NATIONAL GALLERY OF AUSTRALIA
CANBERRA

The meek Michael Riley

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I met Michael Riley once. The invitation to his exhibition, *A common place: Portraits of Moree Murries,* at the Rebecca Hossack Gallery in London had been sent to the journal *Third Text*. It was the summer of 1991 and it was quite warm. I was working as an assistant editor at the journal and when we received the invitation there was an instant recognition in the office that this was to be an important event. The journal's editors, Jean Fisher and Rasheed Araeen, were intrigued by the card, and even though Rebecca Hossack's gallery was not one of the usual sites for this gang, the word went out and most of the hard-core critics and artists that were associated with the journal came out for the opening.

The opening was packed but in the lower section of the gallery there was a series of photographs that maintained their equanimity. The space had been lit with care, enough to see each work with appreciation but not so as to disturb the quietness that had settled between each work. The photographs were portraits. Most of them were of individuals. Some were of families and friends. Every face was calm. Everyone looked directly at the camera with a warm sense of delight. The photographs had simple names: 'Nana Riley'; 'Nana with grandkids'; 'Two mates'. It was obvious that Michael was at home. But more importantly the gaze and posture of everyone in the photographs was homely. The two mates stood shoulder-to-shoulder, one slightly leaning into the other. The dog at Nana's feet was alert, his tail and ears up and ready – he cares that there might be something around the corner. All the photographs were taken with the same backdrop, a long white canvas sheet that also draped down to cover the floor. The background and foreground merged. It was a simple place of intimacy.

This series of photographs has never left me. They were the most remarkable portraits of a community that I have ever witnessed. Michael took out all the jagged edges of the world in which these people lived but brought in the dignity with which they face that world on a daily basis. The scene is soft, but this does nothing to soften the reality. There is no sense that these people are posing in a fantasy world. They are in a state of repose and respite, but are not oblivious to and apart from their own lives. Their world is held in their bodies. This can be seen in their small gestures. It is evident in the way the knuckles and fingers in the hands are crossed together. It can also be seen in the fall of the arms from the slightly puffed torso of a younger man. Even the act of tugging of one kid's arm to hold her in the frame is a kind of act of loving co-operation. In this image the gentle wonder and nervous compliance of the kids is counterposed by the proud smile and firm stance of the mother. As we moved along the gallery walls I felt that we were coming closer and closer to a group of people who understood hospitality and hardship.

Michael had created the most relaxed and real photographs of a community. He had not gone into their homes and asked them to be themselves. He had not followed them in the course of their working life or sought to place them in the landscape in a way that might reflect back their struggle and entitlement. On the contrary, he invited them into a space that was abstract. In this neutral setting he created their aura of their belonging through the small gestures of recognition. This effect was startling in its simplicity but also a turning point in the history of photography. It was in direct opposition to the history of colonial and ethnographic photography that sought to capture the noble savage in their primitive setting. It was also a radical departure from the more recent photorealism that sought to sink the subject into a landscape of grim exploitation and alienation. Michael did not

set out to challenge these traditions by any overt act. At that time, the critiques of colonial and ethnographic photography were being forcefully argued in the pages of *Third Text*. Many artists were also determined to deconstruct the strategies of the past, appropriate and recontextualise images that had been taken of Indigenous people.

It seemed to me that Michael's aim was more subtle and in a simple way more humble. He knew the people that he wanted to photograph. I also felt that he knew the way these people wanted to be photographed. I have seen numerous exhibitions where photographers have spent extended periods 'in the field'. Where they have clearly worked hard to learn the habits, speak the language and even gain the trust of the people that they wanted to photograph. Many of these photographs have the power to reveal the details of people's everyday lives. At times they hint at articulating a deep secret or creating an iconic moment that evokes a genuine sympathy for the subject. But this does not always translate into the production of photographs that the subjects want to see for themselves. The difference between even a committed photographer and Michael's work is that his images are not just a document of time and place. They are portraits that seem to have been delivered not just with consent but also through the active collaboration of the subject. How do you get to this phase of co-production?

There are no short cuts in this art practice. To convey this intimacy requires profound familiarity. It comes through the way one lives with one's family and friends. It emerges from a lifetime of having noticed what makes people happy and what causes them pain. I imagine that Michael was able to ask people to stand in a way that was not simply posing for the camera and they would know what he meant. They would know that he would know when they were putting on a pose. But more importantly he also knew that they wanted to look well and to feel pride and pleasure in the final image. The power of their relationship is in how they work together to create this positive image. Most recently I have come to think that this relationship has nothing to do with the history of documentation but a great deal to do with the process of mediation. The photographer is working with these people for them to create the image of themselves that does not just reflect back a fixed identity, but also presents a sense of who they are and who they are becoming. It shifts the act of representation from recovering the past, to conveying the possibility of being in the present and the future.

