

Tracey Moffatt



BY JENNIFER HIGGIE IN REVIEWS | 05 MAY 98

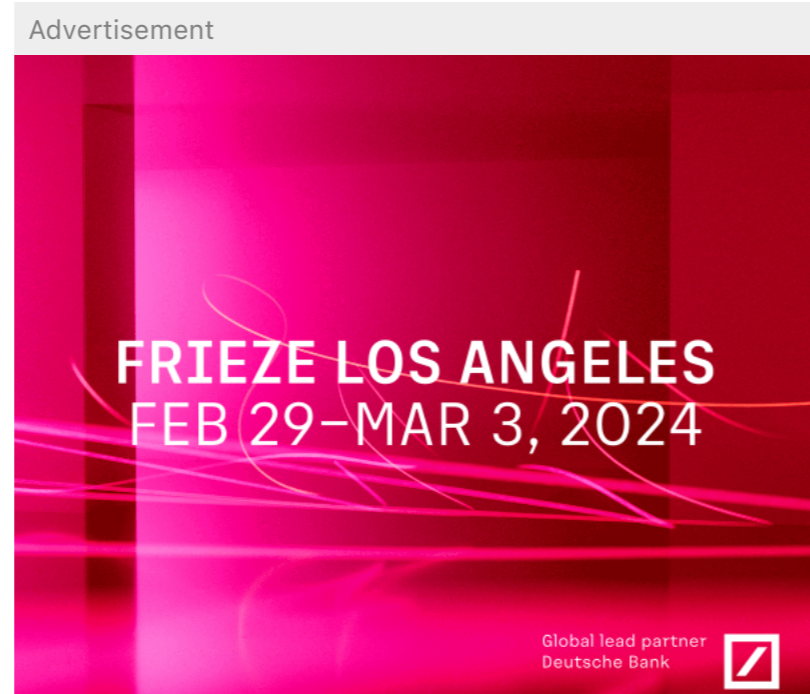
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'I feel my work is never really about being Aboriginal or Australian but is about the human condition' said Tracey Moffatt in a recent interview. The human condition, however, has a way of being unavoidably shaped by its environment. Recognisably set in outback Australia, 'Up in the Sky', Moffatt's powerful recent exhibition of 25 photographs, is as defined by Australia's racist history as it is by Moffatt's blurring of the personal with the political. Informed by other cultures, other places and other media, Moffatt filters Australia's deep North through the literature of America's deep South, the brutal intensity found in the early films of Pasolini (*L'Accatone*, 1961) and Peter Weir (*Cars That Ate Paris*, 1974), 40s documentary photography and the self-conscious staginess of 80s photography. It's an appropriately eclectic reflection of a totally eclectic culture.

Somewhere in a tiny, unnamed town in the outback, Moffatt has photographed an unexplained drama. A bedraggled white man crawls across a road in front of a car, his hair back-lit like a crazy halo. Three white nuns hold up a black baby, who, in another photograph is cradled by a white woman. A small black kid, dressed as a nurse, tosses a hoop in the middle of a paddock, while behind her a blindfolded black woman leans against a concrete wall. Angry women congregate in dressing gowns and stare at someone or something just out of view. A white woman stares out of a black crowd. These images aren't sequential the woman who was holding the baby is now pregnant, standing next to a tall guy with a gun, while an emaciated older man with a chicken dominates the foreground. A black man wrestles with a white man in the desert dust. A racially mixed group walks anxiously away from a bricked up church, illuminated by the setting sun. Car wrecks and campfires create a Mad Max-like backdrop for sinister scenarios with chains and axes. A dead steer hangs from a tree like the silhouette in a Sydney Nolan painting. Shot using pre-flashing and printed in either blue or sepia using offset printing techniques, the images are almost mezzotint soft, a delicate contrast to the harsh scenarios and the landscape depicted.

'Up in the Sky' reminds me of an Aboriginal protest slogan '40,000 years of dreaming, 200 years of nightmares'. Unlike much photography that is overtly 'political', however, Moffatt's aesthetic, riddled as it is with non-sequiturs and imaginary leaps, is as resistant to political sloganeering as it is open to it. Until quite recently (the early 70s) it was the Australian government's official policy to remove Aboriginal children from the care of their parents and place them with white foster families, a policy that created what is now known as 'the lost generation'. The extent and far-reaching consequences of this policy were only recently made known in Australia following the findings of the Human Rights Commission, a report that has both deeply shamed and divided the nation. Whilst Moffatt does allude to this situation, she juxtaposes it against a violence that was, and is, equally endemic banal, commonplace, non-institutionalised violence. When Moffatt references the church, however, whose role in the destruction of many Aboriginal communities is also well documented, something more conspiratorial seems to be afoot. The photograph of the three white nuns holding a black baby high in the sky like a wriggling sacrifice is as sinister and understated an image of dispossessed childhood as I have ever seen.

Filled with a pervasive sense of violence's flip-side boredom and rural malaise, Moffatt's photographs, like a mystery without a denouement, have a kind of frozen cinematic quality. In some of the images she milks the vocabulary of corny horror films prescriptive tableaux where melodrama explodes into very real violence, fuelled by a lethal cocktail of isolation, poverty and heat. In other images, what is being both explored and experienced is much more indeterminate, a dusty, somnambulant, twilight world, where the visceral meets the psychological in a space of mute, inevitable tragedy. It's an environment of multiple dislocations and tensions racial tension, tension between the sexes, between generations, bureaucracies and environments. Ultimately, however, its unresolved and ambiguous qualities make it impossible not to read the aptly titled 'Up in the Sky' as an allegory about the unresolved and heart-breaking conflicts that lie deep in the soul of contemporary Australia.



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Jennifer Higgie is a writer who lives in London. Her book *The Mirror and the Palette – Rebellion, Revolution and Resilience: 500 Years of Women's Self-Portraits* is published by Weidenfeld & Nicolson, and she is currently working on another – about women, art and the spirit world.

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