Wungguli – Shadow : Photographing the spirit and Michael Riley[1]

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Feathers float – so do clouds – and dreams.

Feather – a Wiradjuri word for feather and wing are the same, *Gawuurra*. Probably Cowra, the name of a town to the south, comes from this. In contemporary Aboriginal practices of other groups, feather-appendage is extended in meaning to string tassel, sacred string marking a journey, connecting landscapes, people, family lineages, and, importantly, the embryo cord linking child and mother.

A wing of the eagle hawk, *Malyan*, a skin name, a scary dream-being overhead. Is it guardian angel or assassin? In the south-east, a feather left behind is often evidence of such a spiritual visit.

At the funeral of actor and activist Bob Maza in 2000, his son held his father's Bible and recollected his words, 'to dare to dream your dreams'. It's interesting that Michael Riley chose to avoid the word 'dream' in naming his final photographic work *cloud* (2000), avoiding glib connections to 'Dreamtime'. What rolls past our eyes and through our senses is the culmination of self-examination. In a series of poetic photographic texts made increasingly poignant through events in his personal life, these are dreams of childhood memories in Dubbo, New South Wales: dreams of floating, of release.

> You talk of conservation
> Keep the forest pristine green
> Yet in 200 years your materialism
> Has stripped the forests clean
> A racist's a contradiction
> That's understood by none
> Mostly their left hand holds a Bible
> Their right hand holds a gun[2]

Michael Riley's earlier photographic essays, *Sacrifice* (1992), *flyblown* (1998), and the evocative short film *Empire* (1997) deal with the broad but brutal issues of the 'black armband' – true facts – of Australian history. This is the history of a colonialism beginning with cursory sightings, then violent exchanges, wars, and massacres, followed by the saving and assimilation of the Aboriginal survivors by Christian missionaries. The history of 'clearing the land', to wipe clean and rewrite. A history of Aboriginal people being murdered or forced from the land and onto missions and reserves. The gun or the crucifix. Crosses, prayers, stigmata, dark fishes, Bibles, water, cracked earth. The death of the environment in Christian overtones. Of biblical plagues – drought, locusts – a poisoning of the water. As rural industry takes over the physical land, Christian missionary zeal takes the soul of the people.

cloud appears as more personal and free. A floating feather; a sweeping wing; a vigilant angel; the cows from 'the mission' farm; a single Australian Plague Locust in flight, referring to the cyclical swarms of locusts; a comforting Bible; and a graceful emblematic returning boomerang. The boomerang is really the only overtly Aboriginal image in the series and the locust is one of the few native species left that is visible and cannot be swept aside. It persists.

Dubbo, on the Macquarie River in central-western New South Wales, is named from a Wiradjuri Aboriginal language word meaning red earth and net cap, as in the clay cap worn by Wiradjuri women in mourning. On a Dubbo website in 2000, a timeline of linear white history contained only one mention of Aboriginal people (what they called the Macquarie mob), despite a long history of Aboriginal settlement in the area. That mention was the hanging of Jacky Underwood (aka Charlie Brown) at the Dubbo Gaol in January 1901, the year of the Federation of Australia as a nation. Jacky Underwood and the Governor brothers from the Talbragar River were declared outlaws (outside the law) when they reacted to insults by white neighbours and overseers by brutally murdering them in what was called the Breelong Massacre. This event was mythologised by Thomas Keneally in his 1972 novel, *The chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*, which was itself transformed in 1978 into a film by Fred Schepisi.

Resistance fighter Windradyne was already leading the Wiradjuri people in a war with colonists before explorer John Oxley passed through the present site of Dubbo in 1817–18 in search of the inland sea. Oxley saw the area's rich potential for grazing and agricultural industry without understanding that an Indigenous form of this was there already. The abundant wildlife – kangaroos, emus – and other plant life that provided for the Wiradjuri quickly came into competition with the ever-growing numbers of colonial sheep and beef cattle. The warfare continued when the Surveyor-General of New South Wales, Major Thomas Mitchell, arrived in the area in the early 1830s. By 1865, when Dubbo was declared a village, open physical warfare had fallen off, with white infrastructures being set up such that, by 1872, Dubbo had grown to a municipality.