In the late 1970s John Berger and Jean Mohr made a book of photographs about the lives of mountain peasants. The writer and photographer knew their subjects intimately. John Berger lived in the village for many years and Jean Mohr originated from a similar place. They had both understood the challenge of making a book of photographs. Mohr noted that the point of intersection between the photographer, the subject of a photograph and the viewer were often contradictory. Each person approaches the image from a different perspective, with different assumptions and unique sets of references. Their concern was to produce photographs in which the fundamental questions – 'who is being represented?' and 'what use is being made of the image?' – could be asked in such a way that everyone felt empowered to answer. There is a chapter in this book called 'Marcel or the right to choose', in which Mohr photographs a shepherd in the mountains with his cows, dog and grandson. After having shown Marcel dozens of photographs, he requested the right to be photographed as he wished:

> The next Sunday, early in the morning, Marcel knocked at the door. He was wearing a clean, freshly ironed, black shirt. His hair was carefully combed. He had shaved. 'The moment has come,' he told me, 'to take the bust. Down to there!' He indicated his waist with one hand. Below this chosen line he was wearing his working trousers and his boots covered with cowshit. Sunday or not,

> he still had fifty cows to look after. He stood in the middle of the kitchen and concentrated on the camera which was going to take his portrait.

When he saw this portrait, in which he had chosen everything for himself, he said with a kind of relief: 'And now my great grandchildren will know what sort of man I was.[1]

A few years later I met Marcel's grandson. He was on holidays from his science course and was about to assist in the delivery of a calf. After he cleaned the barn he came next door and had a drink with us. He had the same smiling expression of satisfaction as his grandfather. The image of Marcel and the presence of his grandson seem to come from the same place. The co-presence between the photograph of Marcel and the smile on the face of his grandson might be another way of thinking about posterity. Michael, I suspect, would have understood this claim that photography has the power to convey the inter-generational passage of traits. I am guessing, as there is now no way to check, that he felt he was photographing his family for the sake of the future.

We did have the chance to check some of these impressions and reflections. At the opening in London, Jean Fisher, Rasheed Araeen and I asked to be introduced to Michael. The heat of the day had not lifted and so we took our beers and stepped out into the shady footpath. Michael came outside to say hello and shook our hands. He was extremely shy and modest. Rasheed was quick to commend him for the technique of blurring the horizon line through the curve of the sheet. Jean was most moved by the deep humanism that was evoked by his subjects. Michael was appreciative but he shuffled nervously and his eyes floated off towards some other kind of horizon. Jean asked him if we could record an interview with him that might be published in the journal. He agreed, and so on the next day we went out to Brixton to have lunch and discuss the politics of representation and the use of photography in redeeming the subjectivity of Indigenous people. We asked questions about his technique for developing a trusting relationship with his subjects, and the development of a mode that we called 'critical intimacy'. We also asked him if there were parallels in the laws on and conditions for representing the art of the Indigenous peoples in the Americas and Australia. Throughout the interview Michael replied slowly and mostly from a personal perspective. He was uncomfortable with being in a dark basement flat, the slowly turning reels of the Walkman, and with some of our more strident questions. We turned off the machine and went to a nearby restaurant to eat Mexican food on the terrace, because to everyone's surprise it was still warm.

When I returned to Australia in 1998, Alasdair Foster from the Australian Centre for Photography invited me to edit a special issue of the journal *Photofile*. I was interested in exploring the concept of the 'strange'.[2] During my time away I had often pondered on the vast levels of complexity in the social and historical landscape of Australia. How do we make sense of all the different histories that have jostled for attention? How do we even begin to grasp the multiple layers and diverse fragments that are dispersed in our everyday surroundings? My aim was not to seek to find photographic testimonies of the strange, or marginal and unfamiliar images, in order to then validate them as worthy of closer attention and public appreciation. The focus was more directed towards an encounter with the strange that expanded the frameworks of hospitality towards the other, enabled a recognition of the uncanny, and provided a space in which ruined forms might emit a new and different perspective on the otherwise over-confident claims on progress. I was particularly interested in how an urban or rural landscape may evoke tender reflections on the vulnerability of the human condition. In my discussions with Alasdair Foster he introduced me to a recent body of work by Michael called *flyblown* (1998).

