



Tracey Moffatt

An Interview with Tracey Moffatt

Marta GILI

MARTA GILI. Though your first work is dated 1989, the last three years of your career have been particularly meteoric. In 1998, I count eight individual exhibitions in Europe alone. What do you think this phenomenal success is due to?

TRACEY MOFFATT. I am totally thrilled with the recognition I am getting for my work around the world but it has been a while in coming. In Australia from the mid-eighties through the nineties I worked steadily as a director of "community art projects" (painted murals - how embarrassing!) and videos and television documentaries and pop music videos but I always found time to be an artist - and made my own obscure art films and my "photo dramas". This was for a relatively small audience in Australia and the art films would be shown at Film Festivals around the world.

But right from the beginning I had "attitude". I would ring up the organisers of National and International "Women's Film Festivals" and scream at them to take my films out of the "Black films" section and screen them in with the "mainstream" work (as if any of the films made by women then in these types of Festivals were "mainstream" films!).

So I was never ignored in Australia, I was taken seriously, praised and also criticised. From the moment I made my first work it was collected by major state museums and written about at a very high level by the film and art world intelligentsia. My work in film and photography is now well and truly a part of "art and cultural" studies in high schools and universities and the same thing is true of learning institutions here in the United States.

But it was always a horror for me that my "avant-garde" work in film and photography was often relegated to "cultural" or "anthropological" studies - but this was because I put Black people in my pictures.

So I was often (but not always) written about as a "social commentator" not as an innovative artist.

So now it delights me that the very elitist art world (let's not pretend that it isn't elitist - you're not "in" until the art world decides that you're "in". GOOD, this is the way it should be - I'm not bitter.) has taken me up and what I make is actually bought by "art connoisseurs" who haven't taken the slightest interest in my political correctness. They buy because they think that my images "work" on some level.

I'm not putting down art collectors because people from all walks of life collect what I make, not only the rich, I think that there is nothing greater than the thought of someone living with a piece of your art on their walls.

So what is the appeal all of a sudden? I have a feeling that it's because what I do is completely unfashionable. My work has an uncool emotion and heat to it, my narratives have glaring clichéd aspects. People feel that they've seen it before - but I'm giving it to them all over again with my own slant on it. People recognise the "clichés" and don't seem to mind them.

There is nothing cool and "architectural" about my images - they are the opposite so they can spark up a frigid white space.

But my finicky artist side makes me obsessive, so I strive very hard to achieve a type of "classical" composition and careful selection with

printing processes and colour. This has come from years of staring into books on great painting and worshipping the genius cinematography of old films.

I've always looked and looked, and I'm still looking - for example last night here in New York I had a party so I got out a video of *Macbeth* (1948) by Orson Welles and we watched it and drank and howled in appreciation at the photography and the sets and the lighting and at how thin Orson was.

MG. Much of your work is concerned with what we might call a visual universe seen through the eyes of American and English-speaking culture. How do you think your work connects with the European tradition?

TM. It is true that I am influenced by literature, in particular the great American southern writers like Carson McCullers, Truman Capote and Tennessee Williams, but this is only because the type of stories they wrote reminds me of the "redneck" aspects of my own environment in the state of Queensland, Australia, where I grew up.

But Federico Garcia Lorca's writing has always been a love for me - especially his play *The House of Bernarda Alba*, it is now seared into my brain. I read it over and over again after the play in London in 1987 (with Glenda Jackson as Bernarda - she was to die for!). My short film *Night Cries* was greatly influenced by this play - the idea of women living cooped up together in a hot environment and going insane.

MG. Photography has become a classical medium in contemporary art. In your work, photography seems to be closely linked to film narrative. Nevertheless, the narrative of your films is very photographic. How do you see the relations between the two?

TM. When I construct a photograph I'm aware that it is just a still image and it has to "resonate" in some way. It has to stand alone, it isn't a "film still", it is a "composed" image.

I've attempted to be inventive with technique and take into account every photograph ever made in the history of photography. I could be reworking an old photographic technique - such as with my new photogravure series *Laudanum*.

But of course there is always my narrative, my "photo drama" - so with my photographs you may only be getting a fragment of a larger story.

My films, however, are films that must "work" for their length of duration. Though the storylines are twisted they have to capture an audience's attention for the time period. They have to "work" in a dark space with the audience sitting comfortably on chairs - not glanced at for a second in the corner of a bright gallery space.

As for being "photographic", it could be said that the slowness of my films may lend them to be described as "slow-moving photographs".

I'm formally trained as a filmmaker - not as an artist. I like and respect the old-fashioned rules - regardless of the type of movie I've made, from the formal aspects of my 35 mm films to the cheap amateur hand-held camera look of the *Heaven* video, it all has to hold an audience in a spell.

The only link or relationship in my chosen art form is that it is all initially produced with a camera, be it a moving or a still one, and it all goes up on the wall in a straightforward way. I never make "installations" or pile video monitors on top of each other in a sculptural way like the brilliant Korean artist Nam June Paik - this would be foreign to me.

