

Tracey Moffatt retains the mystery ahead of Venice Biennale



Tracey Moffatt: 'I operate in the realm of imagination.' Picture: John Feder.

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- Matthew Westwood

The Venice Biennale, which opens next month, is just about the hottest ticket in the art world, but who needs La Serenissima when you can have Sydney's Middle Head? It's gorgeous, even on an overcast day. No vaporettos or gondolas on the Grand Canal, just the Manly ferry chugging by and the water of Sydney Harbour reflecting silvery blue.

Artists love the place. Julian Ashton brought students to paint at Balmoral Beach. Streeton and Roberts had their artist camp nearby. Even today, a group of students from the National Art School is here, painting en plein air, as generations have done at this magnificent spot.

We're here to meet Tracey Moffatt, the photographer and filmmaker who is Australia's chosen artist for the Venice Biennale. She has invited a posse of

journalists to Middle Head to visit her temporary studio, the Old Governor's Cottage within the national park. As we venture down from the house to a scenic spot that looks across to Manly and the heads, Moffatt plays the tour guide, pointing out the sights and relaying bits of local history.

Moffatt cuts a glamorous figure — she's dressed today in a brightly printed top — and exudes confidence, but in other ways she is intensely private and has a reputation for snappiness. She has already told the assembled reporters that she normally wouldn't bother doing press interviews. She lived in New York for 12 years among the Chelsea gallery scene, and after returning to Australia in 2010 has kept largely out of the public eye.

That may explain why Moffatt is less a public figure than some other Australian artists who have not had her international success. Even the art students, when I ask them if they recognise the woman at the centre of attention, have no idea who she is, until it's pointed out that she's Tracey Moffatt, the celebrated photographer, soon headed for Venice.

There's an air of mystery, too, around today's event that is flagged as a visit to Moffatt's studio and a preview of her Biennale exhibition, called *My Horizon*. In fact, there is disappointingly little to see.

The cottage where Moffatt has been working shows no evidence of having been an artist's studio. Moffatt makes narrative photographs, or "photo dramas", that are a bit like movie stills. She works like a film director, moving her actors around the scene to tell a story and create atmosphere. But today there is no sign of costumes or props, photographic equipment or, indeed, of pictures. The two series of large-scale photographs and two short films that comprise her exhibition have been shipped to Venice.

Apparently the secrecy is to do with the Biennale, and rules that seem more like a doge's dictum. Moffatt's work, to be installed in the new Australian Pavilion, cannot be unveiled until the official preview on May 10. But perhaps the rules also suit

Moffatt's preference for privacy, allowing her to skirt questions about the ideas behind her work and about what the pictures represent.

For now she is able to reveal just one of the images, on a TV screen. The picture called *Hell* shows three figures in silhouette, wearing hats and clothes that could be from the 1940s or 50s. They are standing on a bridge or between two low walls, and beams of sunlight cut through the haze, an effect achieved with a smoke machine. There are few narrative clues until Moffatt points out the figure on the left is a mother. There's a man in a trench coat, smoking a cigarette — Moffatt refers to him as a devil, or middleman — and standing in the background what appears to be a policeman.

What's going on? A hint is in the title of the series, called *Passage*, and a printed statement that refers to legal and illegal journeys. The mind races ahead, trying to connect the figures into a story. Perhaps it's about people-smuggling, or an escape from a violent place.



Hell from the Passage series, which makes up part of Moffatt's Venice exhibition.

“You’ll see a baby, which isn’t in that shot,” Moffatt says later. “A mother wanting escape, she wants passage. Or it could be read that she’s arrived, if it’s a dockland, a port. It’s a time of day when it’s not quite daylight, not quite night ... enough to give

me the theatrics of the shooting rays. The slippage: the characters slipping in and out of shadows, and alleyways, and clandestine meetings and discussions.”

