

# Tracey Moffatt defies labels but adds to the story of Aboriginal art in the Venice Biennale

By [Daniel Browning](#) for [Away!](#)  
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**Photo:** [Hell](#), by the artist Tracey Moffatt. (Supplied: Tracey Moffatt)  
**Map:** [Italy](#)

It must be particularly frustrating for the enigmatic Tracey Moffatt to be hailed as the first solo Aboriginal artist to represent Australia at the Venice Biennale.

Her work, including two suites of photographs and film works, will soon be installed in the monolithic, brutalist black cube that is the Australian Pavilion — the only 21st century building on the site known as the Giardini della Biennale.

Moffatt has always rejected the label "Aboriginal artist", preferring instead to be defined simply as a contemporary artist.

Media player: "Space" to play, "M" to mute, "left" and "right" to seek.

Part of Moffatt's courtly dance with fame is to defy those critics who might categorise her.

"I think Tracey Moffatt wants to present herself as a slippery kind of character that the media and the pundits can't grab hold of," says the Aboriginal artist Vernon Ah Kee, who exhibited his work at the 2009 Venice Biennale in a group exhibition with non-Indigenous artists Ken Yonetani, Clare Healy and Sean Cordeiro.

"She revels in it — and honestly, more power to her.

"It's a clever game but I don't know how helpful it is to her or Australian art. She's always hesitant to describe herself definitively, and that's fine, but when people don't have anything to latch on to, they're just going to make up their own stories."



[Photo: Tracey Moffatt rejects the label "Aboriginal artist", preferring to call herself a contemporary artist. \(Supplied: Kate Ballis\)](#)

Moffatt's insistence on self-definition — or at least taking the epithet "Aboriginal artist" away from others — could be interpreted as mischief, or a form of personal sovereignty.

Certainly, Moffatt's artistic output over a 35-year career defies categorisation.

Yet Aboriginal artists still produce work that exceeds the nationalist term "Australian".

Aboriginal art, at the very least, contends with, deflects or subverts the entire notion of an Australian nation state. If it's good, it even makes you think you imagined the last 230 years.

## **A history of Aboriginal participation at Venice**

Rover Thomas and Trevor Nickolls were the first Aboriginal artists to represent Australia at the Venice Biennale in 1990.

In Thomas's work, "Australia" is subsumed by the ochres mined on Gija country in the East Kimberley, where the master lived and worked.

"Australian" is almost like saying "Lilliputian" — not very descriptive, and not particularly helpful when it comes to visual art.

"Aboriginal", however, is evocative, offering a political and social context as much as an aesthetic one. It can drive meaning and compel us to think very broadly.



**Photo:** [Two art handlers hold Lundari \(Barramundi Dreaming\) by the late Rover Thomas. \(Getty Images: William West\)](#)

According to Seva Frangos, the art consultant who led the first exhibition of Aboriginal art in the Australian Pavilion in Venice in 1990, the Australia Council has driven a political agenda to position Aboriginal art in a certain way internationally.

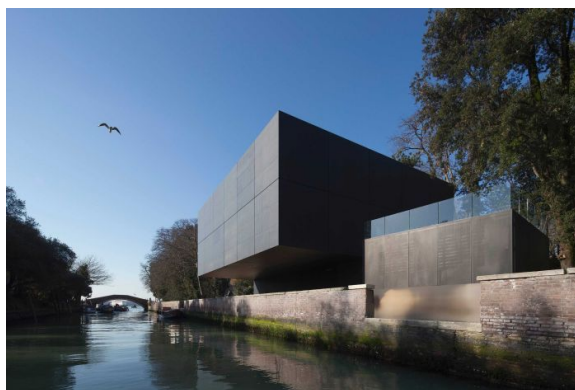
Before then, Ms Frangos says, Aboriginal art was seen as ethnographic. But at the 1990 show, Australia wanted to present Indigenous artists as Australian contemporary artists.

"That was the concept of the show. It straddled a fine line in many ways," she says. "The work itself was world class.

"This was Australia attempting to take contemporary Indigenous art from remote communities to the world, and to have a dialogue about that within a contemporary art practice."

The next big exhibition of Aboriginal art in Venice was in 1997 when Hetti Perkins, Victoria Lynn and Brenda Croft curated a group show featuring three leading Aboriginal artists, all of whom were women.

That exhibition, titled *Fluent*, was perhaps last big fanfare of Aboriginal art in terms of official Australian representation at the Venice Biennale.



