



Tracey Moffatt's Haunting Narratives

For her fifth solo exhibition at Tyler Rollins New York, Australian artist Tracey Moffatt's new body of well-crafted photographs reveal an uncanny sense lurking in the backdrops of enigma, adventure and catastrophe.

TEXT: Bansie Vasvani

IMAGES: Courtesy of the artist and Tyler Rollins Fine Art

"I don't like to reveal where the images are shot," Tracey Moffatt tells a group of students and art lovers during an informal discussion of her six photographic diptychs featured in her solo exhibition, "Portals," at Tyler Rollins Fine Art in New York. Here, as in her previous bodies of work, the exact whereabouts of her carefully crafted *mise-en-scenes* remain a mystery. Meant to be doorways to an imaginary world, the Australian artist's works, which aspire towards painterly images, also look like film stills in motion. But what comes immediately to mind from the hazy whiplashed photographs in the show is an uncanny sense lurking in the backdrops of enigma, adventure, and catastrophe.



Tracey Moffatt, *The Hospital Ship*, 2019, C-Type print, 79 x 117 cm; 79 x 73 cm. Image courtesy of the artist and Tyler Rollins Fine Art.

Reminiscent of the film noir tradition of the late 1940s, Moffatt's images are psychological narratives that propel imaginary investigations of dramatic scenes. Consider *The Hospital Ship* (2019); in this diptych, a ship appearing to be stranded in the distance is accompanied by the image of a ghostlike figure wearing a nurse's cap emerging from the water. With her heart symbolically aflame, and her expression obscured by the power of a strange force whose shadow hovers ominously behind her, one is left to concoct a story about the tragic conflagration and the despair of the lone, heart-broken survivor. Similarly in *The Outlaw* (2019), the eeriness of an outside agency lingers through the marvelous evocation of the prairies of old Westerns. Here a lone androgynous looking cowboy standing by a desolate building in the outback accompanies a hazy image of a horse galloping wildly through the fiery dried underbrush of an open landscape. What is their relationship, one wonders? Is the horse fleeing for its life?

While Moffatt creates the illusion of movement by shifting the camera at a low shutter speed and utilizing the old-fashioned technique of strobing to freeze the subject and leave a motion trail around it, she also evokes a mysterious energy. This palpable sensation that permeates the scenes of calamity and adventure is enhanced by Moffatt's astute use of color. Recalling J.M.W. Turner's enriched landscapes in which reality recedes in favor of atmosphere, the subdued hues of blue and yellow around the hospital ship and the nurse, and the blazing splendor of honey around the horse replicates the master painter's ability to create the pouring in of opaque light. A similar atmospheric effect can also be seen in *The Visit*, (2019), where a child roaming unaccompanied in the wilderness seems illuminated by ethereal rays.



Tracey Moffatt, *The Visit*, 2019, C-Type print, 79 x 73 cm; 79 x 117 cm. Image courtesy of the artist and Tyler Rollins Fine Art.

Unlike the more stylized manner of her "Passage," series that was presented for the Australian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2017, the haunting effect that Moffatt devised in her earlier "Spiritual

Landscapes,” series in 2013 recurs in this new body of works through the swirling dreamscape of her mobile figures and narratives. Although Moffatt has rightly argued against being pigeonholed by her Aboriginal heritage, one can’t help but recall the significance of Dreaming—a term used by anthropologists to describe Australian Aboriginal creation of myths and beliefs. Australian Aboriginals believed that the Spirits created the people and the land and gave tools to their Ancestors who made everything. This period, termed Dreamtime, connects the past to the present and the future, and is believed to never come to an end.

By posing as a model in these images, which by no means are self-portraits, Moffatt acknowledges that history and her own background inspire many of her photographs. In *The Visit*, for instance, the image of the child is a photograph of Moffatt playing in the Cherbourg Aboriginal Settlement in Queensland where from the turn of the 20th century, Aboriginal natives were held or ‘re-settled,’ while the humble woman in the adjoining panel whose hands are raised as if she is in a trance is the artist dressed to suit the part. Reluctant to reveal more, Moffatt shares the fact that her own family members have become very emotional when confronted by some of these scenes. One questions then if the woman is reaching out to the ancestors of the land to help make sense of events occurring in her environment.



Tracey Moffatt, *The Airport*, 2019, C-Type print, 79 x 117 cm; 79 x 73 cm. Image courtesy of the artist and Tyler Rollins Fine Art.

The persistent notion of an inescapable past, even of something unsettling is seen in *The Airport* (2019). Here a lopsided moving shot of an old building resembling an airport from six decades ago seems covered by wisps of grey smoke. Does the accompanying image of a woman on an empty tarmac who is

Moffatt wearing a 1950s green sheath dress and sunglasses have anything to do with it? This sense of disquiet, that something is wrong and misplaced also occurs in *The Bunker*, (2019). What is a stylishly attired woman shadowed by a ghost doing abandoned on a moor?

In all the works in the exhibition, large swaths of desolate land underscore the significance of the places and its implied harrowing history. Whether or not the landscapes represent Australia, and the lurking feeling of phantoms surrounding the trendy characters are meant to be indictments on the settlers who uprooted the Indigenous people, Moffatt's renown as a theatrical storyteller is more convincing than ever.

About the artist

Tracey Moffatt is one of today's leading international visual artists working in photography, film and video. Many of her photographs and short films have achieved iconic status both in her home country of Australia and around the world. Her photographs play with many different printing processes and have a filmic, narrative quality. She approaches all her photographic and video work as a film director, and she is known as a powerful visual storyteller. Moffatt recently represented Australia for the 2017 Venice Biennale, with an exhibition of new work in the Australia Pavilion in the Giardini. She was the first Australian Indigenous artist to present a solo exhibition in the biennale.

Born in Brisbane, Australia, in 1960, Moffatt studied visual communications at the Queensland College of Art, from which she graduated in 1982. Since her first solo exhibition at the Australian Centre for Photography in Sydney in 1989, she has exhibited extensively in museums all over the world.

Tracey Moffatt: Portals

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