

A woman with her arms raised in a light-colored, possibly white or cream, dress is the central figure. She is surrounded by a large number of birds in flight, some appearing as dark silhouettes against a pale, cloudy sky. The overall mood is ethereal and dramatic. The text is centered over the upper part of the image.

TRACEY MOFFATT

INVOCATIONS

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Gael Newton

Once upon a time....

Tracey Moffatt has been making staged photo-series since 1989 when she produced *Something More* during her residency in Albury for the Albury Regional Art Gallery. The work was in the form of a grid of nine colour and black and white photographs and showed what seemed to be stills from a Hollywood B' grade movie set in 'the Deep South'. It was, however, the tropical north of Australia and told a tale in fragments of a young coloured/Asian girl trying on new clothes, new lifestyles and new identities in an unsuccessful bid to escape the confines of her home town. The sets had quite lush painted backdrops and obvious stage props. There was no attempt at believable illusionism. Truth was not to be found in the usual tone and detail snapshot reality of the camera, as Moffatt's models came from cinematography, not the photoessay. *Something More* instantly established Moffatt's presence in the Australian art world and its fragmentary psycho-dramas set in surreal and exaggerated spaces became her signature style.

For each new series Moffatt has chosen a different print/presentation format: from colour prints to photolithography, photogravure and now mural sized screen printing. *Invocations* was shot on a specially constructed stage set in New York, where the Australian-born artist and filmmaker now lives. The artist used adult and child actors as well as animals. It is the most elaborate series of her work to date and takes the form of a suite of thirteen multi-colour screen prints, whose surface quality is akin to that produced by the animation techniques of Walt Disney but also to that of the bleached facture of frescoes. A specialist screen printer in New Jersey, NY, printed the works.

Moffatt draws on a store of imagery taken from her own early years in Brisbane and the suburban pop culture of the sixties, especially movies; from melodramas to deeply surreal *film noir*. She is an

image magpie, but the vast storehouse of her remembered images is then elaborately distilled as she develops over many years the next series concept. The plans are drawn up precisely as storyboards and every detail of set and costume and effect is previsualised then assembled on set with actors and a crew for shooting as in a film production. The compositions in *Invocations* alternate between eight rondel and elliptical shaped magical scenes, modelled on the sets for Walt Disney animation classics, and five vertical rectangular images which are set in an expansive Australian-looking red desert.

A distinctive feature of several of Moffatt's series and film sets has been the use of dramatic and clearly painted backdrops and staged settings. Interestingly, a mix of similar three-dimensional naturalism for the figures and flat graphic representation was a feature of the new urban Aboriginal artists' works which flourished in Sydney in the mid to late 1980s when Moffatt began her career. *Invocations* is a mix of print, paint and photographic effects. In her 1998 series *Laudanum*, set in a colonial mansion, the live actors were melded into their setting by the translation of the expected sharp gloss of photographs into a grainy surface of monochrome photogravure. *Up in the sky*, 1997, set in an Australian outback town, was printed in monochrome photolithographs, and *Scarred for Life*, 1994, was also in photolithography with the appearance of pages from *Life* magazine. In *Invocations*, Moffatt has again, and to a greater degree, merged live actors with the obviously fictive sets by rendering them in the same painterly style as the backdrops.

The narrative structure of *Invocations* interweaves separate story lines, indeed levels of reality, as well as formal effects in each of the major formats but the stories seem unrelated. Firstly, there is a horizontal plane running through the small rondels which show a black child in a fantastic forest of anthropomorphic trees and witches invoking the supernatural, all set against turbulent nightmarish skies. Secondly, there is upward movement through the vertical rectangular images which show a black woman accompanied by crows and later cast down or slain by a naked man in

a desert and frightful hags pursued by leaping hounds, recalling a Goya-esque hell. Despite this presence of the 'un-blessed' and supernatural, Moffatt's choice of rondel and arch topped rectangular formats and the prevalence of richly coloured turbulent heavens has the feel of the illusionistic ceiling paintings and spaces of a Baroque church. In *Invocations*, however, the viewer is always aware that the scenario is staged and that God has been usurped by older ghosts and spirits.

A common motif from the European traditional fairy tale, a motherless child, is cast out of the everyday world into the dark wood beyond the gate. One of the recurrent locations for the passage to right thinking and a secure identity for the lost child is in a forest haunted by spectres, where anything is possible and values are inverted. It is never an easy journey for the child to pass through and the endings are not always happy. *Invocations*, with its magic number of 13 prints, begins with a crystal ball image through which we see a little girl dressed in virgin white asleep in a fearful wood. Around her the tree spirits look shocked and fearful. Are they friend or foe: afraid for the child or of her? We are transported and beguiled. But wait - this child is not the familiar fairy tale miss with blonde locks but a coloured child. She is, it seems, also a black *avatar* of Dorothy from the 1939 MGM animation extravaganza, *The Wizard of Oz*. This child, however, turns out to like the dark side and in the final three images she steps out, hands in prayer at the border between the wood and an open lit desert backdrop, then skips happily back - not forward - along the yellow brick road, into the forest. The series closes with an indistinct apotheosis of a figure in the blue heavenly clouds.

Invocations cross breeds its sources as the rondo images are inhabited next by great swirling and writhing figures and an atmosphere of devil worship. The five larger images, by contrast, seem set in a Hitchcockian world. A black woman dressed in besmirched white satin stands in a desert scene with telegraph poles like crucifixes. She supplicates to a flock of black crows that are shown to turn upon her in a subsequent image framed between two rondels showing witches. The low angled

shot of the coloured heroine is a familiar filmic device, reinforcing that this is no real space but one invoked out of the psychological realm.

Moffatt's titles are highly associative and vastly expand the emotional space of the piece and set the 'score' for each series. The old fashioned word 'invocations', meaning to call upon a deity, is not exclusive to black magic but is most associated with the attempt of mere mortals to access supernatural powers to achieve some end or salvation, to aspire, in short, to 'Something More'. Moffatt creates zones in which the supernatural is conjured into the domestic realm in her films such as *Night cries*, 1989, as well as her still series. She gave an equally anachronistic title to her 1992 feature film, *Bedevil*, which dealt with a trilogy of ghost stories set in rural Queensland. In interview Moffatt said that film was 'based on ghost yarns coming from both my black and white relatives'. Moffatt was born in 1960 in Queensland and, along with her sister, was raised in a foster family in Brisbane. Her natural Aboriginal mother died in 1993 while *Bedevil* was in pre-production. Obsessed with stories, tele-dramas and movies as a teenager, Moffatt started staging her own non-suburban reality by taking photographs of dramatic tableaux she had planned and produced by dressing up the local kids.

The themes undercutting Moffatt's work are of the lost child spirit and of women undergoing the mysteries of exile, violence, sexuality and subjection. Some do not survive. The woman of colour in the white goddess' satin slip, for example, is a fallen woman amidst brutal males who are also doomed. Hands are often shown raised to flog and defend, grasp and supplicate. It is said that all variations of a myth are true. In crafting and creating her enigmatic modern fables, Tracey Moffatt reanimates the storytelling genre.