

TRACEY MOFFATT UP IN THE SKY



Up in the sky 1
from the series *Up in the sky* 1997
toned photolithograph
61 x 76 cm
Purchased with funds provided by the Art Gallery Society of New South Wales
Contempo Group 1997
362.1997.1



Up in the sky 6
from the series *Up in the sky* 1997
toned photolithograph
61 x 76 cm
Purchased with funds provided by the Art Gallery Society of New South Wales
Contempo Group 1997
362.1997.6



Up in the sky 15
from the series *Up in the sky* 1997
toned photolithograph
61 x 76 cm
Purchased with funds provided by the Art Gallery Society of New South Wales
Contempo Group 1997
362.1997.15



Up in the sky 16
from the series *Up in the sky* 1997
toned photolithograph
61 x 76 cm
Purchased with funds provided by the Art Gallery Society of New South Wales
Contempo Group 1997
362.1997.16



TRACEY MOFFATT

AUSTRALIA b1960

ARTIST STATEMENT

‘My work (*Up in the sky*) is full of emotion and drama, you can get to that drama by using a narrative, and my narratives are usually very simple, but I twist it ... there is a storyline, but ... there isn’t a traditional beginning, middle and end.’

Tracey Moffatt, 1999¹

CRITICAL STATEMENTS

‘Moffatt’s vision is essentially theatrical, and one might argue that being an artstar – with all its attendant posturing – is as much a part of her practice as the art itself.’

Hannah Fink, 2004²

‘(The series) *Up in the sky* 1997, is a travelogue from the artist’s journey to the social and geographical margins, a visual document of the rugged world of misfits, drifters, and tough types that could almost be anywhere. It is in Australia. You will not fail to notice that Moffatt’s vision subtly re-genders this mythically male territory, populating it with female characters and featuring a mother and child as the main protagonists – if this sprawling but coreless photographic epic could be said to have any. Moffatt’s project, though, is the strangeness of her images – the poetic density of these ostensibly documentary photographs – as well as the way in which they relate to one another, implying narrative continuity and refusing it at the same time. What is her story “about”? What exactly does it “document”?’

Ewa Lajer-Burcharth, 1998³

‘Her narratives have the character of Greek tragedy which might also be interpreted from a very twentieth century view as concerning the unconscious and the realm of dreams, fantasies and possession.’

Gael Newton, 1988⁴

‘Moffatt always added another ingredient of glamour (to her work). Glamour is to do with being made beautiful rather than beauty, which is understood to be innate. Glamour is showbiz, the projected image – and glamour has a slightly tacky edge ... Glamour broadcasts itself, and the aspiration to be glamorous is allied to camp when it occurs in adults. This edge in Moffatt’s work immediately differentiates her from her peers and from a clear cut political understanding.’

Judy Annear, 2002⁵

TRACEY MOFFATT

UP IN THE SKY

One of Australia's most widely acclaimed artists, Tracey Moffatt is known nationally and internationally for her film, photography and video works. Drawing on cinema and the mass media including television, her art is as likely to be inspired by popular culture and memories from her 1960s childhood and 1970s adolescence, as it is by socio-political history or art history.

Moffatt grew up in Brisbane and, after studying at Queensland College of Art, moved to Sydney to pursue a career as an artist. In 1986 her work was shown in the *NADOC '86 exhibition of Aboriginal and Islander photographers*, the first contemporary exhibition of work by Indigenous photographers. In 1987 she was one of the ten founding members of Boomalli Aboriginal Artist Co-operative, established in response to the lack of representation of urban Aboriginal art within the wider art scene and stereotyped ideas of what constitutes Aboriginal culture. Other members of this group, described as Sydney's 'Black avant-garde', included Brenda L Croft, Bronwyn Bancroft, Fiona Foley, Avril Quail, Jeffery Samuels and Michael Riley.

Moffatt held her first major solo exhibition, which included the iconic series of Cibachrome photographs *Something more* 1989 at the Australian Centre for Photography in Sydney in 1989. She has since held more than 100 solo exhibitions in Europe, the United States and Australia, including the major survey *Free falling* at the Dia Center for the Arts, New York (1998), and self-titled exhibitions at both the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney (2003–04), and the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, Montreal, Quebec, Canada (2005). Many monographs have also been published on her work.

In her taut and sometimes disturbing body of work, Moffatt makes images that are often confronting, thought-provoking reflections on contemporary (Australian) life which consider race, desire, love and hate. Her work is characterised by the use of glamour, camp and violence. Although famously reluctant to be categorised as an Aboriginal artist, Moffatt's Aboriginality has been an important ingredient in her work.

