

MARGARET DAWSON
TRACEY MOFFATT

PHOTOHISTORY



AUSTRALIAN CENTRE FOR CONTEMPORARY ART

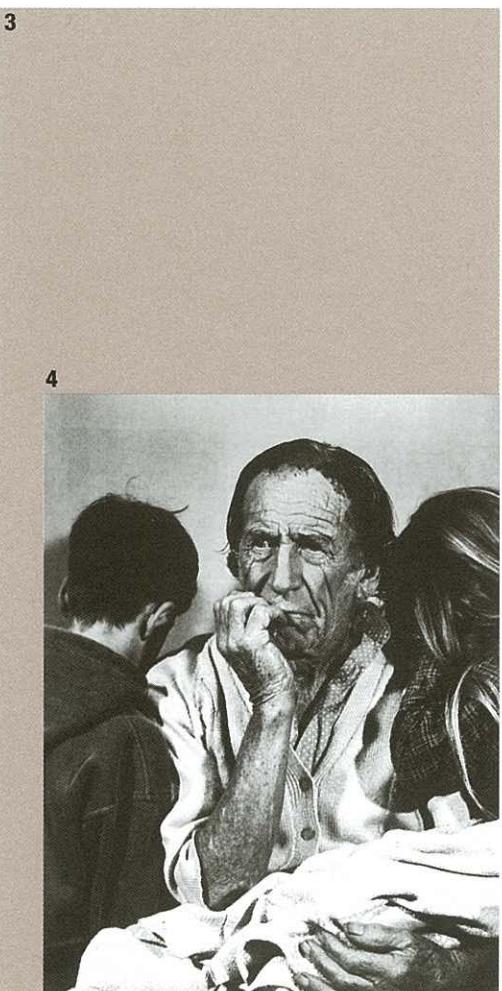
