



Up in the sky, behind the clouds

Brenda L. Croft

I do what I do because I like doing it, I'm not chasing fame ... Photography is just a medium for me, a way of putting across my views and images to the world. It's no big deal.¹

Big sky. Flat, open plains. Scudding clouds, as if swept across the canvas by a colossal invisible hand. The plane shudders as its landing gear drops – clunk – and, when its wing dips to the right, the black soil of Moree rises up in greeting. I was travelling there to meet with the family and friends of Michael Riley (1960–2004), whose mother's people were part of the Moree Kamilaroi community, and whose father's people came from the red-soil western plains of Dubbo, Wiradjuri country, to the south, where I had travelled some weeks earlier.

How do you measure a person's life? Through their creative output? Their traces left behind, the *memento mori*? Through the reminiscences of others, in the spoken and written word? Through their family, their ancestors and descendants? Michael left us physically in August 2004, aged 44, suffering the after-effects of childhood poverty – the fate of too many Indigenous people in Australia, a First-World country, where the majority of the Indigenous people continue to live in Third-World conditions. By any standards Michael's life was extraordinary and he has left behind a body of work that encompasses the complexity of contemporary Aboriginal life in myriad forms: portraiture, social-documentary and conceptual photography and film, and fine-art film. And he remains a strong and positive presence in the memories of his family, friends and colleagues. His last series, the otherworldly *cloud* created in 2000, remains the best known of his prolific creative output. However, it would be remiss to consider this visually luscious series as Michael's signature work, since it is but one facet of a multi-dimensional body of work created over two decades, drawing on the collective experiences of millennia.

Untitled [blue sky with cloud] from the series *flyblown* 1998
chromogenic pigment print National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

There it goes, up in the sky
There it goes, behind the clouds
For no reason why²

For Michael, land was life. His roots were deep in the red and black soil of western and north-western New South Wales – Wiradjuri and Kamilaroi traditional lands. That was why I had to visit his birthplace, and that of his parents.

Along with his indissoluble connections to his peoples' country, Michael also established and retained strong links with Sydney, the largest city on the continent, where he lived from the late 1970s onwards. It was in this bustling, energetic, badly-planned city that he created his photographic, film and video work; that he bore with dignity and stoicism the enervating, endless cycle of hospitalisation and treatment; and where he was buried. Although Michael travelled extensively within Australia and overseas in the two decades of his artistic career – curtailed as this was in his last years – his life's work revolved around the invisible triangular axis of Dubbo, Moree and Sydney.

Michael's mother, Dorothy Wright, was from the Moree Kamilaroi people, and she settled in Dubbo after marrying Michael's father, Allen, better known as 'Rocko', a Wiradjuri man. Michael, their second child, was born at Dubbo Base Hospital in 1960. He spent much of the first years of his life on Talbragar Aboriginal Reserve, 7.3 hectares of land located on the outskirts of Dubbo, at the junction of the meandering Talbragar and more powerful Macquarie Rivers.

Screen grabs from *Blacktracker* 1996 ABC TV

His family has long links with the region directly around Dubbo, unlike many Aboriginal people who travelled or were brought to the town. They had lived for generations on their traditional lands, which, as with other land grants, were established as an Aboriginal Reserve during the reign of Queen Victoria (1838–1901).³

Michael's paternal grandfather, Alexander Riley, best known as Alec or 'Tracker', was a vital influence on his life, remaining inspirational long after his death at the age of 86 on 29 October 1970. Born in 1884, Sergeant Tracker Riley worked for the New South Wales Police Force from 1911 until 1950 and, at the time of his death, was still the only Aboriginal person to have achieved the rank of Sergeant. He was instrumental in solving some of the state's most infamous crimes, including the Moss Murders, the state's biggest serial murder case in the 1930s. Awarded the highest police award, the King's Medal in 1943, Tracker Riley was honoured with a state funeral following his death and in 2003 an historical display was installed in his memory at Dubbo Gaol, the result of efforts by his descendants to ensure his achievements were officially acknowledged in his hometown.

Tracker Riley was the patriarch and revered elder at Talbragar Aboriginal Reserve and, with his wife Ethel, remained contentedly on the reserve long after other residents had moved into town under the Aborigines Welfare Board's assimilation policy of the 1960s. He refused to move into the new town houses in Dubbo, scornfully referring to town living as 'a rat-race'.⁴ The Rileys were among the last families to live on the reserve, with the last family group being 'encouraged' to move off the reserve and into Dubbo by Aboriginal Welfare Officers in 1970. Many family members – particularly the grandchildren who loved exploring the nearby



rivers and surrounding countryside – recalled visiting the old man and his wife, Ethel, throughout the 1960s.

Michael's cousin, Ron Riley, remembered sitting with his brother Allen, or 'Rocko', Michael's father, and other cousins listening to their grandfather's stories for hours and poring over photographs in the albums.⁵ This was a recollection that stayed with Michael all his life, too.

In 1996 Michael brought the story of his grandfather's life to the screen in *Blacktracker*, which he wrote and directed when he worked with ABC Television's Aboriginal Programs Unit. Tracker Riley's life 'encompassed a period of great oppression in the history of Aboriginal people, but [his] legendary skills and deep humanity lifted him above the ignorance of the times.'⁶ The film, which Michael worked on with many family members, including his cousin, Ron's daughter, researcher Bernadette Yhi Riley, remains a source of great pride for the Wiradjuri community in Dubbo. In turn, *Blacktracker* was the inspiration for *One night the moon* (2001), directed by Rachel Perkins – Michael's colleague and co-director of the Indigenous film company, Blackfella Films – and produced under the auspices of mdTV (Music Drama Television) for SBS Television.

It was while living at Talbragar Aboriginal Reserve that Michael first encountered Christianity through Sunday School classes taught by representatives of the Aborigines Inland Mission (AIM) and attendance at other churches, such as the Salvation Army and Seventh Day Adventist Church.⁷ Although as an adult Michael expressed ambivalence about and distrust of Christianity and its ongoing impact upon Indigenous people, his mother Dot recalled that, as a child, he 'loved going to church, yeah.'⁸ This may have had

more to do with the games devised by the Minister to entice the children's attendance – including finding hidden shillings – than with becoming one of God's converts, a saved 'heathen' soul.

Although the last family moved away from Talbragar Aboriginal Reserve in 1970, after Tracker Riley died, his son, Boykin, lived in the old house until 1986 before moving into town. After Boykin's death, the house was demolished. However, the site continues to be considered sacred by Tracker Riley's descendants and other former residents. Now in the care of the Dubbo Local Aboriginal Land Council, the site is fenced off, under lock and key, to keep local yobbos from doing burnouts in their utes⁹, or stealing or destroying the carefully constructed facilities – toilet block, barbeque, benches, water tanks – and newly planted trees.

Devoid of the weatherboard and tin houses – which were kept spotless – the reserve is a tranquil place, where former residents and family members visit to sit and reminisce about who lived where, what hi-jinks children got up to, the camaraderie among the community, fishing, floods and broken bones, and listening to Grandfather Riley talk about the people in the photos in his albums and scrapbooks. These memories formed the basis for Michael's photographic series *Yarns from the Talbragar Reserve* (1998), which so beautifully portrays many community members who lived on, or were associated with, Talbragar Aboriginal Reserve, many of whom have since died. This series, acquired by the Dubbo Regional Art Gallery in 1999, will go on permanent display in Dubbo's new cultural centre following its completion in late 2006.

