

MICHAEL RILEY



Wiradjuri/Kamilaroi artist Michael Riley was born in 1960 and moved as a young man to Sydney, where he enrolled in a photography workshop at Tin Sheds Gallery, University of Sydney. Riley was a photographer and filmmaker and founding member of Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Co-operative. His works were included in the landmark exhibition, *NADOC '86 exhibition of Aboriginal and Islander photographers*, Aboriginal Artists Gallery, Sydney, 1986. His first films were made at Film Australia, and in 1995 he was commissioned by the Museum of Sydney to create the permanent video installation *Eora*. Following his success in Australia and inclusion in the Fourth Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art, Queensland Art Gallery, 2002 and the Festival of Sydney, 2003, Riley's works were included in the international exhibitions *Photographica Australis* at ARCO in Spain; *Poetic justice*, 8th International Istanbul Biennial, Turkey, 2003; and the 11th Asian Art Biennale, Bangladesh (for which he was awarded one of three grand prizes); and he is one of eight Indigenous artists whose work was permanently installed at the Musée du quai Branly, Paris, France, 2006. A major travelling retrospective, *Michael Riley: sights unseen*, curated by Brenda L Croft, was developed by the National Gallery of Australia and shown at the Art Gallery of NSW in 2008. Michael Riley passed away in Sydney in 2004.

In conversation with Hetti Perkins, Sydney, November 2003.

Linda 1986

I come from a place called Dubbo, in midwestern New South Wales. My father comes from there, he is a Wiradjuri man; and my mother comes from Moree, she is a Kamilaroi woman. We lived on Talbragar Reserve at Dubbo for a number of years when mum and dad were married then moved up to town when I was about seven or eight.

In 1976 I came to Sydney and decided I wanted to do a carpentry apprenticeship as an excuse to get out of Dubbo. I couldn't understand why all my friends wanted to stay in Dubbo. All I wanted to do was to get out and get into the city and do something different and see different things and meet different people.

What was the catalyst for your interest in photography?

I was always interested in photography since I was like 12 or 13. I bought myself a home-developing kit and started playing around with developing photographs in the bedroom, in the wardrobe. And I was always interested in images and liked seeing things around me differently. I remember lying down in the front yard one day and looking up at the telegraph poles and lines, at the power cables cutting across the sky and almost cutting through the clouds – looking at the simplicity of it, looking at things in depth and from a different perspective. People might think that's boring, looking at telegraph poles or telegraph lines and finding something interesting in it, but that's what I did.

What were the images that you developed in your wardrobe?

Just pictures of family and friends and landscapes. We had a tree in the backyard, I used to climb up the tree and I'd take photographs of the sunset in the afternoon. I had bought a cheap Kodak camera.

Then in Sydney, in 1982–83, you were enrolled in a photography workshop?

I enrolled at the Tin Sheds, which was a workshop at the University of Sydney for photography. It was a community workshop and Bruce Hart was running some classes there for Kooris. I did his short course and was offered a job at Sydney College of the Arts as a technician in the darkroom and the studios. While I was there, I took some courses within the framework of the arts course.

Did Bruce Hart have a major influence on your work?

He taught me how to see things differently, how to look beyond the image and to have compassion for your subject. Bruce was influenced by European photography and he tried to instil in me the ways people saw documentary

photography in Europe, like Josef Koudelka and [his images of] gypsies [in Europe].

At that time I was interested in representing Aboriginal people in a different way to the negative images of Aboriginal people in the media. I'd decided to do portraits of young urban Aboriginal people in the 1980s who were doing their own thing, mixing into society, trying to break the stereotype of who Aboriginal people are.

A lot of the subjects have gone on to successful careers and some have been quite well-known over the years. These are people that, I suppose, you could call 'movers and shakers', people who want to change things, change themselves, want to move on, sort of break away from the stereotype of coming from a mission, doing nothing more or less, or being the drunken blackfella in the park – the images you see all the time.

For that generation, or at that time, was there a feeling of people making their opportunities through their own actions?

