

Tracey MOFFATT



Tracey Moffatt: Innocence and Violence

»Down under« is what globetrotters call Australia. For Australian artists in the 60's and 70's this geographical distance meant, above all, their cultural distance from the artistic centres of Europe and America. They described their location on the cultural periphery in terms of regionalism and provinciality and attempted to formulate with these strategically employed terms their own cultural self-consciousness: the peripheral location was regarded as a positive challenge. Such a reinterpretation of the periphery promised that Australian art would no longer submit to the value hierarchy of European and American art; in contrast to the vortex of the centre, the periphery represented a cultural open space. The altered perspective made it possible to draw upon intrinsic cultural conditions for the art discourse and to integrate them into the artistic practice. The intensively discussed debate at the time about the value of the cultural periphery and the insight drawn from it, that it made no sense to continue to burden oneself with a cultural inferiority complex, have opened the way for the younger generation of artists from Australia.

In place of the location functioning as a stigma a point of view has arisen today which relates itself to the international as well as the regional and local. This produces a hybridity, a synthetic mixture of regional and international artistic influences, which exist beside each other as equally important and flow into the artistic work. In contrast to the prejudice and tradition-boundness of European art, eurocentrically fixed on a presumed cultural centre, a new openness is thus created for Australian art. For the younger Australian artists it is therefore typical that they oscillate

between the internationalism of art and the regionalism of their own culture. Today they can address the contradictions of Australian everyday culture and the problems of the hybridity of a multicultural society in their art with relaxed self-assurance.

Even though they have achieved such a balance between internationalism and their own local elements, the question of cultural identity is still important for Australian artists. This issue is generally faced by every artist as they position themselves and their art in the social context of their culture. The artist in Australia cannot take up a traditional cultural identity or rebel against one, rather every Australian artist is part of a process of finding, contributing through their artistic work to the formation of the self-identity of this young, modern and multi-cultural nation.

In the 80's Australia began to question the historical premises as well as the divergent cultural roots of its identity. The falsifications of the colonisation were uncovered and rectified. This process of critical questioning established the actual functioning basis for the re-thinking of the cultural identity. It is far from being finished and artists such as Tracey Moffatt are bringing an interesting contribution to it.

Tracey Moffatt's early works are characterised by her examination of the social climate of the 70's in a type of historical self-analysis. She creates a critical picture of Australian culture which is strongly influenced by Great Britain and America. While education as well as bureaucracy and public institutions are formed in the mould of British tradition,

everyday culture, consumption and entertainment in contrast are determined by America. This formation of social life led to a special climate of social and cultural alienation. In distilling the social stigmata out of the individual experience of her own generation, while at the same time reconstructing the social confusion of a young nation, she proceeds like a sociologist.

In *Scarred for Life* (1994) she appropriates the style of magazines such as LIFE, which were a part of the cultural and social education of Australian youth in the 70's. The stifled atmosphere of Australian middle-class homeliness is reconstructed with close attention to details. These are family scenes, in which children and teenagers are tormented with harsh social conventions and the moral repression of the spirit of the times. Moffatt shows deep emotional wounds, for example in one image where the teenage daughter willingly and obediently tries to clean her father's automobile, while the father jeers her as »useless« because of her adolescent chubbiness. The subtle interplay of visual scene and captioned sentence opens up the view of familial brutality. Moffatt presents humiliations and wounds which inscribe themselves deep in the soul, one is – as in the title – »scarred for life«. Especially because these moments are not didactically reconstructed in the text-images the core of social brutality and callousness only becomes clear in the comprehending of the delayed combining of image and text; the observer is already in the story when she grasps the conflict, surprisingly feeling the painful moment.

In her photographic series *Something More* from 1989 Moffatt combines aspects of fictive

representation of photography with the narrative conventions of film. The nine large-format single pictures condense the genre narrative patterns of the Western: the contrast of the good woman and her evil counterpart, seduction, the struggle between men and violence. The constellation of the figures and the props used, seem at first glance to be familiar from our own experience of film, yet the images, in an irritating shift, take place in improvised painted theatre scenery, the figures are comprised of a colourful mix of different ethnicities and the plot is located in the landscape of the red Australian deserts. In the same way the series seems to function according to dramatic rules of tension-filled exposition, threatening high point and evil end, but the openly structured order of the images mixes up the dramatic junctions and does not follow the classical linear dramatic sequence. It also becomes clear that not one single story is being told, but rather many stories, that something like a meta-text of the genre is being distilled.

