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Tracey Moffatt's Venice Biennale entry is a hellish work

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Artist Tracey Moffatt describes her bucolic studio surrounded by national park as her temple. But inside hell awaits.

Hell is the title of her dramatic photograph that will form part of her exhibition *My Horizon* to be unveiled at the prestigious Venice Biennale in May.



Photographer and artist Tracey Moffatt has been preparing for the Venice Biennale at her Middle Head studio. Photo: Nick Moir

Shot in hazy late afternoon light, *Hell* conjures a film still from a 1940s-era movie.

In the dramatic, sepia image, a woman gazes away as a snappily dressed man smokes a cigarette behind her. In the distance another man waits.



Hell, an image from Tracey Moffatt's Passage series. Photo: Tracey Moffatt

Moffatt is reluctant to discuss her work – beyond volunteering that it was shot with the aid of a smoke machine – or even its location. So if hell is other people, as Sartre famously wrote, Moffatt isn't saying. She will say only that the drama the three are enacting is as "old as time itself".

As the sole artist to represent Australia at this year's biennale – the Olympics of the contemporary arts calendar – Moffatt has produced a large body of work since she was selected more than a year ago. Getting ready for the prestigious show has had elements of nightmare.

"You are working to a deadline ... you have to speak to the press. Normally I wouldn't," says Moffatt.

She works in silence in her Middle Head studio, like a high priestess in her temple – talking only at mealtimes. "It doesn't mean I'm grumpy," she says.

Her starting point for her photographs is finding the right location.

"I find a location and spin a story around it," she says.

Her images are entirely constructed – she does not photograph reality. Their hallmark is an operatic blend of pain and glamour.

Hell is one of 12 large-scale photographs from the series *Passage*, set in a mysterious dockland.

Her *My Horizon* exhibition comprises two major photographic series – including *Passage* – and two video works. Aside from *Hell*, these remain under wraps until Venice.

But all explore journeys, legal and illegal, as well as race, gender, sexuality and estrangement – themes that have recurred in her work.

"People throughout history and across cultures have always escaped across borders to seek new lives," she says.

Naomi Milgrom, Australian commissioner for this year's biennale, acknowledged Moffatt's "ferocious commitment" to creating a deeply poetic suite of photos and films.

Curator Natalie King described the forthcoming exhibition as expansive and personal. King has edited a publication to accompany *My Horizon*, with contributions from international and Australian writers, including Alexis Wright and Djon Mundine.

Artists who have previously represented Australia at the Venice Biennale include Fiona Hall, Patricia Piccinini, Bill Henson and Arthur Boyd.

Moffatt, who was born in Brisbane in 1960, is one of Australia's most successful international artists.

She came to prominence in the mid-1980s with work that alluded to black stereotypes and has drawn on her background as an Aboriginal child growing up in a foster family.

A photographer, film and video maker, she is best known for her striking self-portrait in red cheongsam, from her 1989 *Something More* series.

But despite her stellar career, Moffatt would like to have demonstrated ability in a different form of visual art.

"I wish I could paint," she says.