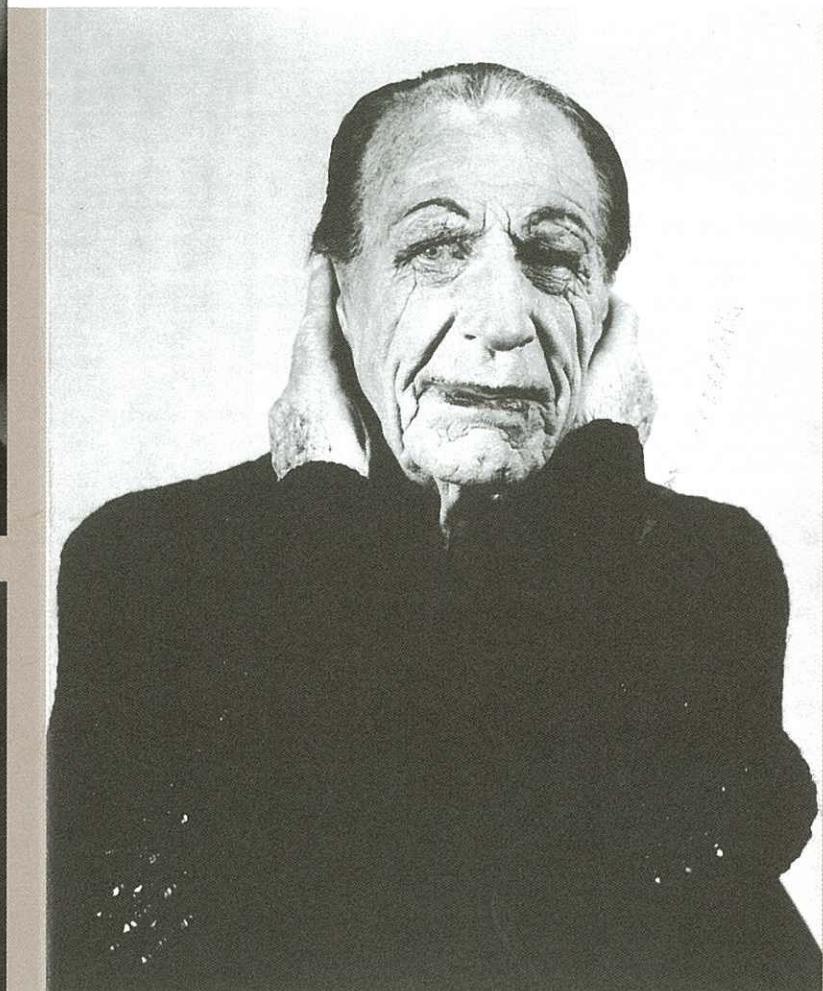
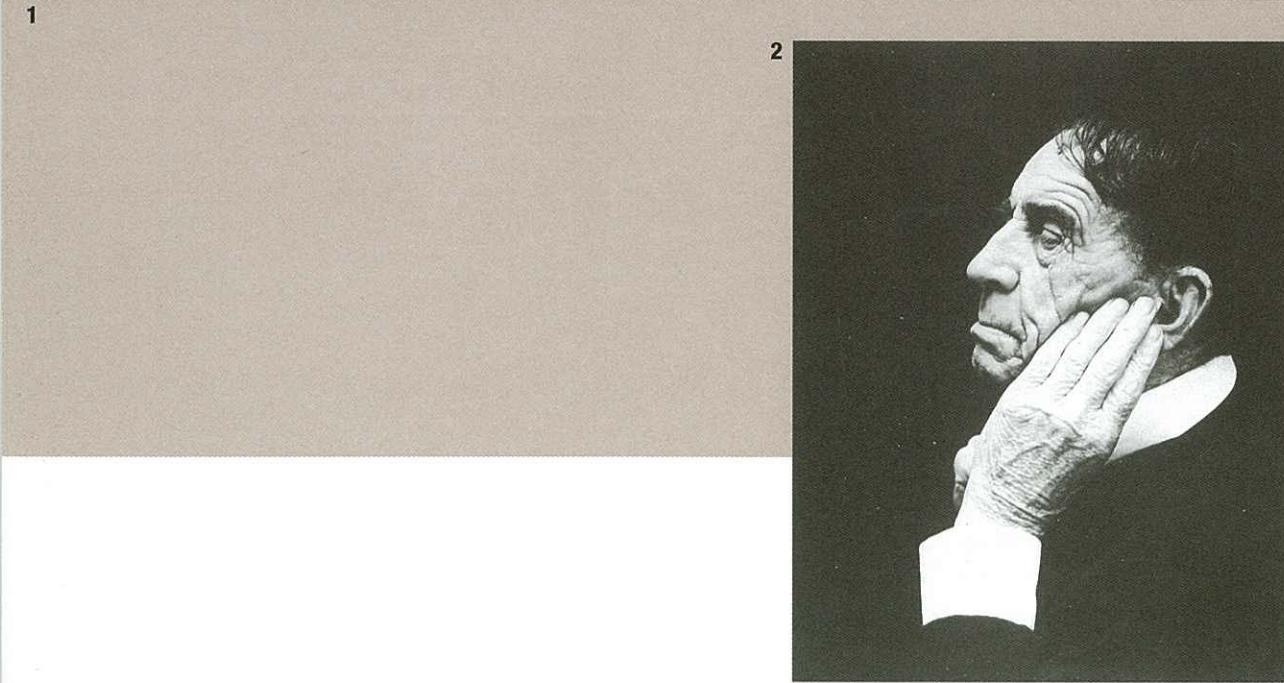
MARGARET DAWSON

1 *The Men From Uncle* 1995–97, no. 18

2 *The Men From Uncle* 1995–97, no. 10

3 *The Men From Uncle* 1995–97, no. 13

4 *The Men From Uncle* 1995–97, no. 14





TRACEY MOFFATT

- 1 from *Up in the Sky* 1997
- 2 from *Up in the Sky* 1997
- 3 from *Up in the Sky* 1997
- 4 from *Heaven* 1997



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While never engaged in direct quotation, Tracey Moffatt's photographs and films regularly hint at or remind us of the art historical heritage and popular cultural milieux from which they emerge. Her films draw on painting, her photographs from film. 'How do they know that I adore Drysdale's photography?', she pondered when invited to write on one of his images.⁷ Drysdale is just one of a number of artists and filmmakers hovering behind the scenes in *Up in the Sky* ('Look at the pale, pale blue sky. Unrelenting and cloudless...the image aches with exquisite hopelessness.'⁸).

Moffatt's eye ranges across mass culture as well as the 'high' arts, and here, when considering her treatment of figures in the landscape, one thinks of *Mad Max* as much as Pier Paolo Pasolini, David Moore along with David Lynch, and Sidney Nolan but perhaps also Pro Hart (*Up in the Sky* having been shot in the desolate landscape beyond Broken Hill). As Moffatt sees it, 'the most interesting artists have always had a keen awareness of history and of what was going on around them — borrowing from this and that and admitting to outside influences. I also like to do my homework, though it is never work, I should just call it "joy".'⁹

Up in the Sky takes its name from a song repeatedly sung by the lead character in Pasolini's neorealist film *Accatone* (1961). Like Pasolini, Moffatt also chooses amateurs over professional actors, and has remarked on his use of hand-held camera and the hardness of his Italian light when commenting on his importance for her work.¹⁰ However, by drawing from film but applying its techniques to still photographs, she disrupts any narrative reading of her images which the recurrence of characters and backdrops might otherwise enable.

The 'outback' or 'West' in Moffatt's *Up in the Sky* is no heroic frontier. Her characters and their theatrical actions point, rather, to the mythical nature of our imaginings and to the fact that such spaces are far removed from the highly urbanised experience of most Australians. As Wayne Tunnicliffe points out, images of the land continue to stand in for nation, 'eliding debates over land rights, land care, ownership and land use, and particularly the bitter battle over native title.'¹¹ The roles of figures in this landscape are now reversed, with muscular female car wreckers replacing the noble pioneer, and black and white youths grappling in the dust in place of the epic battles of the West.

Moffatt subverts another iconic Australian identity in *Heaven*, that of the surfer. Using the low-tech means of home video, she stalks her prey, capturing them as they change in and out of their bathers on the street or in beach carparks. Beginning with long distance shots from across the road or from apartment windows, the film builds in intensity as Moffatt dares to approach her victims, teasing and cajoling them to give her a glimpse of their 'manhood'.

The effect of Moffatt's interactions is to reduce the iconic stature of the surfer as the epitome of masculinity, as they variously strut, flee or aggressively turn on her. Once more, any sense of narrative is prevented, in this case by the sounds of lapping waves and beating drums which obliterate the dialogue that is exchanged between Moffatt and her subjects. A sense of 'climax' occurs with the sight of Moffatt's hand darting out to unsuccessfully whip away the towel protecting a surfer who has particularly caught her eye.

Moffatt and Dawson are each, in their own way, 'bad gurrls' in the art world.¹² Using quotation, humour and parody, they both raid and invade the hallowed halls of photography, film and art. By doing so, they remind their viewers of the richness and importance of this cultural heritage while also moving beyond it to provoke and to entertain.

Clare Williamson

NOTES

- ¹ Louise Garrett, 'Making up the men from uncle', *The Men From Uncle*, published by Margaret Dawson, Christchurch, 1998
- ² Margaret Dawson, artist's statement, *The Men From Uncle*, Hocken Library, University of Otago, 1997
- ³ Garrett, op.cit.
- ⁴ Lynne Cooke, 'Free-falling', room brochure, Dia Center for the Arts, New York, 1997, n.p.
- ⁵ Catriona Moore, *Indecent Exposures: Twenty Years of Australian Feminist Photography*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1994, pp 154-5
- ⁶ Margaret Dawson, email to the author, 2 October 1998
- ⁷ Tracey Moffatt, 'Artist's Choice: Boulder City, Kalgoorlie, Western Australia', *Art and Australia*, vol. 35, no. 3, 1998, pp. 346-7
- ⁸ ibid.
- ⁹ Tracey Moffatt, letter to Lynne Cooke, curator of Dia Center for the Arts, New York, in advance of her exhibition *Free-Falling*, autumn 1997, sourced from Dia website, www.diacenter.org/exhibits/moffatt, April 1998, n.p.
- ¹⁰ Tracey Moffatt, cited in Justin Spring, 'Hunters and Collectors: Tracey Moffatt', *Art / Text*, 60, Feb-April 1998, p. 61
- ¹¹ Wayne Tunnicliffe, 'Tracey Moffatt', *Strange Days*, exhib. cat., Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 1998, p.24
- ¹² As used by Isaac Julien and Mark Nash in 'Only Angels Have Wings', *Tracey Moffatt: Free Falling*, Dia Center for the Arts, New York, 1997, p. 13

CHECKLIST OF WORKS

MARGARET DAWSON

b. 1950, Blenheim, New Zealand
lives and works in Christchurch, New Zealand

The Men from Uncle 1995-97

26 selenium toned, silver gelatin photographs
50 x 60 cm (each varies slightly)

Courtesy of the artist, and
Jonathan Smart Gallery, Christchurch

- 1 After Nadar of Theophile Gautier 1855
- 2 After Nadar of Delacroix 1855
- 3 After Nadar's M. Desbords-Valmore on her deathbed 1859
- 4 After Nadar of Michel E. Chevreul 1886
- 5 After Nadar of Guizot
- 6 After D. Wynfield of Sir John E. Millais 1863
- 7 After J.M. Cameron of Tennyson 1865
- 8 After J.M. Cameron of Herschel 1867
- 9 After J.M. Cameron of Longfellow 1868
- 10 After Frederick Evans of Aubrey Beardsley 1894
- 11 After Lartigue and Steichen, *Tattooed Man*
- 12 After Kertesz of Mondrian 1926
- 13 After Steichen of Greta Garbo 1928
- 14 After Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother* 1930s
- 15 After Dorothea Lange's *White Angel Breadline*
- 16 After Lucia Moholy's Baron Blackett 1936
- 17 After Cecil Beaton of Augustus John 1940
- 18 After Cecil Beaton of Walter Sickert and his wife 1940
- 19 After Paul Joyce's portrait of Samuel Beckett 1944
- 20 After Frederick Sommer of Max Ernst 1946
- 21 After Gordon Parkes of a minister in Chicago 1950
- 22 After ? of Bernard Shaw posing as Rodin's Thinker
- 23 After Eugene Smith's *Spain* 1951
- 24 After Eugene Smith's Haitian mental patient 1959
- 25 After Cartier Bresson of Ezra Pond 1970
- 26 After a portrait of Kenzaburu Oe, Japan 1993

TRACEY MOFFATT

b. 1960, Brisbane
lives and works in Sydney and New York

Up in the Sky 1997

25 offset photographs
61 x 76 cm image size
Collection: Monash University

Heaven 1997

VHS videotape, 28 mins
Collection: Monash University

COVER IMAGES details from:

Margaret Dawson *The Men From Uncle* 1995-97
and Tracey Moffatt *Up in the Sky* 1997

PHOTOHISTORY

Margaret Dawson *The Men From Uncle*

Tracey Moffatt *Up in the Sky* and *Heaven*

26 November – 20 December 1998

and 12 – 31 January 1999

The Australian Centre for Contemporary Art gratefully acknowledges the assistance of Margaret Dawson and Tracey Moffatt, Roslyn Oxley and Sarah Preuhs, Annamarie Jagose, Ian Robertson, Wayne Tunnicliffe, John Barrett-Lennard, Bec Dean, Mark Galea, Vicki McInnes and the Monash University Gallery.

Margaret Dawson gratefully acknowledges the assistance of Creative New Zealand
Margaret Dawson is represented by Jonathan Smart Gallery, Christchurch

Tracey Moffatt's *Up in the Sky* and *Heaven* were originally exhibited at the Dia Center for the Arts, New York October 1997 – June 1998

Tracey Moffatt is represented by Roslyn Oxley Gallery, Sydney
Her films are distributed by Ronin Films, Canberra

Catalogue published by the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art November 1998, Edition 400 ISBN 0 947220 72 0

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Catalogue design by Ian Robertson
Printing, Econoprint, South Melbourne

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ACCA is supported by the Victorian Government through Arts Victoria – Department of Premier and Cabinet
ACCA is assisted by the Commonwealth Government through the Australia Council, its arts funding and advisory body



A SECOND LOOK

Margaret Dawson and Tracey Moffatt play with our minds. Through the very medium which traditionally purported to speak the truth, they stage dramas, build towns and bring the dead back to life. Adopting roles of producers, directors, and even makeup artists, and collaborating with cast and crew, they each, in markedly different ways, transport their audiences to worlds which are unknown but yet oddly recognisable. In Moffatt's case, photography, film and video intersect and diverge, in Dawson's, the fine art black and white print returns to centre stage. Through each, the history of photography itself runs as a vital, if not always obvious, thread.