The 1980s was very exciting for me as an Aboriginal artist – there was a surge in urban Koori art. In 1987, Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Co-operative was formed, which is a collective of urban Aboriginal artists, including me, and a lot of the very successful contemporary Aboriginal artists today have come from there. It was a time when people were enrolled in art colleges and getting trained in what an artist is supposed to be traditionally, as opposed to the 1950s and 1960s when Aboriginal artists were seen as making trinkets for tourists or kitsch art. It was a time when contemporary urban artists started to be taken seriously by the art world. It was artists trying to find some studio space and a place to exhibit without being judged as just more kitsch artists. It was a way of putting artists, who'd never had the chance before, up on the walls and giving them the chance to see if their work sank or swam. As a lot of the galleries around would not take that risk, we put it together and did it ourselves.

In 1986 you were involved in an important exhibition that Anthony (Ace) Bourke curated, where you exhibited Maria [1985] [also known as Portrait of Maria and Polly], for the first time.

The NADOC '86 exhibiton of Aboriginal and Islander photographers [at the Aboriginal Artists Gallery, Sydney] was the first group show of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander photographers in the country. It was an important show in that respect, and people still refer to it and that people like Tracey Moffatt, Brenda L Croft, myself and various other photographers had shown there at the beginning of our careers. The photographers were all Indigenous and they were dictating what they wanted

to show and how they wanted to show images of their own people, rather than ethnographic photographs or by missionaries as a curiosity or something ... the 'dying race' sort of thing.

They were all portraits of women, weren't they?

Mine were.

Why is that? Was that deliberate?

Just to show these amazing-looking women in a light they would not have been shown in before.

The image of Maria directly confronts representations of Aboriginal people of the past. It is very formal. Was that a deliberate strategy?

Oh no, it was just the way she wanted to pose. She wanted to present herself very straight on, somebody who has their own mind and knows what they want, a strong black woman, and just trying to show that. And I liked the beauty of black women in general, really. Max Dupain, I think, bought a portrait of Maria off me, from the '86 exhibition.

The subjects that you've photographed are often compiled in series. Are there any of those works that you feel are particularly successful, or are achieving what you are trying to say?

A common place: portraits of Moree Murries [1990] was an important show for me in that it showed a community of Aboriginal people, in the country. There are two Aboriginal missions in Moree and I got people from both those missions together and photographed them. It looks like people walked in front of the camera and sat however they wanted to sit and showed themselves however they wanted to show themselves. All of them were related to me. It's important because it is a record of a community at that time and a few of those people have passed away.

Sacrifice [1992] – what was that about?

Sacrifice was the first conceptual exhibition I'd put together. It was the first time I'd reflected on Christianity, the history of Aboriginal missions and mission life – exploring those images from childhood, of being sent to Sunday school and wondering what the hell all this strange concept of religion is for an Aboriginal kid growing up in the bush. How Aboriginal people were thrown onto reserves and missions and told not to speak their languages, not to conduct ceremony or song, but to be corralled and controlled.

Why did you call it Sacrifice?

It's like human sacrifice, Aboriginal people having to sacrifice themselves all the time to be a bit more like what non-Aboriginal people want us to be. We have to sacrifice something of ourselves all the time.

[Some artists today] feel that being Indigenous is secondary and that they are an artist first.

I think that's sad. I think you're an Aboriginal first – it's what you are – and then you are an artist. It's what your art stems from; it's what makes you strong, what makes you interesting ... I think we have got very rich stories and histories to tell, and reflect on.

Speaking of stories to tell, what about the collaborative film with Destiny Deacon, I don't wanna be a bludger [1999]?

It was a satirical look at urban contemporary Aboriginal life, an almost comedic look at the kitschness of how a lot of people see us or would like to see us as Aboriginal people. It was basically a story, a day in the life of Destiny's character, who wakes up one morning and decides she wants to be an artist and get off the dole because she doesn't want to be a bludger all her life. She goes through all these escapades of trying to get into art school and being rejected, and she also tries to be a fortune teller, which she thinks might be a career move for her. It all ends up in disaster for her at the end of the day. And her cousin [Harold, played by Michael Riley], who lives in a home in a wheelchair, comes over for a birthday party one afternoon. All the Koori mob are there and give him this wonderful birthday. Anyway, it was just a look at a slice of life in the day of an urban Koori. It's hard to say what it's about. Black humour? Yes. I think a lot of people didn't know whether to laugh or what, you know. You're allowed to laugh at it.

