

In retrospect

Anthony 'Ace' Bourke

I met Michael Riley in 1986. I had seen photographs by Tracey Moffatt and I wrote to her to ask if she wanted to participate in an Aboriginal photographic exhibition. She said she would only participate if the artists included were Indigenous photographers.

I suppose at the time I may have been considering including non-Indigenous photographers like Penny Tweedie, Wes Stacey, Sandy Edwards, Jon Rhodes, Juno Gemes and Jon Lewis.

For *NADOC '86 Exhibition of Aboriginal and Islander photographers*, held at the Aboriginal Artists Gallery in Sydney during NADOC Week in 1986, Tracey produced Michael Riley, Brenda L. Croft, Mervyn Bishop, Tony Davis, Ros Sultan, Ellen José, Christopher Robinson, Darren Kemp and Terry Shewring. It was the first exhibition of Aboriginal photography and, looking back, I wonder why it didn't feel more historic. I was familiar with the work of Trevor Nickolls, Arone Raymond Meeks and Jeffrey Samuels, and I had seen the exhibition *Koorie art '84*, which *did* feel historic. I was aware of just how many talented urban-based Aboriginal artists were emerging, so by 1986 the exhibition was not a surprise.

The photographs of Michael Riley and Tracey Moffatt, however, were exceptionally resolved and assured. Michael, like Robert Mapplethorpe, really understood the power of black-and-white photography, achieved through his rapport with the subject, an instinctive feeling for composition, and expertise with lighting and printing. His portraits of *Kristina* and *Maria* became classics.

Interestingly, I presumed the exhibition was the beginning of many more Aboriginal artists emerging from urban areas, but the next wave didn't happen. This was an extraordinary Indigenous and non-Indigenous generation.

Did the exhibition create the attention it should have? Both photography and 'urban' Aboriginal art were less collected then, and most of the people that came to the exhibition knew how inaccurate the usual stereotypical representation of Aborigines was. The exhibition became famous in retrospect.

As a founding member of Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Co-operative, Michael's heart always lay there, but he exhibited regularly throughout the 1990s with Hogarth Galleries in Paddington, where I was a co-director, and with Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi in Melbourne. His first exhibition, *Portraits by a window* (1990), consisted of beautiful and sensitive photographs of the friends in his life. Once I asked Michael what had been the best periods in his life and he said, 'Oh, meeting you and Hetti Perkins and everyone'. This was the time when his life and work in Sydney was expanding and

coming together in the interesting direction he wanted it to go in. People were attractive, well-educated or very bright, interesting and talented. This was being appreciated and utilised, and there were opportunities to be taken. Michael both captured and personified this.

Armed with the trusty Nikon (and the idea of a simple backdrop taken from my copy of Irving Penn's book *Worlds in a small room* (1974), which I was never to see again), Michael photographed his community in Moree (and later in Dubbo). These photographs were less stylised than Penn's, more traditional, and less posed than his early works. He asked people how they wanted to be photographed. *A common place: Portraits of Moree Murries* (1991) is extraordinarily valuable documentation, and was an exhibition of exceptional insight and poignancy.

Michael's work was always fully resolved, distilled, refined. He had an extraordinary aesthetic of elegance and simplicity. It was subtly political rather than overt, and probably more successful for it. It broke the stereotypes, or re-represented Aboriginal people, but in a non-confrontational way. My co-director at the Hogarth Galleries, Helen Hansen, comments, 'I remember he always had trouble with the titles for his exhibitions – words weren't necessary, they were extraneous to the idea, the work said everything'. And she remembers how people 'were drawn into an intimate, silent dialogue with the work, and he was able to convey a wealth of information with ease and a lack of artifice'.

Without fanfare, he quietly, persistently, consistently, built an imposing body of work and a reputation. I saw him as the Capricorn goat he was, climbing steadily, one step after the other, up and up the mountain. And the view from the top was ... *cloud* in 2000, his final work.

Michael's selection to participate in *Poetic justice: 8th international Istanbul biennial* in 2003, with *cloud* and his film *Empire* (1997), was a career highlight that secured his international reputation. Sadly he was too ill to go to a city he always wanted to visit, and I was fortunate enough to represent him. I arrived to see *feather* from the *cloud* series as the signature image for the Biennial on posters all over the city, from the grand, pedestrianised Istiklal Caddesi to outside the Topkapi Palace.

Sydney curator, writer and gallerist Jo Holder commented:

This was Michael's global moment. *cloud* was the perfect voice or emblem for the time. It fitted so well into the east/west axis of Istanbul. With the invasion of Iraq and American unilateral foreign policy, the world was in free fall and the work seemed to me to describe a sense of just how wrong it was. It floated above the abyss.

Everyone could relate to the universality of his imagery in *Empire* as well, and the beautiful and haunting music permeated the venue, M.S.U. Tophane-Amire Culture and Arts Centre.

Michael intended to do a body of work about water, a constant theme that ran through his work, and his sister Wendy has described the hours Michael would spend looking at the water in the river. (I was to be a drowning priest, a role Michael gleefully looked forward to my doing.) Recently I visited Dubbo and saw the landscape that inspired him – the water in the two rivers that conjoined at the

Talbragar Reserve, the endless blue sky and horizon, the long grasses. Michael reclaimed them and reasserted ownership.

Michael particularly liked the distinctive, moody photoessays on working-class Europeans by Czech-born Magnum photojournalist Joseph Koudleka (born 1938) but he also admired the understated elegance of Anglo-Swedish photographer Axel Poignant who, following his arrival in Sydney in 1926, went on to make pioneering photoessays on the Liverpool River Aboriginal communities in 1952. Michael was especially interested in the photograph of the swaggy and his bike, *Australian swagman* (1953–54), and the long road stretching endlessly to the horizon. Michael wanted to look at the Australian myth of the outback, and deconstruct it and reclaim it as Indigenous.

Michael quietly and assiduously seemed to do a lifetime's work in half the time, but he had so much more he wanted to do and say.