

Calling out around the world

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Tracey Moffatt with her Kaleidoscope exhibition. Picture: Lyn DiCiero

Tracey Moffatt is arguably one of Australia's best-known and most influential artists. The much-admired Queensland artist is in WA for her solo exhibition Kaleidoscope, on show at PICA as part of the Perth Festival, her first here in more than a decade.

She also doesn't give interviews. It's not quite what you want to hear when an artist of her calibre arrives but, thankfully, Moffatt had a change of heart, agreeing to a rare chat with The West Australian.

Over her long and illustrious career she has managed to avoid interviews like the plague. As a result her work has probably become more written about around the world. Moffatt says she always feels put on the spot. “When I’m in front of my work I’m quite verbal but I’m a little tongue-tied with nothing to look at to trigger a conversation.”

Moffatt was based in New York for 12 years before returning to Australia a few years ago. She says she missed nature, beauty and great food. “I never regarded Central Park as nature. The vibe and the life in New York — you can’t beat it — the scene, meeting the great art world intelligentsia who are in and out of your house; Calvin Klein sits beside you at a dinner; you get to talk to Jasper Johns. It’s quite something.”

The exhibition brings together works from her recent Spirit Landscape series, comprising five diverse photographic bodies of work, together with her new video work, Art Calls. She says the art world tends to be less humorous than it could be.

“Culturally it’s difficult for me to not have a joke. I’m a party girl basically, so Art Calls is where I Skype and talk to artists all over the world but be very irreverent, and make it fun.”

Indeed, the mix of Australian and American artists, filmmakers, designers, dancers, architects and historians who appear in Art Calls at times seem surprised by Moffatt’s interviewing technique. Local artist Abdul Abdullah was temporarily lost for words when Moffatt asked him if all the girls were chasing him.

The frank and down-to-earth expose of both interviewer and interviewee continues with subjects such as Destiny Deacon, Jenny Kee, Jan Billycan from the Kimberley and Abdullah’s brother, Abdul-Rahman Abdullah. Always one to shake up the norm, Art Calls is Moffatt’s method revealed in another medium.

“I wanted the show to feel as if the viewers were personally visiting the artists in their surroundings, and that they were witnessing a play,” she says.

As we walk around the exhibition, Moffatt is happy to shed light on the evolution of the works under the Spirit Landscape banner. The series As I lay back on my Ancestral Land features a woman’s body in the landscape.

“It’s to do with me going back to my Aboriginal traditional lands in central Queensland. It’s the most beautiful place you’ve ever seen in your life — pristine bush, towering white cliffs, beautiful bubbling streams. This series features a woman on the ground with the feeling of looking up. I wanted to photograph the place but how do you photograph the Australian bush in an interesting and original way? So my idea was to look up and out of the landscape using very acid colours.”

The seductive Plantation series, with 12 pairs of delicately hand- coloured photographs, were originally taken in 1997 and rediscovered by the artist in 2006.

“I love the history of photography and I wanted a sort of menacing, even alien presence in this. This is my narrative work which I’m best known for and I’m going to go back to narrative in my new work which is all in my head at the moment.

“I wanted these to look a bit wrecked — it’s almost like it’s a set of prints found underneath an old Queenslander house, rotting in a suitcase and as you’ve flicked through them and wondered what they were about. Of course it could be read as Jamaica or the West Indies, somewhere in South-East Asia. With all my work I never like to locate it, so it isn’t about Australia. I think that’s why my work has gone international, because it works across so many cultures.”

While Moffatt has broken with tradition to give an interview, she is also making a public appearance at the Octagon Theatre to present an illustrated talk about her work.

Moffatt is a larger-than-life character with a big and fun-loving personality, traits she says some people seem to have a problem with. “In New York, every Latino or black person and every Jew thinks I’m normal, so fitting in with New York was very easy for me. My big personality was never a problem.”

Kaleidoscope at the Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts runs from tomorrow-April 15. Tracey Moffatt: Up Close and Personal is at the Octagon Theatre at 5.30pm on Friday.