Was the film Quest for country [1993] a journey home?

It was a journey home – just a road trip from Sydney to Moree, looking at country, wondering how things have changed, what things would have been like and playing with time and space. When you're driving out west, you think about all these things – all the massacres that happened, how Aboriginal people survived, how lands have been cleared and just imagining how it would have been. And also trying to retrace family roots, or trying to find out more from relatives than they had told me before, the simple thing of family, concepts of family and the importance of family contacts.

Boomalli: five Koorie artists [1988]. Do you want to talk about that film – your first film?

It was my first film for Film Australia, looking at the creation of Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Co-operative and five contemporary Koori artists from there, namely Tracey Moffatt, Bronwyn Bancroft, Jeffrey Samuels, Fiona Foley and Raymond Meeks.

They come from all over Australia. What were some of the things they discussed in the film?

I think the diversity was apparent. These artists had all come together at the same place at the same time, doing different things, but were all contemporary Koori artists striving to create just a slice of their life really – their philosophy, their thoughts and what art [and] being Aboriginal is to them. A lot of the film centred on identity – how people see themselves as Aboriginal people.

In cloud [2000], you juxtapose icons that represent Aboriginality, set against the same blue sky you were looking at when you were a 13-year-old, gazing up at the telegraph poles. Your pursuit of clarity or minimalism, as well as the ideas of wide-open space and defining Aboriginality, were all brought together in cloud.

cloud was quite a resolved exhibition, in that it brought all those elements together: my childhood, Christianity, histories of Aboriginal peoples, and making some sort of connection by showing things like the cow floating in this ethereal sky. This is a strange sort of animal to Aboriginal people ... Aboriginal people would kill livestock to survive and then would actually be hunted down or shot for doing these things, for trying to survive themselves.

The blue sky – is that a symbol of Australia? Does it encapsulate Australia somehow?

It's more than that; it's almost like a dream state, what you see in a dream. You could call it an Australian landscape.

What about images like the feather and the locust in cloud?

The feather is impossibly just suspended in the sky. I see the feather as a messenger, sending simple messages on to people and community and places. And, at Dubbo, we used to have huge plagues of locusts. As a child I remember thousands and thousands of locusts swarming around my head.

Mythology seems to be a theme, whether it's mythologising Christianity or Aboriginal people, or mythologising the outback. An interesting strand runs through your work of taking the real and making it surreal. It's mythologising the everyday.

