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TRACEY MOFFATT: *Vigils and Travellers*

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We write as two authors, equally affected and transformed by Tracy Moffatt's two-part exhibition *Vigils and Travellers*, where she reconfigures the dynamics of witnessing and the gaze by drawing out the tension between the spectacular and the personal while complicating subject/object relations. Moffatt engages our identification with the photographic subject by reorienting it away from objectification via a vertical structure of hierarchical relations, to a horizontal empathetic gaze, producing what we call "connective vulnerability." By maneuvering the gaze towards the horizontal and situating it within the archives of body memory, she moves the subject towards an active empathy.



Tracey Moffatt, *Spanish Window* (from the series *Body Remembers*), 2017. Digital print on archival rag paper, 60 × 89 1/2 inches, Edition of 6. Courtesy Tyler Rollins Fine Art.

Within the parlance of theory, "the gaze" has been critiqued as a theoretical apparatus that is complicit in reinforcing subject/object binaries and vertical systems of knowledge and domination. In 1975, Laura Mulvey argued that narrative cinema articulates a "male gaze" in that it portrays women as decorative objects, not agents of action.¹ In the same year, Michel Foucault claimed that society self-disciplines due to an internalization of surveillance.² Mulvey shows us that the power of the gaze operates by producing or reifying distance between the one who watches, who is presumed to have power, and the object of the gaze, who is assumed to lack it. Foucault demonstrates the way these systems of watching map onto other societal power structures, such as incarceration, and working more abstractly, slavery, colonialism, and globalization. Moffatt's photographs and film however, complicate these visual schemas by producing a horizontal gaze, something that we might think in relation to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's rhizome, by making sideways connections in lieu of the vertical hierarchies.³ In Deleuze and Guattari this horizontality is meant to disrupt order and facilitate trans-species interactions; in Moffatt's work laterality produces empathy and activates witnessing as being-alongside. This structural reorientation, in the form of connective vulnerability, in turn, moves away from a subject-object segmentation and towards a horizontal co-existence.

Vigils, the first part of the current exhibit, features Moffatt's photograph series *Body Remembers* (2017), which debuted in her show titled *My Horizon* at the Australian Pavilion for the 2017 Venice Biennale. The images elicit intimacy through the subject's bodily orientation and ambiguous openness. The protagonist is a female maid who wanders alone in a crumbling empty house set against a vast, monochromatic desert tinted with the ochre tones of the horizon. Evoking the fragmented, dream-like surrealism of Maya Deren and Alexander Hammid's *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943), the photographs suggestively connect the character's psychic interiority to the architectural states of domestic ruin, producing a subject who is both subject and object via metaphoric superimposition. However, the images linger on the subject's moment of contemplation thereby resisting any conclusive certainties. The film-screen scale of the photograph, the suggestion of stillness, and the "anonymity" of the subject (who is always shown in partial or back view, or at most, a sliver of a face and an arm) prompts the viewer to enter the frame to fill in the gaps. The protagonist's facelessness allows an overlapping of the subject and viewers' bodies by making space for the viewer's narrative. The image titled *Spanish Window* (2017) centers on the maid's back as she adjusts her collar while looking out of a window at a photographically overexposed landscape. Moffatt maneuvers the tension between the descriptive clarity of the interior room, as shown in the detailed texture of the wall and maid's uniform, and the emerging futurity of the bright yet indiscernible horizon. By photographing the subject from behind, she is shielded from classification. Without a face to focus objectification on, the viewer/voyeur loses their privileged distance and is compelled to put themselves in the subject's shoes. Experienced from the point of view of a faceless, unguarded, back, we are put in the position to participate and relate to her vulnerability.

And yet a personal specificity co-exists within this "open" subject. The maid which according to the show's press release is portrayed by Moffatt herself, represents the matrilineal lineage of domestic work by her mother and grandmother. The paid domestic surrogate transforms into a carrier of familial legacy. By evoking the maternal, Moffatt reminds the viewer of the materiality of memory passed in the whispers of mothers and grandmothers, and the materiality of time that has passed through blood and skin. She moves the viewer outside the vertical orders of history into a circular interiority where the past, present, and future collapse into a constant relational presence.

By destabilizing the structure of the gaze through the horizon(tal), Moffatt opens the viewer to more active and empathetic forms of witnessing and vigilance. In particular, she allows us to see the struggle for and over the domestic by situating this tension within the specific Australian context of indigenous displacement and colonial expansion, which are conjured by the rustic furnishings and home in ruin. This allows us to think about the myriad ways that the idea of the domestic itself is attached to histories of settler-colonialism and xenophobia. The frontier, after all, is the landscape of invasion, and one that is premised upon the belief that the "domestic" (often framed as the white and civilized) should be expanded, even as it imagines the settled landscape to be devoid of habitation. This privileges a concept of domesticity that links whiteness to property and nationalism. Moffatt issues both critique and resistance to this ideology in her summoning of her own/the maid's interiority across a horizontal plane of identification.