All those who shared their memories with me recalled Michael as being a good child; quiet like his brother and sisters, always





(above) *Willy Hill*; (opposite, clockwise from top left) *Tucker Taylor*; *Alma Riley*; *Mary Toomey (Cookie Carr)*; *Merle and Frank Pearce*; *Violet Fuller*; *Florence Nolan (Florrie Carr)*; from the series *Yarns from the Talbragar Reserve* 1998 gelatin silver photographs Gift of the Artist – Guardianship Dubbo Regional Art Gallery





observant, with a loving nature and a cheeky laugh, which in later years could be put to wicked effect as he regaled friends and family with the latest, tantalising gossip. Many of his cousins and friends recollected that, even as a child, he had an unusual perspective on life. He stood outside the crowd, watching and listening, easily recognisable in the distance because of his lion's mane of red curls and freckles – traits passed on from his maternal grandfather, Reuben Wright. Also known as Bengalla, after the pastoral station on which he was born in 1908, Wright was a Kamilaroi man from Moree, who was renowned for his green eyes, red hair and freckles.¹⁰

In Michael's father's country at Talbragar, the big sky is ever-present. It is easy to imagine Michael as a small boy lying on his back on the earth, with the grass waving around him in the breeze, staring up at the clouds skimming overhead, following the line of telegraph wires as they looped from pole to pole, becoming smaller and smaller, till they vanished in the distance, leaving him to wonder where they led.

Michael's mother's family had moved from the small Aboriginal township of Boggabilla near the New South Wales–Queensland border to Moree in 1939. Situated on the banks of the Macintyre River, Boggabilla is a mainly Aboriginal community of approximately 750 people, quite poor in a rich agricultural region, nine kilometres south-east from Goondiwindi on the Queensland border, and 118 kilometres north-east of Moree.

Bengalla Wright moved with his wife, Maude (born 1904), and family into Moree in 1939 at the request of the Aborigines Protection Board to manage a hostel on Moree Aboriginal Reserve – also known as Moree Mission – for Aboriginal women from surrounding communities such as Boggabilla, Toomelah, Boomi and Muningindi requiring pre-natal care. Bengalla and Maude were married at Boomi in 1929 and their marriage produced ten children, with Michael's mother, Dorothy or Dot, being the fifth child. Bengalla and Maude made a striking couple. He was noted for being an extremely handsome young man, a reputation supported by historical photographs showing a lantern-jawed presence, green eyes piercingly apparent in faded black-and-white images, his mane of hair a mirror of Michael's. Images of Maude as a young mother depict a clear-eyed, attractive, strong woman – not someone to be messed with, by family accounts. An early image of Dorothy, pictured with her best friend, portrays a beautiful young woman whose face would be closely echoed by Michael's own.¹¹



(above top) *Nanny Wright and Dot Riley, Moree c.1970s* black-and-white photograph Wendy Hockley; (bottom) *Maude and Ben Wright, Moree c.1970s* black-and-white photograph Cathy Craigie
(opposite, clockwise from top left) *Pat Doolan; Malcolm Burns; Keith Murphy; Maggie Smith-Robinson; Coral Peckham; Margaret Riley* from the series *Yarns from the Talbragar Reserve* 1998 gelatin silver photographs Gift of the Artist – Guardianship Dubbo Regional Art Gallery



Untitled [long grass] from the series *flyblown* 1998 chromogenic pigment print National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

The Wright family moved, following Bengalla Wright's search for work – to Moree Station, and then to Dubbo, where Ben was employed, like Tracker Riley, as a Police Tracker.¹² It was in Dubbo, that Dot met Michael's father, Allen 'Rocko' Riley, whom she married and moved with to Talbragar Aboriginal Reserve, where they had their own family, including David, Wendy, Michael and Carol.

Although Michael grew up in the red-plains country of Dubbo, his mother's family ties ensured that the Riley clan returned to her country, the black soil of Moree, each year for Easter and Christmas holidays.

Moree was a unique community. In the town, local landowners, cow cockies, and pastoralists mingled with members of the Murri community, and Lebanese, Greek, Afghan and Chinese residents. The internationally renowned Moree artesian baths attracted overseas visitors, notably northern Europeans and Japanese. Relationships weren't always formed on 'the wrong side of the blanket' and the links between different local communities spread, like river tributaries, through the generations.

The Moree Aboriginal Reserve was home to an independent community, which experienced similar sparse conditions to Talbragar. During Michael's childhood, his maternal grandparents, Bengalla and Maude, were the caretakers at the reserve, with Ben also responsible for maintaining the mission's swimming pools. Michael's relatives, particularly his aunts, recalled a community in which everyone shared and respected each other. The reserve was self-sufficient, running the country's oldest Aboriginal pre-school and Aboriginal funeral fund. Archival photographs from the 1950s show an extremely well-catered for and well-kept community.

Moree, however, was no country idyll. Although a strong sense of community existed, on the reserve and in the fringe-camps, families lived in poverty. Under the policies of the Aborigines Welfare Board, hundreds of children were 'removed' from their families and placed in foster homes or state-operated 'part-Aboriginal' children's homes, or were adopted out. Until the Freedom Ride of 1965, when Charles Perkins entered the Moree Baths with local children in tow, the colour bar operated in the town, preventing Aboriginal people from entering pubs, some shops and the artesian baths.

This process showed the ugly face of Australia very publicly – long known by Indigenous people living in similar small towns and the 'Black' areas of cities across the country. Images of Perkins being forcibly removed from the baths by the local constabulary

were countered by the positive outcome: Perkins later sitting in the cool waters of the pool on a scorching summer day, surrounded by local Murri kids. What had been accepted as the status quo for decades could exist no longer, but this freedom did come with a price.

Moree holds different memories for different generations. The older generation – those of Michael's parents' age – fondly recall the dances, informal get-togethers, and major events, such as trips to the local agricultural show to watch the touring boxing troupes, which often included many local Aboriginal men.¹³ For many young Aboriginal men, boxing was an alternative to seeking work as a fencer, shearer, wheat bailer, station-hand or itinerant seasonal worker, and it brought the added glamour of attracting young Aboriginal women. Michael recreated this world in his documentary, *Tent boxers* (1997), directed while at the Aboriginal Programs Unit at ABC Television.

For the next generation, the memories are harsher and remain bittersweet. Lyall Munro Jnr was the first local Murri man to leave town by a different route – a sports scholarship to De La Salle College, Armidale – and was one of six local Murri children who, in 1965, were escorted by Charlie Perkins into the Moree Baths. The ideological liberty that the Freedom Ride offered awakened in Lyall Munro Jnr an indelible desire to see his people no longer relegated to Australia's equivalent of America's 'Deep South' servitude. But it also came at a high personal cost – he was barred from entering the town for three years in the early 1980s, shortly before the death of his cousin, 'Cheeky' Macintosh, who was killed during an altercation between local Murri people and the police. His despair was still palpable as he recalled his early encounters with Michael, when Michael would return to Moree each year from Dubbo with his family, to visit his mother's people.¹⁴ Michael's life as an Aboriginal person was very much shaped by the experiences of his people in the 1960s and these were sources of inspiration for his later work.

The annual trips between Dubbo and Moree continued throughout Michael's life, and he easily slipped between the two communities, all the while maintaining his quietness, his ability to stand apart and observe, yet be considered integral to both places. His inscrutable nature enabled him to observe unimpeded the bravado of his Moree mob; engaging in the communal gossip, the happily heated exchanges and discussions, while retaining the stillness of his father's family. His father, who died unexpectedly in 1985 while Michael was on his first trip to Europe with his Moree cousin, Cathy Craigie, was much loved by the Moree community and was spoken of warmly



(top to bottom) *George Waters, Eric Craigie and Reuben 'Ben' Wright, Moree* c.1930s; *Eunice and Maude Wright, Moree* 1952; *Dorothy Wright and Madge Swan, Moree* c. late 1950s
 Images reproduced from *Burrul Wallaay (Big Camp)*, *Moree Mob*, vol.2 by Noeline Briggs-Smith Northern Regional Library Service, Moree NSW, 2003
 (opposite) *Toni and Maria* c.1984 colour photograph
 Cathy Craigie

by many during my recent visit – and people often mentioned that Michael took after his father.

Dot remembers Michael's early interest in photography, recalling how he earned enough money collecting golf balls from the waterholes on the golf course to purchase a small 'Box Brownie' camera. His earliest images were of family members in domestic settings: his younger sister Carol, arranged with her toys on her bed, smiling coyly at her big brother. Michael and his cousin, Lorraine Riley, dreamed of becoming fashion designers, and another cousin, Diane McNaboe (née Riley) remembered being co-opted as a model in those early days when they were inseparable due to the close proximity of their ages.¹⁵ People recalled his love of beauty, his aesthetic sensibility – questioning the design flaws in a piece of furniture – or how he persuaded his (usually innocent but all-consuming and transparent) crush-of-the-moment to pose for photographs.

Gonna look back in vain
 And see you standing there
 And all that'll be there
 Is just an empty chair

In the late 1970s Michael moved to Sydney in search of employment, along with many of his family and other young Aboriginal people from regional areas. His intention was to be an apprentice carpenter and it was during this time of great personal growth that he met some of the most influential people in his life. There has always been an internal migration within Australia of poor, working-class and Indigenous people from regional and remote areas to larger towns and cities where they established de facto communities and proxy families.

In Sydney, Michael initially lived in Granville, meeting people who became not only lifelong friends, but his surrogate family: Linda Burney, brother and sister John and Raelene Delaney, Dallas Clayton and David Prosser. Here, too, he created enduring bonds with *true* family, including cousins Lynette Riley-Mundine, Cathy Craigie, Maria (Polly) Cutmore, Ian 'Yurry' Craigie, Craig Jamieson and others. His elder brother, David, was also closely involved in this fluctuating group.

His fledgling interest in photography was reinvigorated in Sydney when he reconnected with Yurry Craigie, his cousin from Moree, through contact with Yurry's older sister, Cathy, who had moved to Sydney prior to Michael. Cathy remembers Michael turning up





(top to bottom) *Stop Black Deaths in Custody banner, Land Rights rally, Canberra c.1983; Gary Foley with loudspeaker, Land Rights rally, Canberra c.1983; Kevin Gilbert on Land Rights march, Canberra c.1983; Land Rights rally, Canberra, Kevin Gilbert, Bob Weatherall, Geoff Clarke and others c.1983 colour photographs Michael Riley Foundation*

on her doorstep in Leichhardt in 1980–81, wearing the ubiquitous flannelette shirt, a favourite item of clothing, and introducing himself with ‘Hi, I’m Michael, Michael Riley.’¹⁶

Cathy Craigie and her cousins, sisters Maria (also known as Polly) and Toni Cutmore, intrigued Michael. They were definitely part of the ‘out there’ Moree mob, not afraid to speak their minds, and the two sisters were the subject of many of Michael’s early attempts at what he imagined ‘fashion photography’ to be: big hats, soulful eyes, gorgeous girls. These were an extension of his earlier forays into home-style fashion ‘design’. The only thing was that these gorgeous black women would not grace the pages of any of the major national fashion publications of the era as they were too ‘Aboriginal’, neither exotic nor generic enough.

In Leichhardt in 1987, Michael moved into a house with Linda Burney, and his cousins Lynette Riley and Craig Jamieson. The house acted as a community meeting place, with a fluid cast of visitors, some staying for varying periods and who, having entered each other’s lives, never really lost touch. John Delaney, a young Aboriginal man who moved to Sydney in his late teens to undertake an apprenticeship, recalls staying in Michael’s room at Leichhardt after turning up with his belongings in a plastic garbage bag – what little was had individually was shared among all.¹⁷ John’s older sister, Raelene, was extremely close to Michael during this time.

Among the hundreds of negatives collated after Michael’s death is a roll of film that includes images of Michael’s baby son, Ben, being held by a smiling John, and images of Linda with her first-born baby, Binni. His images of women friends and their children are stunning and incredibly intimate, showing the bond between photographer and subject, as much as that between mother and child.

In the early 1980s, having lost interest in his apprenticeship, Michael was encouraged to revisit his photographic leanings more seriously by his cousin, Yurry, who was working as a technician at the Australian Centre for Photography in Paddington, under the tutelage of Jo Holder.¹⁸ After undertaking a Koori photography course in 1982 at the Tin Sheds Gallery, University of Sydney, Michael met a person who came to be a crucial mentor, photojournalist and teacher, Bruce Hart. This was a turning point in his life and Hart’s encouragement set Michael free to follow his artistic vision, combining it with his cultural heart.

In the early 1980s, inner-city Sydney was a haven for artistically inclined Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from all over

Australia. From the passion of the antipodean Black Power movement of the early 1970s – which heralded such events as the Aboriginal Tent Embassy's establishment, or anti-establishment, opposite the Provisional Parliament House in Canberra in 1972 – had emerged such cultural powerhouses as the National Black Theatre, Redfern Aboriginal Dance Theatre, and the Aboriginal and Islander Dance Theatre (AIDT), established in the late 1970s by African-American dancer, Carol Johnson.

The AIDT was based in an old church building on Bridge Road, Glebe, with many of the students and staff living nearby. Glebe was a haven for low-income earners, left-wingers and artistic types, with its beautiful old terrace houses and workers' cottages, surrounded by cafes, alternative bookshops and an art-house theatre. Cathy Craigie, Maria and Toni Cutmore lived in a share-house at the end of Glebe Point Road near Black Wattle Bay and Michael was a regular visitor, organising photo-shoots, co-opting his cousins into posing for him. His subjects soon expanded to include students from the AIDT, particularly favourites Kristina Nehm, Darrell Sibosado and Gary Lang, fellow artist Tracey Moffatt, and later students Tracey Gray, Telphia Joseph, Delores Scott and Alice Haines.

Indigenous visual artists were also studying at the tertiary art schools in Sydney.¹⁹ They exhibited their work in seminal shows such as *Koorie Art '84* and *Urban Koories* (1986), the latter perhaps lumbering the emerging movement with its unwieldy title, still refusing to be discarded two decades later.²⁰

As he explored 'art' photography, Michael's main foci for subject material were the numerous rallies, marches and rock gigs held in Sydney and Melbourne, and documenting gatherings of family and friends, especially those around the birth of children. He and Yurry participated in rallies and marches in Sydney and Melbourne. Yurry's portraits of Michael at that moment really capture his 'insider/outsider' spirit – the faraway look on Michael's face as he sits lost in thought on a Melbourne tram, evoking fellow photographer and reviewer, Robert McFarlane's 1963 portrait of a young Charlie Perkins, riding home on a Sydney bus at night, gazing pensively out the window.²¹

Both images perfectly encapsulate the unknown future of two young Aboriginal men, each of whom will later be struck down by the same disease, although unaware of this at the time of their unexpected portraits. Some elusive quality in their respective portraits suggests a prescience that they would later become part



Michael on Melbourne tram c.1984 black-and-white photograph Ian 'Yurry' Craigie

of the horrific statistics which shadow Indigenous peoples around the globe: poor health stemming from childhood poverty, leading to shorter life expectancies than for non-Indigenous communities.

Those of us who were fortunate enough to be a small part of these exciting times were unaware then that we were making history; we were just having fun and learning as much from being with each other as from any tertiary-accredited study. We were growing into our Aboriginal identity as well as our adulthood and we were lucky to be able to share this together. Michael was one of those people around whom different worlds revolved: he became an axis for many of us who, like him, had travelled to Sydney from other places to live and work. He was instrumental in establishing Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Co-operative (later Co-operative) in late 1987, working particularly closely with Avril Quail, another founding member whom he had met in 1984 at Sydney College of the Arts.²² Avril was also a subject in Michael's earliest portraits, which were first exhibited in *NADOC '86 Exhibition of Aboriginal and Islander photographers* at the Aboriginal Artists Gallery, Sussex Street, Sydney, September, 1986. Avril's and Michael's works, both featuring Kristina Nehm as a subject, were reproduced alongside each other in the exhibition catalogue accompanying *Koorie art '84*.²³

Another young photographer and filmmaker, Tracey Moffatt, who was working ahead of Michael in the dual media, was also a centre of activity at this time, for it was she who invited Michael and others to be a part of the landmark exhibition, *NADOC '86 Exhibition of Aboriginal and Islander photographers*, which she curated with the assistance of Anthony 'Ace' Bourke.²⁴ Michael's image of his cousin Maria (Polly) Cutmore, hung in the exhibition, has become a classic image of the time, and a print was acquired by renowned Australian photographer, Max Dupain.