In 1883, the Aborigines Protection Board was established and an ongoing legal battle over the control of Aboriginal reserves commenced between the white authorities and Aboriginal people. Talbragar Reserve, on the junction of the Talbragar and Macquarie Rivers, was established in 1898 as one of these self-sufficient properties in the centre of what had become beef and dairy country. In 1905, of 114 reserves gazetted in New South Wales, 63 per cent (73) were declared over to Aboriginal farmers already working crops on that land or Aboriginal farmers who were ready to take up the land.

A sophisticated Aboriginal population developed from the Dubbo and the Talbragar Reserve area who, despite losing their land, being disempowered, and disenfranchised, were never really displaced in their own hearts and minds. A line of sophisticated people who fall between, in Michael Riley's words, the 'Rad Ab' and the 'Trad Ab'; between those politically active marchers of the streets and the spiritual people sought out by new-agers and visiting backpackers. It was these sophisticated Aboriginal people that Michael strove to highlight. He would count himself among this group. His male relatives and friends nicknamed him 'Elvis' because of his slicked-back hair and stylish dress.

> The Aborigines are semi-nomadic, hunters, fishermen and plant-food collectors who employ their art in the décor of their rituals and in the decoration of their everyday weapons and utensils … The aesthetic sense of the Aborigines is a much debated question … Much of Aboriginal art is crude technically.[3]

In an historic event in 1960, the State Galleries of Australia had organised the largest ever, national touring exhibition of Aboriginal art. Of over 100 objects, bark paintings from northern Australia dominated. Also included were several painted skulls and a number of restricted sacred ceremonial objects from central Australia. This was the image of Aboriginal art when Michael Riley was born the same year in Dubbo. In the following year, 1961, amid concerns about the perceived end of the

'authentic traditional Aboriginal', the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies opened in Canberra. However, in 1962, Mervyn Bishop became Australia's first Aboriginal press photographer working for *The Sydney Morning Herald*.

Michael went to school in Dubbo. His parents were religious (Christian) and went to church on Sunday regularly like average good suburbanites. They sent the kids to Sunday school – the right thing to do, but it also meant they got a break from them. Michael, however, seems to have found the Christian experience very 'creepy'.

> I hated it, I thought they [church] were creepy, I'm not a Christian, I'm not really against Christians. I just don't like hypocrites.[4]

For him, it was a sort of inversion of Christian missionaries denouncing Dreaming stories and beliefs as primitive and evil. An image of the Bible, a recurring theme throughout his autobiographical work, comes out of this time. He always wanted a Bible but 'they wouldn't give me one; all the other kids had one'.[5] The Bible image, which appears in both the *Sacrifice* and *cloud* series, contains an ambiguity, being depicted as both discarded and floating vision-like, although upside down, in the sky. Is it the sign of a true spiritual believer struggling with his belief, possibly a metaphor for the struggle of acceptance of the 'white' presence in his world?

He says he was never told any Dreaming stories, just vaguely about Biame, the All-Father (or Ancestral Being) who lives in the clouds, and he was shown a few sites around Dubbo, like the grinding sites on the river. Riley was also told, though, '… there were places. You'd be told, "You can't go near there" or "Don't go there, it's a dangerous place".[6]

The crucial point in his spiritual Indigenous diaspora comes from the meeting of Christianity, Indigenous people and religious beliefs. Riley was conscious of the ambiguity of Christian missionaries as agents of negative colonisation and questionable positive, redemptive, assimilation. Although they 'saved' Aboriginal people physically from the guns and the violence, spiritually they subverted them, discouraging and preventing them from continuing their own religious and social practices, from speaking their own language. In personal conversations, an anger surfaced in Michael about what he felt he had lost.