Tracey Moffatt, *Hell* (from the series *Passage*), 2017. Digital c-print on gloss paper, 40 1/4 × 60 1/4 inches. Edition of 6. Courtesy Tyler Rollins Fine Art.

Through empathy and the horizontal gaze we begin to imagine possible futures and pasts in relation to the ruins. Has this destruction already happened or is this disruption of the linkage between property and whiteness on the horizon? What we can imagine, however, is that this destabilization of domesticity and its linkages to disruptions of nationalism and settler-colonialism is part of the summoning of a collective imaginary that the maid's project of looking into the horizon enables.

The second photographic series, *Passage* (2017), consists of a trio of characters—a mother (shown in some images with a child), a dapper smoker, and a leather-clad motorcyclist/cop—in a purgatorial landscape whose status is unknown. Here, the ambiguity resides in the specificity of situation rather than characterization. The scenes depict the travelers roaming the docks as their faces are obscured by the heat and smoke. In *Hell* (2017), Moffatt shot into the sun so that the adult trio are bathed in a bright but hazy pink light, mostly seen through their silhouettes. Seemingly displaced, they await respite from the heat. Moffatt deliberately obscures information that might lead to any specific narrative other than that of transition, which provides its own form of universality. Connective vulnerability, via horizontal associations, takes place through the inference of migration—even and especially as its specific circumstances regarding each character's travails vary. Existing in this transitional space, they remind the viewer how the anxiety of non-belonging and forced containment destabilizes identity. And yet, Moffatt's intentional obscuring of difference, via the refusal of attaching specific narratives to an identifiable other, creates a permeability in which the viewer is able to envision themselves in (an)other's body. It is a moment of co-vigilance where the viewer (with and through the characters' bodies) is reminded of what is lost within the violence of migration. The viewer is able to connect their personal relationship to this violence and compile it with the images. The viewer and the photographic subjects become a "they" persistently watching and waiting to see another futurity in the horizon.

Though this horizon is more firmly entrenched in the landscape of the bureaucratic and institutional, as the large buildings and "customs" signs suggest, the light pink and blue coloration, fog, and angular sun rays suggest an elsewhere beyond the borders. This horizon exists in the in-between-ness of arrival and/or departure somewhat akin to José Esteban Muñoz's argument that queerness is a horizon of being in that it opens toward a different possible future. Moffatt augments the queerness of the blurry "not-quite-return" through the employment of fog and fantastical colors.⁴ But, in *Cop and Baby*, the biker/cop, who looks as though he just stepped out of Tom of Finland's homoerotic universe, embraces the migrants, suggesting a future of queer solidarity through both look and touch. That his bike bears an "Indian" logo also acts as a subtle nod that connects histories of settler colonialism and indigeneity with those of refugees. As the bags produced for Moffatt's Venice Biennale show suggest: "Indigenous Rights are Refugee Rights."

If both photographic series highlight the politics that can be enacted through horizontality and its production of connective vulnerability, *Vigil*, a 2-minute video that sutures animation of a sinking refugee boat with images from mid-century Hollywood films, raises the stakes in relation to current socio-political events. The images are culled from news footage of the Christmas Island Boat wreck, where a ship carrying asylum seekers from Iraq and Iran sank in the Indian Ocean on December 15, 2010. The reaction shots are black-and-white film stills depicting the horrified faces of iconic stars such as Elizabeth Taylor and James Stewart. The editing is frenetic, matching the pace of our twenty-four hour news cycle and incessant media consumption. The momentary outrage for one violent spectacle is replaced by the next one. There is barely any time to consider what has happened within this daily bombardment. The routine frequency of such

images and their violence melts into the background becoming noise. The viewer is dazed and overwhelmed into complacency and helplessness. As Moffatt's video illustrates, in this landscape of image compression, the accumulation of pictorial reactions takes precedence over sensing what is distinctly lost. On the one hand, this illuminates the dangers of the vertical/ cinematic gaze. One could argue that this mode of watching reinforces the passivity of spectatorship and the idea that tragedy is unstoppable. It is hard not to note the difference between individual, recognizable actors and their faceless refugee counterparts. In contrast to the photographic series, it is clear that looking focalized through media voyeurism is not active, nor does it produce collectivity—each celebrity reaction shot is individuating and escalates the terms of immobility. *Vigil* asks us what it means to witness tragedy in the era of techno-voyeurism.

Intervening into complex conversations about the gaze and politics, Moffatt's work activates an empathetic gaze that seeks to commemorate and reinvigorate histories that would otherwise be dismissed. Privileging horizontality, she invites viewers to bring themselves (and their histories) into the frame. This augments the vulnerabilities that connect us all and invite us to begin to forge a politics around seeing and being present with (an)other.

Notes

Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16(3): 6-18. October 1975.

Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison*, (New York: Random House, 1975).

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*. Trans. Brian Massumi (London and New York: Continuum, 2004 [1980]).

José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: NYU Press, 2009).

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