Exhibition reviews

and shops. The text transforms the apparently innocuous landscapes, conveying a direct, visceral memory that Moffatt must have experienced in re-encountering these places. Each work is labelled, with ‘bullied here’, ‘stole a mars bar’ or ‘tea at the reverends’ among the tags.

In ‘Picturesque Cherbourg’, Moffatt draws on the picture postcard tradition, focusing on sunny images of houses surrounded by white picket fences and flowering bushes. Under close examination, each image includes subtle rips, fractures and re-piecings, conveying a sense of trauma and unease. Cherbourg was the site of a government mission, where Indigenous people from Queensland and New South Wales were sent after being torn from their land. Members of the artist’s family were relocated there in the 1920s.


Shown on a wall-mounted digital frame, In and Out comprises snapshots taken by Moffatt in a mining town, and proposes another layer to the themes of possession and occupation of land and place. The work juxtaposes images of men quickly entering a brothel, anxious not to be seen lingering on the steps, with scenes of open-cut mining pits and ravaged landscapes. This exploration of place and possession continues in her ‘Pioneer Dreaming’ series, a group of screen grabs of female actresses such as Ingrid Bergman and Elizabeth Taylor, reproduced on handmade paper in desert tones. Excerpted from iconic, romanticised films, these works focus on the genre of films in which American pioneers staked a claim to, and possessed, lands inhabited by Native Americans.

Spirited offers an unusual exhibition premise, tightly focused around themes that are both universal and specific to Moffatt’s own past. The inclusion of works by other artists from the QAGOMA collection complicates any straightforward, romanticised interpretation, offering multiple views of the intertwining of memory and place, and the encounters between Indigenous people and their colonisers. In particular, the works act as a return to place and a form of exorcism for Moffatt, bringing together many of the threads she has explored in her artworks throughout her career.

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doi 10.1017/qre.2015.20

Cheryl Creed and Nickeema Williams, A thousand words, State Library of Queensland, 6 December 2014 to 17 May 2015.

Portraits are more than pictures of people when they capture the inner life of their subjects. They potentially trigger recognition of those qualities that unite us as human beings. Such ‘inner’ portraiture features in A thousand words, a sensitive display of portrait paintings and photographs conveying Indigenous perspectives of contemporary Indigenous life at the State Library of Queensland’s kuril
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dhagen centre. Cheryl Creed’s acrylic paintings and Nickeema Williams’ photographs introduce audiences to people they call ‘my mob’, emphasising the individual character of people living in Indigenous communities across Queensland. The exhibition collectively left an impression of a universal sense of human dignity.

Creed was born in 1965 at Cherbourg on Wakka Wakka country, and now resides in Cairns. The genesis of her portraiture series derived from the Exhibition Ready Program run by Cairns-based UMI Arts, where artists are mentored in career development and exhibition preparation and presentation. Creed’s series of vibrantly coloured acrylic paintings draws inspiration from images of friends and family in her Facebook albums. The milieu of social media instils her portraits with a tenor of unguarded openness, and she discusses her art in a Digital Story video screened as part of the exhibition. Creed explains how she sought to portray the beauty of her people in the Cherbourg community, and her aim of countering the ‘negative spirit’ that is often imposed upon them. Creed’s subjects agreed to the portraits and watched her transform Facebook’s visual stories into more complex accounts of their lives through her art.

While portraits tend to focus on the individual, *A thousand words* conveys a strong current of community spirit. Audiences learnt about Creed’s subjects through the filmed interviews with the portrait sitters screened elsewhere in the exhibition space. One of the most common remarks in these interviews identifies the exhibition as an important visual history of their community, and a legacy for future generations. If histories of Indigenous life are habitually written by outsiders, then this visual history is regarded as something from within. Interviewees commented that Creed had captured a life rather than just a face in her images, and celebrated a person’s existence.

Nickeema Williams (b. 1995), the other artist featured in the exhibition, captures the spark of life in her subjects in a different form with her photographic portraiture. Williams is a young artist whose background in photography, fashion design and modelling channel into her portraiture through a sophisticated understanding of the body’s pose.

Williams’ series depicts young people, mainly from Cairns and the Woorabinda community. Individuals are posed more like models, with some wearing a natural-fibre headdress designed by Williams. The headdress effectively functions as a device to frame inner thoughts, and helps to characterise the mood of the subject (they are also sold as ‘wearable art’ fashion items). Where Creed’s portraits aim to make a direct connection with her subjects, Williams concentrates more on capturing the subject in unguarded moments. It is a successful strategy for conveying youthful uncertainty and a sense of self in flux.

A different genre of Williams’ portraiture was featured at Cairns Regional Gallery simultaneous with the display of *A thousand words*. Unlike the Brisbane showing, it involved portrait drawings of Williams’ family in the Torres Strait Islands. Her family connections span Woorabinda (where her mother was born), Brisbane, North Queensland and the Torres Strait. Despite varied artistic interests, the artist returns continuously to portraiture because of her preoccupation with contemporary issues of identity. Williams has said:

I am fixated on this idea of identity and living in a westernised society, a completely different environment to my ancestors. Being a young
light-skinned indigenous woman trying to re-establish the loss of cultural knowledge, my work tends to be influenced by racism, urbanisation, land and nature, family history, stereotypes/appearance and connections both spiritually and emotionally. (Nickeema Williams, 2014, Sub-0 The Affordable Art Show, http://www.sub0artshow.com/nickeema-williams.html)

A thousand words is perfectly placed within the SLQ’s kuril dhangun space. The centre’s name derives from the local Jagara language, and means ‘place of the kuril’ — a native marsupial mouse. The marsupial also gives its name to the nearby landmark of Kurilpa Point on the Brisbane River. Kuril dhangun opened in 2006 as an Indigenous meeting place, and is a space that encourages learning and audience participation. Its mission is to facilitate ‘community connection, advocacy, and the creating, sharing and preserving of Indigenous knowledge, ideas and experiences’ (http://www.slq.qld.gov.au/services/library-spaces/kuril-dhangun). The exhibition hosted an extensive range of ‘hands-on’ public programs that included ‘A thousand fibres’ where Indigenous artists provided instruction in weaving innovations and traditions.

Perceptions about Indigenous identity often ignore the fact that a sense of community does not restrict the capacity for individuality. This exhibition makes it impossible to ignore the diversity and complexity that constitutes our community of Indigenous Australians.

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doi 10.1017/qre.2015.30

Distant lines: Queensland voices of the First World War, State Library of Queensland, April to November 2015

This year has seen a tidal wave of events commemorating the 100th anniversary of the Gallipoli landings. Some of these events have been the traditional Dawn Services, parades and speeches, and events sponsored by various veterans’ groups. Others have been more commercially oriented, such as Bankwest’s ‘Gallipoli Run’ and Woolworths’ embarrassing ‘Fresh in Our Memories’ marketing campaign. Australian history has never been more prominent on our television screens: in April, every free-to-air network aired dramas and documentaries on the Anzacs. One of them even mentioned New Zealand.

Sitting outside this nationalist evangelism and commercial hoopla are other unpretentious events — less strident in their nationalist pronouncements — inviting Australians to reflect on the First World War and its meanings. The Distant lines: Queensland voices of the First World War exhibition at the State Library of Queensland encourages visitors to quietly meditate on the personal narratives of twenty-five Queenslanders who served in the First World War, and to explore the war’s repercussions at home.

The exhibition is in two parts: the ‘War front’ and the ‘Home front experience’. The walls of the entrance to the ‘War Front’ exhibition are papered with 25,000 sepia photographs, which were originally published in The Queenslander, and