

Zooming in on an artful tease

Tracey Moffatt talks gibberish, or so she would have you believe, writes Lenny Ann Low.

Straight away, Tracey Moffatt takes over with a mischievous smile, a commanding tone and a mock question.

"Right, 'Am I a feminist?' " she says. "No, I would prefer women to be browbeaten and not be in positions of power."

Moffatt pauses, preparing for her next mock retort.

"Women artists should be ignored because they've got nothing to say. Yes, write that down."

A lot has been written about Tracey Moffatt but not much of it has come from her. One of Australia's leading contemporary artists, Moffatt, whose renowned photographs, films and videos feature in a major survey exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art from tomorrow, enjoys the debate, discussion and critiques about her work but thinks artists should "shut

"You shouldn't believe a word that comes out of an artist's mouth because it's gibberish," she says, wielding an unlit cigarette in the MCA galleries yesterday. "We're not movie stars. We think we know what's what but we don't really."

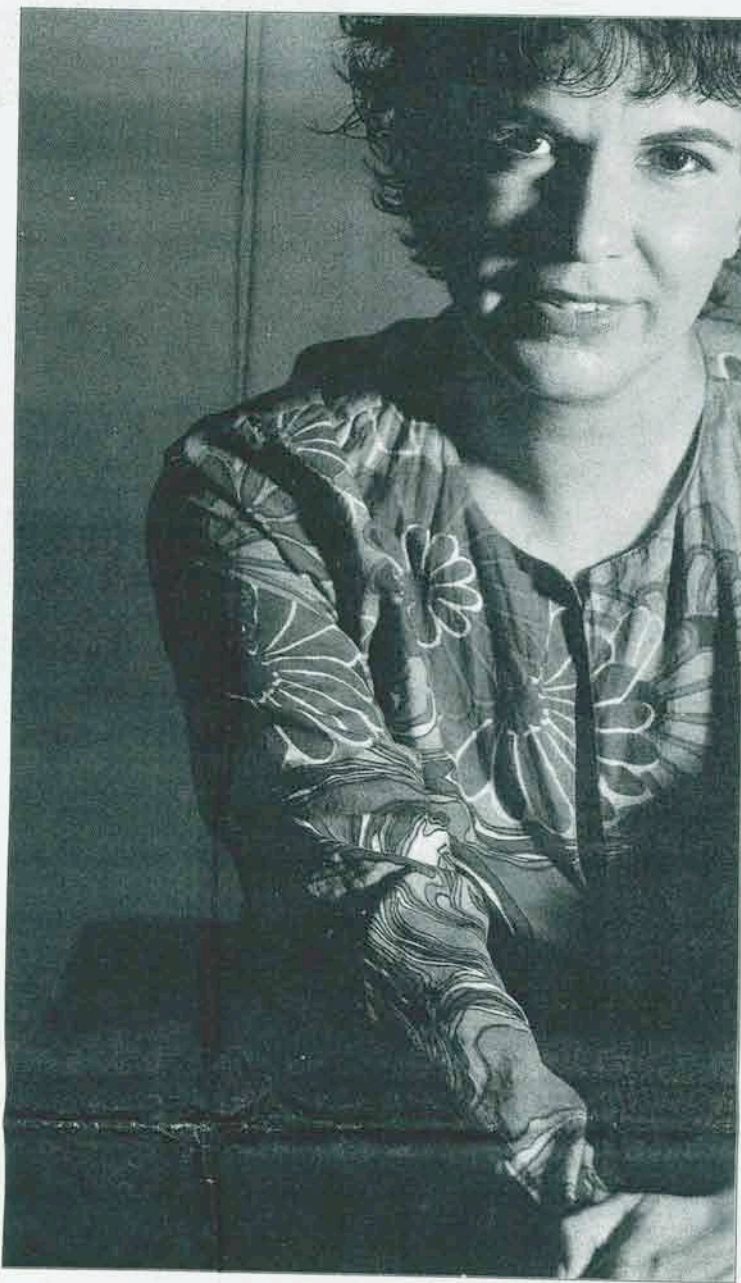
Moffatt believes visual artists are inarticulate when attempting to explain their work - "Look at Picasso, he clowned around in interviews" - but fluent with their images. While she loves reading biographies, and describes commentaries of one of her favourite artists, Andy Warhol's, as "droll and funny", Moffatt doesn't like to talk.

"And the fact that I haven't said a lot has created a lot of writing and discussion about my work," he says. "It's come from the writers, which I love. I love it when they go off on tangents and write five pages on one image. I do care that because I haven't said a word."