**Photo:** [The Australian Pavilion in the Giardini della Biennale in Venice. \(Supplied: John Gollings\)](#)

The Australia Council tender process only invited submissions from female Indigenous artists, which led to a minor critical backlash.

"Of course there were a few hackles raised, which got reflected in the early press of the time," says curator Brenda Croft.

"It would be much more rampant now — but it was quite negative and dismissive, which we expected."

Fluent included the work of Emily Kame Kngwarreye, Yvonne Koolmatrie and Judy Watson, covering a broad range of Aboriginal women's artistic practice.

"The Venice Biennale is this weird carbuncle, a limpet that's attached itself to the city," Croft says.

"These are expos, they're art expos. [Venice] sees itself as the most important, but is it?"

## **Moffatt's work 'open to many interpretations'**

Tracey Moffatt is circumspect, even slightly evasive, about the work she has created for the historic Australia Council commission, as she must be.

"My Horizon is open to many interpretations," Moffatt told Cassie McCullagh in an interview for Books and Arts.

"For me, it could be about looking out into the distance or into the future to escape from where we are or our situation, almost like a retreat, a moving into the realm of one's imagination. And that is what artists do, we go to some other place."

Only one sepia-toned image, shadowy and filmic, has been released to the media — complying with the strict embargo set by the Venice Biennale itself.

Media player: "Space" to play, "M" to mute, "left" and "right" to seek.

The title of Moffatt's Venice exhibition My Horizon is represented perfectly in this image. We don't know whether the actors are fantasising of the horizon beyond, trapped in a world they cannot escape. There is refuge beyond the horizon — or is it a place where dreams go to die?

Hell is from a suite of photographic images entitled Passage, and in Moffatt's enigmatic narrative style, probably alludes to some interpersonal drama. The image might be read as a scene from a 1940s film-noir, but there is nothing Hollywood about it.

The costumed actors in this particular shadow play appear to be African; a woman — dressed for some kind of journey, possibly pregnant — gazes into the distance across a sandstone embankment.



[Photo: Something more no. 1 1989, a Tracey Moffatt work held by the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. \(Supplied\)](#)

A man in a lairy suit and broad-brimmed hat smokes a languid cigarette, while another man waits nearby on a motorcycle.

Moffatt does not take photographs; she stages them, as if they are scenes from a film.

If this is a nostalgic take on the absences and silences in film history, and the exclusion of people of colour except as ciphers, the nostalgia is for a world that never existed.

Power and colonial history, and cinematic tropes figure in Moffatt's images over time.

Sex and sexual allure, promise and threat are conflated with racial politics.

## **A platform to interrupt nationalist discourse**

Aboriginal artist Daniel Boyd, whose artwork sometimes obliterates colonial paintings to mere points of light, had his work curated into the Venice Biennale two years ago.

Oddly enough, curator Okwui Enwezor also selected a 1994 work, held privately, by the late Emily Kame Kngwarreye.



**Photo:** [Daniel Boyd works on Untitled \(2014\), acquired by the Art Gallery of New South Wales. \(Supplied: Daniel Boyd/Art Gallery of NSW\)](#)

Boyd told *Awaye* at the time that he was thrilled that Enwezor had included several of his monochromatic paintings to be seen in two highly visible locations: the Arsenale, a complex built around Venice's historic shipyard, and the Giardini.

"I must say that it's a huge honour to be representing Indigenous Australians," he said in 2015.

According to Ah Kee, "the pavilions function like these little embassies".

"Another aspect is that they are spaces for disruption and a place to ask questions of their own countries, and some artists do that amazingly," he says.

Ah Kee's installation featured 10 custom-made surfboards. The work, an installation called *Cant Chant*, riffed on the idea that the beach is a contested, even racialised site in Australia.

Ah Kee also exhibited a multi-channel video about two parallel flashpoints in recent Australian history: the 2005 Cronulla riots and the death in custody of Cameron Doomadgee on Palm Island in 2004.



**Photo:** [The entrance to the Australian Pavilion in the Giardini della Biennale in Venice.](#) (Supplied: John Gollings)

He says the biennale can offer a platform to interrupt nationalist discourse even by zeroing in on domestic politics.

But he rejects the suggestion that Aboriginal art has always rocked the boat in Venice.

"That's at the crux of what Venice is: do you bow to the national narrative and pitch your tent to the popularity side of the fence? Or do you want to stand on the other side of the fence and hold signs up, as well as mirrors to the country?"

Ah Kee says there is no doubt that Aboriginal artists have well and truly earned their place in Venice.

"There is room for Aboriginal voices everywhere now — because it's our turn."