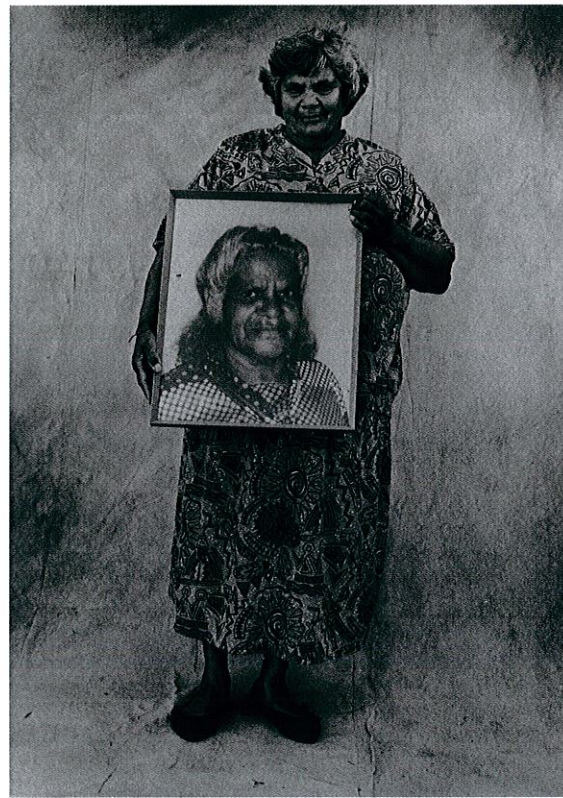
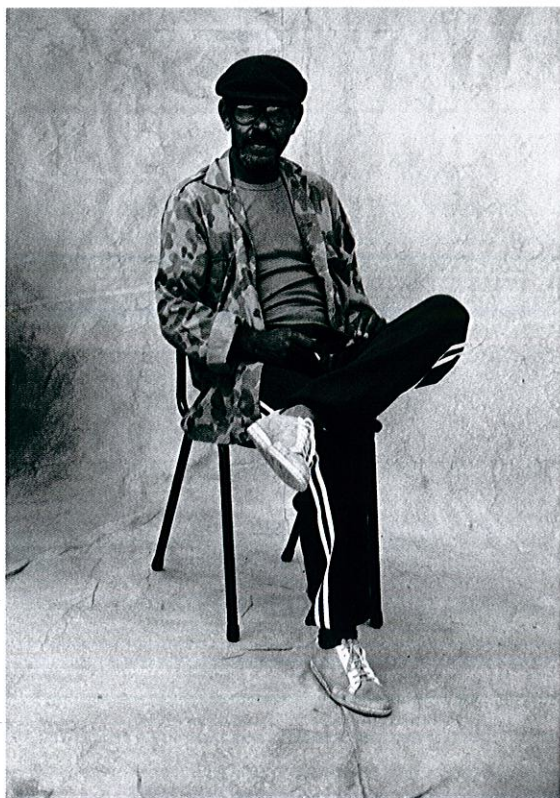
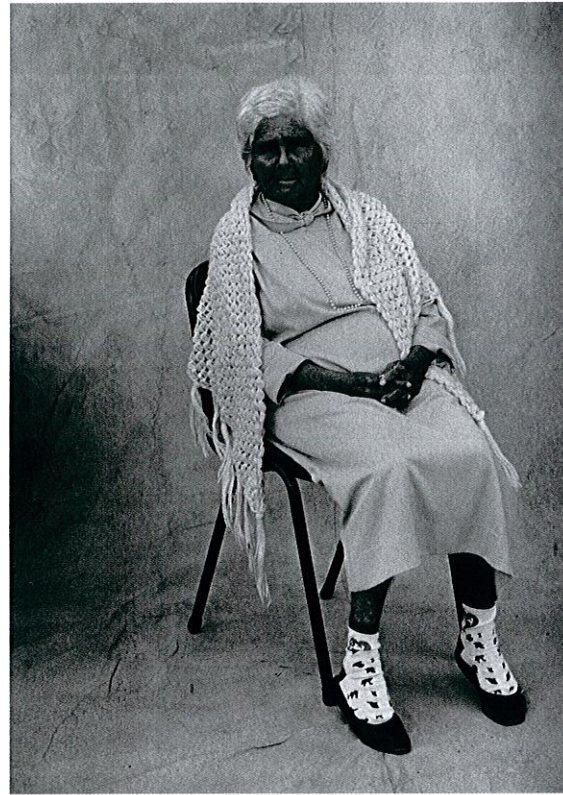