This installation involves five panels, each composed of pairs of images that conjure up the gaping extremes of the Australian landscape. A dead galah on a dusty and cracked track; boundless skies

with murky waters; hybrid wheat fields rustling in the wind; blood red, gold and blue crosses dominating the foregrounds; and a Bible floating, as if in the position of a dead man, on a shallow riverbed – these haunting images arrest all sense of time. The landscape hovers somewhere between life and death. The story of colonisation is being told from a different perspective in these panels. They have the elegiac qualities that inspire a sense of reflection and humility that is common in much religious iconography. This calm note of destruction is the opposite of the alarmed shrill of protest, but the resonance is more reaching. I found these gentle and sombre images to have a haunted quality. They did not thrust themselves into our consciousness by making any aggressive or confrontational claim. Like his video *Empire* (1997), these images manage to touch, ever so lightly, the landscape that seems both parched and scarred. The harshness of this environment is multiple. At one level it must contend with the extremes of nature: the ease with which fire spreads through the bush, or the tendency for drought to be followed by flood. Overlaying the signs of natural tension in the landscape are the scars that have followed the paths of western colonisation. Michael picks up these traces of colonisation by identifying both the agricultural seed and the word of the Bible as two of the dominant means that have led to the desacralisation of the landscape and culture of Aboriginal communities. Polluted rivers, over-farmed valleys, deforestation and rising salt beds are paired off with the ominous Christian crosses that dominate the foreground.

By focusing on the ecological damage that went hand-in-hand with the frontier myth of settlement and which was paralleled by the drive to civilise and convert the Indigenous peoples to Christianity, Michael was able to highlight the stunning contradictions of contemporary Aboriginal experience. After the acknowledged failure of conversion and the near genocide that is coyly referred to as ‘cultural contact’, there is now a perverse relationship maintained by mainstream Australian society – on a political and social level Aboriginal communities are being subjected to increasing marginalisation and exclusion, while culturally and aesthetically they are everybody’s darling. Aboriginal art is the marketing success story of the 1990s. However, behind the celebrations and beneath the symbols of Dreamtime are the realities of an increasing gap between the health and welfare of Indigenous and mainstream Australian communities. At a time when Aboriginal art and culture is being promoted to celebrate the timelessness of this continent, Michael returns us to the land with all its physical and political needs.

Michael’s images disturb the cosy assumptions that we have gained control over the environment. His subtle juxtapositions between the ruins of the land and fragments of both Christian and Indigenous cultures suggest the need for a new way of thinking about reconciliation. Michael is not making easy condemnations against the complicity between the church and colonialism. Rather than rejecting Christianity, he makes us think about the gap between Christian values and the legacy it produced, or rather, in the social and political whirlwind in which it was embroiled. I got the feeling that Michael was not trying to reject the principles of the Christian faith but rather asking us to consider the consequences of its imposition in the Australian context. The complexity of Michael’s approach is made more evident when you consider the relationship between the music and the images in his video *Empire*. The images of the landscape range between intense close-ups and wide, open horizon shots that seem to be taken from the sky. We go from an insect’s perspective to the bird’s-eye view. This gives the video a sublime and an omniscient gaze. The music is also a contemporary variation of elegiac church music. Together they lift us into the realm of the gods but also drop us into the despair of mortal tragedy. This combination is telling. Michael is taking us inside the world of a believer. At no stage do you feel that he is casting judgment upon other people, or that he is somehow claiming to occupy a transcendental viewpoint from which he can look down on others, or look back at the past. The perspective that Michael offers is of someone who began with genuine and good intentions. It would be simple to find an example of a

malicious, rapacious and brutal coloniser. However, Michael's approach is not drawn towards moral condemnations of individuals but is a testimony to the flaws and contradictions in a system that sought to deliver progress, enlightenment and solidarity.

The images in the series *flyblown* had a deep effect in me. They made me think of the ways in which the problems of colonialism persist in our contemporary landscapes. The evidence of failure is not just in the burial sites of massacres, or even in the ongoing ecological damage, but rather that we still have no answers to the question of how can we all live together in this place. We may think that we are not as evil as the colonial masters, but we are not as innocent as we may often like to think. Our presence in this place has consequences. Even when walking in the landscape I often feel how strange it is to be in land in which my knowledge of its history is still so thin. I struggle to find my own bearings, partly because I have yet to map out a genealogy that can link me deeper into this history. When my Auntie died she wanted to be buried in Greece next to her mother. When her husband died he chose to be buried in Australia so that he could be near his sons. The images in *flyblown* remind me of the uncanny effect of the Australian sun and heat. I have grown up with classical myths about the piercing effects of nature. Whether it involves people who risked flying too high or talking too much, these myths are ways of striking a balance with nature. The myths help familiarise and domesticate the landscape. Such stories are always out of place in Australia. They don't quite make the same kind of sense. And so when I stare into the horizon there is an uncanny stillness that is burnt into my consciousness. The flameless summer light can become an all-consuming yellow. At night the only witness is the distant but ever-present cicada whose restless chorus offers little redemption. It feels as if our desire for reconciliation will not find a footing until we discover new myths for our own place under this sun. I selected one of Michael's images of a shining cross that is set against an open sky saturated in red for the front cover of the special issue 'Strange'.

