

Tracey Moffatt's cryptic photographic suite *Pet Thang* 1991 juxtaposes a sheep with the naked body of the artist. By conflating this animal with blurry body close-ups, Moffatt presents an enigmatic photo tableau in acrid lime green tones and fleshy pinks. Here skin, faces, body parts, and a sheep's dense woollen coat sit in starkly uncanny contrast. Hovering forms are eerily suspended across a dense black background, detached from context or originating reference. Bringing together incongruous motifs in a taut composition, Moffatt conjures a shadowy presence, conjugating animal and human with eroticism and isolation.

This suite of phantasmagoric photographs also alludes to the strained relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, as sheep were a species introduced during colonisation. Notably, wool became Australia's major export for pastoralists and graziers of the late nineteenth century; in *Pet Thang*, Moffatt deploys wool to signal settler invasion.

As Moffatt's second photographic series, *Pet Thang* followed on from her distinctive and critically acclaimed suite *Something More* 1989. Unlike the theatrical mise-en-scène of the earlier series, *Pet Thang* is puzzling with its dreamlike references to horror, darkness, and lewd intimacy. There are enigmatic S&M overtones, as black leather gloves are on the sheep's paws. Is this a sacrificial lamb, a toy, or part of Moffatt's memory bank?

The artist has herself commented on the perplexing attributes of the series: "*Pet Thang is very strange, and I'm in it!*"¹

Uninterested in capturing reality with the camera, Moffatt is a deft conjurer who produces photo fictions and make-believe visual ensembles. Carefully configured, planned and orchestrated, her images are storyboarded like a film director would compose a cinematic shot. Moffatt 'spins a yarn', luring us into incongruous worlds of heightened drama:

My adult practice as an artist is only an extension of my childhood shenanigans, though I like to think that my current artworks at least have 'adult themes'. I have always been enthralled by make-believe and the 'set-up'.²

Natalie King

1 Marta Gili, "An Interview with Tracey Moffatt", in *Tracey Moffatt* (Barcelona: Fundacio la Caixa, 1999), 107.

2 Natalie King, "Tracey Moffatt in Conversation with Natalie King", in *Tracey Moffatt: My Horizon*, ed. Natalie King (Surry Hills, NSW; Port Melbourne, Victoria: Australia Council for the Arts; Thames & Hudson Australia, 2017), 11.



Tracey Moffatt, b. 1960

Pet Thang #4, 1991

Type C photograph, 110 x 71 cm

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Image courtesy of the artist and
Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney.

*Let there be light, and there was light
Let there be sound, and there was sound
Let there be drums, there was drums
Let there be guitar, there was guitar, ah
Let there be rock.*

Let There Be Rock, AC/DC, 1977

In 1977, Bon Scott from Aussie heavy metal glam rock band AC/DC wrote the lyrics for the title track of a new album with the help of a Bible. In doing so, he fused the sacred with the profane by correlating the Biblical birth of time from the book of Genesis with the birth of rock 'n' roll. Artist Nell adeptly extends this fusion by injecting a Buddhist twist into this rock-Bible mix by stitching together a Zen robe from AC/DC t-shirts arranged on a mannequin in a room plastered with hand-made crucifixes. Some of the t-shirts are the artist's own, while others have been collected from around the world and fastidiously sewn together. Moreover, AC/DC is a colloquial synonym for bisexuality and, by implication, for in-between places: between heaven and hell; masculine and feminine; sex and death.

Nell's ecclesiastic robe overlaid with Tibetan beads sits on a headless mannequin, with arms outstretched in an exultant gesture. Nell has assembled broken and dirty paintbrushes that were once used by artists (James Gleeson, Margaret Olley, Richard Larter, Lindy Lee, Caroline Rothwell...) and drumsticks once used by drummers (Matthew Hopkins of Naked on the Vague, Charlie Drayton of Cold Chisel, Jim Elliott of The Cruel Sea...), redeploing these creative implements into crucifixes of communion.

Let There Be Robe 2012 is Nell's inglorious tribute to a rock house of worship and devotion. The installation was originally commissioned by the Museum of Old and New Art (MONA), Tasmania, in conjunction with the festival MONA FOMA 2012 and was subsequently included in Nell's solo exhibition *Hometown Girl Has Wet Dream* (dedicated to Mike Kelley) at Maitland Regional Art Gallery, NSW, that year. Nell, who grew up in the country town of Maitland, declares that: "Sunday school was my first aesthetic." She riffs off the spiritual force of music with creative and Christian symbols in an ensemble that was subsequently dedicated to the memory of female rock pioneer Chrissie Amphlett. Literally and lyrically, Nell's rock 'n' roll chapel is an anthem to life, love and lust.

Natalie King



Nell, b. 1975

Let There Be Robe, 2012

Zen robe, t-shirts, beads, badges, mannequin, socks, Converse All-Stars, guitar picks, paintbrushes, drumsticks, scissors, pencils, screwdrivers, chopsticks, dimensions variable

Gifted by the citizens of the Gold Coast to future generations 2017.

Image courtesy of the artist and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney.