

Untitled

To see this image, the thoughtful insight of a deceased friend leads me to wandering anecdotes, to fond memories—moments I roll over like a chanting of the best attributes.

Michael Riley was born on the Talbragar Reserve in 1960, but his family moved into Dubbo proper that year. Though seemingly successful as an artist—critically and somewhat financially—he lived a type of artist couch-surfing existence between, most probably, three friend's houses: his cousin Polly's, his supporter and fellow Wiradjuri activist and now member of federal Parliament Linda Burney's, and one other's.

Traditional Aboriginal life existed in a dichotomy, a binary similar but different to yin and yang, male and female, fire and floods, positive and negative. It embodied the idea of the division and unity of the universe; one cannot exist without the other, and it's the interaction of the two that creates life. Anthropologists called this a moiety system—two halves, after the French word for 'half'. People married across this division. Michael's father, Allen Riley, was a Wiradjuri man from Dubbo. His mother, Dorothy (née Wright), was a Kamilaroi woman from Moree. They lived on Talbragar Reserve at the junction of the Macquarie and Talbragar Rivers, the place of the possum people. They were church-going people. Following colonisation, Aboriginal people would encounter another binary: Catholicism and Protestantism. Catholicism and Anglicanism, in Michael's case. Some of the Riley family were Catholic, others Anglican. In my own family case, Catholic and Pentecostal.

Most Aboriginal people would now say they are Christian, though the form of that belief isn't a standard Western one. A form of Aboriginal universal spirituality remained part of our lives through conversion, and it's no accident that Christian and an Aboriginal imagery run through

Michael's photographic compositions. Stigmata, fishes, crucifixes may be metaphorically Christian but they also operate in an assimilation sense in *Sacrifice* (1992), like the large Christian crosses—red, gold and blue—in *flyblown* (1998) and in an airborne Bible and guardian angel statue in *Cloud* (2000). Or possibly they are forms of *vanitas*, the reality of decay of beauty, youth and value in animals and land, dying or degraded, falling apart. Michael said, 'I found I wanted to tell stories and I wanted to tell Aboriginal stories'.

A former editor of *Art and America* magazine said to me that in the USA people discuss an artist's Christian denomination as an attribute of their character and practice, but in Australia this is rarely mentioned. She also said that in the USA Catholics aren't really seen as Christian. For most of my time knowing Michael, he appeared to be searching for a more universal sense of the spiritual—beyond a colonised, assimilated social persona. In one of our last conversations he talked of the simplicity of Buddhism. I'm told that mud in a dream might indicate someone struggling with a responsibility, or a cleansing breakthrough. An image of a discarded Bible in a muddy puddle possibly signals a cynical rejection of organised Christianity and, to him, its failed promise. Michael died early, really, at the age of forty-four. It is still a fact in many Aboriginal communities that by the time the generation of sons has reached thirty they have no male role models to guide them, their fathers' generation already dying.

The powerful image of the Bible bathed in rich-brown mud suggests firstly that race, the colour of our skin, identifies us as colonised by the coloniser. It also references the practice of body painting and 'haptic specificity'. Historically, socially, one only allows people in a specific relationship and time to enter their intimate personal space, to paint their body. The earth used for paint comes from a specific site, the coloured earth left there by a creative spirit, and its application, places or reinforces one in a relationship to that spirit and site.

Djon Mundine OAM

Michael Riley

1960–2004, Talbragar Reserve, NSW

Wiradjuri language group

Untitled, 1998, from the series *flyblown*

C-type print, edition 20

H 82 × W 108 cm

Acquired 2019

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