Moffatt's art practice has always navigated between the still and the moving image. She first gained critical recognition for her film work when her short film *Night cries: a rural tragedy* 1989 was selected for official competition at the 1990 Cannes Film Festival. Her first feature film, *beDevil*, was also selected in 1993. The moving image has continued to be a vital part of Moffatt's practice. In 1997 she made *Heaven*, and has since made a number of other short, fast-paced montages drawn from cinema – such as *Lip* 1999, *Artist* 2000 and *Mother* 2009 – with her long-time collaborator, film editor Gary Hillberg. The tenth and final work in this series is *Other* 2010, commissioned for the 6th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art. *Other* is a funny, frenetic and sexy 6-minute film exploring the fear, fascination and repressed desire that encounters with the 'other' provoke.

In her photographic art Moffatt has consistently worked in ways akin to film-making, developing a number of major photographic series which suggest a narrative reading. Each series sets up staged tableaux, but although a story is implied through continuity of character, location, themes and the serial arrangement of images, it is never explicitly stated. The viewer is intrigued and assumes a coherent narrative, but in fact, on closer look, there are only fragments or flashes of story with no simple resolution.

The structure of the work suggests the logic of a dream – and her compositions are compelling and condensed, charged and layered – tapping into powerful and fundamental drives such as desire.

Her first major series, the lush and saturated *Something more* 1989, evokes 1950s B-grade movie stills with their melodramatic staging and camp sensibility. In constructed settings against a painted outback sky, the series suggests the story of a restless girl – played in the series by Moffatt herself – who yearns for 'something more'. Dressed initially in a red cheongsam and trapped in dusty poverty in a quintessential outback, her attempts to escape into a world of glamour and luxury are thwarted and she dies on the road which had seemed to offer her a way out. The mixture of harsh reality, fantasy and glamour is characteristic of her work.

Moffatt's subjects evoke our deep-seated pain, fears and desires – the wounds that never heal – hence the title of her two-part tragicomic series *Scarred for life* 1994 and 1999 which references the documentary look of photojournalism and the photo essays in *Life* magazine. Based on true stories told to the artist, these vignettes have a familiarity and universal resonance because, as Moffatt has observed, 'everyone has a tragic tale to tell'.⁶

Chosen as the first body of work to be exhibited in the Art Gallery of New South Wales's new dedicated photography gallery, Moffatt's *Up in the sky* series of 25 photolithographs examines the subject of race and violence, presenting a loose narrative set against the backdrop of an outback town populated by misfits and marginal characters. The series draws on the bleak and gritty look of Pier Paolo Pasolini's masterpiece of Italian cinema *Accattone* 1961, as well as American Walker Evan's photographs of Cuban country towns shot in 1933.

One of her larger photographic series, *Up in the sky* recalls the story of the Stolen Generations, developing a mythic and uncanny narrative that probes the ways this history lives in our collective consciousness. The central characters, a mother and child, are seemingly pursued and menaced by witch-like nuns who clutch at the precious child. In other vignettes men of different race wrestle, Amazonian women attack wrecked cars, and a 'mad' man cackles and leers.

Up in the sky was shot on location in the remote and wide open spaces around Broken Hill, NSW, dispensing with the artifice of the sets and painted backdrops featured in Moffatt's earlier work such as *Something more*. Films such as *A town like Alice* 1956, *Wake in fright* 1971, *Mad Max 2* 1981 and *Razorback* 1984 were set in the landscapes around Broken Hill; and *Up in the sky* echoes their dystopian atmosphere in the dust, emptiness and vast skies.

Moffatt's interest in the ways that earlier artists such as Albert Namatjira have depicted the land is evident in some of her work such as *Something more* and *Night cries: a rural tragedy*. Other artists admired by Moffatt are Georgia O'Keeffe, Annie Brigman, Louise Bourgeois and more recently, Andy Warhol.

Rather than being tied to a specific time or place, Moffatt's work seems to stem from a universal imaginary, dependent on the powerful drives associated with longing and loss, the forces of beauty and horror, and the ripples of trauma.

ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION

'The serial arrangement of the photographs suggests a narrative format, but if there is a story here, it is being told in flashes, through arrested, surreptitious moments of vision ... no storyline, no closure or conclusion can be discerned. Some scenes do appear in a closely progressing sequence, but others are separated by huge jumps in the narrative.'

