Tracey Moffatt

17 April – 19 May 2001

Exhibition guide

"I am not concerned with verisimilitude… I am not concerned with capturing reality. I'm concerned with creating it myself."

Trained as a film-maker, Tracey Moffatt has worked as a commercial photographer and film-maker, alongside a highly successful career exhibiting more personal photographic series, videos and films. Her work has featured at Cannes (1990), at the Venice Biennale (1997) and in a major show at the Dia Center for Arts in New York (1997/98). Her exhibition here is the largest solo presentation of her work in the UK to date, and the first showing of her latest work, Invocations, in Scotland.

The works in this exhibition span a decade of her career, from 1990 until the present day, and clear themes emerge throughout: a strong interest in media stereotypes; a knowing use (and subversion) of film and photography styles and genres; experimentation with visual languages and codes; an exploration of power struggles – primarily between individuals (mistress and servant, parent and child, man and woman, film-maker and her subjects!) and the effects of an imbalance of power. While avoiding obvious political statements, her work is highly regarded for its forthright treatment of race and gender issues, and for her experimentation with style, technique and narrative.

She was born in 1960 in Mt. Gravatt, a suburb of Brisbane, Australia, and her work draws on her childhood – real life experiences, but just as importantly her memories of television and films. Her encyclopaedic visual memory allows her to move easily between styles and techniques, picking whatever seems best for each project. She studied film at Queensland College, and she recognises that this course triggered her long-held love of television, film and photography: "Thinking back it was never just those two years which inspired me to pry myself off the couch and into the studio where I have made most of my images. It had to do with a whole 1960s childhood and 1970s adolescence spent glued to the television or with my nose in a book. I took in everything from schlock to the sophisticated: from black and white Jerry Lewis movies, Skippy and The Benny Hill Show to late night adult theme films like those of the English director John Schlesinger (I prided myself that I understood the homosexual element in Sunday Bloody Sunday at age fourteen)…

In the Australian working class suburb in which I grew up I was merely accessing what was available: the best of British, American and Australian television. There were never outings to the Theatre or Musicals. Nor was there talk around the house of high culture in any form. Nor talk of politics. For this lack of talk I am eternally grateful. If you are attracted to these things then you are going to discover them for yourself."

Typically, her work fuses references to popular and high culture, using humour, sexuality, and highly stylised techniques to explore socio-political themes. Ideas are triggered by her own obsessions and fantasies, but she points out : "Artist's ideas start out from the personal but often they speak about the history of others."

Invocations, shown in the large gallery downstairs, consists of 13 large-scale photo silk-screens, a technique which immediately speaks of artifice, with rich textures built up in overlaid screens and colouration which ranges in effect from old-fashioned, hand-tinted photographs to the lurid colouring of 1950s promotional posters for technicolour films.

Regardless of her medium, she constructs her narratives using the film-maker's process of drawing up storyboards, often staging her vision in a studio, or on location. In this case the photographs were shot on a New York sound-stage with actors, props, lighting and elaborate backdrops, intended to represent a fantasy world somewhere between Disney and Goya. Visual references are made to a host of films and stories: Hitchcock's The Birds, The Wizard of Oz, and Hansel and Gretel all spring to mind, yet the connections between the images lie with the imagination of the viewer, and there is no linear narrative to guide us.

Three stories are interwoven: a woman in a barren, desert landscape is attacked by crows and a lone male protagonist; witches and demons brew up storms and trouble; and a child enters a magical, living forest. In a separate image she emerges from the fringes of the forest, her hands pressed together in a gesture of prayer. The stylised gestures and poses, the background landscapes, and Moffatt's use of colour are all clearly symbolic, and changes in the format, scale and atmosphere of individual scenes create a tension between childish innocence, and the worldly sensuality of the woman. The child's world is like a coloured plate from a book of fairy tales, with touchingly innocent, domestic details like her old fashioned slippers and night-dress. The comedy, Disney-inspired forest seems at odds with the melodramatic desert scenes featuring the woman, or the blurred suggestions of supernatural and subconscious worlds. In the best traditions of the horror movie, innocence seems to be the best protection from dark, irrational forces.

The title points to the supernatural and otherworldly, but it too is ambiguous. Who is invoking what, and for what purpose?
Invocations is shown beside Night Cries: A Rural Tragedy (in the small side gallery). This is Moffatt's acclaimed early film, shortlisted at the Cannes Film Festival in 1990. A full scale movie in its style and effect, it tells the story of a middle-aged Aboriginal woman forced to care for the aged invalid white woman by whom she was adopted as a child. Their story alludes to the assimilation policy brought in by the Australian government which forced Aboriginal children to be raised in white families, a direct reference to Moffatt's own experience, and she acknowledges: "Night Cries is a very personal piece of work and has to do with the love-hate relationship I had with my mother and,

yes, there is a religious and ritual component, but the film haunts me and ten years later it hurts me to talk about it. When I made it I didn't even think it was about me."