MG. Nevertheless, all your images contain a narrative component which you yourself often subvert when you show them. John Berger said that all stories are discontinuous and that they are based on a tacit agreement about what is not said. Do you think the spectator connects with this tacit agreement, or are your stories designed precisely to disconcert the spectator?

TM. I like your question about what is said and not said. It is exactly like me, I can turn it on or I can turn it off, depending on my moodiness. So, I guess my work can disconcert the bored spectator.

MG. A Spanish philosopher, Miguel de Unamuno, said that thinking is talking to oneself, and that ideas often come when one makes the effort of presenting them to others. It seems clear that your work contains much of your personal history, but does it also contain something of the history of others?

TM. Yes, my work can have autobiographical elements or my own obsessions and fantasies in it - this is what initially triggers the work. When realising a work, it is shocking to me that it can take on other nuances I never intended. This is the fascination with making art. I whine to myself when I look at my work: "Oh no, I didn't want it to be like that, but look how it has come out... oh well, better to leave it like it is".

So I "finish" a work and then I hardly want anything to do with it. I can barely attend my own art openings - my eyes glaze over, deliberately out of focus so I don't see what I've made. (I'm secretly repelled by my art - is this healthy or should I book time with a good shrink?)

It is supernatural when this happens - when one's pithy ideas come out and take on other intentions. Despite my controlling nature and wanting everything my way the materials I use are doing what they want.

So it is simple - yes, artists' ideas start out from the personal but often they speak, as you say, about the history of others.

MG. There is another aspect of your narratives I would like you to tell us about: that of language. Paradoxically, films of yours like *Night Cries* and *Heaven* are silent. There is a dramatic element in them, sound, but there is no articulate language. On the other hand, the photographic series *Scarred for Life* is sustained to a large extent by the text. In this case, words direct the meaning. How do you articulate word and image in your work?

TM. With *Night Cries* and *Heaven* I felt that there was never a need for the spoken word. Things are stated gesturally and with emotive soundscaping.

The straightforward text I used to describe the scene or real life "dilemma" (the stories are all true) in each of the *Scarred for Life* pictures is very deliberate. The scenes are very snap shot and everyday in look - nothing out of the ordinary.

But this is the whole point of the series. A person can make a passing comment to you when you are young and this can change you forever. You can be "scarred for life" but it isn't necessarily a bad thing. The photographs can be read as both tragic and comic - there is a thin line between both.

As well, I've attempted to recreate pages out of *American Life* magazine of the 1960s, so this explains the thin paper I printed on, the washed-out colours, the drab layout and the captions.

MG. Themes like rootlessness, anxiety, impotence and failure are present in many of your works. How do you explain this?

TM. That's life, isn't it? When I get really happy and content I get nervous. I just know that a disaster is around the corner!

MG. Your photographs, which are full of documentary connotations (*Up in the Sky*), are nevertheless staged or set up. What is your opinion of the documentary photographic style you seem to satirise in your work? Do you share its idealism or its voyeurism?

TM. I love documentary and voyeuristic photography. I just wish I wasn't so controlling and had the patience to do it. I tried once to do "street photography" and got bored in three seconds and jumped in the car and drove home. Thank god the poor people on the street were saved from me.

It isn't easy, either. In the Diane Arbus biography it was interesting to read how she obtained a lot of her extraordinary images that now stand as "classics" - for example, the "Jewish Giant" with his parents, which was achieved by Arbus returning again and again to the living room of that family and making them pose over and over. I think that she went back eight times or even more - you'd want to kill her! But it was that genuine "shocked" expression on the faces of the parents as they looked up at their giant son which is what she wanted.

One of my recent favourite photographic books is of those New York brothel pictures shot through a tiny bathroom window.

The book is called "Dirty Windows" and photographer Merry Alpern made her pictures over a period of months in the winter. She would set up in a friend's apartment across the alley way with her camera and zoom lens on a tripod and holding her breath she nervously clicked away, until the cops busted the brothel. The pictures are wonderful and her own text on how she achieved the pictures is even more hilarious.

So I appreciate all photographic genres - if it holds one, I'm open to it all. The same with film.

For example, contemporary cinema doesn't hold me like old films do, but I love contemporary documentary cinema. The full length documentaries that people spend years of their lives making are so much more interesting now than contemporary narrative films. The Mohammed Ali documentary *When we were Kings* was almost my favourite film for 1997. It mesmerised me - made me laugh and made me cry my eyes out.

As well, it may have to do with technology - the new digital cameras are so small and unobtrusive and the quality so superior that film-makers can go places with a camera and capture like they have never been able to do before.

Also, the average Joe on the street has a video camera and he is out there capturing. There is nothing like a real-life drama captured on home video that you often see on the nightly news. It is always the best footage. It's the footage that you drop everything to watch.