Moffatt is jocular, theatrical and plain-speaking as she walks through the MCA galleries featuring 140 images from 14 major works and seven film and video pieces from the mid-1980s to the present. Rummaging through a tray of tools for a cigarette lighter, he remonstrates with people for not smoking any more, while stressing artists' inability to talk about their work.

Surely Moffatt wouldn't utter mundanities about her work.

"Oh, well, all right then, trigger me off," she says. "But, I am not going to talk about this, it's been talked about too much."



Moffatt points at her lauded work *Something More*, the famous 1989 series of nine images featuring her wearing a red cheongsam in a stylised Australian outback setting.

Last year, the collector Reg Richardson made headlines when he paid more than \$226,000 for one of the work's 30 editions, setting an Australian record for a set of photographs bought at auction. Moffatt's work is increasingly being sold on the art market for high prices.

"I don't get a dime," she says. "Put that down. I see none of the money. Twelve years ago that picture sold for \$900 and I would have got half of that. It's something you can't control. It's all about the art market."

"All I can do is put work out and then it just goes on from there. It has been great for contemporary work, though."

Moffatt now lives in the Chelsea district of Manhattan, fulfilling a dream she's held since she was 10, an Aboriginal child and one of four adopted children fighting to be noticed by a white foster mother in the suburbs of Brisbane. Now, her neighbours are Susan Sontag and Annie Leibovitz and she regularly sees Debbie Harry walking her dog in the street. She dines with Cindy Sherman, the US artist Moffatt is often likened to.

"It's stimulating, but there's stuff that drives you crazy in New York," she says. "That's why I come back to Australia to make my art a lot. It's easier."

"Here, you get in the car, you pick up your props, go to the studio and make your work. In New York, your front door is blocked by these guys gambling, the taxi drivers are rude and there's a traffic jam."

Moffatt escaped her draconian

upbringing at 18 when she went backpacking in Europe for nine months. Upon her return she enrolled at Queensland College of Art.

"I think oppression is very good for creativity," she says. "I grew up

The most insulting thing that I ever hear, and it always comes from Australians, is, "Oh, you don't look Aboriginal."

in a very strict household, completely ruled, which I don't look back on and regret. I actually think it provided space for creativity and fantasy."

Moffatt has included three works, "tragic little pictures" as she describes them, which she took of her family and friends dressing up in 1973.



"I think I look like my mother." ... Tracey Moffatt in Sydney yesterday. Moffatt's uncle, Jack, in the series *Beauties*, left, and *Fourth* #2, top. Photo: Stephen Baccon

"The German academics have written about 'Moffatt's very early work', " she says, smiling. "But, in fact they're a lot like I do now."

"I'm directing the scene, I finding my models, I'm dressing them up and I take a picture of it."

One new image Moffatt has made for the exhibition re-creates her as an eight-year-old in the suburbs of Brisbane, with a pretend camera made out of cardboard.

"I played being a photographer. My white foster mother was in the background. It was kind of rare that my foster mother paid attention, but she came out to watch."

"I remember this moment, I've analysed it a little. It's about me discovering that I could get attention by being creative."

Moffatt says her direct, "unfanciful" approach allows the series *Scared For Life I and II* to express its mixture of tragedy and humour. In images and text, Moffatt re-created stories including that of two young boys forced to urinate in their chip bags while locked in a van as their mothers continue an affair. Or the "Kwong

Uncle Jack, a stockman, in singlet and black hat.

"This image is raceless," she says. "Someone said he could be a Mexican cowboy, he could be an Italian cane-cutter."

"In a way it might be about me. I get asked if I'm Indian or Puerto Rican. I can move across cultures."

"The most insulting thing that I ever hear, and it always comes from Australians, is, 'Oh, you don't look Aboriginal', reassuring me, like, 'Don't worry about it'. I actually think I do. I think I look like my mother."

Moffatt says she is "dying" to get back to New York to continue working on new images.

"I'm doing Photoshop," she says. "In the old days it would have been called retouching and airbrushing. I like the airbrush look. It adds a softness, like on this one."

Moffatt stands beside her 1999 *Self Portrait*, featuring the artist as a coolly stylish photographer watching the horizon in a desert landscape.

"Could you just stress that I have lost weight since that picture was taken," she says, "that I have been doing Pilates?"

It is these asides, of which there are many, delivered in an entertaining deadpan that belie Moffatt's dislike of interviews. Whileartfully teasing the international art persona created by other people, she is clearly relishing the realisation of the dream of the young girl in the backyard with a cardboard camera.

"I enjoy it but in the end I want to go away and make my work. I'm not interested in capturing reality. I want to create my own reality."

Tracey Moffatt opens with at the MCA from tomorrow. Admission is free.

