



Something more about Moffatt

Natalya Lusty on an artist who manages to be provocative, profound *and* popular

Over the Sydney summer, record crowds visited the largest survey of Tracey Moffatt's work yet shown in Australia, hosted by the Museum of Contemporary Art. Advertising the exhibition, on bus shelters and scrolling billboards across the city, was a self-portrait of Moffatt holding an old-fashioned Pentax camera, dressed in a knitted olive-green top and standing against a highly stylised backdrop reminiscent of an Albert Namatjira landscape. The saturation of Moffatt's hand-coloured *Self Portrait* (1999) in places usually reserved for the likes of Love Kylie lingerie ads is perhaps fitting for an artist whose idiosyncratic style and irreverent iconoclasm have taken her far.

Like many of Moffatt's images, this photograph doesn't readily declare itself as anything more than a straightforward self-portrait. On closer inspection, however, we can see many of the strategies that have dominated Moffatt's work since her emergence as an experimental artist in the 1980s. While the Namatjira backdrop alerts us to the history of Australian art and the privileged place of landscape painting, the reference to an indigenous artist working in a European tradition highlights Moffatt's own ambiguous status as an experimental Aboriginal artist working with popular visual technologies. Similarly, the retro styling of her clothes and the camera itself reflect the prominent place of history in Moffatt's portrait of contemporary cultural identity.

Posing as a glamorous tourist photographer from another era, Moffatt fuses fantasy and reality in a way that asks us to reflect on the very historicity of visual representation, specifically photography's status as a medium that cuts across both popular and high art genres, as well as commercial and personal use. In another self-portrait, *Artist at Work* (1997),

Moffatt again casts herself as a photographer, this time dressed in army fatigues, battling her way through long grass, an almost comical array of technical equipment hung around her body. As a war photographer or as a snap-happy tourist, Moffatt underscores the inventive character of her photographic images. As Susan Sontag once observed, photographs are interpretations of the world in much the same way as paintings and drawings. Moffatt's images do not simply record what is there but construct extended narratives around the emotional and psychic lives of her subjects. While her images are often rooted in personal experience, their strength lies in their ability to tap into an affectively charged collective memory.

Robert Hughes has left us with an indelible image of Australia's cultural heritage stained by the legacy of its convict beginnings. Despite early attempts to suppress this "convict stain" in the name of social and political respectability, the question of our criminal origins dominated discussions of national identity for more than a hundred years, from the 1880s through to the 1980s. If popular histories such as *The Fatal Shore*

have taught us anything, it is that the sublimation of history and the desire to forget have profound effects on how we understand the present. But while the question of our convict heritage has been assimilated into a mythologising account of the nation's colourful pioneering origins, it has excluded other histories of violence and dispossession.

In the past two decades the debate around national pride has shifted to the question of Australia's indigenous inhabitants: to the stolen generations, land rights, self-determination and indigenous health and poverty. The widespread appeal of the Phillip Noyce film *Rabbit-Proof Fence* suggests the urgency with which these issues need to be addressed. It also highlights how popular visual mediums, in

harnessing the universalising language of emotions, may be an effective pedagogical tool for grappling with the enormity of these debates in the public sphere.

Like Hughes's popular history and Noyce's more recent film, Moffatt's images and films unearth the terrors and desires of Australia's past in order to make sense of the present. What distinguishes Moffatt's work, however, is its conscious reflection on how particular kinds of stories are told at the expense of others. Rather than giving us the "truth" of the past, Moffatt creates socially inscribed narratives that reflect what is missing or repressed in the cultural imaginary. Mining the emotional capacities of popular visual technologies such as film, video and photography, as well as their historical effects, Moffatt creates stories that are at once universal and intimately local.

As an Aboriginal artist adopted into a white family and raised in a working-class suburb of Brisbane, it is not surprising that Moffatt's Australia is a postcolonial landscape littered with the psychic traumas of dispossession, interracial conflict and gendered subjectivity. In the familial drama played out in her short film *Night Cries: A Rural Tragedy* (1989), a black daughter nurses her dying white mother in an isolated homestead, intercut with flashbacks of the daughter's abandonment as a child. While on one level the film hints at the removal of Aboriginal children from their families, the narrative is haunted by the universal themes of loss and abandonment,

love and loyalty, as well as racial interdependence. In reimagining the power relations between a white mother and her adopted black daughter, Moffatt discloses the cultural anxieties that inform the relationship between black and white Australians.

Moffatt's Australia, however, is also infused with the brash spectacle of Hollywood film, European cinema, television melodrama and



are invited to share the pain of Moffatt's protagonists, we are nevertheless bemused by the pettiness of their predicaments. In creating these images, Moffatt was continually reminded of the cast of child-hating adults in *David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations*. Like Dickens, Moffatt is an exquisite social satirist, capturing a tragicomic world in which children bear the brunt of spiteful adult egos.