What a productive time the late 1980s were, particularly around the establishment of Boomalli: Fiona Foley was picked up by Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery; Bronwyn Bancroft had established a small fashion boutique, *Designer Aboriginals*, in Balmain; Tracey Moffatt's career rocketed skyward at a phenomenal rate shortly after Boomalli's first exhibition in late 1987; and other south-eastern artists such as Brent Beale, Gavvy/Kevin Duncan, Robert Campbell Jnr, David Fernando, and Sheryl Connors either joined or had their work exhibited at Boomalli.²⁵ Concurrently, Indigenous visual and performing arts

organisations were being established across Australia in Brisbane, Darwin, Perth and Melbourne.

Slightly earlier, in January 1987, the first Black Playwrights' Conference was held at the Australian National University in Canberra, bringing together established and emerging Indigenous playwrights, actors, writers, directors, performers, set-designers and interested observers from all over Australia for an intensive two-weeks of workshops. The talent in one place was impressive: Brian Syron, Kath Walker (later changing her name to Oodgeroo Noonuccal in protest against the 1988 Bicentenary), Jack Davis, Ernie Dingo, Bob Maza, Justine Saunders, Kevin Smith, Maureen Watson and many others. From this fertile pool of Indigenous creativity the Aboriginal National Theatre Trust (ANTT) was established in Sydney in 1988, fostering emerging talent such as Lydia Miller and Rhoda Roberts under the enthusiastic Syron and Kath Walker's son, Vivian Walker, among others.²⁶

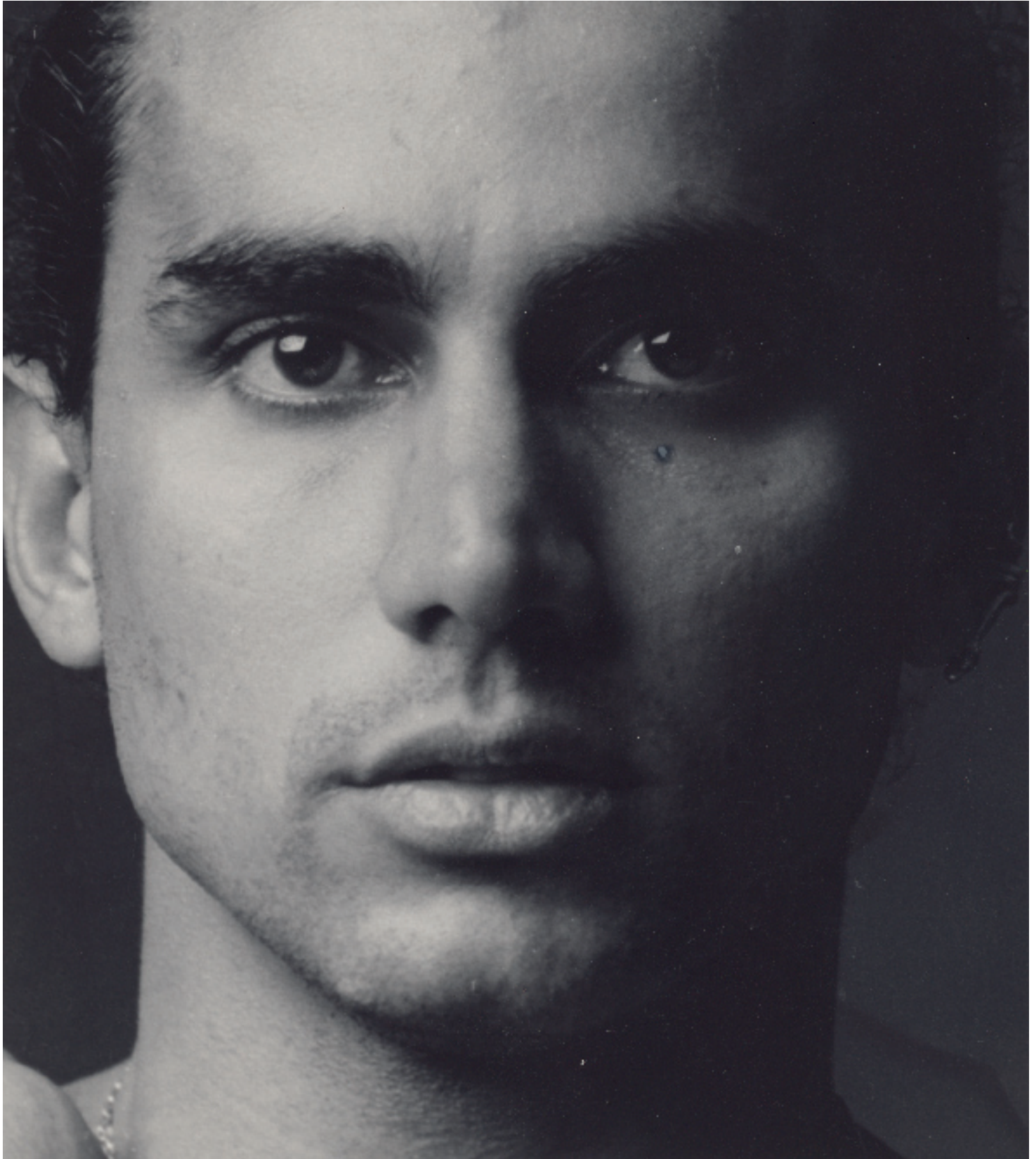
The second Black Playwrights' Conference was held at Macquarie University in February 1989 and Michael, then working with the Aboriginal Programs Unit of ABC Television, invited me to assist him in documenting the full two-week program on video. Participants included relative unknowns Lillian Crombie, Stephen Page, Darrell Sibosado, Raymond Blanco, Kristina Nehm, Kylie Belling, Lawrence Clifford, Joe Hurst, Billy McPherson, Frances Peters-Little, Alice Haines, Christopher Robinson and Matthew Cook, alongside stalwarts such as Bobby McLeod and those mentioned previously. Important working relationships were created at the conference, which led to, or were associated with, the establishment of cultural organisations such as Bangarra Dance Theatre, Sydney (1989); Ilbjerri Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Theatre Co-operative in Melbourne (1989); Yirra Yaakin Noongar Theatre, Perth (1993); Kooemba Jdarra Indigenous Performing Arts, Brisbane (1993); and Blackfella Films, which Michael and Rachel Perkins established in Sydney in 1993.

As well as documenting the second Black Playwrights' Conference, Michael also presented his first film, *Boomalli: Five Koorie artists*, made for Film Australia in 1988. The Playwrights' Conference footage – never screened, remaining deposited with the ANTT archives at the New South Wales State Library – included gems such as the early development of Jimmy Chi's *Bran nue day*, Ray Kelly's *Get up and dance* and Johnny Harding's *Up the road*.²⁷

Michael's art films and photographic stills work overlapped with his television experience, the latter being where he created

Alice and Tracey from the series *Portraits by a window* 1990 gelatin silver photograph National Gallery of Australia, Canberra





a series of documentaries on Indigenous issues, specific to his own experiences and that of his communities.

His beautiful black-and-white stills series, *Portraits by a window*, was shot at Boomalli's Chippendale premises in 1990. He invited friends and their families to sit in front of a simple, paint-spattered backdrop on whatever chairs were available, lit by the suffused, side-light from the large windows in the artspace premises.²⁸ As one of those photographed, I remember sitting next to my father, Joseph, his arm resting around my shoulder, warm and protective. I was 24-years-old and within six years my father would be gone, but you would never have guessed that from the distinguished man that he appeared in that frozen moment.