In every Aboriginal home, despite the disjointed removals of family members and from place of birth as a result of former genocidal government policies, is a set, a wall, or boxes of family photos where the lineage of family, extended family (clan), country, and spiritual memory are invested. Michael told me his first photo was most probably a portrait of a family member, a snapshot. Like Mervyn Bishop before him, he bought a simple photographic kit from a local chemist and started to develop his own photos in his room at home when he was about 14.

> I was interested in the process – I was inquisitive. I just knew there were images I wanted to do.[7]

Many Aboriginal artists have come to a form of expression through the backdoor; in a roundabout way, that is. This isn't negative. It just enriches the experience, and the resultant artistic observation.

It could be said that all Aboriginal art is autobiographical in the sense of linking people, land, environment, and history. Michael's first film for Film Australia, *Boomalli: Five Koorie artists* (1988), was a fresh bright work on his peer group, the Boomalli artists. Working at Rapport Photo Agency around this time, he arranged a black-and-white studio portrait series of his friends in the Sydney

black art community. In fact, a path that appears through most of his work is his direct associations with family, friends, and community.

> I found that I wanted to tell stories and get stories from Aboriginal people. The land around there is barren and flat, almost semi-arid desert. What I was trying to do within those images was not just show how farmers and graziers, whatever, people have changed the surface of the land, the country but to try to give an idea that Aboriginal spirituality is still there within that land even if the surface has changed. There's still a sense of beauty and spirituality there.[8]

Through the large, simply superimposed images of *cloud*, Michael was trying to minimalise things, to distil his ideas about physical reality and spirit. All are dichotomously connected to Dubbo and Riley and are also universal. They are not about a place but a state, the surrealistic cow with mud and manure on its hoofs floating by. In contrast to *Empire's* scenes of a decayed, overworked and desolated landscape, there is no physical land in the *cloud* imagery.

Aboriginal creation stories begin with a sunrise and follow the journeys of an original being across a physical, seasonal and emotional landscape – seeing, experiencing, and naming this and that plant, animal, climatic occurrence and emotional feelings. Religious song cycles follow this progression. Michael's set of large, single-subject memories can almost be thought of as a Wiradjuri song cycle of his land and his life.

One result of being the most urbanised population in the world is Australians' lack of awareness of what really happens in the rural inland – most of the continent, that is. *Galang-galang* is the Australian Plague Locust. Locust plagues are a fact of life around Dubbo. Local outbreaks covered the area in the early 1960s when Michael was born, during his teenage years in the 1970s – 1973, 1979–80 – and again in 1984 and 1994. A plague of sorts was happening at the time of the creation of *cloud* – autumn/spring 2000 – and now at the time of this writing (December 2005).

Usually starting in the north, the locust swarm can travel 500 kilometres overnight to reach the rich winter cereal pasture in the south-east of the continent. In the early 1970s, they covered the roads around the town of Dubbo: 'You could hear them crunching under your tyres, they stripped the bowling club lawn.[9]

Yet beyond the economic imperative, how beautiful, free and graceful is *Galang-galang's* flight. In Indigenous religious terms, locusts, stick insects, grasshoppers, praying mantis are the happy spirit messengers from the land of the dead. A swarm of spirits, they tell of the change of seasons, the cycle of life. They are also seen as guardian spirits. It was this spiritual entity choreographer Stephen Page referred to in *Praying mantis dreaming*, Bangarra Dance Theatre's first full-length work – the guardian spirit that leads the central character from her sojourn back to her family and her culture. In one of the creation stories of my own people (Bandjalung), an old woman leads the children of the extended family into the cleft in a special rock where they turn into locusts. Each year, there is the 'flight of the children'. In Australia, two types of native insects are called locusts: the grasshopper type of Michael's image and the cicada. Both are cyclical in their swarming and both were food sources for Aboriginal people.

Many artists have constructed representations of the Australian landscape, including the area around Dubbo. One such was C.H. Kerry, who was invited in 1899 to record the life on a property at Quambone, on the Macquarie River, north of Dubbo. Superb though they are, his documentary images of the local Aboriginal people are an outsider's perspective of the ritual he was able to witness and record. The Aboriginal workers led a dual existence of interaction with the 'Western

world', in working and continuing to live on the cattle station while still pursuing their Aboriginal religious ceremonial life. In an Aboriginal sense they were still on 'their land' and maintaining a spiritual relationship to it despite the colonial imposition of the cattle station.

