

‘I can see a shadow thinking’

Tracey Moffatt in conversation

Natalie King



Tracey Moffatt, *Hell*, 2017, from the series ‘Passage’; type-C photograph on gloss paper, 105.5 x 156cm; image courtesy the artist and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney, and Tyler Rollins Fine Art, New York

Since graduating from the Queensland College of Art in 1982, Tracey Moffatt has become one of Australia’s most visible contemporary artists. Her moving archive of images gleaned from photographic series such as ‘Scarred for Life’ (1994 and 2000) and ‘Night Spirits’ (2013) – along with her film montages created with Gary Hillberg such as *Lip* (1999) and *Other* (2009) – are loaded with emotive themes touching on belonging, bedevilmnt and black-and-white race relations in Australia, about which the artist has rarely spoken. On the eve of her presentation of two newly commissioned photographic series and two new video works for the 57th Venice Biennale as Australia’s first solo Indigenous artist, Moffatt speaks about the artistic inspiration for her elaborately staged fictions.

Natalie King (NK): You grew up in Brisbane, attending Mount Gravatt High School. As a teenager, you made 8mm home movies of your family sent by self-addressed envelope to Kodak for developing. It seems that from a young age you were ‘spinning a yarn’. What is the role of fiction and make-believe in your staged photo fictions?

Tracey Moffatt (TM): It is true, from an early age I used my Kodak home movie camera and my small instamatic stills camera to create low-budget fictions around the house. I would force my brothers, sisters and neighbourhood children to ‘act’ for me. They were my early models in my staged tableaux.

My teenage play with the camera was a continuation of my extremely early make-believe dress-up dramas that I would create and direct with other children. Even as a toddler, I recall making my older tough cousin Roxanne Moffatt climb in and out of a baby basket at my whim. When I was five we stayed on a farm and I dressed my little brother and his mate as Batman and Robin with bits of painted paper and cardboard and tissue. My recollection is clear because I remember the adults in the farmhouse watching me and chuckling at my handiwork. I remember not understanding why they thought it was funny, as I was absolutely diligent about my fiction and the scenarios that I would ‘direct’.

I have never been very interested in capturing reality with a camera, but rather creating my own version of reality. I can use fiction to comment on my own personal history or serious issues of social history or reflect on what is going on in the current political landscape.

NK: You are renowned for experimenting with the medium of photography, inventively manipulating form so that

photography enters other realms. Can you elaborate on the influence of early vintage photography such as daguerreotype, glass plates or magic lantern image projection?

TM: I am always looking at my photo history books and hardly anything inspires me more than a grainy vintage black-and-white photograph. I stare with fascination at reproductions of the first recorded photograph ever made with a camera in 1826 by Niépce, who shot a view of Paris rooftops, I believe. I read that the picture was made using bitumen of Judea, which sounds biblical to me, and it even comes from the Middle East and has also been called Syrian asphalt. I want to make a photograph using this ancient process but it sounds complicated, and it is probably dangerous to inhale.

One of the dreamy qualities that I like in an old photo is the indistinct. What one can’t see beyond the grain and blur. Often in my own photos I strain to obtain the ‘indistinct’, but because I work with narrative I must work towards a visual clarity.

NK: You have said that artmaking is like witchcraft. What is the role of the spirit, the supernatural, the uncanny or the paranormal in your haunted scenes?

TM: Artmaking can be a very mysterious process, where one must stay open to one’s imagination and alert to all things visual. It can be like entering a world of dreams and the supernatural. The ongoing appearance of images is something that cannot be explained. Art can decide when it is ready to emerge. One can literally get a shock when an image appears. I say to myself, ‘Oh, so it (the art) is going to look like that. Who would have thought that?’ My Venice artworks have possessed me for 18 months. It has been a constant ‘play’ of experimentation and of changing and printing images that has not been fun. My images have come out of my Moffatt memory bank; they come from everything I have ever seen and experienced and also from what I have imagined.

It has taken me more than 12 months to find my ‘palette’ for all of my new Venice Biennale photo works. My never-ending experimenting and testing at the photo-printing labs has made me insane. I only stop when I think that the image is finally original. I also stop when the image is ‘working’ in terms of the narrative I have created. For example, I decide whether I need to open up a shadow or to darken it down. It is about creating a visual mood.