The *Something More* series gains through such shifts and disjunctions an ambiguous texture of the known, familiar, strange and displeasing. In this ambiguous texture there exist differences at various levels. Moffatt plays with the enthusiasm for the hero mythology of the Western and subverts it with the destitution of sub-proletarian conditions typical of rural regions of the Third World. The paltry illusionism of the improvised stage set with its worker's hut is outshone by the brilliant radiance of colour; the threatening details are submerged in the contrast of black and white photography. Cracks appear in the visual fascination. The proximity of the close-ups focuses on the aggressive as

well as on the tender in the different scenes. The close-up thus indiscriminately abolishes the observer's distance. Moffatt creates a conflict with the immediacy of photography to arise in her tableaux. The lust for images and theatricality are confused through the depicted violence as well as in the hard conciseness in the staging of the motives.

The brilliance and seductive power of Moffatt's images reveal in a playful manner to the observer the ambiguity of the suggestive images of the mass media and the violence lurking in the seemingly harmless. Yet one shouldn't see Tracey Moffatt as an enlightened media critic. In her book »Tracey Moffatt – Fever Pitch« she describes her youth. Living in a worker's housing estate on the edges of Brisbane and as an Aborigine growing up with white foster parents, she escaped the harsh reality and boredom by consuming everything that the entertainment media offered at that time. Something of this unconscious intoxication of adolescent immersion in the glamour, splendour and illusion of the mass media images can still be found in Moffatt's artistic work. It reappears there as a moment of beguiling, delirious beauty, arising from the perfection of the visual composition and the precision in the setting up of the scenes. At the same time Moffatt looks with scepticism on a socialisation which reduces itself to forming its view of the world through the entertainment media. She shows in her work how an upbringing based on the stories and images of the entertainment industry skews the view of social reality. The ambiguity of her visual scenes, which is always disclosed only by the second glance, by the intensive involvement with the images, exposes the foreground fascination and the radiant appearance.

For the Australian youth of the 1960's and 1970's the unsorted appropriation of mass media information and illusions was the reason for uncritically taking over the repression of ethnic minorities and internalising the Australian middle class fixation on advancement. Moffatt, though, is no moralist presenting political analyses. Her rebellion lies in her close examination of conditions, which sets the mass media confusion of factual information and pretty fiction into movement and thus cuts out an own path through the illusory worlds. She is concerned, beyond moral lines and rigid separations of high and low culture, with working out medial socialisation and with developing a visual language, with which experience and conflicts can be formulated despite the real visual chaos.

Employing sarcasm, the obvious relationships between the real and the illusory are pushed to the extreme, the wicked but charming game with the media images elucidates the bitter reality. In the ambiguity of the images it is possible for Tracey Moffatt to formulate dreams of innocence and beauty simultaneously with the reality of violence and hardness, something which is increasingly becoming the central theme of her work. Innocence and violence; Moffatt portrays this tragedy across all ethnic, gender and social battlefields. The valuation of good and evil cannot be clearly determined, but is rather in a state of constant fluctuation.

In her work *Up in the Sky* (1997) Moffatt succeeds in convincingly unfolding the tragedy of innocence and violence in the almost epic size of a series of twentyfive pictures. Although the order of the pictures is exactly

determined and resorts to the structure of linear reading, the narrative and visually complex story is not constructed as a conventional and conclusive succession. The observer is presented with varied fragments of a widely-spanning epic. In its centre there is the mysterious but also touching figure of an Aboriginal baby. A white mother, three nuns, an old, helpless man appear again and again and mark the narrative counterpoints of childhood, adultery and old age, and of the differences between disparate ethnicities. Further scenes show a band of young rowdies who vent their anger on auto wrecks; loners who live on the desolate edges of urban civilisation in barracks and sheds; groups of people at a cheerful, carnival-like street fest or in a village street, waiting in eager anticipation. The atmosphere of the softly-toned pictures moves from quiet, stillness and loneliness to different moments of excited anticipation to scenes of erupting merriment or brutal anger.

In the dramatic span of this visual epic two recurring visual motives stand out: the baby lying alone in a run-down room and two young men wrestling with each other in the desert sand. These motives have an emblematic character. The image of the innocent

baby coalesces into the picture of worldly and emotional abandonment. The image of the struggle of the young men, reminiscent of representations of the battle between the archangel Gabriel and Satan, becomes a symbol of the struggle of man with his violent as well as peaceful impulses. The series culminates in two last images. They show an adult man in an extreme close-up, injured and alone in the night, and in bird-eye's total shot lying banished and small like a worm in the expanse of the desert.

The sometimes melodramatic gesture of the works recedes here, instead a concentration on the drama of the tragedy and on a symbolic approach arises. Innocence and violence are narrated by Moffatt as fundamentally opposite energies. Abstracting symbols, though, are not the focus here, rather Moffatt shows in the stations of her picture story that these energies determine the course of individual biographies, the battle of the sexes, social contradictions and ethnic conflicts.

Anne Marie Freybourg
Übersetzung David Sánchez