

Switching Roles in Identity Power Plays

Tracey Moffatt's photographs and videos toy with the relations of race and gender.

Art Review

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At some point in every written account of Tracey Moffatt's work—usually right here at the top—mention is made of the artist's racial identity. Born in Brisbane, Australia, in 1960 to an aboriginal mother and unknown father, Moffatt was adopted at the age of 3 by a white foster family.

This information plays nicely into the cult of celebrity and its thirst for the juicy details of a star's private life—Moffatt, with more than 30 international solo shows in the last three years, certainly qualifies as a headliner—but it's not gratuitous. Moffatt's photographs and videos verge on the autobiographical, and they hinge on power relations inflected by race as well as gender. Her work is at its most potent when it not only exposes those relations but upends them, as in "Nice Coloured Girls," the earliest piece in Moffatt's mid-career survey at UC Riverside's California Museum of Photography.

The 1987 video, just 16 minutes long, interweaves two parallel narratives. One, conveyed through voice-overs, historic images and staged scenes, involves the encounter between an 18th century British voyager to New South Wales and the dark-skinned native woman who approaches his boat. The other, set in a contemporary Australian city, follows the course of three young black women enjoying a typical evening out on the town. After encouraging a white man (whom they call "Captain" in a pithy tie-in to the earlier narrative) to buy them drinks and dinner, they steal his wallet and leave him in a drunken stupor.

Both past and present encounters are shaped by exoticism and exploitation, but in the more recent tale, it's the women who get the best of the man, the marginalized culture that prevails over the mainstream. Yet the victory is bittersweet, ugly in fact, for the women have merely used their own exploitation as justification for exploiting another.



"Something More 5" is among the works by Tracey Moffatt at the California Museum of Photography.

Moffatt, who lives in Sydney and New York, turns the tables on established power relationships in several other videos and photo-sequences in the show (curated by Gael Newton of the National Gallery of Australia), but never again to such disquieting effect. In the 1997 video, "Heaven," she adopts a sexist, objectifying gaze usually aimed at women and turns it back toward men. For 28 tedious minutes, she peers voyeuristically at male surfers changing back into street clothes under the minimal privacy of a towel. In "Lip," an amusing 11-minute video montage from 1999 (made in collaboration with Gary Hillberg), Moffatt strings together excerpts from several generations of American movies, in which African American servants defiantly speak their minds, assert their integrity, and in the process, steal the scene.

Moffatt veers restlessly, fearlessly, from one established genre to another, borrowing techniques from documentary and feature film as well as low-tech, vernacular video. The vocabularies of film and television also permeate her still photographs. She refers to her photographic sequences (which contain from nine to 25 pictures each) as narratives, but character, plot and setting are rationed out

She holds back as much as she gives, and her aesthetic of omission and abbreviation can yield work that's both pretentious and slight.

"Laudanum" (1998), a sequence of 19 grainy photogravures, reads like a fragmented, mock-historical tale of sexual obsession between the mistress of a grand colonial house and her young Asian servant girl. In "Something More" (1989), Moffatt presents a series of nine large photographs, concentrated and episodic as a storyboard. Romance tempts the wistful heroine, played by the artist herself, and violence threatens her. Both series have intriguing components, but neither unites them in any kind of synergistic whole.

Moffatt's preference for the fractional and elusive over the literal can also hold definite allure. The captioned images in the 1994 series "Scarred for Life," for instance, are dense and complex, modeled in style after Life magazine photos but deriving from traumatic childhood memories, perhaps fictional, perhaps not. In one of the pictures, which are printed as offset lithographs, a young white boy with knees up and face squeezed tight pretends to give birth. Another white boy on the floor with him gazes openly up

in his hands.

Moffatt's combination of self-portraiture, play-acting, overt artifice and faux historicism brings to mind Eleanor Antin and Cindy Sherman, as well as a younger crop of artists who are at ease slipping in and out of character, in and out of appropriated styles. Throughout Moffatt's work, women struggle for self-definition against obstacles imposed by race, culture, sex, assimilation and the imposing demands of family loyalty.

All of these forces converge oppressively on an aboriginal woman who cares for her white, invalid mother in the haunting video, "Night Cries: A Rural Tragedy" (1989). An autobiographical reading is hard to resist here, as Moffatt shows the daughter's conflicted allegiances—to the sweet memories of her mother's care, to the droning routine of caring for her now—played out against the stark isolation of the desert. Moffatt's approach is so stylized that the tale rises to the level of allegory, the universal grounded in the particular. Her reach is always this ambitious, even though her grasp isn't always this secure.

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