Ewa Lajer-Burcharth

- Consider this statement and look at the series of photographs *Up in the sky*, 1997 by Tracey Moffatt and describe what you can see. How has this artist communicated the idea of a story? Notice elements such as seriality, location, theme and action. Analyse how each contributes to the construction of a narrative.
- The images in this series are numbered. Is the meaning of the work altered if the sequence is rearranged? Does the narrative progress evenly? Identify the central 'characters' and the role they play. Can you infer what the story may be about? Give an account of your interpretation to the class and compare your version with that of others.
- Describe the different viewpoints used by Moffatt in this series. How has she positioned the camera to achieve this? What kinds of equipment might she have employed? How do these camera angles contribute to the power of the imagery and affect the reading of the narrative?

'Moffatt's settings are as critical to an understanding of her work as any other element.'

Judy Annear, senior curator, photographs

- Consider the use of place in Moffatt's work. Many of her photographic suites and films were created in the studio, using painted backdrops and sets. Look at works such as *Something more* 1989, *Invocations* 2001, and the film *Night cries: a rural tragedy* 1989. How have the use of costume, make-up, props and lighting contributed to mood and atmosphere?
- Discuss how these simulated environments may create a heightened sense of unreality. Why do you think Moffatt chose to create these works in the studio?
- Compare *Something more*, *Invocations* and *Night cries* with *Up in the sky*, photographed on location around Broken Hill, NSW. Identify similarities and differences in mood, atmosphere and sense of place between the studio and location work.

Night cries: a rural tragedy 1989 is a visually striking and emotionally intense film that explores the difficult relationship between a daughter and her elderly mother. Shot in lush, saturated colours, it shares characteristics with her photographic work which is often also theatrical, surreal and highly stylised.

- View Moffatt's film *Night cries: a rural tragedy* 1989 and assess your response to it. Discuss the reasons why an audience might find this uncomfortable viewing. Consider how much our interpretation of the relationship between the mother and daughter is influenced by the contemporary Australian social and political context. Would an audience in another country read it differently? View the film *Jedda* 1955 and discuss ways in which *Night cries* may be seen as a sequel.
- Investigate Moffatt's use of still and moving images. View a number of her photographic series such as *Something more*, *Scarred for life* 1994, *Up in the sky* and *Invocations*. Discuss the filmic or cinematic qualities of these works. Consider the use of series, narrative, costume and location. Compare these with her film work such as *Night cries: a rural tragedy* 1989 or *beDevil* 1993. What qualities of the still image in terms of composition, atmosphere and characterisation may be found in the film work?

'(Moffatt) typically uses photography to raid the image banks of popular culture and personal memory, recasting familiar visual codes with an acutely critical edge.'

Bronwyn Clarke-Coolee, 2007^B

- Research Moffatt's diverse work in photomedia, film and video and develop a case study. Identify recurring themes and subjects such as the use of glamour, camp, violence, the role of the outsider and of the child. Discuss the use of humour in her work and in that of other Indigenous artists such as Destiny Deacon and Richard Bell. How may humour be used to challenge existing systems of power?
- Compare Moffatt's body of photographic work with that of other artists whose work is also constructed, theatrical and political such as Cindy Sherman, Anne Zahalka and Anne Ferran. Discuss reasons why these artists choose to work in this way. How is this approach reflective of contemporary art practice?
- Stage a photo shoot. Create a photographic series or film that uses drama, humour and theatricality to create a storyline. Set up a backdrop or choose a location which contributes to the desired mood. Consider representations of character and story through costume, pose and body language. Discuss the power of performance to express emotion and communicate ideas to an audience.

SOURCES AND FURTHER READING

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NOTES

1. Matt G, 'An interview with Tracey Moffatt', P Savage & L Strongman (eds), *Tracey Moffatt*, City Gallery Wellington, Wellington 2002, p 34

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3. Ewa Lajer-Burcharth, 'A stranger within', *Parkett* #53, Zurich 1998, p 38

4. Gael Newton, 'The memory theatre of Tracey Moffatt', *Aboriginal art in modern worlds*, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra 2000, p 24

5. Judy Annear, 'Backroads and backlots: the serial worlds of Tracey Moffatt', lecture, City Gallery, Wellington, New Zealand 2002

6. Tracey Moffatt interviewed by M Cathcart, 'Arts Today', ABC Radio National, Sydney, 31 Jul 2000

7. Ewa Lajer-Burcharth, 'A stranger within', *Parkett* #53, Zurich 1998, pp 37–38

8. *Photography: Art Gallery of New South Wales collection*, 2007, p 262