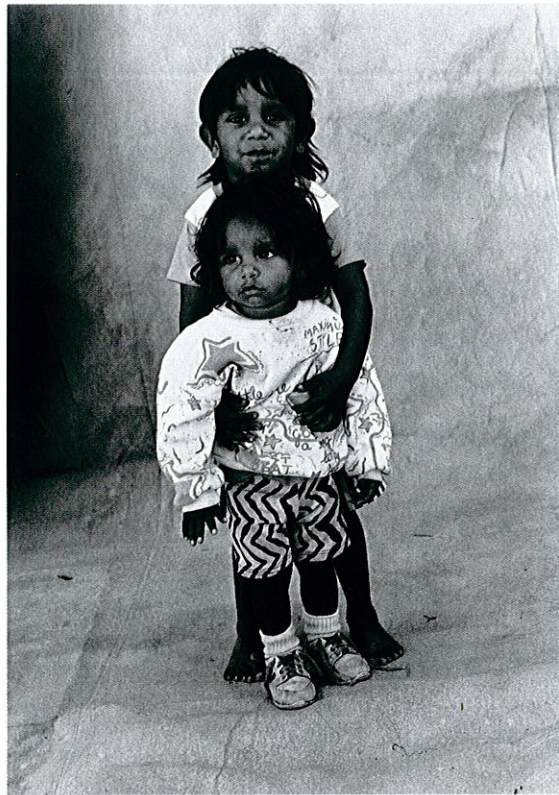
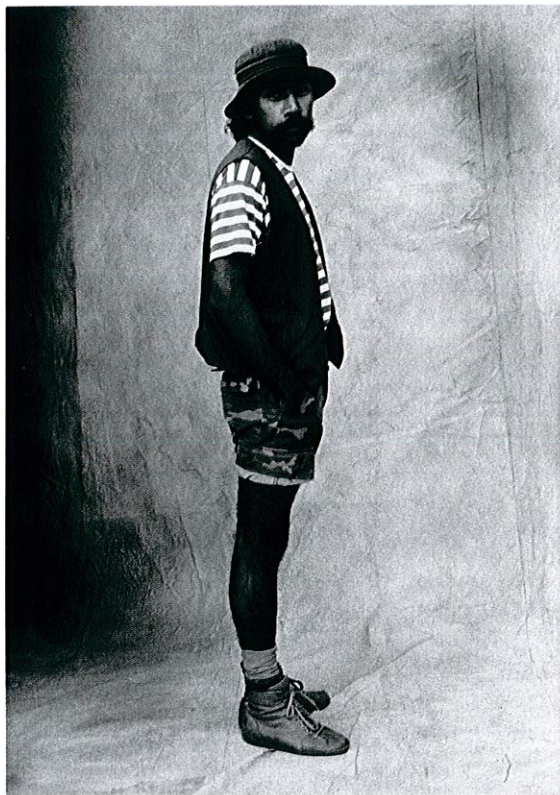
Well, the everyday is more surreal than the surreal, you know?





