

Reading Tracey Moffatt

Andrea Stretton

Tracey Moffatt, courtesy the artist and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney.



clockwise from top left
Tracey Moffatt, *Oodgeroo Noonuccal*, 2005; Shere Hite, 2005; Margaret Mitchell, 2005; Anne Sexton, 2005; Anna Wintour, 2005; Dois Lessing, 2005, all from the series 'Under the Sign of Scorpio', 2005, archival pigment ink on acid-free rag paper, 43.2 x 58.4 cm, courtesy the artist and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney.

During an email conversation about books and reading with the Australian photographer, film director, and video artist Tracey Moffatt in late 2004, she declared, from her studio in New York: 'I'd die if I couldn't read books'.

This tantalising observation made me curious to talk more, so we met during her recent exhibition, 'Under the Sign of Scorpio', held at Sydney's Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery in August 2005. In this photographic series Moffatt depicts herself as forty well-known women, all born under what she calls a 'powerful and extreme' astrological sign. Several of the subjects Moffatt conjures up are authors, including the American 'confessional poet' Anne Sexton, in an image both sensual and menacing; and British-Rhodesian author Doris Lessing, seen from behind with her familiar intellectual bun of hair, facing a glittering Zimbabwean waterfall.

Moffatt invited me to where she was staying, at a Victorian 'Tudor Gothic' estate called Carthona, on the shores of Sydney's illustrious Darling Point – owned, as it turns out, by the family of her Sydney gallery director. 'You have to walk down a long driveway towards the water. There you'll find it. It's like being in *Rebecca!*' she said, invoking Daphne du Maurier's 1938 novel, and Rebecca's long walk towards the scary homestead of Manderley.

There was no sign of the cruel housekeeper or the foreboding boatshed of du Maurier's novel as I wandered down the lane that warm, humming Sydney day, though with Tracey Moffatt's avowed and bold belief in witchcraft and the occult ('the dark worlds', as she calls them), a ghost or two would not have gone astray. Moffatt greeted me by the water, dressed in delicate lollipop stripes, dark boots, and swathes of soft grey scarves, and soon we were seated in the rarefied atmosphere of a large living room, amidst statues, paintings, rare books, and softly lit, tasselled lamps.

I ask what she read growing up (she was born in 1960) in the working class semi-rural Brisbane suburb of Mount Gravatt, but first she wants to read the notes she has dutifully made in preparation for our meeting. Later she admits to being 'a control freak' and wanting to 'get it right'. So I listen as she determinedly reads book titles and dates from small cards – no mean feat, given that her books are mostly back in New York, and she is recovering from yet another packed-out exhibition opening and the accompanying hype.

Moffatt, of course, is renowned for extraordinary and lavish images – mainly photo-narratives recalling film stills – images that dramatise issues crucial to her early life when, as the daughter of an Aboriginal mother and Irish father, she was raised by a foster family. Dress-ups and role-playing are central to the domestic scenarios portrayed in her early work, such as in her emotive short film *Night Cries: A Rural Tragedy* (1989), and continue to be drawn upon in her

extensive repertoire of photographic series and acclaimed exhibitions in Europe, the United States and Australia.

Once Moffatt relaxes into the conversation it becomes clear that, as a child, reading provided her with another form of role-playing, a way of transcending her life circumstances. She loved *Little Golden Books* (the phenomenally successful American hardback series first published in 1942); and was particularly keen on *Uncle Arthur's Bedtime Stories* that featured, as she recalls, pictures of people acting and included, on occasion, black children. There is an intriguing paradox in these memories, and evidence that we select in childhood what we most desire to see reflected in the present. The American Uncle Arthur series, written by Arthur S. Maxwell, were morality tales featuring white characters, and were often sold door-to-door by Seventh Day Adventists in the 1950s and 1960s. They are still admired in the Bible Belt of the United States, and only in later years were versions published that, controversially, featured children with dark skin.

'It was the illustrations that I always liked', she explains.

I loved all biblical stories for their pictures, like the good Samaritan story. I remember some illustrated by photographs of Hollywood actors, in make up ... posed and staged ... there was one about Samson and Delilah featuring Susan Hayward, I'd look at it over and over again.

Although her mother occasionally borrowed library books, the only household volumes were *Mind Alive* and *Time Life* encyclopaedias:

There was a comic strip version of Australian history ... Burke and Wills, Aboriginal culture ... and, in Time Life, hand-tinted images of cities ... people eating gelato in Italian streets ... Parisians on motorcycles, carrying baguettes. You could collect images from Mind Alive, pictures of World War II, Laurence Olivier, other cultures. I was crazy about all of them.

It is not difficult to chart their influence on Moffatt's work, from her famously alluring and highly stylised photographic series, 'Something More', 1989, to her recent 'comic strip' photo-narrative, 'Adventure Series', 2004. Even the photographs recreating events from her childhood and exhibited as 'Scarred for Life', parts one and eleven, 1994/1999, follow the *Time Life* captioned photographic style.