It may or may not be important that Moffatt is the first Aboriginal artist to be given a solo show at the Venice Biennale. Previously artists including Rover Thomas and Emily Kame Kngwarreye have shown in group exhibitions, and Moffatt also featured in an international group show, in 1997. But indigeneity was not a factor in Moffatt being selected for a solo show at the high-profile event. Businesswoman and arts patron Naomi Milgrom, who heads the commissioning panel, says she is simply a great Australian artist. “She had in her mind very clearly what she wanted to do, what she wanted to express,” Milgrom says of her exhibition proposal. “It was just a knockout.”

Moffatt, 56, has spoken before of her upbringing in suburban Brisbane: how she was born to an Aboriginal mother, was fostered to a poor white family and didn’t know her father. Race, identity, sexuality, gender — the whole box and dice of identity politics — are themes that recur through her work. But Moffatt doesn’t go at it with a polemical sledgehammer. If anything, her photo dramas have a certain detachment, even irony and humour. They are about stories, dreams, sensations.

A series such as *Up in the Sky* (1997) includes scenes of primal outback violence, and images that could be about the Stolen Generations, but are depicted with an almost free-floating objectivity. In another of her well-known series, *Scarred for Life* (1994 and 1999), little snapshots about race, disadvantage, gender and social acceptance transcend the particular to become universal expressions of humiliation and hurt. For now, though, she is giving little away about the content of *My Horizon*, other than to say in a statement that it alludes to issues such as race, gender, sexuality, desire, identity, human connection and estrangement, and aspects of her family history.

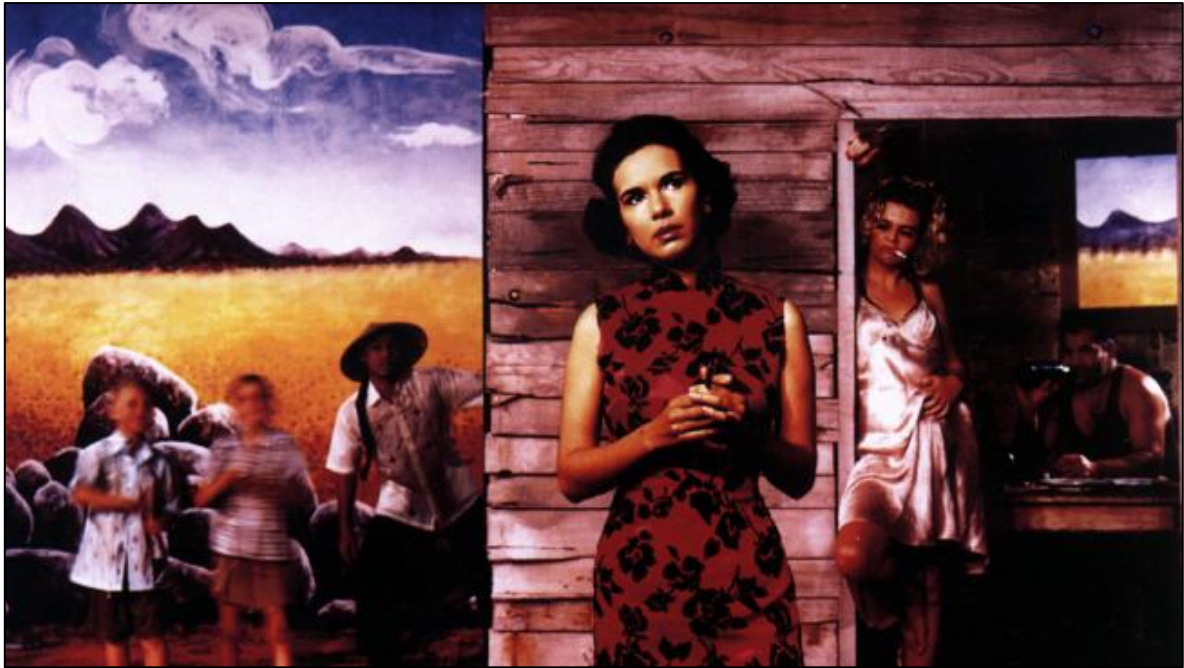
“I operate in the realm of imagination,” Moffatt says. “I’m not a documentary filmmaker, I’m not interested in realism. If I’m interested in realism, it’s only to mimic it, consciously. I’m not like Cartier-Bresson — you know, the decisive moment. I don’t go out with a camera and try to capture something.”