Sunlight can play across a wall or object and ricochet in strobes off glass or a camera lens like gifts from heaven. Human

shadows and the distortions they cast can be visually stunning and strangely telling of a person's inner world. I can see a shadow thinking. I can 'read' a person when I see their shadow.

NK: The title of your exhibition is 'My Horizon', which has been described as a 'line where the sky kisses the sea'. How are the poetic and personal a feature of your new work?

TM: 'My Horizon' can be about one wanting to see beyond where one is. It can mean to have vision. It can mean to project out and exist in the realm of one's imagination. This is what artists do, this is what I do, and it is what saves me. Or one can accept the title in a more literal way in the reading of all of my artworks in my Venice Biennale exhibition.

'My Horizon' can describe reaching one's limitations or wanting to go beyond one's limitations. It can be likened to a dream state, like when one looks out and beyond where one is. The horizon line can represent the far and distant future or the unobtainable. There are times in life when we all can see what is 'coming over the horizon', and this is when we make a move or we do nothing and just wait for whatever it is to arrive.

NK: *Hell* is from your new series 'Passage' with a trio of characters teetering on the edge of unreality: a cast caught in diffuse light. Can you discuss the tense and taut relationships between the mother and baby, smoking guy and the cop who are all part of an intriguing *mise en scène*?

TM: The storyline I have invented for 'Passage' involves a young woman dressed for stowaway travel and a baby boy who isn't, a prowling motorcycle cop and a sharp-suited 'middleman' dude who smokes a lot. In the image entitled *Hell* we see him in silhouette, cocky in stance as he puffs on his cig. His slim sexy body is like a chic devil, and the red colouration across the image is awful. In this image the three main 'characters' come together on a hilltop bathed in searing rays of afternoon light. The hilltop might overlook the harbour. The young mother looks out and away, the motorbike cop in the background backs off, apart from the two figures in the foreground.

They all meet in dark streets and laneways by the harbour and all are tortured individuals. I have never liked to finalise my scenarios but rather leave them open to interpretation. The inferno of emotions visible in my images has to do with the baby boy, who is either sold to seek illegal passage or he is rescued from being sold.

NK: You moved back from New York to Sydney after 12 years of living in Manhattan. Can you describe your current studio environment and working rituals?

TM: I have never had a studio to work in. For the Venice Biennale I was granted the use of a room in an old cottage in Sydney bushland. It has been wonderful to have a separate workspace apart from my small apartment where I usually work. I can lie on my back for eight hours riveted to a book that I can't put down. What I describe can be viewed as wasting time, but it is only that I am 'emptying out'. I empty out all of life's important responsibilities. I am then able to conjure images and ideas, or rather make space for creative thoughts to enter me.

In the end I am an artist who is dead serious about wanting to move forward and experiment with the photographic or film and video form. I still strive for old-fashioned artistry with the camera, and I want to push the photo image into other realms. Still, after 40 years of camera play, I get as excited to see the results of my photo shoots as when as a teen I would dash to the chemist shop after school to pick up my latest photo instamatic creations. It has been a struggle for me to develop this new work for the 2017 Venice Biennale. Artmaking is not easy, and it does not appear overnight. It is a system of painstaking process beyond one's control. Artwork images decide when they are ready to emerge; the artist can only funnel them to a type of completion. Art is never, ever 'done'.

This is an edited excerpt from *Tracey Moffatt: My Horizon* (Thames & Hudson, AU\$49.99), the book accompanying the artist's solo presentation at the Australian Pavilion at the 57th Venice Biennale, 13 May – 26 November 2017, and for which Natalie King is the editor and curator.



Tracey Moffatt, *Artist at work*, 1997, colour billboard, New York; image courtesy the artist and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney, and Tyler Rollins Fine Art, New York



Tracey Moffatt, *Self Portrait*, 1999, hand-coloured photograph, 33.5 x 22cm, edition of 10 + 2 APs; image courtesy the artist and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney, and Tyler Rollins Fine Art, New York



Tracey Moffatt, *Suburban Landscape No. 3. 'Bullied Here'*, 2013, from the series 'Spirit Landscapes'; digital print hand-coloured in water crayon, 81 x 99cm, edition of 8; image courtesy the artist and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney, and Tyler Rollins Fine Art, New York

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Tracey Moffatt, *The Arches*, 2017, from the series 'Passage'; type-C photograph on gloss paper, 105.5 x 156cm; image courtesy the artist and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney, and Tyler Rollins Fine Art, New York