For example, the horror in the Rodney King footage where he is being bashed by Los Angeles police in 1992. It was the undeniable truth in this video footage that triggered the LA riots. People know truth when they see it and back in 1992 people had had enough, so things exploded.

The unknown guy who shot this Rodney King home video footage is a hero and should have been given an American Academy award in recognition.

MG. On various occasions you have denied that your work contains any form of social commitment or denouncement. Don't you feel that your works suggest situations arising from a decadent society?

TM. In all honesty I want to say that with my art I've never set out to make grand statements about social issues because a lot of "political" art is hideous.

If you want to say things then it's best to be a public orator on a soap box or try to get elected to parliament (it's not that I don't have the big mouth for public speaking, it's just that I'm too emotional and not sensible enough. I would get all muddled up and yell at my opponents and call them assholes.)

However I do like "direct action" I've been arrested and thrown in jail for a solo political demonstration in England in 1987. I didn't plan to get thrown in jail, it's just that I mouthed off at the wrong time. Some Australian news crews were there and filmed it so my family back home got a pleasant surprise when they switched on the television that night. I heard that they all laughed.

So it isn't that I don't have socialist beliefs - I do. I'm left-wing fair and square. I might as well add that I also like paying taxes if it is going to make the world a better place. I admire that in Australia - even though we now have a right-wing government, the legacies of various Labour governments are still there: free health care, education, social security and a great freedom in general.

In Australia, you feel that only the sky is the limit. Australians are confident and loud like Texans - but also, outward-looking and fearless travellers, because we feel that we are isolated, but isolated from what?

I don't think my art is didactic and preachy. I merely comment about what I perceive around me, or rather it's my fantasy of what I see. I don't understand a lot of artist who hide away and are so self-absorbed I wonder if they ever read goddamned newspapers - I do, every single one I can get my hands on.

This is why I love to be in London on a Sunday - seven newspapers with good bitchy articulate commentary on art, world events, etc.

Your suggestion that my work has come out of "decadent society" - what do you mean? For a start I love the word "decadent" - it's so Catherine Deneuve.

I'm dying to be "decadent" because I grew in a family that wasn't rich. I'm a socialist who lives for designer clothes .

MG. Is the film *Heaven* the revenge of a woman looking at men in the same way men have always looked at us, that is, with a mixture of voluptuousness and indulgence?

TM. You could call *Heaven* a "revenge" film if you wish - but I would call it a "comedy". Most straight guys hate it. But I didn't make it for men - I made it for all the women in the world who like to "look".

MG. *Night Cries* is a film about the always complex relations between mother and daughter in which the characters are tormented by their feelings. There is also a religious, ritual, component. Could you tell me about this?

TM. *Night Cries* is a very personal piece of work and has to do with the love-hate relationship I had with my mother and, yes, there is a religious and ritual component, but the film haunts me and ten years later it hurts me to talk about it.

When I made it I didn't even think it was about me... boy, did I expose myself.

Don't make me explain. Artists don't have to tell everything.

MG. Continuing along the lines of love-hate family relations, your adolescents in *Scarred for Life* are mostly terrified of their parents. The family would appear in your work to be a place where people fail to connect. Is this a true reflection?

TM. Some families connect with each other and some don't connect. In whatever "family" version you are born into, be it with blood family or adopted family or whatever is the first world we ever know, it's a battle from the second we open our baby eyes. This is a part of the wonderful hideous fabric of life and it is why we are what we are.

But you can't blame your family for a damn thing, better still, you have to thank them with all your heart.

MG. Psychoanalysts always link dream to desire. Is *Pet Thang* a dream?

TM. *Pet Thang* is very strange, and I'm in it!

MG. Formally, your latest series, *Laudanum*, breaks away from the documentary aesthetics of the other series to explore a pictorialist treatment. How does *Laudanum* link up with the rest of your work?

TM. As I do this interview I am finishing off the printing of *Laudanum* (*laudanum* was a legal drug that was an opium preparation. Upper-class women took it to "calm the nerves".) Yes, it has broken away from the documentary aesthetic of the last photo series *Up in the Sky* and, yes, it is pictorialist. But isn't all my work pictorial? My work is concerned with all the old-fashioned things like colour and surface form and composition, etc.

So the "look" for *Laudanum* which I have printed as photogravure is a turn-of-the-century look. It was inspired by many things, "spirit" paintings by "Spiritualists" done last century and old photographs, film - *The Servant*, 1963 - directed by Joseph Losey. Again, literature - *The Story of O*, 1954, by Pauline Reage (the first "poetic" dirty book I ever read). I was intrigued by the preface essay to the novel - entitled *Happiness in Slavery* by Jean Paulhan. What a title!

As I talk about this it has occurred to me that there is also something of Lorca again - *The House of Bernarda Alba*. In *Laudanum* the women are cooped up together in the house. It could be a mythical colony - the shutters are closed to keep the heat out. Though, when you look at the pictures, you can see that things actually "hot up", a private drama is enacted and we get to "peek in".