Michael's images are moving and so unaffected: Avril Quail with her newborn daughter, Miya; John and Raelene's sister, Dorothy/Tudley Delaney, looking like a compatriot of early twentieth-century African-American writer, Zora Neale Hurston; Tracey Gray and Alice Haines, young dance students in their prime; Delores Scott, resembling a Modigliani sculpture; Charles Perkins and his doppelganger son, Adam, resplendent in their business suits; and so many others, graciously captured by Michael's vision. Whereas the respective gazes of the women he photographed for the 1986 Aboriginal photography exhibition were searingly direct, in *Hetti*, the subject is caught unawares. With her eyes closed in repose, the image conveys an intimate moment of reflection replicating the spiritual pose of the male subject in *Darrell*. These two images could be referencing moieties, the yin and yang of contemporary Indigenous life. Michael's statement about his friend Hetti explained his fascination with beauty and urban-based Indigeneity:

Hetti is a good friend of mine, not a model and has beautiful cheekbones, beautiful face and shoulders ... I didn't do much setting up ... Very glamorous, just the way she is ... I just want to show young Aboriginal people living in the cities today; a lot of them are very sophisticated and a lot of them are very glamorous. A lot of them have an air of sophistication which you don't see coming across in newspapers and [television] programs. I'm just talking about positive things really, positive images of Aboriginal people.²⁹

(opposite) Gary 1989 gelatin silver photograph Anthony Bourke
(above and below) Joe and Brenda from the series *Portraits by a window* 1990
gelatin silver photograph Brenda L. Croft; *Charles and Adam* from the series
Portraits by a window 1990 gelatin silver photograph Hetti Perkins



I'm gonna live my life
Like everyday's the last
Without a simple goodbye
It all goes by so fast

The late 1980s and early 1990s were an extremely dynamic time for Michael, as if he knew that ill health would strike him soon. In 1987–88 he directed *Dreamings: The art of Aboriginal Australia* to accompany a groundbreaking exhibition of the same name, which received critical acclaim at the Asia Societies Gallery in New York. It was as if his work was a counter to the insidious whitewash of the Bicentenary in 1988.

1991 saw the public release of two very different but equally important films. *Malangi* highlighted the achievements of one of the country's most renowned bark painters and central Arnhem Land artists and statesmen, Dr David Malangi. Michael travelled to Arnhem Land to meet with and film Malangi in his traditional homeland and the film resonates with the empathy and mutual respect of the filmmaker and the subject. It is a beautiful film, capturing the dignity and honour of a great artist. Michael never lost his respect for Aboriginal elders.

Poison, a highly innovative experimental film, which received the Golden Tripod Award and the Bronze Award for Best Short Television Drama at the New York Film Festival in 1991, was based on the reporting of a number of tragic heroin overdoses of young girls in the Aboriginal community centred around 'The Block', Eveleigh Street in Redfern. Michael had read 'Seven little Australians' in *Rolling Stone* magazine, which presented the bleak and sorrowfully curtailed lives of a group of young Aboriginal teenage girls, afflicted by the influx of narcotics into the community.³⁰

Prior to the 1980s, alcohol and cannabis were the most insidious drugs affecting Indigenous communities. A cannabis shortage, coupled with the decreasing cost of 'smack', opened up horrible new tracks – literally – to personal oblivion and cultural destruction for the lost kids of urban-based Aboriginal communities. The demographics had changed: when Michael took the journey from Dubbo to Sydney, it was an optimistic pathway, one where you were meeting up with and being joined by your mob, achieving things together. You might not finish that apprenticeship but there were

Nanny Wright and dog from the series *A common place: Portraits of Moree Murries*
1991 gelatin silver photograph Moree Plains Gallery

other options and people willing to take a chance on you, support you and encourage you.

By the time of *Poison* these possibilities seemed to have vanished: the roads were now dead-ends for those young kids whose lives should have mirrored ours. *Poison* featured Lydia Miller, Lillian Crombie, Rhoda Roberts, Binni and Willurai Burney and another of our treasured community, Russell Page, the gifted younger brother of Stephen Page, who died in 2002. Another important collaborator who worked with Michael on this project was Joe Hurst, who designed the set: friends from school days, they were also artistic contemporaries.

Opinions were divided about the influence on *Poison* of Tracey Moffatt's *Night cries: A rural tragedy*, made in 1989, and tensions existed between the two artists for some time. The irony was that Michael and Joe were far more influenced by 1960s sci-fi television series, particularly *Star Trek*, but given the social intimacies of urban-based Indigenous artists throughout the 1980s and 1990s, it was not surprising that ideas and influences were subliminally shared and exchanged, rejected and consumed by many of us.

In 1986–87 Michael was one of a number of Indigenous and non-Indigenous photographers who travelled to Indigenous communities around the country to work with and document people as a direct response to the Bicentenary in 1988. An initiative of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, the resulting publication *After 200 years* is an impressive document of the times. Michael worked with another Aboriginal photographer, Alana Harris, visiting the country communities of Leeton in New South Wales, and Robinvale in Victoria. Of the hundreds of images, he took a number that were published in *After 200 years*, some of which were subsequently acquired by the National Gallery of Australia.³¹ These were included in the travelling exhibition *Re-take: Contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander photography*, organised a decade later by the National Gallery of Australia.

From the mid-1980s onwards Michael travelled overseas regularly, to exhibitions and cultural events, including the aforementioned *Dreamings* exhibition and the major cultural festival associated with *Tagari lia: Our family*. This international Aboriginal arts festival was an initiative of the Aboriginal Arts Management Association (AAMA) and included visual arts, the then fledgling Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal rock group, Yothu Yindi, and an Indigenous film, literature





(clockwise from top left) *Jag*; *Moree kids*; *Phyllis Draper*; *Jessie and grandkids*; *Mum Maude*; *Kenny Copeland* from the series *A common place: Portraits of Moree Murries* 1991 gelatin silver photographs Moree Plains Gallery



(clockwise from top left) Auntie Ruthie; Glenn and son; Jim; Mr and Mrs Lyall Munro; The Drifter and The Crow (Trevor Cutmore and Herb Binge); Mary Stanley with son and daughter-in-law from the series *A common place: Portraits of Moree Murries* 1991 gelatin silver photographs Moree Plains Gallery

and theatre program.³² This 1990 program – which included an exhibition of the same name at the Third Eye Centre in Glasgow, Scotland – was the brainchild of AAMA's Chairperson, Lin Onus (1948–1993), whose mother was from Glasgow.³³ During this visit to the United Kingdom, Michael met Australian expatriate, Rebecca Hossack, at her gallery of the same name, in Windmill Street, London. She staged his London showing of *A common place: Portraits of Moree Murries* in 1993.

Sacrifice (1992) was another turning point in Michael's work and life, created in a particularly fruitful year for the artist. This conceptual series employed one of Michael's favourite subjects and closest friends, Darrell Sibosado. Darrell related recently how the setting was 'a perfect day', with Michael turning up at his place in Darlinghurst, having talked through the concept of the shoot earlier, and using whatever props came to hand, including a handheld torch for the sensual lighting effects.³⁴ Though a person of very few words for much of the time, Michael's subjects trusted him implicitly, and most recall very little in the way of discussion before a film or stills shoot commenced. Michael nominated *Sacrifice* as the moment where his work deviated from the classical studio set-up, and his imagination was freed to create a new visual language, although one can see the hand of other artists such as Robert Mapplethorpe, and closer to home, Olive Cotton and Max Dupain, with their particular use of the sharp-edged southern light.

Sacrifice has a languid, sultry air, bordering on putrefaction: everything seems over-ripe, bleeding – literally, in the image of the stigmata – or about to ferment. The black-and-white works were printed with a colour process, hence the luscious tones, and were exhibited at Sydney's Hogarth Galleries in Michael's third solo exhibition. The series had an immediate impact – similar to that of Tracey Moffatt's *Something more* shown at the Australian Centre for Photography in 1989 – drawing the attention of major

public institutions. The National Gallery of Australia acquired a full series, this being the first acquisition of Michael's work for the national collection.

Michael's work at this point developed ideas he initiated with *Poison*, crossing into the ethereal, bringing his fascination with Christianity and symbolism to the fore, and letting any overt Indigenous reference sink into the layering effect of a potent body of work. There is timelessness to the images or, perhaps, a hint of the earliest representations of the photographic process, a tinge of gothic gloom and universality that could place them as being from *anywhere*. Yet they are rooted in the Aboriginal history of this country.