The photographic medium can simultaneously breathe life into the non-existent and freeze it out of that which actually is. Death is never too far away in Margaret Dawson's series *The Men From Uncle*. In this group of twenty-six photographs, Dawson re-stages famous icons in photography's history, in most cases portraits of well known men and women. What links these images is the fact that each identity is re-presented by Dawson's elderly uncle, with whom she has collaborated on these fictions. What is deathly in these images is not so much the frailty of Dawson's uncle as the disappearance of the original subjects. In the case of 'After Frederick Evans's Aubrey Beardsley', a 'much older visage' reminds us of Beardsley's 'failure to make old bones and thus fulfil his youthful promise'.¹

We create history out of memory and fiction as much as from fact. Portraits and the family album are the residue from which we reconstruct famous identities, loved ones and even ourselves. In previous series, Dawson regularly used her 'self' as the model, but not the subject. Through the use of costumes, props and backdrops, she created images which destabilised any notion of an immutable self.

The Men From Uncle extends this project through the presentation of images through which her viewers attempt to 'see' her uncle as well as the nominated identity, but ultimately discover that they are prevented from achieving either. Dawson has written of this project, 'We, my uncle and I, altered his appearance by growing his beard and hair...The meaning and the concept of the famous image was altered by having a different subject, a different context and another artist's signature to the artwork. The question of originality is considered again. Many of the images are relevant to my uncle's life or existence now.'²

Documentary photography, that supposedly most 'honest' of media, is as staged and constructed in its author's choices, selections and omissions as images which make overt claims to fantasy. Dawson's version of Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother* accentuates its staging through its re-enactment by a male protagonist. 'On one hand, "reality" is shown to be authenticated by the camera's frame, and authorised by the ideological frame of the museum (and the market), and on the other, the incoherence of the subject position suggests a release from the bounds of representation itself'.³

Tracey Moffatt's photographic series, *Up in the Sky*, similarly transgresses and melds notions of the documentary and the fabricated. Whereas much of her previous photographic and filmic work has made a feature of the artificiality of its settings, this work confounds by the very 'realness' of its landscapes and interiors, which form the backdrops for strange characters and surreal events. Against a searing sky or the walls of a dilapidated bedroom, a motley cast of 'saints' and 'sinners' act out a drama which hints at teenage motherhood, the removal of indigenous children, and poverty, violence and desperation amongst a rural underclass. As Lynne Cooke remarks on Moffatt's images and her use of personal experience as well as ideas drawn from the mass media, art and photography, 'ultimately they are neither subjective nor autobiographical'.⁴ Any suggestion of reportage or the journalistic photo-essay is deliberately disrupted by Moffatt's use of pre-flashing and soft colours.

Both Dawson and Moffatt look back to photographers before them, in a mixture of homage and humour. Dawson is the more overt, fastidiously reproducing well known images which have entered the annals of photographic history, and titling each as 'After Nadar...', 'After J M Cameron...', etc. Whereas her previous 'self-portraits' had been enacted in full, and sometimes gaudy, colour, each image in *The Men From Uncle* is faithfully re-created in black and white. By doing so she remarks upon the so-called essential honesty or purity of the fine art print and yet simultaneously denies this 'truth' through the obvious artifice of its staging. As such she utilises the 'theft, stuttering and mimicry', defined by Catriona Moore as strategies open to women artists in recent years⁵, but also questions the view that these acts are simply oppositional by stating that 'I think emulation and appropriation are marks of respect for the history we are linked with or learn from'.⁶ The effect of these images is to encourage us to revisit the originals as well as to consider the implications of her duplicates.