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Tracey Moffatt



Free
spirit



**REBECCA
HARKINS-
CROSS**

is a Melbourne-based writer and critic.

Tracey Moffatt has never enjoyed discussing her work. Throughout an esteemed career, spanning more than three decades, the filmmaker-turned-photographer has maintained the same stance: if she spells out what her art might mean, then she shuts off other interpretations. So the news that she had agreed to take part in public talks for her new exhibition, *Spirited*, which opened in October at Queensland's Gallery of Modern Art (GOMA), was received with vague surprise.

Assistant director Simon Wright introduced her on stage. "Tracey's arguably – I love that word... Bigger it, you *are* the most prominent Australian artist exhibiting nationally and internationally today. It's true." This is difficult to dispute: at 54 years old, Moffatt is a bona fide art star. She's had more than 150 solo shows, exhibiting her work at landmarks from the Venice Biennale to New York's Museum of Modern Art and Dia Art Foundation; her short film *Night Cries* (1989) and feature *Bedevel* (1993) premiered at Cannes. On the home front, a retrospective of her work at Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art in 2003 trumped attendance records; the following year her breakthrough photography series *Something More* (1989) was sold at auction for \$227,050, making them Australia's most valuable photographs to go under the hammer.

Still, after 12 years abroad, residing in the heart of New York's gallery district, *Spirited* represents something of a homecoming. Moffatt created this body of work after relocating back to Australia four years ago. What's more, the series returns to the landscapes of both her ancestors and her childhood, in suburban Brisbane. The Moffatt siblings grew up in working-class Mount Gravatt East with an Irish-Australian foster mother; their Aboriginal birth mother would visit occasionally, but Moffatt has said in the past, "She wasn't one for looking after kids." Returning to these personal landscapes feels like something of a statement: Moffatt's early period dealt explicitly with the politics of a divided heritage, but she's since spent the intervening decades struggling to shake the mantle of black female artist.

Perhaps it's because of her conflicted relationship with her birthplace that, in Australia at least, qualifiers such as Wright's "arguably" always seem to accompany descriptions of Moffatt's career. "I wanted to be read as an artist," she says, "and I could only do it by getting out of this country; by not being confined to the basement of an art museum where they're showing Aboriginal

art." She's referring to her escape to New York in 1998. "I wanted my work up there with Rothko – not that I have been."

Moffatt tells me this over lunch at GOMA Restaurant, where all of the dishes are inspired by artworks in the gallery's collection. Moffatt has barely finished her train of thought when the waitress brings our dessert. Traditional custard has been trussed up to look like a dot painting: infused with wattle seed, spray-painted with Daintree chocolate, dabbed with fresh vanilla curd. Moffatt has insisted we share one after spying someone eating it as we came in.

The waitress explains the design. "As you can see that rippling is reminiscent of the Australian outback. You're really lucky," she says, pointing out a tiny imperfection in the chocolate's surface. Apparently this is rare. "I had a lady come in who said that it reminds her of a little native animal who's just jumped across the plate."

Moffatt isn't shy about tucking in. "Oh my God, it's so fun to eat," she exclaims. "Wow, they really invent here, don't they?" With a sense of humour that's just as dry in person as it is in her art, this is one of many times during our conversation that I can't tell if she's taking the piss. It's only later I remember the scene in *Bedevel* where the women serve "bush cuisine" such as snake terrine with a walnut vinaigrette.

"Let's divide it. That's your half," Moffatt says, carving a line across the chocolate topography with her spoon. "Go for it."

Moffatt's most famous photograph, the first image from the 1989 *Something More* series, is a self-portrait. The 27-year-old artist cast herself as a glamorous ingenue wearing a cheongsam, gazing out wistfully beyond the ochre dust and rural desolation behind her. This playful melodrama was as much Tennessee Williams' Deep South as it was outback Queensland. These days, Moffatt has banned use of that iconic image of her in the red dress; it's been overdone. "I can't look at it," she says.

Twenty-five years after that photograph was taken, Moffatt looks remarkably unchanged. Her style appears effortless, hair set in a soft half-bouffant and black cat's-eye sunglasses that she keeps on throughout our meal, shielding her from the Brisbane glare. She is entertaining company: a performative raconteur with a deadpan wit – at one point an elderly gentleman at a nearby table asks her to keep it down – she speaks with lively intonations. But this storytelling also acts as a shield, allowing her to reroute questions, or ignore them entirely.

She tends to take such detours when I ask how she feels about Brisbane. On stage, too, Wright asked her to talk about Mount Gravatt East. "Not want go back. Not want go back," she said, shaking her head, affecting the diction of a hypnotised patient being forced to return to the site of their trauma. She flashes a wicked smile. "Oh, I guess I'll talk about its distance. It was a long way to go." She doesn't seem traumatised so much as bored; she's often said the suburb's tedium, which drove her to escape into books and television, contributed to her becoming an artist.

As much as Moffatt avoids discussing her upbringing, she returns to it compulsively in her work. Her 1994 series *Scarred for Life* restaged various people's painful childhood memories in the style of a *Life* magazine spread, with Moffatt casting herself in her own: a backhander across the face on Mother's Day. In *Backyard Series* in 1998 she exhibited photos she'd taken as a teenager; in them she directs neighbourhood kids in staged scenes that, in hindsight, say much about the artist she'd become. In 2008's *First Jobs* she revisited the menial work she took in her youth: keeping house, canning pineapples, packing meat.

