

Disturbing narrative of passion and power

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IT is always good to see Australian artists doing well overseas. Flicking through the last few issues of *Artforum*, one of the better international art magazines, Tracey Moffatt's name is everywhere, associated with more than a dozen public and commercial galleries, many of them the cream of the international scene.

Moffatt is by far the most prominent Australian artist working overseas today. Yet her rise has been one of the most spectacular but unusual success stories of Australian art. Unusual in the sense that, aside from a handful of films, Moffatt has made very little artwork, only seven series of photographs in 11 years; and spectacular if one considers that she does not even rate a mention in *The Encyclopedia of Australian Art*, last revised as late as 1994.

Moffatt has been quick to capitalise financially on her success. Her last two series of photographs, limited to editions of 60 with around 20 images per series, sell for a little more than \$US1000 (\$1540) a print, the international

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demand being such that prices are now no longer quoted in lable Aussie "pesos". Not bad going for a girl who, as she freely admits, only started experimenting with photography and film at art school in Brisbane, her home town, because she couldn't paint or draw.

Yet success has come at a price. Jealousy and the usual round of art world back-biting have made it difficult for Moffatt to continue to live and practise here. Part of the blame for this, if the truth be known, also lies with Moffatt, whose ungenerous remarks to a newspaper reporter last year about her first (and for many years only) commercial gallery dealer did little to endear her to the local art community.

Moffatt's best series of photographs have always been her first, promisingly titled *Something More* (1989). Her last series, *Up in the Sky* (1998), surpassed the earlier work in ambition, but replicated the cliched myth — wedged in the European imagination — of the Australian outback as a place alien to man, an empty, brutal space fit only for battlers, ghosts and wild primitive men. If you don't believe me, try comparing this series of photographs to a few of Russell Drysdale's paintings.

Titled *Laudanum* (1998), her latest series consists of 19 black-and-white images exploring an ambiguous homoerotic relationship between an elderly white

mistress and her young Asian maid. Imaginatively staged and impeccably shot in colonial homes around Sydney, many of the individual stills are modelled on classic scenes from horror films, erotic books or old photographs. The numbered images progress around the gallery walls from left to right, creating a loose cinematic narrative.

The story begins with a handful of dream-like interiors followed by the most powerful shot in the show, which depicts the mistress cutting away the maid's hair. This brutal image of power and domination, which also has class connotations, is well suited to the old, toned photogravure process used for making the prints, sliding in and out of the past and the present, reality and fiction. Subsequent images are more cinematic, consisting of some heavily romanticised nudes as well as ominous, hallucinatory scenes reminiscent of horror films. These works are exotic and interesting, but remarkable more for the way they have been produced than the images themselves.

For me, however, it is all downhill from here. Four of the final five photographs manipulate daggy overlay and altered perspective techniques, resembling little more than experiments with the medium.

Laudanum, a tincture of opium, was a common drug at the turn of the century, often used by women as a sedative. Yet it is also a hallucinogenic stimulant. In Moffatt's hands, the drug becomes an illicit lubricant for unspoken lesbian desire, the mistress's means of seducing the maid, or at least a wild dream of it. While there is productive ambiguity here, imagery of guilt and shame — especially shots depicting the mistress covering her face — suggest that the desire was satiated. The psycho-sexual dynamic between the two women in the images is rich and fascinating, but Moffatt's treatment of racial issues is less subtle or commendable.

Accompanying the photographs is a video of clips from Hollywood films of black maids interacting with their white female employers, mirroring the dynamic between the white mistress and Asian maid. The video and photographs are separate works, but the connection is obvious and crude, conflating an American experience and contemporary racial politics in this country.

As an adjunct to these remarks, it is worth stating that the depiction of a young Asian woman as a servile sex object is not an innocent gesture. I am not prudish, but was disturbed by this unnecessary, even reckless act of racial degradation.

Tracey Moffatt, Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney, until May 8.



Object of desire: one of the 19 black-and-white images in Tracey Moffatt's latest series of photographs, *Laudanum*