

Behind the gloss

Rosemary Sorensen says clunky tackiness is quirkily effective and a little sad

TRACEY Moffatt's highly entertaining and deeply disturbing short film, *Love*, is showing at the Institute of Modern Art.

It's a knockout.

Love was one of the short films in the big Sydney retrospective at the Museum of Contemporary Art at the end of 2003. It's essentially a cut and paste job from numerous films, both well-known and marginal, which makes it seem less "essential Moffatt" than other work, such as the 1989 photographic series, *Something More*. But it nails what makes Moffatt's art work.

The thing about Moffatt, it seems to me, is that she's wickedly funny but her ideas also are obvious, in the way that good ideas often are.

And she's technically interesting too, so you can look at the gloss and shine of a series of works like her *Adventure Series* that also is on show at the IMA, and admire — maybe to the point of criticism — her confidence.

But if you see just one of the images from *Something More* — the one most often used to advertise Moffatt's work is probably the woman in the bright red sarong in the doorway of the tin hut — it's tempting to find her imagery trite, and a little bit off.

Because she's got this core of

concern within her work, she does occasionally offer up a series of images that tip into the exploitative and nasty. It's Bill Henson territory — valid and interesting, but maybe unaware of, or not in control of, its effects.

But, unlike Fiona Foley, say, who seems to think that a striving for controversy is the way to make art that stops you in your tracks, Moffatt transcends the core idea and takes you into the lovely space where a viewer can hear the message, can admire the technical work, but then is given the freedom to bring your own ideas to the work.

She's just very clever, is about the long and short of it.

In *Love*, you watch all these snippets from the era of great romance with amused nostalgia, even as something else builds — a gentle but insistent portrait of the ideology behind Hollywood's rise and rise.

You're in, thinking, and as you muse about all these wonderfully corny films that so beguile, the film gradually changes direction, does a U-turn that you might find uncomfortable.

This kind of clever composition seems old-fashioned now, in an era in which feminism is unfashionable. But I suspect fashion is not particularly interesting to Moffatt. The extraordinary film of



that she took with a hand-held camera of surfers changing out of their togs (doesn't that sound entertaining — not) is, for my money, likely to become a classic when, some time in the future, we get back on track with what we used to call, naively maybe, gender issues.

The hot ticket at the IMA, however, is probably Moffatt's *Adventure Series*, which the gallery has just bought.

Moffatt was back in home-town Brisbane towards the end of last year, and this, apparently, is a kind of trace of her time back here.

Of the series of works, all of

them three-image sets that sort of link to make mini-narratives, Moffatt says, "I wanted to make something glossy that looked comic strip and pop."

It's the world of the B-grade adventure, featuring women with fabulous breasts (extremely fabulous in one of Moffatt's images), that the artist says she remembers as being "so sexual and hot".

The Moffatt elements are all here, then: memory, projected desire, screen super-reality, with a lurking hint of racism.

This is not a grand series, but it's good stuff. The clunky tacki-

ness of the images is underscored by quirky moments, like super-imposed kangaroos, and a goanna's graceful curve beneath a tootling little plane, hell-bent on adventure, in the sky above.

If you had a will to do so, you could construct the narratives around these snippets, but you'd soon find yourself making up nonsense. There's no real story: there's a teasing pleasure in the invitation to make up a story behind the images.

It's playful, reminds us how silly popular culture can be, but then lets a sadness seep to the surface.

Tracey Moffatt, *Adventure Series*, IMA, 420 Brunswick St, Fortitude Valley, until April 23



CONFIDENT artist . . . Tracey Moffatt, above, and some of her *Adventure Series*.