As a teenager at Mt Gravatt High School in the 1970s, Moffatt discovered *The Story of O* (1954) by Pauline Reage (the pen-name of French journalist Dominique Aury). 'I was fifteen', she says, 'I didn't know anything about sadomasochism, but the novel gripped me. I took it to school in a brown paper bag – everyone wanted it.' She says the book inspired her photographic series 'Laudanum', 1998, staged in a gloomy nineteenth-century mansion and evoking the story's dark romance of domination and submission.

Around this time she also read cult texts of the moment, such as Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* (1970), Tom Robbins's *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* (1976) and Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying* (1973). 'It's hard to say exactly how you come across books', observes Moffatt. 'They were passed around at school ... I'd baby-sit for middle-class people and find books there.' In 1979 she went backpacking in Europe and America, reading widely before returning to study at art school in Queensland.

On her first trip to New York in 1980, she was introduced to the writings of Anais Nin, Henry Miller and Andy Warhol. 'I love Andy Warhol's party scenes with photos and text, and was always attracted to his conversational writing tone – even when I later found out that his assistants wrote most of it!' In Mexico that same year she read *A Separate Reality* by Carlos Castaneda (1971), providing the beginning of her abiding fascination with the counterculture ethos. 'I seemed to know a lot of hippies back then. Not that I was a hippy', she adds with a laugh, 'I had too much style'. Castaneda's echo can be heard in Moffatt's silk-screen photographs imbued with uncanny, mystical apparitions in her series 'Invocations', 2000, and in references to 'supernatural forces' in her recent 'Under the Sign of Scorpio' catalogue essay.

In the 1980s she also came across the American writer Carson McCullers, best known for 'Southern Gothic' fiction about lonely misfits, such as *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* (1940) and *The Ballad of the Sad Cafe* (1951).

As with Tennessee Williams, another Southern author, I came to her writing through movie adaptations. Her descriptions of the deep South remind me so much of Queensland from my childhood: the backwoods, the racism, the suffocating, sultry nights ... it's so evocative. It relates to what I hope to create in my work – a potent atmosphere.

I wonder how much 'Black' literature Moffatt has read, given that when she was discovering her seminal books there was a blossoming of Black writing and publishing houses throughout the world. Moffatt enthusiastically replies that this genre was a revelation, sparked in her twenties when she read the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Colour Purple* (1982) by the African-American author Alice Walker.

It [became] so important for me to read black voices ... having had classic Anglo literature forced, though happily, onto me at school ... then to discover the brilliance of the "Harlem Renaissance". Alice Walker's book about [African American intellectual] Nora Neale Hurston is one of the most stunning biographies I've ever read ... plus it almost has the greatest title in the world!

The title of the book is *I Love Myself When I am Laughing... and Then Again When I am Looking Mean and Impressive* (1979). An apt caption for some of Moffatt's own exploratory self-portraits.

Moffatt's conversation is curiously devoid of Australian literary references, aside from Germaine Greer, and the Queensland Aboriginal poet and activist Oodgeroo Noonuccal (Kath Walker), who she studied at school. It strikes me as a particularly local phenomenon that a brilliantly talented young woman, born in Brisbane and now a natural on the international artistic stage, should never have been given the encouragement or inspiration to fully engage in the Australian literary imagination. 'I don't know why that is', she says. 'I really can't say'.

What about Indigenous publications, such as Sally Morgan's best-selling study of her Western Australian family's mixed white/Aboriginal descent, *My Place* (1987), and Sam Watson's novel *Kadaitcha Sung* (1990) featuring Aboriginal characters in Brisbane? For a moment, this warm and loquacious artist falls silent. 'Mmm, *My Place*', Moffatt finally says, 'very disturbing, the violent father', before adding, thoughtfully:

I think I did not relate to those because my work is not concerned with narrative ... not traditional narrative anyway, though the ambience may be similar to literature. Much of it was, and is, essentially realistic, documentary ... or oral history, written down.

She agrees that such writing is both necessary and important. 'But my own work departed from that', she explains. 'It has always wanted to be fantastical, probably more like magic realism.' Books have indeed helped shape this sense of artistic freedom. 'My reading has been very varied, so I always felt I could go anywhere in my art.'

These days Moffatt enjoys literary journalism in magazines such as *Vanity Fair*, and still has an 'intense love' for biographies and autobiographies, especially those about film directors. 'Being a film director is a lot like being a lion tamer. I love reading about how different directors work, to make myself feel better about being a control freak.' However, she now reads very little fiction ('I don't know why'), and almost no art theory ('It always seems foreign to me ... either that, or I'm foreign to it.'). As an exception she cites a book of Eastern-inspired poetry and thoughts on art, *Writings* (1991), by the Canadian-born American minimalist artist Agnes Martin.

Nevertheless, as with many artists, books of all kinds multiply like towers in her tiny New York studio ('I have perfected the art of slipping the bottom book out without toppling the rest of the stack'), and there are few titles she would discount as a possibility. 'I like having books around me', she continues, 'and I'm not a snob about reading. It's like shopping for clothes – you have to keep your eyes open, because you never know what you'll find.'

Tracey Moffatt, *Under the Sign of Scorpio*, Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney, 4–27 August 2005.



