a strong curriculum with a focus on literacy and use of technology for learning." A school class photo of 1973 shows Moffatt as the only Aboriginal student in her class. It was around the time of her birth that Aboriginal people received the right to vote, rights to property and freedom of movement, but children of mixed descent were still being removed from their parents to be raised by white families as good Western European homemakers (the girls) and hardworking labourers (the boys).

Moffatt lived at Mount Gravatt with four siblings cared for by white foster parents although her mother visited. She would go on to graduate from the Queensland College of Art in Visual Communications (1982). Moffatt says she read widely but selectively in literature and film through the 1970s and came to Sydney in the 1980s to the Sydney Filmmakers Co-op. She was one of ten art-school-trained Aboriginal artists who were founding members of the Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Cooperative in inner city Chippendale, Sydney, established in 1987. Soon after, she was picked up by the prestigious Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery and never looked back.



Tracey Moffatt, *Weep*, from the series *Body Remembers*, 2017, digital pigment print on rag paper.
Courtesy of the artist, Roslyn Oxley9, Sydney and Tyler Rollins Fine Art, New York

The American painter Edward Hopper framed in windows a number of images of women engaged in domestic pursuits. Does looking out the window, or to be before the window, imply opening and passing through the window? Or is the woman at the window merely captive of the gaze? For *My Horizon*, her exhibition in the Australian Pavilion for the 57th Venice Biennale, Tracey created four new works: two moving image works, *The White Ghosts Sailed In*, and *Vigil*; and two photographic series of still images. Passage presents a series of vignettes of ports and people in transit.

In *Body Remembers*, sepia-type monochrome images of deserted farm houses reflect on an empire in decline. A woman, a lone maid or servant, possibly a family member, is shown mostly looking away from the camera or in shadow. We only see her face a few times but she looks familiar (this is Moffatt herself). In Moffatt's earlier series *Laudanum* (1998) we similarly watch a private scene but through what would appear a keyhole spying on the strange but irresistible, intimate moments of the abuse or torture of a young non-white maid by her mistress. In the new work we observe, as if in a dream, the mixed race woman in her room in a state of personal reflection going about her work.

Similar to the ambiguity of Roeg's scenography, Moffatt usually plays with some form of linear momentum, while allowing audiences to develop their own lines of thought and outcome. Many of her moving image compilations and stories work through the motions of some form of progression through a start, a middle and an end or climax, building to a crescendo. The series of film compilations or montages produced in collaboration with Gary Hillberg are kaleidoscopic snippets of mainly Hollywood films that create packed, tightly edited single-subject arrays of impactful images on a myriad of subjects: these include *Lip* (1999), *Artist* (2000), *Love* (2003), *Doomed* (2007), *Revolution* (2008), *Mother* (2009) and *Other* (2010).

The film montages demonstrate how we collect and aggregate information from thousands of fragments in radio and television news and quick reads of online articles brought together within our own experiential aesthetic and emotional logic. These imaginative works are a form of consciousness-raising and a reminder that some of the most important ideas in history come in the form of short essays, snippets of conversations and reflections. Each set of images, like a novel or novella, features a lone figure or a small minority group, like refugees—collectively formulating a sense of magic realism.



Tracey Mofatt and Gary Hillberg, *Other* (still), 2010, 7 minutes, looped video with sound.
Courtesy the artist, Roslyn Oxley9, Sydney and Tyler Rollins Fine Art, New York

I think that Australians have a problem conceptualising themselves and their society as a suitable subject in imaginary terms (maybe in any terms). This is partly a form of cultural cringe, implying that ideas have to come from and be first affirmed overseas by cultures that are more mature or authoritative. This tendency is also a shying away from colonial guilt, the crime of attempted annihilation of the Aboriginal people living on the continent when the British “white devils” arrived here by boat in 1788.

The four new artworks are also like collective chapters in a wider story, rich with metaphor. *The White Ghosts Sailed In* presents a resonant image of the headlands at the entrance to Sydney Harbour viewed from Middle Head. For curator and writer Judy Annear, writing in her catalogue essay on the exhibition, it is an embodied aperture, poignant with tension. The land is covered with green vegetation with almost no buildings as if to present a pre-contact state. A baby’s cry is heard along with that of a bird (a dove or a rainbird), a sound, the “Word”, suggesting a beginning or perhaps the cataclysm to come. It could be any bay or harbour but here it is the flooded river valley of Bamarratta, the eel river. Periodically, the spirit moves these creatures to flood forth into the Pacific travelling thousands of kilometres to near present-day New Caledonia to give birth. Their translucent clear young then return across the reverse distance to the place of their parent’s origins.

The second moving image in the series of works for *My Horizon, Vigil*, uses news media video footage of a refugee boat crashing onto the rocks on Christmas Island, interspersed with clips

from Hollywood movies and stars (like Elizabeth Taylor), staring out through large regal windows at the spectacle as witness to the horror of the deaths, or the horror of the “other” soon to be among them. The image could be an overt political statement of particular currency today or of historical movements and racism, reinforcing the fear of the other.



The Australian Pavilion, canal-side exterior of the Australian Pavilion, showing *Vigil*, from Tracey Moffatt's *My Horizon*, Biennale Arte 2017. Photo: John Gollings

In the year before Moffatt's birth (1960), two evocative films were released that speak to her career and life, Douglas Sirk's powerful *Imitation of Life*, and Emile Camus's *Black Orpheus* filmed in Brazil. Both plots centred on the lives of mixed-race, beautiful, vibrant, black peoples experiencing problems with identity and the spirit world to convey a sense of fatalism and difference or otherness.

Similarly, on location in Venice, this is a city that for much of its history operated as a conduit port between the West and the East, between Europe and Asia (the Orient), for the trade in goods, people, and ideas representing the self and other. The third artwork, a series of still photographic images in flattened colours, represents people in transit, arriving in a port, cautiously approaching, interacting and negotiating with local authorities, and sorting out their next moves. All these compositions are loaded with the warmth and strength of exotic men and women of character like Moffatt herself.

To come full circle, I come back to this image from my imagination of a little girl child: she is sitting alone singing to herself, in her own wordless, free-form song for her own internal pleasure. This is Tracey Moffatt the artist, also the lost child, like the haunting image of the little girl in red amidst the chaos and displacement of the Holocaust in *Schindler's List* (1993), in further reference back to Roeg's *Don't Look Now*. She is like one of the characters in Moffatt's own *Backyard Series* (1998), evoking Moffatt's memories of childhood role-playing and dress-ups, as the first kindling of her love of the masque. This ponderous character of the child, like the grown person on the threshold of a new life, is steadying herself, summoning herself into existence, preparing to go forth.



Tracey Moffatt, *Mother and Baby*, 2017, from the series *Passage*, type C photograph on gloss paper.
Courtesy of the artist, Roslyn Oxley9, Sydney and Tyler Rollins Fine Art

Tracey Moffatt's *My Horizon* was commissioned by Naomi Milgrom AO and curated by Natalie King for the Australian Pavilion, in the Giardini, Biennale Arte, Venice (13 May – 26 November 2017).

Djon Mundine OAM was a participant in the 2017 First Nations Curator Program at the 2017 Venice Biennale and a contributor to the catalogue, *Tracey Moffatt: My Horizon* co-published by Thames & Hudson and the Australia Council, and edited by Natalie King. He is a member of the Bandjalung people of northern New South Wales and is an independent curator, writer and occasional artist.