Walter Benjamin, one of the most melancholic figures in philosophy, once said that there is no better starting point for serious thinking than laughter. At the time that the issue of *Photofile* that I edited was in press, I also attended the 1999 exhibition *Living here now: Art and politics – Australian perspecta* at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. As I approached an installation I noticed some very unusual behaviour. People seemed to be gathering around a video monitor with a kind of nervous excitement and homely relief that you do not often encounter in an art gallery. From a distance I gazed at this phenomenon. Viewers were actually stopping to let the video have its time. They were slowly opening themselves up to the experience of viewing, rather than simply glancing at something as they passed by on their way to the coffee shop or some other destination. I also began to notice that they were at first giggling to themselves. The gallery was starting to feel like it was being occupied by schoolboys and schoolgirls who were uncertain as to whether they could laugh out aloud or whether they should tuck their grins under their jumpers. Eventually the atmosphere broke and there was open laughter. The space of the gallery had finally, albeit rather briefly, become what it should be: a social space. As I entered the space I also joined in and found to my great pleasure that it was a video by Michael and Destiny Deacon called *I don't wanna be a bludger* (1999).

Watching this video again is a more complicated experience. Destiny's bitter-sweet jokes and her incredulous undermining of bureaucratic authorities are still as funny and as breathtakingly audacious as they were the first time I saw the video. The stereotypes that she manages to unpick have not disappeared and the pathos of the aspirations that she expresses have not lost any of their vitality. It is this tragicomic balancing act that brings these two great artists together. Throughout the video one is uncertain about one's own response – tears and laughter seem equally

appropriate to each scene. However, what remains almost unbearable is Michael's cameo performance. In a scene where Destiny puts on a party for the kids in her family, Michael appears as a disabled uncle. He enters in a wheelchair wearing a short-sleeved shirt and dicky bowtie, broken glasses with lenses as thick as a Coke bottle and a triangular party hat. This is an archetypical image of the clown. Michael also plays a helpless mute that is unable to feed himself and who also falls from his wheelchair as Destiny is trying to drag him up the stairs. After Michael's unfair death it is impossible to see this scene as anything other than life's cruelest joke.

Now that Michael has gone, how to remember him? Looking back at the photographs and videos that he produced in such a short career it is almost impossible to separate the tragic qualities in his work from the tragic circumstances of his death. It is as if one element foretells the next. However, it is also crucial to celebrate the other passions that radiate from his work. Michael's portrait photography challenged the conventions of representing the history of Aboriginal communities. In his collaborative portraits he captured an active self-presence that was distinctly absent in the traditional ethnographic displays and documents that set out to capture 'types' and effectively objectified the very subject of their investigations. This tendency to objectify and exoticise is consistent with the colonising mission. While the formal structures for colonising Australia have been dismantled, we have, to paraphrase Ngugi Wa Thiongo, not yet found ways to decolonise our imagination.[3] Michael's work not only reveals the scars and ruins that mark our landscape, but he also positions us as the inheritors of this land and its history. We cannot stand outside or above this strange land.

The way I wish to remember Michael is as the most affirmative embodiment of the qualities of meekness. I take my image of meekness in part from my brief meeting with him in London and in part from the Italian philosopher Norberto Bobbio. The meek, according to Bobbio, always find hope in the fragments of the past and in the fleeting hints of recognition with the other. Bobbio claims that meekness must not be confused with the sadness of humility, or compared to other passive states such as modesty, submission or resignation. On the contrary, he asserts that meekness revels in its capacity to survive and remain calm in the face of adversity, and is untouched by the tendrils of vengeance and fury. Meekness, he insists, is a unilateral social virtue: it does not expect reciprocity.

A meek person does not brighten their kindness, curiosity and concern in proportion to the other's power. Bobbio praises the meek not for their display of a superior form of goodwill, but for the way that they behave as if their generosity simply exists, like a constant pulse. It continues even when every gesture goes unnoticed.

For, as Bobbio states: 'The meek are cheerful because they are inwardly convinced that the world to which they aspire is better than the one they are forced to inhabit.[4] When an artist like Michael Riley comes into this world, you only have to meet him once to have him with you for the rest of your life.

[1] Berger, John and Mohr, Jean, *Another way of telling*, London: Writers and Readers, 1982, pp. 36–37.
[2] Papastergiadis, Nikos (ed.), *Strange: Photofile*, no. 57, October 1999.
[3] See Wa Thiongo, Ngugi, *Decolonising the mind: The politics of language in African literature*, New Hampshire: Heinemann, 1986.
[4] Bobbio, Norberto, *In praise of meekness*, translated by Teresa Chataway, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000, p. 31.