The characters are based on the 1955 classic film Jedda (directed by Charles Chauvel), one of the earliest Australian films to address the predicament of Aboriginal people being incorporated into a racist society. In Night Cries, the characters are presented as if thirty years older than in Jedda and living out their days alone in a decayed studio-set homestead in the middle of a painted-backdrop desert. The film has no dialogue, and the story unfolds through gesture, posture, looks and actions, accompanied by the smooth crooning of Jimmy Little, a well-known Aboriginal Christian singer.

Connections between the two works become clear. Although it is not overtly autobiographical, Invocations returns to the saturated colour, and artificial painted stage sets used in Night Cries, and its structure is similar to the wordless film with its dream-like narrative sequence, weaving present time with flashbacks to childhood memories. Less obviously, some of the images in Invocations seem to refer to the publicity posters for Jedda, where the 'uncivilised' Marbuck carries Jedda ('an Eve in Ebony'!) through the desert landscape of the Northern Territories.

Laudanum (1998), shown along the back wall in the upper gallery, is one of Moffatt's most complex photo stories. Shot in a colonial mansion in Australia, with two actresses portraying the roles of a young Asian servant girl and her hysterical, white Victorian mistress, the title refers to the opiate legally prescribed to women in the late 19th-century – often to calm 'nerves'. The story starts with a scene of submission, the maid grovelling on the floor as her mistress descends the staircase, and it rapidly develops into a disturbing story of sexual abuse, humiliation and domination, the final images suggesting a murder and cover-up.

The photographs imitate the 19th century technique of photogravure, and the variations of surface, texture, tone and atmosphere add emotional impact to the story. The formats of the individual prints vary too, echoing the twin 'arches' of stereoscopic photography, the oval frame of the portrait miniature, the curved corners of hand-held daguerrotypes, and so on. These are more than 'period' features, however: the unusual framing devices are used to suggest claustrophobia and voyeurism, and the degraded surface of the prints parallels the breakdown of 'rational' vision into a hallucinatory nightmare. The critique of colonial abuse of power gains from these choices: the staged melodrama and the literal disintegration of the imagery somehow packing more of a punch than a documentary approach.
The dark themes of sexual and racial domination in Laudanum contrast with the cheerful brutality of Scarred for Life II, the provocative voyeurism of Heaven, and Moffatt's 'crowd-pleasers' Lip and Artist.

Inspired by the style of the 1960s Time/Life books, Scarred for Life II (1998/99 – shown along the front wall of the upper gallery) is based on real-life stories from

Moffatt's past, and of her friends: memories of throw-away put-downs, thoughtless, cruel remarks, bullying, neglect and abuse. The subjects range from the absurd (for a split second he really thought that brother was mother) to the tragic (to get into their house every night the children had to dash past their drunken father at the door). Each shot is created with deadpan, documentary seriousness, and the framing of each scene implicates the viewer, as an eye-witness, or even as the abuser. Any seriousness is undercut, however, by "confessional", matter-of-fact inscriptions beneath each image. She explains:: "A person can make a passing comment on you when you are young and this can change you forever. You can be 'scarred for life' but it isn't necessarily a bad thing..."

Both Lip and Artist were made in collaboration with US film-maker Gary Hillberg. They are collages of clips taken from well-known Hollywood films, their selection and juxtaposition isolating stereotypes, allowing us to see how they are constructed, and what they represent. Lip is a tribute to the black woman housemaid, set to the music of Aretha Franklin. The clips are not the expected images of subservience and domination, but instead depict the black actresses stealing scenes in which they were intended to be marginal characters. A key moment comes in a sitcom which lampoons the stereotype of the enormous black maid, eyes rolling, giving down-to-earth back-chat to her simpering white mistress. Left by herself, the maid deflates her bulk, puts on a pair of glasses, and starts to write 'Well, these white folks have fallen for every trick in the book..'

Artist uses the same technique to explore Hollywood's depiction of the creative process and artists themselves. The same rituals are enacted: the confident whisk of the paint brush, the futile laugh of frustration, and the violent destruction of one's own work.

Heaven brings us back to the themes of voyeurism and sexual power struggles explored in Laudanum, however, this time the voyeur is the artist as she pursues male surfers on Sydney's Bondi Beach. Moffatt alternately teases, flatters, and goads her subjects, deliberately flaunting the borders between an admiring fixation and an invasive voyeurism, and her choice of medium – the hand-held video camera – is particularly apt, with its associations with 'candid camera', real-life footage, and the implications of 'peeping Tom' curiosity. The humour of the piece comes from her cheeky provocations, but also from the gap between the heroic glamour associated with surfers (exploited most recently in advertising campaigns for Guinness and Quiksilver, to name but two), and the reality as the surfers duck and hide, trying to maintain their modesty as they change clothes.

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