Spirited, though, is perhaps the most pointed return we've seen yet. This body of work focuses on various landscapes of significance to Moffatt, though she prefers not to pinpoint locations so that their interpretation remains universal: rainbow-coloured cloudscapes in her family's ancestral lands in central Queensland; black-and-white shots of Mount Gravatt East overlaid with primary-coloured text declaring the memories they evoke; picture-postcard scenes from Cherbourg, a mission town where many of her family still live, torn up and reassembled; haunted landscapes shot in the middle of the night.

This series gives the impression that, for Moffatt, Australia is full of ghosts. "Spirits are real," she says. She feels them often, becoming more susceptible when she's weak or vulnerable. She's heard children's voices at her art dealer Roslyn Oxley's home, a Gothic Revival mansion in Sydney's Darling Point that used to be a boarding school; she could never photograph Aboriginal massacre sites as the energy is too intense.

She grows increasingly animated telling these ghost tales. "I knew this psychic in New York, she was Israeli, and she was such a psychic – the crazy eyes! And she said as a child her powers were so strong she could explode the toaster. And her Jewish mother was, like, belting her: 'You did it again!'"

When Moffatt attended Queensland College of Art she used to regularly visit a little old lady for tea readings. The woman would always tell her, "I see you crossing water."

The final photo in *Something More* has Moffatt's heroine ruined on the highway. Left face-first in the dust, a sign points to big city Brisbane still 300 miles away – a cautionary tale for girls who dare to transgress their place. In real life, Moffatt managed to escape.

She moved to New York with more impetus than most. A solo exhibition of her work was to be shown at the prestigious Dia Art Foundation; Moffatt was the first Australian bestowed with the honour. When English filmmaker and friend Isaac Julien was asked to contribute a catalogue essay, she sent him a letter: "If you write about me as a woman artist of colour I will kill you!" The billboard showed Moffatt as a guerilla photographer in the jungle, weighed down with myriad cameras around her neck and in her arms.

"Life could've been really great for me if I'd stayed," she says. "I mean, it would've been so comfortable in

Sydney. I was already a well-known artist... But then you choose to go and live in a sixth-floor walk-up. You're 37 years old and you go back and live like an art student again. That's what's humiliating. And it's a tough town,"

she says of New York. "It's tough, oh my God! It's so snooty, the art world can be."

When I ask if she felt like an insider, there's no hesitation. "Yes, I met the city. I went out into the city. You have a love affair with the city." She lived in Chelsea above the popular restaurant Bottino. "Every day you're seeing everyone. 'Hi Trace, how are you?' Which made it difficult because you couldn't duck downstairs to buy the newspaper in your pyjamas."

There's still a glimmer of the small-town girl besotted by the great metropolis. "I used to secretly go to this Puerto Rican hole-in-the-wall joint," she says, affecting a broad New York accent. "[I'd] have this yellow chicken. It was so divine... It wasn't even organic, but it was delicious, and really good for hangovers, and then I looked around and saw Patti Smith doing the same thing with her band, and then I felt good."

Moffatt spent "12 years going out", but now her party days are over. "Well almost, not quite," she laughs. She left New York because she missed nature – something she attributes to her Aboriginal side. ("I did not consider Central Park nature.") That, and she can now stay in close touch with her American art dealer via the internet; when she left Australia, faxes were still de rigueur.

In 2010, Moffatt traded in Chelsea for Sydney's McMahons Point, swapped the view of 10th Avenue's grimy sidewalks for the azure waters of Berrys Bay.

The set piece of *Spirited* is the premiere of *Art Calls*, a TV series whose first two episodes were commissioned by GOMA and will eventually be shown online on ABC Arts. It's a return to Moffatt-as-actor, who stars as a talk-show host Skyping into the homes and studios of various artists, writers, architects. She says it's a heightened version of herself: "TV Tracey." A surrealist credit sequence renders her like a spirit medium, ready to convene with the dead.

You can see the hallmarks of a director, as she cajoles her guests into telling stories and performing. The fact that she's controlling has become something of a running joke. During a media tour the day before *Spirited* opens she's still giving the curators instructions on lighting and hangings. When Wright delivered his first question at the public talk, Moffatt replied, "No, no, no. The question was supposed to be how does *Art Calls* sit within *Spirited*, the show, here at GOMA?" "Let's do that then," he laughs.

She says she wanted people around her, old friends and new. "It's Tracey Moffatt, and her work, with the others," she says. "It's me, it's Tracey Moffatt wanting the company." Throughout *Spirited*, other artists' work, selected by Moffatt from GOMA's permanent collection, is shown in dialogue with hers.

Whenever she doesn't want to answer one of my questions she segues into talking about the work of others: the great minimalists, Agnes Martin and Bridget

Riley; her beloved Southern writers, Carson McCullers, Truman Capote and Katherine Anne Porter; accounts of colonial history. Before she goes to sleep at night she likes to read about shipwrecks, to unwind.

Just as she doesn't like talking about her art, she says she finds it painful to even look at it in the gallery. "It's a sort of, this is a little bit extreme, but it's like almost a... a self-hate. Not a hate, but that I've exposed something and I'm a little ashamed of it. A little... It's an old idea. It was in my head two years ago and now it's on the wall and I'm done with it and the next thing is now going on inside. That's what's got to come out."

I ask her about unrealised ambitions, and she says she doesn't really have any. For Moffatt, success is being able to keep making art. She tells me why she finds tales of shipwrecks so comforting. "I like the survival stories. And that's what it's like being an artist, it's surviving and it's your next body of work. You're all alone and nobody's coming to save you." ●

Artist Tracey Moffatt's latest exhibition represents a homecoming of sorts for the one-time New York resident. Just don't expect the native Queenslander to say too much about it. By *Rebecca Harkins-Cross*.