The series is also inspired by 1950s and 1960s photo essays in magazines such as *Life*, which, long before the proliferation of reality television, constituted the primary means of exoticising the everyday and the not-so-everyday lives of others. On one level the series title becomes ironically sensationalist, hinting at the documentary genre's voyeuristic fascination with the tragic, reducing personal and emotional pain to a banal uniformity. In recreating the look and feel of a *Life* magazine spread, however, Moffatt draws attention to the central role of popular culture in orchestrating particular kinds of emotional response. While we might be "moved" by these scenarios of shame and humiliation, their ironic humour pulls us up, forcing us to reflect on any identification, gratuitous or not, we might have with the characters in her photo narratives.

In other works, irony gives way to an underlying playfulness, which softens the more immediate effects of shame and humiliation. In her short video *Heaven* (1997), Moffatt is at her most brazen. Taking up the art of beachside peeping, traditionally privileged as a white, male preoccupation, Moffatt goes "hunting" for surfers caught in the awkward act of changing out of their wetsuits, towels modestly wrapped around their waists. Using a low-tech, hand-held camera technique, *Heaven* registers the disavowed voyeurism latent in the home video genre as well as early ethnographic documentary. The mock ethnographic feel of the video is enhanced by an intermittent soundtrack of Tibetan chanting and tribal drumming, which silences the animated dialogue between

filmmaker and her subjects — as if to further inscribe the work's obsession with "looking". As Moffatt teases and cajoles her Adonis-like surfers to revel in the flirtatious display of their masculinity, the ubiquitous shame of the naked white body threatens to disrupt their humorous candid camera routine.

Moffatt's idea of heaven may be a tanned, muscly surfer caught in a state of undress. But beneath the wry audacity of her gaze lurks the white shame implicit in the disavowed eroticism central to the anthropological scrutiny of indigenous culture, as well as the more explicit shame of the naked white body that has served to define the very terms of racial difference. Stripped of his black wetsuit, Moffatt's unmasked surfer also uncannily evokes the minstrel tradition in early American popular culture, whereby the blackface performances of white men disclosed the sexual fetishisation of the black, male body. Moffatt's visual observations, though delightfully pleasurable, are never innocent. While *Heaven* is a place of earthly naked angels, Moffatt's intrusive camera alerts us to the irony of the white male body as the object of an indigenous woman's gaze. In "lovingly compiling" her humble home video, Moffatt transforms the visual codes that have traditionally defined men as connoisseurs of looking and women as their preening objects of visual gratification.

The significance of the eroticised body to race relations within Australia is a constant theme in Moffatt's work. In *Nice Coloured Girls* (1987), this is made palpable through the relationship of three young urban Aboriginal women and "a captain" (a drunken white man), whom they try to pick up. Without money to pay for their night on the town, the women home in on their prey, eventually robbing him of his money, before fleeing into the night. Asking us to look beyond the stereotypes that swirl around her characters, Moffatt discloses the vulnerability of both her duped captain and her ironically named nice coloured girls. Juxtaposing this

contemporary drama is a voice-over narration recording the "first encounter" between colonisers and Aboriginal women, taken from the diaries of Lieutenant William Bradley. In describing how the native women need his protection, Bradley reveals a similar naivety to his modern-day counterpart. By situating her narrative in the past and present, Moffatt highlights the continuing interdependence of coloniser and colonised. Although history repeats itself in terms of the economic vulnerability of Aboriginal women then and now, Moffatt's modern-day coloured girls seem to have finally gained the upper hand. In *Nice Coloured Girls*, and to some extent in *Heaven*, Moffatt tears away at the fabric of history, finding in its hidden seams, a cast of empowered heroines who disrupt conventional colonial narratives of sexual exploitation.

Heaven's original location as a video installation in the exhibition *Up in the Sky* (1998) frames the images of surfing bodies with black and white photographs of indigenous and non-indigenous subjects located in the Australian outback. In these images poverty and isolation as well as the importance of community underscore the experience of rural Australia as a site where black and white citizens share a similar experience of marginalisation. In one such image two young men, one Aboriginal and the other white, wrestle in a desert landscape; the fierce entanglement of their bodies becoming an erotically charged dance of physical combat. In contrast to the hallucinatory effect of the eroticised bodies in *Laudanum*, here the erotic is made familiar and everyday, disclosing the corporeal identifications that inform the history of indigenous and non-indigenous relations.