In 1993 Michael travelled overseas to see the selection from *A common place: Portraits of Moree Murries* included in the major survey exhibition *Aratjara: Art of the First Australians*. As *Dreamings* was to North America, *Aratjara* was to Europe.³⁵

Quest for country (1993), written and directed by Michael, was produced under the international Indigenous *Spirit to spirit* co-production for SBS Television, and was the filmic bridge between *A common place: Portraits of Moree Murries* (1991) and *Yarns from the Talbragar Reserve* (1998), a photographic series of the Dubbo Aboriginal community. *Quest for country* was the most autobiographical of all Michael's work, and his quiet determination is evident as he is filmed driving through the countryside of New South Wales, travelling home from Sydney to Dubbo, through a desecrated landscape – power stations ominously spewing water vapour, clouds roiling in fast time-exposure, casting shadows over the land. The technical aspects of the film evoke US director Godfrey Reggio's *QATSU* trilogy (1975–1982), particularly the first film, *Koyannisqatsi* (a Hopi term meaning 'life out of balance'), and Francis Ford Coppola's urban dreamscape/nightmare, *Rumble fish* (1983).³⁶

The 1990s were an incredibly productive period in both still and moving imagery for Michael. In 1995 the Museum of Sydney commissioned the film *Eora*, which proved to be a love letter to, and eulogy for, the original custodians of the Sydney region.

Screen grabs from *Tent boxers* 1997 ABC TV



Shot in and around the harbour of the country's largest city, the metropolis is barely apparent. Riley makes vivid use of the natural beauty of the bush and water, paying homage to the reminders of the Eora/Yura clans, in the form of the prolific, but mostly unknown rock engravings in the region. Michael co-opted family, friends and colleagues from the AIDT as participants, and a poignant footnote is that one of the young dancers, Keith Connors, died in a tragic accident overseas prior to the launch of the film.

Throughout the mid-1990s, Michael worked for ABC and SBS Television, completing a series of documentaries including *Blacktracker* (1996) and *Tent boxers* (1997) for ABC, and *The masters* (1996) for SBS. The latter remains the only sit-com portraying contemporary Indigenous urban life produced in Australia and the cast included Destiny Deacon, Lillian Crombie and Lee Madden. A number of projects were developed through Blackfella Films. In 1996–97 Michael was commissioned by Sheryl Connors, Aboriginal Education Officer at the Australian Museum, to produce a series of portraits of eminent Indigenous people based in Sydney. This series is displayed in the Indigenous Australians Gallery of the museum, and the rapport between the photographer and his subjects is evident.

Empire, a film commissioned by Rhoda Roberts for 1997's *Festival of the Dreaming* program of 2000 Sydney Olympic Games Organising Committee (SOCOG), has proven to be Michael's *pièce de résistance*, and resonates as strongly today as when it was premiered. Arguably, it can be considered the final work in a series comprising *Poison*, *Quest for country*, *Eora* and *Empire*, in which *Poison* and *Eora* comment on the losses and dreams of urban-based Indigenous people, and *Quest* and *Empire* trace the connections with Indigenous peoples' traditional lands. Other Indigenous emerging filmmakers and actors who worked with Michael on projects over this time remember his quiet demeanour and lack of conversation, masking his intense focus on the scene at hand.

Interspersed with these seminal films, Michael also produced short educational films, experimental works and music clips for friends

and colleagues, including *Breakthrough: Alice* (1989), an anti-racism short film for the Department of Education, Employment and Training about the life of a young urban-based Aboriginal woman, Alice Haines; *Frances* (1990), about his close friend and fellow filmmaker, Frances Peters-Little, exhibiting Warhol-ish influences in the 'film test' feel of the footage; music clips for Indigenous singers – *Starlit bushes* and *Mother Earth* (1992); *A passage through the aisles* (1994), about the childhood experiences of his dear friend, Linda Burney; and *Songlines* (1998). He also worked with artist Destiny Deacon, on numerous satirical projects over the decade: a short sat-com (as in satirical-comedy) series for *Blackout* on ABC TV – *Welcome to my Koori world* (1992) – culminating with the cuttingly edgy, witty, almost painful to watch *I don't wanna be a bludger*, commissioned for the contemporary biennial art event, *Living here now: Art and politics – Australian perspecta* (1999) at the Art Gallery of New South Wales.

Michael moved easily between working as a creator of stills and moving imagery. Of his later photographic series – *A common place: Portraits of Moree Murries* (1991), *Fence sitting* (1994) and *They call me niigarr* (1995), *flyblown* (1998) and *Yarns from the Talbragar Reserve* (1998) – *flyblown* and *Yarns from the Talbragar Reserve* had the greater impact. *They call me niigarr* was his last exhibition at the Hogarth Galleries. His most overtly political exhibition, it was also his least successful in terms of the public's response. The series was included in *Abstracts: New Aboriginalities* which was exhibited at Spacex Gallery, Exeter, and undertook a regional tour in Britain in 1996–97.³⁷ The exhibition's title, *They call me niigarr*, was a pun on the subject's – David Prosser, dressed in a suit and bow tie – language group, Niigarr, and the artist's statement accompanying the work was Michael at his most outspoken:

The exhibition is about racism. Racism comes in many forms. It can be blatant, it can be hidden, patronising, and plain demoralising. For many Aboriginal people the result of racism has been all these things. Names such as these are not intentionally meant to be offensive. Non-Aboriginal people joke as they use these words. The words and images of this exhibition come from my childhood experiences with racism – experiences shared by my people.³⁸





(above) *Untitled [galah]* from the series *flyblown* (1998) projected on wall of Palazzo Papadopoli, Venice Biennale, Italy 1999 Brenda L. Croft
 (below) *Untitled [galah]* in *Oltre il mito (Beyond myth)*, Venice Biennale, Italy 1999 Brenda L. Croft

flyblown was first shown at Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi in Melbourne in November 1998 and closely echoed the imagery in the film *Empire*, during which it was shot.³⁹ During its showing Michael met with musicians Paul Kelly and Kev Carmody, who were in the early stages of writing the music for Rachel Perkins' film *One night the moon*. The initial intention had been for Michael to also work on the film, but by that stage he was already constrained by the weekly dialysis in Sydney that his illness required.

In January 1998 Michael was diagnosed with renal failure, having collapsed at home in Glebe around New Year's Day, and being admitted to Royal Prince Alfred Hospital in Camperdown, Sydney. I was shocked to run into him there on a visit to another friend. How familiar that place was to become in relation to Michael's wellness, or lack of it, over the next few years. At that time though, he seemed as stunned as I that he had been admitted, but the diagnosis made sense of the constant headaches he had suffered throughout his years in Sydney. A childhood bout of rheumatic fever had attacked his immune system and the effects were now being felt.

In 1999 Gabrielle Pizzi curated an exhibition by Indigenous photo-media artists for the *al latere* section of the 48th Venice Biennale, which included a selection from *flyblown*.⁴⁰ *Oltre il mito (Beyond myth)* was shown in the beautiful *giardini* of the Palazzo Papadopoli, on the Grand Canal, and the artists' works were displayed in the gardens during the day and projected on the *palazzo* wall at night, which looked incredibly cinematic when viewed from passing *vaporetti* (water buses) or the other side of the canal.⁴¹

Unfortunately, Michael was unable to travel to Venice and share in the acclaim his work received. This was Michael's biggest source of frustration in the last six years of his life – the restrictions his illness placed on travelling for work prevented him from accepting many opportunities that the rising profile of his work offered. However, he refused to complain and, as if in response to his increasing restrictiveness, his output not only remained constant, but the content and context was elevated to another (other-worldly) plane.