The Triumph of Painting (Part One)



Marlene Dumas, *Young boys*, 1993 (detail), oil on canvas, 100 x 300 cm, courtesy Saatchi Gallery, London.

David Teh

'The Triumph of Painting' is Charles Saatchi's grand survey of contemporary painting. It's not about painting's triumph, but about its survival, inviting us to consider – and reject – the 1970s posture that painting is an irrelevant relic of bourgeois luxury.¹ This 'debate' is a furphy, and when raised in relation to Saatchi's impressive collection it is a meagre compensation for the lack of any real curatorial agenda. Throw the London broadsheets a bone to pick, and pick they will.

What gets up people's noses is that the collection Saatchi is plugging is so substantial it has an institutional air about it. Notwithstanding the gallery's eclectic co-tenants (McDonalds, London Aquarium, a Chinese restaurant), this institutional disposition is encouraged by its Thames-side setting in the oak-clad corridors of County Hall, former seat of the Greater London Council. This bureaucratic warren is no white cube: some works enjoy a palatial room to themselves, while a hundred clocks are frozen at a hundred different times of day, as if art's millennial inertia had infected the very architecture of the place.

Punctuated by massive photo-portraits of each artist, 'Triumph' has a peculiar, hagiographic tone. Patchy and repetitive room-notes are compiled in a free 'Picture by Picture Guide', with all the unabashed hyperbole of the press release (Luc Tuymans's *Still life*, 2002, for example, is 'an epic masterpiece of metaphysical and spiritual contemplation'). This is even more irritating when viewers scan the Who's Who list being wheeled out over the show's coming phases ('The Triumph of Painting' spans a series of six exhibitions, culminating in a show of 'New Young Artists'). The exercise begins to feel like a little boy playing Top Trumps with himself. But enough ink has been shed over Saatchi's shameless spruiking – at least it's not dressed up with intellectual pretensions.

The exhibition's first instalment gathers artists who rehearse painting's redundancy alongside others who disprove it. Of the former, the most out of place is Herman Nitsch, whose *Schuttbilder* (splatter paintings) pretend to be an abstract expressionist cat among Saatchi's figurative pigeons. This is where the lack of a curator is most sorely felt. As records of Nitsch's orgiastic 'Aktions' (involving coprophagy, masturbation, animal sacrifice, etc.) they are mute and inadequate. Nitsch's collage *Golden love*, 1974, at least offers a psycho-historical scrapbook of this life of occult devotion and performative excess.

Peter Doig's rich, painterly surfaces, on the other hand, have remarkable depth and sensuousness. In *Concrete cabin*, 1994, a LeCorbusian apartment block looms beyond the fringe of a gloomy forest. Doig puts a block of flats where the Romantics put the radiant void; the built environment becomes atmosphere and nature a subject within it. Paint is spattered and scraped, congealed and calloused. Bark dries like bark, thick glazes conceal and reveal, but the whole still reads with unwavering coherence.

Tuymans's *Still life*, 2002, inflates and levitates Cézanne's fruit, as if to undo cubism's quest for concrete form, an effect completely lost in reproduction. *Portrait*, 2000, meanwhile, will surely become an icon of our *fin de siècle*. This portrait of the forgettable is an unforgettable image, though we'll never wonder who its sitter is. It is paint that effaces her, even as it preserves her, like the bandages of a two-dimensional mummy. Tuymans's art is an art of redundancy, showing how little information is necessary to corner us with a mood. Similarly, Marlene Dumas elicits a palpable sense of complicity in the viewer. Starting with subjects that should

convey a homely familiarity – a small girl lifting her dress over her head in *The cover-up*, 1994 – Dumas refuses to domesticate them with descriptive context, forcing us to collude with the image. Any narrative we bring seems only to darken the scenario further, for example, her *Young boys*, 1993, lined up naked, a dozen shades of vulnerability.

The exhibition's German contingent offers more pedestrian responses to the questions asked of painting. Martin Kippenberger's conceptual projects bristled with punk and dada humour, but painting stifled his wit. Jörg Immendorff's allegories recall the Mexican muralists of the New Deal era. Vibrant but gloomy, Immendorff's 'Café Deutschland' series reflects Germany on the cusp of reunification. Once a student of Joseph Beuys, Immendorff plays the role of artist-intellectual ruminating on his role after modernism and fascism, and grappling with the ghosts and exhausted iconography of such histories. Immendorff's frank symbolism hovers between profundity and pretension, and perhaps this is where his appeal lies: he doesn't balk at sharing his cabaret table with modernism's gods, but his nostalgia offers a way in for an audience equally unsure how to mourn them. Immendorff captures well the whiff of redundancy that haunts figurative painting, but relies on others to dispel it.

¹ Asked recently by *The Art Newspaper* whether the matter of painting's survival had not been settled by the Royal Academy's 1981 survey 'A New Spirit in Painting', Charles Saatchi quite fairly retorted that that show, which enshrined neo-expressionism and the 'transavantgardia', was almost twenty-five years ago.

The Triumph of Painting (Part One), Saatchi Gallery, County Hall, London, 26 January – 27 June 2005.