Up in the Sky also registers the profound impact of the Australian landscape on the popular psyche. Shot in an abandoned mining town near Broken Hill, these images strip the outback of its heroic capacity to sustain a romantic vision of "life on the land". Instead they evoke the surreal bathos of its hopelessness and abjection: a graveyard of

broken-down vehicles rusted and abandoned in the desert, a calf hanging dead in a tree, a white mother clutching her dark-skinned baby in a dilapidated fibro house miles from nowhere. In subtle ways these images invoke the dystopian tradition in Australian landscape painting, capturing the eerie lyricism of a Drysdale or Nolan, making us "feel" the intensity of the light and heat, the despair and loneliness. The characters that populate Moffatt's desolate landscape also owe something to the gritty neorealism of Pasolini's early film *Accattone* (1961). Taking her title from the refrain ironically sung by the film's lead character, Moffatt shares Pasolini's passion for the sacred dignity of the socially marginalised misfits who exist in a world without material comfort or social respectability.

Rooted in the experience and look of both a familiarised and defamiliarised Australia, Moffatt's art nevertheless signals the universal function of representation and socialisation as inescapable elements of human experience. The work's broad social themes and diffuse cultural references demonstrate a conscious refusal to make art that speaks for and on behalf of a monolithic indigenous culture; what critics have called the burden of black representation. Moreover, her inventiveness with form suggests an artistic sensibility that is concerned as much with the politics of the aesthetic as it is with political and social issues. As such Moffatt's images provide an important context for understanding the manifold effects of representation across cultural and geographical locations. This in part explains Moffatt's international appeal and the diversity of her audience.

Moffatt's show at the MCA has been a huge success, breaking every attendance record since the museum opened in 1991. According to the MCA this is due in part to an extensive advertising campaign. If we didn't see the show, it was hard to miss Moffatt's tantalising

the city. Most of the credit however must go to the work itself, which manages to be accessible in spite of its political and experimental nature. As a product of a theory-laden art school generation that thrived on large doses of postcolonial and feminist theory, Moffatt's work doesn't shy away from its postmodern origins. While the general public is extremely fickle when it comes to much postmodernist art, there is a poetic intimacy and sweeping vision in the work that makes it unprecedented in Australian art. Unlike other contemporary Australian photographers such as Bill Henson or Patricia Piccinini, there is no uniform style or look to Moffatt's work. Her canvas incorporates everything from lurid kitsch and stark realism to delicate beauty and gothic surrealism. This element of surprise and inventiveness has in itself

become Moffatt's signature style.

Similarly, the open-ended meaning of the work seems to tantalise rather than alienate viewers. Moffatt is adept at planting seeds of suggestion which tease her audiences into tracing elusive threads, all the while not knowing at what point they have left behind the work's implied scenarios and strayed off into their own imagination. This is the essence of the work's generosity, which extends to Moffatt's enthusiasm for the discursive tangents her work inspires in critics and writers. In speaking of the "fever pitch of excitement" which governs the production of her images, Moffatt conveys the emotional intensity of the work and the reason it might resonate so powerfully with audiences.

The popular appeal of Moffatt's work also lies in her choice of medium. In recent years, photography has become the "cool new canvas", fetching prices usually reserved for more traditional art objects such as painting or sculpture. With its strategies of pastiche and appropriation, art photography appeals to a new generation of artists

diet of popular culture and postmodern theory. Photography also encapsulates our love of the ephemeral and the instantaneous, which has come to embody the technological world we now inhabit. Although it has taken almost 150 years for photography to become a respectable art form, the awareness of its unique properties in transforming how we see the world is not as recent as we like to imagine.

In describing the shift in pictorial schema that the new technologies of modernity — photography and cinema — had brought about, the German Marxist critic Walter Benjamin announced at the beginning of last century the emergence of an optical unconscious, which he compared to the discovery of the instinctual unconscious in psychoanalysis. What Benjamin's homology implies is the profound capacity of the camera to mimic memory by conferring on a single image an emotional resonance and a collective history that belies its otherwise static form. This suggests how the photographic image, like memory, is condensed in its relationship to the external world through elements that are conscious and unconscious, true and illusory.

Describing herself as a director of photo narratives, Moffatt emphasises the enigmatic connection that exists between what is real and what might be imagined. In stirring up the shadowy realm of individual and cultural memory, Moffatt unearths our desires as well as our fears, offering viewers a kind of reparation, a way in which to know and feel "something more" about ourselves and the world in which we live. While art may never reach the mass audiences of films such as *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, in Moffatt's hands it can perhaps entertain and provoke in far more profound ways.

The Museum of Contemporary Art's Tracey Moffatt exhibition finishes on Sunday. Another exhibition of Moffatt's work, at the John Curtin Gallery in Perth, runs until March 28.