It is in *Sacrifice* that the symbol of the cross, that most potent of Christian symbols, first appeared, looming large against a turbulent sky. Christianity is a subject to which Michael returned again in later work such as *flyblown*, *Empire*, and his last and most potent series of photographs, *cloud* (2000). His images reflect what he described as the 'sacrifices Aboriginal people made to be

Christian.⁴² They resonate with loss, experienced not only by the individual but by entire Indigenous communities: 'loss' of culture and land in enforced, and sometimes embraced, 'exchange' for Christianity. Biblical elements abound in *Sacrifice* – the cross lying on the chest and standing out sharply against the sky in an unseen cemetery; the shimmering skin of the fish, in stark contrast to the parched earth on which it rests; the oozing liquid in the dark palms of the Black Christ-like figure evoking his struggle on the cross; the granules of sugar, flour and coffee echoing the rations meted out to Aboriginal people on missions, and hinting at the struggles present-day communities face with the onslaught of drugs.

Michael's involvement with, and support by and for, Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Co-operative was integral to his creativity at this time. He worked closely with Jonathan Jones, then Exhibitions Co-ordinator. Although Michael had let his membership lapse for a period in the 1990s, his commitment to the organisation he had been instrumental in founding cannot be overlooked. Even though his illness caused his health and well-being to fluctuate, he was chairperson of the organisation during a period of major transition. He remained dedicated to Boomalli until the end, and was supported in his work by long-time colleagues, Joe Hurst, Jeffrey Samuels, family members Joyce and Melissa Abraham, and Tracey Duncan.

cloud is Michael's legacy and the work for which he is best known in Australia and overseas. The first series to move into digital manipulation, it was a natural progression from *Sacrifice*. Michael was assisted in bringing his concept to fruition by Jonathan Jones and Francisco Fisher, then Exhibitions Manager at the Australian Centre for Photography, where the series was first exhibited in 2000, in conjunction with *Empire*.

Unbeknownst to many, Michael's health had suffered badly, with extensive periods of hospitalisation and a couple of very close calls. In fact, after one particularly bad turn where he had to be resuscitated, I remember visiting him at night, and seeing him asleep in his darkened room. Disturbed by his thinness, I wrote a note at the Nurses Station and went to leave it with him before departing without disturbing him. However, when I re-entered his room, he was awake and he grabbed my arm, whispering so softly that I had to lean down to hear him: 'I'll tell you what I saw on the other side'. Not wanting to tire him and perturbed at what he might tell me, I reassured him that he could tell me during my next visit when he felt better. We never had that conversation as he

could not remember my visit, but whenever I look at *cloud* I feel as if that is the trace of his vision.

As his work gained increasing critical acclaim within Australia and overseas, as it soared in spirit, his body was failing him. *cloud* was selected for the 2002 *Asia-Pacific triennial of contemporary art* at Queensland Art Gallery. That same year, as part of the Festival of Sydney, *cloud* was flying high above Circular Quay. It was included in *Photographica Australis*, curated by Alasdair Foster for ARCO 2002, Spain, and its Asialink tour in 2003–04, where his work was awarded a grand prize in the *11th Asian art biennial*, Bangladesh (about which he joked in his usual dry wit: 'Trust me to win a prize from a country with no money!').⁴³ In 2003 *cloud* and *Empire* were selected for *Poetic justice: 8th international Istanbul biennale*, which his friend, Anthony 'Ace' Bourke, attended on his behalf and who later accompanied Michael and Boomalli's then Exhibitions Co-ordinator, Tracey Duncan, to the award ceremony at the Australian Centre for Photography in Sydney.⁴⁴ Today, *cloud* continues to have an independent life. A selection of images from the series will be permanently installed, as part of the Australian Indigenous Art Commission, at the new Musée du quai Branly, Paris, opening in June 2006.

Christians and Indigenous people both believe in something other than what we see is tangible – right in front of us. The afterlife, the Dreaming, call it what you like: what a pity that all too often there has been conflict between the two belief systems. It would seem that much of Michael's work is about dealing with these contradictions; not only the contradictions between Indigenous and non-Indigenous existence, but also the contradictions that Indigenous people face in determining where they see home, especially those of us who have grown up with fractured cultural experiences and traditions. Fractured but not irreparable. And it is ironic that, while so much of Michael's work seems to deal with loss, these are the biggest gifts he gave us all.

Michael's legacy is also the pride with which he invested his communities of Dubbo, Moree and Sydney. It is reflected in his family, friends and colleagues who were touched by him, his talent and his work, which remains with us. The recent visits to Dubbo and Moree were not only about recalling his presence: his spirit was there watching, in the company of the native animals – the brown snake, wedge-tail eaglehawks, echidna, wallaby, brolga, kookaburra and seemingly millions of bats that made themselves known. These totemic animals were ever watchful, either standing silently or circling overhead, like sentinels. He was there, along with



his ancestors, in the wind that rustled the leaves of the trees under which I sat with his family and friends as we recalled his quietness, his observation, his wicked sense of humour, his love of gossip, his mentoring of others and his generosity of spirit.

Big sky. Red soil, black plains. Sunrise, sunset. Love and respect. Claiming. Pride. Michael's art cannot be separated from his life. He showed that there is more than meets the eye when we view the world around us.

You just really keep your eyes open and look for things that other people don't see. You just see things and then take the picture.⁴⁶

Notes

- ¹ Michael Riley quoted in Kleinert, Sylvia and Neale, Margo (eds.), *Oxford companion to Aboriginal art*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 687.
- ² This and subsequent quotes from lyrics are from Williams, Victoria, 'I can't cry hard enough', recorded on *Swing the statue*, USA: Mammoth Records, 1994.
- ³ See Riley-Mundine, Lynette, 'Talbragar Reserve' in Riley, Michael, *Yarns from the Talbragar Reserve*, exhibition catalogue, Dubbo, NSW: Dubbo Regional Art Gallery, 1999.
- ⁴ *Dawn: A magazine for the Aboriginal people of NSW*, January 1967, Sydney: NSW Aborigines Welfare Board, 1967, p. 4. 'Dawn and New Dawn were magazines published between 1952–1975 by the New South Wales Aborigines Welfare Board, with the aim of providing interesting information and an exchange of news and views. The *Dawn* and *New Dawn* served as a way for people to keep in contact. The magazines also contain articles about the conditions and activities on reserves, stations, homes and schools throughout New South Wales. During its time of publication the magazines were also used to highlight the work of the Aboriginal Welfare Board. Today the magazines are a valuable source of family history information as they include details of births, deaths, marriages and baptisms, as well as hundreds of photographs.' From What are Dawn magazines?, Fact Sheet 16, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres

Strait Islander Studies, Canberra, viewed 23 April 2006, <http://www.aiatsis.gov.au/library/family_history_tracing/fact_sheets/fact_sheet_17>.

- ⁵ Ron Riley in conversation with the author, Talbragar Aboriginal Reserve, Dubbo, NSW, February 2006.
- ⁶ ABC Content Sales: *Blacktracker*, Sydney: Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2006, viewed 23 April 2006, <<http://www.abc.net.au/programsales/s1190767.htm>>.
- ⁷ The AIM of Australia was established in 1905 by missionary Retta Dixon in the Singleton district of the Hunter Valley, New South Wales. Retta Dixon is best remembered for the Retta Dixon Children's Home for part-Aboriginal Children, which operated in Darwin from 1946 to 1980, and housed hundreds of Aboriginal children who had been forcibly removed from the care of their families and community under the assimilation policies of the time. These children are known as the 'Stolen Generations'.
- ⁸ Dorothy Riley (née Wright) in conversation with the author, Talbragar Aboriginal Reserve, Dubbo, NSW, February 2006.
- ⁹ Utilities; tray-backed working vehicles, the vehicle of choice in most rural communities.
- ¹⁰ See Briggs-Smith, Noeline, *Burrul Wallaay (big camp), Moree Mob*, vol. 2, Moree, NSW: Northern Regional Library and Information Service, 2003, pp. 293–5.
- ¹¹ Briggs-Smith, Noeline, pp. 293–5.
- ¹² Briggs-Smith, Noeline, pp. 293–5. See also 'Along the mail route' in *Dawn: A magazine for the Aboriginal people of NSW*, July 1952, Sydney: NSW Aborigines Welfare Board, 1952, p. 10.
- ¹³ Sisters Edna Craigie (née Cutmore) and Gloria (Dort) French (née Cutmore) in conversation with the author, Moree, NSW, March 2006.
- ¹⁴ Lyall Munro Jnr in conversation with the author, Moree, March 2006.
- ¹⁵ Diane McNaboe in conversation with the author, Talbragar Aboriginal Reserve, Dubbo, NSW, February 2006.
- ¹⁶ Cathy Craigie in conversation with the author, Sydney, February 2006.
- ¹⁷ John Delaney in conversation with the author, Sydney, January 2006.
- ¹⁸ Jo Holder is a contemporary artspace director with a lengthy involvement in the Sydney contemporary art scene, particularly in relation to Indigenous art and artists. She has been involved with Mori Gallery, Artspace, the Australian Centre for Photography and most recently, Cross Art Projects, Potts Point, NSW.
- ¹⁹ These included the National Art School in the former women's gaol in Darlinghurst, later called East Sydney Technical College, before reverting to its original name; Alexander Mackie College in Paddington, now the College of Fine Arts, part of the University of New South Wales; Sydney College of the Arts





at its White Bay Campus, now located in the former asylum at Rozelle; and the Eora Centre for Aboriginal Studies, originally in Regent Street, Redfern, now in Abercrombie Street, Chippendale.

