
THE

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Tracey Moffatt at the 2017 Venice Biennale

While the photography in Tracey Moffatt's exhibition at the Venice Biennale bears touches of the knowing melodrama of her early work, her film work comes with a disaffected Hollywood air.

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Tracey Moffatt's work exhibited in the Australian pavilion at the 57th International Art Exhibition in Venice.
Credit: John Gollings

American artist Mark Bradford's sculptural, painterly world at the Venice Biennale, inside the US pavilion, evokes emotions, agoraphobic anxiety and panic. Bradford's work takes its lead from his poem on Hephaestus, god of the forge and of artists, cast out of Olympus, and, no doubt, the fate of the black man in city neighbourhoods in the United States.

Folly by Phyllida Barlow, the British artist's jumble of gigantic painted polystyrene, scrim, timber and concrete sculptures, shows her vision of post-Brexit Britain. The awesome ugliness of this and so many other exhibitions, each in their nation's pavilion, strikes at the anxiety of people everywhere, on one side or the other of a nasty conflict or among the millions fleeing across national borders seeking refuge from violence.

South Korea's mock gaudy advertising, with neon and hybrid American-Asian kitsch aplenty, left me exhausted. But there were occasions for light relief from these apocalyptic visions,

especially in the Arsenale, where beauty, delicacy and emotion were not suppressed by the desperate clamour for my attention so evident in the Giardini.

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New Zealand's Lisa Reihana presented a magnificent animated ultra-high-definition film, scrolling slowly across the warehouse wall at the end of the Arsenale, depicting historical and imagined vignettes from the records of Captain James Cook's pursuit of Venus across Oceania, in a revision of a scenic wallpaper commissioned by a merchant in the 19th century. She and her team, including her husband, made *In Pursuit of Venus (Infected)*, over a period of 10 years.

Yet the horrors of the world, the flight of refugees, the loss of home, the disasters, were the inescapable, repetitive subjects.

So different from all this was the Australian presence. Among the spectacular, dense, overwhelming festival of world art, the Australian pavilion hosted Tracey Moffatt's exhibition, *My Horizon*, consisting of two films and two series of photographs, and the contrast was palpable. I was in the large crowd at its morning opening in the speckled sun and shade in this lovely corner of the Giardini. When the speeches were done, we filed in. Would Moffatt's work succeed amid the visual uproar of this 57th International Art Exhibition, loved and condemned for its extravagance? As snarky critic John McDonald remarked, the numbers were one thing: her exhibition drew record crowds.

Two starkly different views of the success of *My Horizon* immediately emerged: love and rejection. Some asserted that Australia should have chosen Moffatt years ago to represent the country at the biennale, "when she was at her peak". Others worried that these works were a return to her early work, lacking in innovation and grand vision. Others still were seduced by the elegance of the two photography-based series, *Passage* and *Body Remembers*, almost painterly with subdued ochre hues in the shadows and tones on rag paper. They are moody, glamorous and redolent with the well-traversed social and cultural history that has inspired Moffatt as an artist, and also drawn a loyal audience.

While much has been made of Moffatt as an Indigenous artist, what is so evident in *My Horizon* is her concern with the idea of gender, especially the oppressed woman seeking to be free, with memory and trauma, with landscape, horror and escape. Moffatt appeals to a very hip universalism in these works, and it is this complexity that was admired in Venice.

These photo-dramas are reminiscent of her *Something More* series, which shot her to stardom in 1989. But whereas cibachrome photographs are saturated with rich colours to exaggerate the staged melodrama and horror of her subject, these new works are softly coloured, dreamy in a more disturbing way, and so elegant.

Something More deliberately evoked B-grade Hollywood movies of the 1950s, and the trope of the exotic coloured siren embroiled in shabby small-town sexual and racial tensions, set on a dangerous path to escape. By contrast, *Passage* has the filmic qualities of some recent American

television influenced by arthouse films. *Body Remembers* conjures a sense of the recurring nightmare with a tinge of irony, and even a worldly ennui, in its presentation of a mysterious black housemaid among the ruins of a house where she may have served. Both series struck me as more American than Australian, and may reflect the artist's long period of residence in New York. Whether this is the referential source, I cannot say. It could just as easily be attributed to the predominance of American popular culture in film, television and media, and Moffatt's use of Hollywood film imagery throughout her career.

The two films, *Vigil* and *The White Ghosts Sailed In*, do not sit well with these sophisticated photo-works and yet they are clearly a progression from her eight montage films made with Gary Hillberg. Varying in length from 10 to about 20 minutes, the montage films are made from spliced segments of footage from Hollywood movies, each segment less than the legal limit of 10 seconds. Hollywood stereotypes that emerged in the 1940s – such as the black savage (*Other*), the black maid (*Lip*), the scorned woman (*Love*) – are hilariously drawn from short, repetitive segments to reveal their profound impact in our cultural life. *Vigil* is in a similar vein, but takes the television images of refugees crammed onto fragile boats and arriving at the dangerous northern shores of Australia and splices them with Hollywood film segments of white people looking in horror through binoculars, a window and a ship port. The “us and them” of white privilege and non-white suffering is starkly drawn, cartoonish, and while this binary is its simple narrative, the subtext is the tabloid media's deliberate manufacture of fear and loathing of refugees. With *The White Ghosts Sailed In*, Moffatt takes her ironic reading of “us and them” to the level of absurdity: she constructs the conceit that a movie camera was seen from the cliffs of Sydney Harbour on January 26, 1788, as Captain Arthur Phillip was about to arrive at the head of the First Fleet. The film was sealed up and lost for many years, and found on an Aboriginal mission, and hence the grainy, scratchy quality of the celluloid. I wondered if this conceit would be appreciated by Aboriginal people of the Sydney region.

The emotional coolness of *My Horizon* is more obvious than in Moffatt's previous works. The sense of detachment, perhaps a deliberate nod to the effect of film, television and other image capturing as it mediates our experience of life, or even the default setting of a highly cerebral artist, is as powerful a statement as the subject matter. Notable, too, is the playful sardonicism on the matter of interpreting Indigenous history. Since she left Australia for New York, Moffatt has declared that she is an artist, not an Indigenous artist. This statement is rarely understood in the essentialising art scene in Australia, but much has changed since the ridiculous reviews of her work by Sydney critics in the 1980s. Her diffidence about the Indigenous subject in her artwork, whether herself as the mysterious maid in *Body Remembers*, or imaginary natives with a movie camera in *The White Ghosts Sailed In*, is evident, and perhaps unnecessary. She was a pioneer in the field of film and photography as contemporary art, and she has influenced many artists, while retaining her unique status as a trailblazer.

My Horizon is complex and mysterious, two qualities that Moffatt has strived for throughout her career. She purports that she will not be interviewed about her work or explain it, and yet a handsome book of the same name has been published by Thames & Hudson. The information and interpretation in its essays are sometimes enlightening but usually enigmatic. Moffatt has retained the mystery she so highly values – while providing the images and some biographical details, she leaves the reader with just a few more hints about her artworks.