Moffatt likes to tell or hint at a story, but she also has an obsession with image-making and with referencing visual styles from the past, whether cartoon strips, Victorian gothic, documentary photography or Italian social realism. The Venice Biennale series called *Passage* is a visual homage to film noir and the movies she enjoyed watching as a teenager: hence the moody shadows and air of mystery or jeopardy.

The second series takes its visual cues from the surrealist cinema of Luis Bunuel and Maya Deren, in what Moffatt says is a suite of dreamlike pictures that play with flashback and visions of the future. Other details she won't reveal, not even the name of the series, but she describes her frustration in getting the concept to its final form. An initial idea of giving the photographs a painted texture — similar to those of her 2010 *Plantation* series — just wasn't working. "It was putting texture on to the paper so that the works became painterly — but the new work wasn't about painting," she says.

"That's where I got into a pickle, and I'm staring at a blank wall, and I'm getting phone calls from my commissioner, 'How's the work coming along?'. And it's not coming along. And there was the panic setting in, and there was the terror, and I've now added a new terror to my list of terrors: going to the dentist, air turbulence, getting my legs waxed, and now it's making work for the Venice Biennale."

By now I'm sitting with Moffatt on the veranda of another of the cottages at Middle Head. The press photographs done for the day, she has changed into a black T-shirt and jeans, sunglasses perched on her head. Preparing for Venice has exhausted her and already she's thinking of the recovery party she'll have once it's over, perhaps at this place.



Something More No.1, a 1989 self-portrait taken by Tracey Moffatt.

The tizzy, the sense of panic, she says, is part and parcel of her art-making. Typically she begins with an idea and a storyboard that sets out, as if for a movie, the individual frames that will comprise her fractured narratives. For the photographic sessions she'll cast her characters from models, actors or people off the street and move them around like pieces on a chessboard. She may take up to 100 photographs of a scene before she chooses one that will take its place in the series — or decides that it doesn't work at all. How does she know when a photograph has the desired effect? "When I feel I haven't seen it before," she says. "That's all it is. And when it's not working, it's because I've seen it before. It looks like something else."

Presenting an exhibition of entirely new work at Venice gives her an uncomfortable feeling of being scrutinised or exposed on the world stage but actually she wouldn't have it otherwise. Moffatt wants only to make new work, not to be pulled back into the orbit of well-circulated images.

That would include her famous series *Something More* from 1989 — with Moffatt in a red cheongsam wanting to escape a scene of rural poverty — and her mashup films made with Gary Hillberg that are now on a tour of regional galleries. Moffatt is happy the films are being shown but didn't want to be involved in the exhibition.

“Just don’t call me,” she says. “Send it around, let it go to the 17 venues, but I’m not going to do one interview. It’s all about letting go and letting one’s work go out into the world. My success is to do with the fact I’m always able to let go, and that’s what I think artists should do. You make the work and leave it alone.”

The same goes for shows at major institutions, it seems. Moffatt says a big museum — she won’t say which — offered her an exhibition next year, but she insisted that she would only make new work for it. She already is making calls for a future project, scouting for locations and forming pictures in her head.

For now, the art world, and Moffatt’s family and friends, are about to descend on Venice. Will she be able to give herself a good time? After a conversation potholed with deliberate vagueness and circumspection, she’s unequivocal. “I love a good time. It’s either one or the other with me: I’m totally intense and working, or I’m a party girl. There’s nothing in between.”