

## From the chapter 'Frame-by-frame – film'

Rachel Perkins

From the moment Michael explored the moving image, he made exceptional and innovative films. Even in the most mundane production environments, Michael created ideas that pushed the boundaries of form and the depiction of the Indigenous experience. With the National Gallery of Australia's retrospective, those films now have the opportunity to be examined as a distinctive legacy, created at the birth of Indigenous filmmaking in Australia.

I first met Michael in Alice Springs in the Northern Territory as he was passing through town on his way to film Michael Nelson Jakamarra at Papunya for his first documentary *Dreamings: The art of Aboriginal Australia*. We were both starting out as filmmakers. Michael was at Film Australia and I was at the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association (CAAMA). The year was 1989 and the Bicentenary and extensive lobbying had created an awareness of Indigenous culture which influenced the Australian film industry and government bodies to recognise the need for an Indigenous voice in the Australian screen industries. An injection of government support assisted the ABC and SBS to establish Indigenous Units, CAAMA to begin its video unit in earnest and Film Australia to offer opportunities to Indigenous filmmakers, of which Michael was one of the first. When I moved to Sydney from Alice to work at SBS, Michael and I immediately became friends. So began our filmmaking collaboration that continued on and off over the next 15 years or so. But Michael always remained, in a creative sense, one step ahead.

Michael's passion for visual expression began with photography. His filmmaking evolved as an extension of this passion. The genesis from the still image to the moving image meant Michael's films, although created for television, were never really TV; they were artworks.

The still images he created spoke to his films. This can most clearly be seen in the photographic series *flyblown* (1998) and *cloud* (2000) and their reflection in the sumptuous experimental film, *Empire* (1997). The film *Quest for country* (1993) is a further meditation on the abuse of settler culture on the environment, also captured in the photographic series *flyblown* (1998). The images in the exhibitions *Yarns from the Talbragar* (1998) and *A common place: Portraits of Moree Murries* (1991) are reflected in the people and the places in the films *Blacktracker* (1996) and *Tent boxers* (1997). These are Michael's mob and his films are about their world.

Filmmaking, as opposed to photography, necessitates a more collaborative process and many Indigenous filmmakers had the privilege to assist Michael in making his films. I was one of them and in many ways we grew up together making films. I recall we seemed to spend a lot of time on the road, thinking up new ideas for films. In this context Michael continually impressed me with his

sureness of vision. From the first moment he articulated an idea for a film, he always had the complete concept determined. Even more so than photography, to get the money to make a film the idea would need to be expressed convincingly on paper. With great tolerance Michael would scrawl out pages of indecipherable text and whoever was working with him at the time would type it all into a computer as he dictated from his notes. The dictation was, from start to finish, a complete work. No redrafting or rethinking.

As much as Michael was true to his creative vision, he was equally true to his personal style. Michael had no regard for television hierarchy and the flashy two-minute TV idea 'pitch'. He would just arrive in his shorts, outline the idea to the executive with the power to make it happen and then curl his hair around his finger, look at the floor and wait for their response, which was always 'yes'. Everyone understood that Michael was a true artist and no-one assumed they could turn him down or, worse, tell him about his art.

In 1993 Michael and I established an independent production company together called Blackfella Films. We were both tired of all the debate about the rejection or acceptance of the term 'Aboriginal filmmaker' and wanted to make it clear where we stood. Our first production through Blackfella Films was an international co-production by Indigenous filmmakers from Australia as well as Maori, Sami people and Native Canadians. Michael's film was called *Quest for country* (1993). Blackfella Films is still operating, currently shooting the largest documentary series to be undertaken in Australia and employing Indigenous people throughout the production.

Michael was universally loved by all his work mates and particularly by his family. His films, in a way, are testimonies of his love for these people. If you review most of the films he has made and also his still images, they are people close to him; made with or about family, friends and fellow artists. He had an exceptionally independent vision as an artist and a true and loyal heart as a friend.