By the time of Michael's birth, the search for the exotic authentic had shifted from the south-east to northern Australia. Australian Axel Poignant and US *Life* magazine photographer Fritz Gorro both visited Arnhem Land in the 1950s to document and 'compose' their subject matter. Michael's photos are less a simple documentary examination from outside than they are a spiritual vision of landscape from within – not a physical surface recording but an allusion to the spiritual within the land and his attachment to it.

In the early years of this new century, Australians are again re-examining their history and resultant identity. Central to this is the question of our place in the world, and recognition of our 'black armband' history. Photography arrived into the world soon after the first Europeans appeared in the Pacific in significant numbers. A relatively new technology, it has certainly changed, some say even advanced, over its lifetime. As cinema could be said to be the artform of the twentieth century, so photography could be said to be that of the preceding one. It came into popular use at the last rise and gasp of European colonialism: the final colonisation of Oceania, the South Pacific. It became a vehicle for recording the new exotic lands and informing 'un-exotic' Europe of the strange landscape, flora, fauna, and people. Ultimately and blatantly photography became another tool of colonialism, a tool with which to label, control, dehumanise and disempower its subjects who could only reply in defiant gaze at the lens controlled by someone else.

It's a common saying that the camera doesn't lie. In a sense, to photograph is to produce an image of something by allowing light to fall on it and the film inside. For many Indigenous artists, to take up photography as an artform was often a conscious move to counter this history of the medium.

People leave but their spirit remains. Michael Riley was a worldly art practitioner and person. His quiet, seemingly aloof demeanour actually belied a deep-thinking person of extreme warmth, humour and generosity. His periods of silence, where he was physically present but also a strong, positive spiritual presence, were a very masculine thing.

The exceptionality of Riley's records is in the sensitive human articulation of an Aboriginal history and landscape: personally, physically, historically, and emotionally. A known and lived Aboriginal history very much rooted in the present.

> And the locusts sang, yeah, it give me a chill,
> Oh, the locusts sang such a sweet melody.
> Oh, the locusts sang their high whining trill,
> Yeah, the locusts sang and they were singing for me.[10]

[1] *Wunggili/Wungguli* – 'visible projection of oneself: shadow, reflection, image, picture, [ext] replacement; photo(graph), movie, cinema; soul, spirit, ghost'. From Zorc, R. David, *Yolngu-Matha dictionary*, Batchelor, Northern Territory: School of Australian Linguistics, Darwin Institute of Technology, 1986, p. 269. An early version of this essay appeared in the exhibition leaflet *cloud: Michael Riley*, Sydney: Australian Centre for Photography, 2000.
[2] Carmody, Kev, 'Thou shalt not steal' from the recording *Pillars of society*, Song Cycles Pty Ltd, 1989. Lyrics viewed 2 April 2006, kevcarmody.com.au/recordings_songs.php?recID=2
[3] McCarthy, Frederick K. D., Curator of Anthropology, Australian Museum, 'Introduction', *Australian Aboriginal art, bark paintings, carved objects, sacred and secular objects, an exhibition arranged by the State Art Galleries of Australia*, 1960–1961, exhibition catalogue, Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1960, p. 7 and p. 15
[4] Michael Riley in conversation with the author, Glebe, New South Wales, 2000.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Ibid.

[7]Ibid.
[8]Michael Riley, unpublished interview with David Burnett on his inclusion in the *Asia–Pacific triennial of contemporary art 2002*, Queensland Art Gallery.
[9]Michael Riley in conversation with the author, Glebe, New South Wales, 2000.
[10]Dylan, Bob, 'The day of the locusts', from the recording *New morning*, Big Sky Music, 1970. Lyrics viewed 2 April 2006, bobdylan.com/songs/locusts.html