- ²⁰ The source of the first wave of contemporary Indigenous art (initially labelled Urban Koori Art) can be traced to the exhibition *Koorie art '84*, held at Artspace, Sydney, 1984, when Arone Raymond Meeks, Avril Quail and Gordon Syron exhibited alongside Arnhem Land artist, Banduk Marika. In 1986 *Urban Koories*, held at the Workshop Arts Centre in Willoughby, Sydney, brought together many of the artists who had exhibited in *Koorie art '84*, including Euphemia Bostock, Fiona Foley, Michael Riley and Jeffrey Samuels. These two exhibitions were seminal to the development of a discrete contemporary Indigenous art movement on the eastern seaboard. At the time there was significant resistance to, and rejection of this new yield of artists in the same assimilationist manner that had been in covert existence since the first half of the century, in that the artists and their work were dismissed as 'second-rate white art/ists', ie, not truly Aboriginal art/ists.
- ²¹ **McFarlane, Robert**, *Charles Perkins travelling to university*, 1963, gelatin silver photograph, 33.6 x 22.5 cm, National Library of Australia, viewed 23 April 2006, <<http://nla.gov.au/nla.pic-an21225034>>.
- ²² Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Co-operative's founding members were Bronwyn Bancroft, Euphemia Bostock, Brenda L. Croft, Fiona Foley, Fernanda Martins, Arone Raymond Meeks, Tracey Moffatt, Avril Quail, Michael Riley and Jeffrey Samuels. The co-operative was formed to provide a place where Indigenous artists could create, exhibit and promote their work on their own terms. Its inaugural exhibition, *Boomalli au-go-go*, was held in November 1987, at the premises of a former sewing/sweatshop in Meagher Street, Chippendale.
- ²³ *Koorie art '84: Artspace, 5th–29th September 1984*, Surry Hills, NSW: Artspace, 1984, pp 65–66.
- ²⁴ The artists were Tracey Moffatt, Michael Riley, Tony Davis, Brenda L. Croft, Chris Robinson, Ros Sultan, Ellen José, Terry Shewring, Mervyn Bishop and others [sic – as stated on the invitation featuring *Kristina*]. The exhibition opened on Monday 8 September 1986.
- ²⁵ Kamilaroi artists Beale and Duncan knew Michael from Moree; Ngaku/Dunghutti artist, Campbell Jnr, was from Kempsey and, with Fiona Foley, was among the first Aboriginal artists to be represented by a contemporary gallery in Sydney – Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery. Campbell Jnr also organised *Kempsey Koori artists* which was shown at Boomalli in 1988 and included the work of Kamilaroi artist David Fernando. Sheryl Connors became a member of Boomalli in 1988 and curated an exhibition of Michael's work at the Australian Museum in 2004, where she is Aboriginal Education Officer.
- ²⁶ Brian Syron and Vivian Walker lived and worked for many years overseas, including in New York where Syron studied with Stella Adler. Syron was behind the establishment of the Australian National Playwrights' Conference in 1972.
- ²⁷ Aboriginal National Theatre Trust Limited, video recordings, 1980, 1988–c.1990, VT 523 – VT 661, State Library of New South Wales.
- ²⁸ Michael photographed many people and the final selection of works exhibited were, in order of the catalogue: Delores (Scott), Frances (Peters-Little), Dennis/Dillon (McDonald), Charles and Adam (Perkins), Kylie (Belling), Darrell (Sibosado), Hetti (Perkins), Binni (Kirkbright-Burney), Avril and Miya (Quail), Telphia (Joseph), Alice (Haines) and Tracey (Gray), Dorothy (Delaney), Djon (Mundine), Maria (Polly Cutmore), Tracey (Moffatt), Kristina (Nehm – all three from the original 1986 exhibition), Joe and Brenda (Croft).

- ²⁹ Dewdney, Andrew and Phillips, Sandra (eds), 'Liking what I do': Interview with Michael Riley, part 1 in *Racism, representation and photography*, Sydney: Inner City Education Centre, 1989, p. 143.
- ³⁰ Holmes, Natalie, 'Seven little Australians' in *Rolling Stone*, October 1990, pp. 78–81.
- ³¹ *After 200 years: Photographs of Aboriginal and Islander Australia today*, exhibition catalogue, Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 1990.
- ³² AAMA is now known as the National Indigenous Arts Advocacy Association, Inc. and is based in East Sydney.
- ³³ From the Yorta Yorta nation on the Victorian and New South Wales border, Lin Onus was a great supporter of younger Aboriginal artists and he played an influential role on the Aboriginal Arts Board (1986–1988), becoming Chair (1989–1992), before helping to establish AAMA.
- ³⁴ Darrell Sibosado in conversation with the author in Sydney in February 2006.
- ³⁵ *Aratjara: Art of the First Australians*, a decade in the planning, was curated by Bernhard Luthi, with the assistance of numerous people from Australia including Djon Mundine. This survey exhibition travelled to Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Wesfalen, Dusseldorf; Louisiana Museum, Copenhagen; Hayward Gallery, London in 1993.
- ³⁶ For more information on the QATSI Trilogy, see 'The QATSI Trilogy', viewed 23 April 2006, <<http://www.koyaanisqatsi.org>>.
- ³⁷ The tour included 198 Gallery, London and Huddersfield Library and Art Gallery, Huddersfield, Britain.
- ³⁸ **Riley, Michael**, *They call me niigarr*, artist's statement, October 1995.
- ³⁹ *flyblown* was shown in conjunction with the author's solo exhibition, *In my mother's garden*.
- ⁴⁰ The other Australian artists exhibited were Brook Andrew, Destiny Deacon, Leah King-Smith and Brenda L. Croft.
- ⁴¹ *flyblown* was included in *Beyond the pale: Contemporary Indigenous art for the Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art, 2000*, at the Art Gallery of South Australia, as part of the 2000 Telstra Adelaide Festival of the Arts. *Beyond the pale* showcased the work of 25 of Australia's leading contemporary Indigenous artists. The series was later shown in *By the river* as part of *Message sticks* program at the Sydney Opera House in 2004.
- ⁴² Kleinert and Neale (eds), p. 687.
- ⁴³ This comment was reported to the author by Anthony 'Ace' Bourke, who attended the award ceremony held at the Australian Centre for Photography.
- ⁴⁴ Tracey's family is from Moree and she worked closely with Michael during his last years, through her role at Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Co-operative. Boomalli provided extensive support to Michael until his death.
- ⁴⁶ Riley, Michael, artist interview in *Guwanyi: Stories of the Redfern Aboriginal community*, exhibition catalogue, Glebe, NSW: Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales, 1996, p. 19.

(above and below) Screen grabs from *Poison* 1991 ABC TV printed with the kind permission of the actors Lydia Miller, Rhoda Roberts, Lillian Crombie, Willurai Kirkbright-Burney and the family of Russell Page



(above and opposite) *They call me niigarr* series 1995 collaged cibachrome photographs Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Co-operative Ltd