Tracey 1986
Kristina 1986/2001



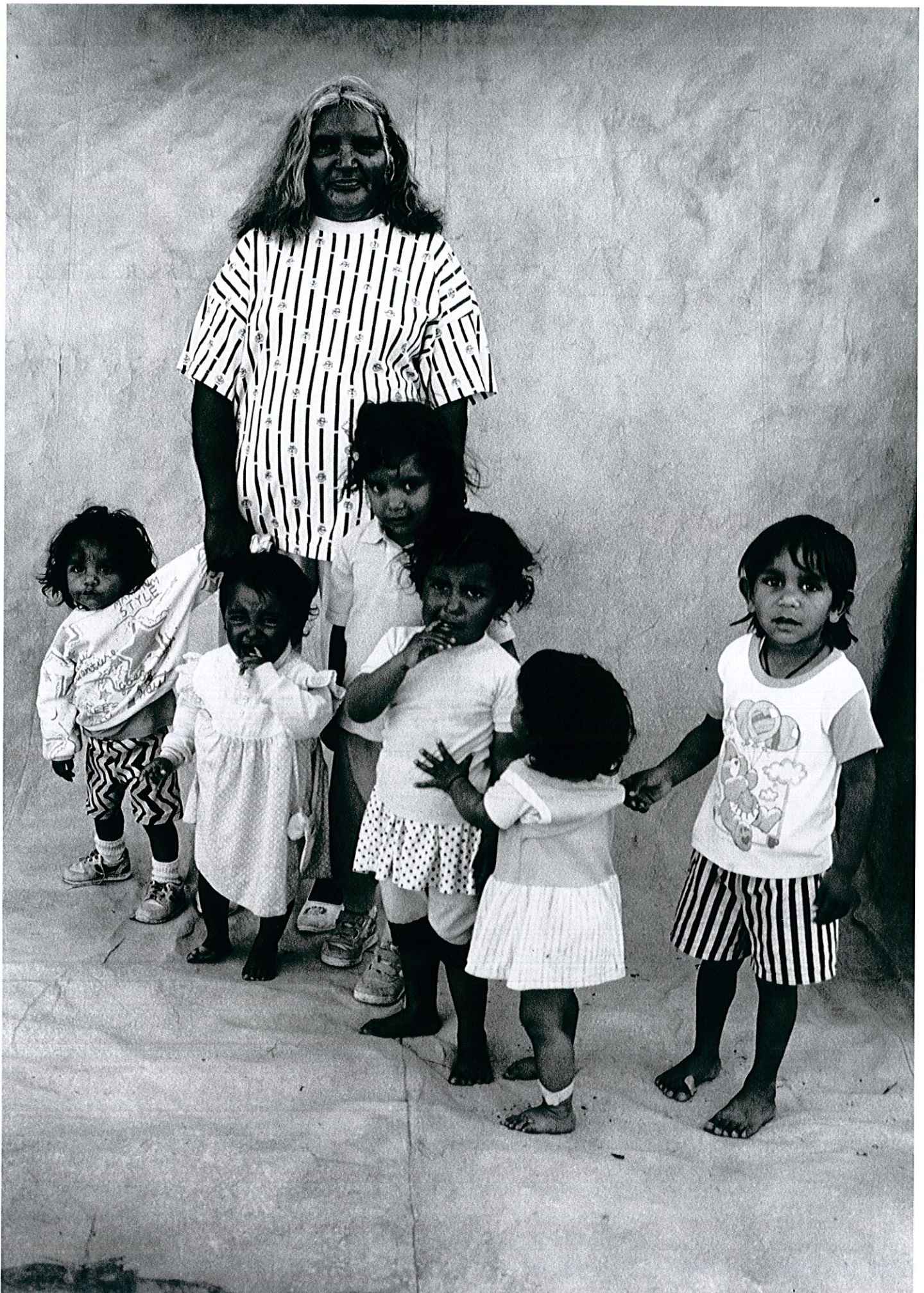


Jag
Kenny Copeland

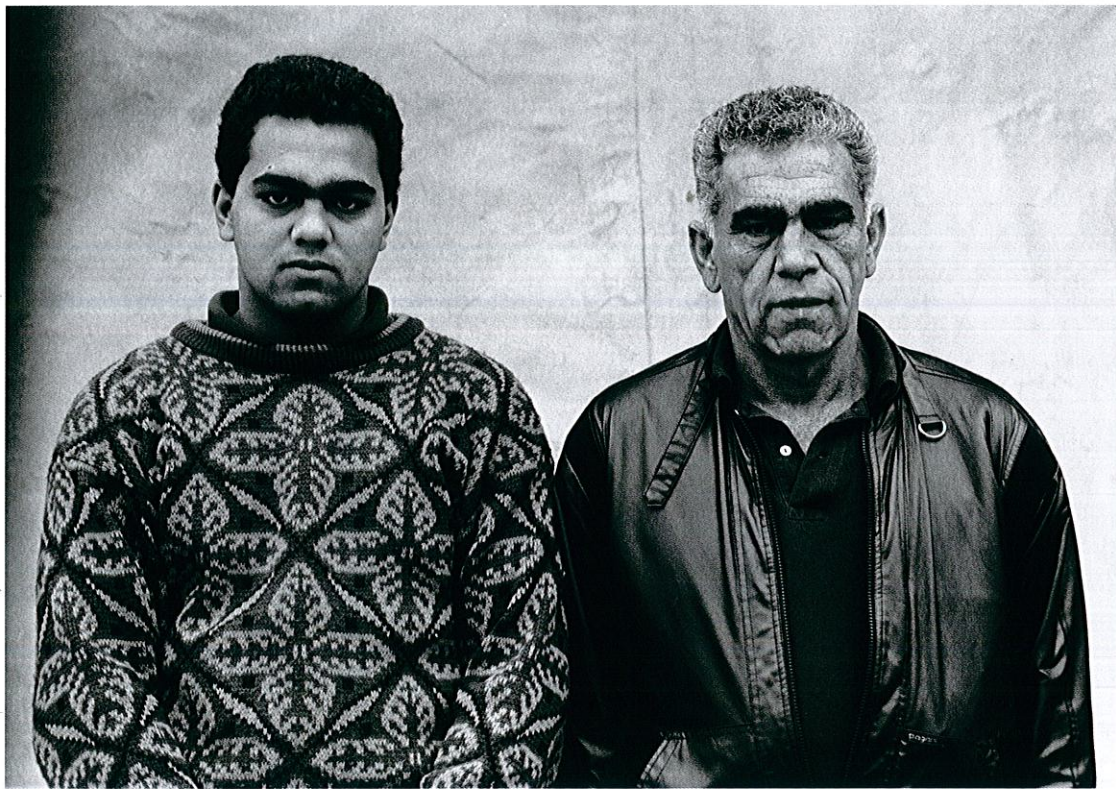
Moree kids
Mum Maude

Phyllis Draper
Aunty Ruthie

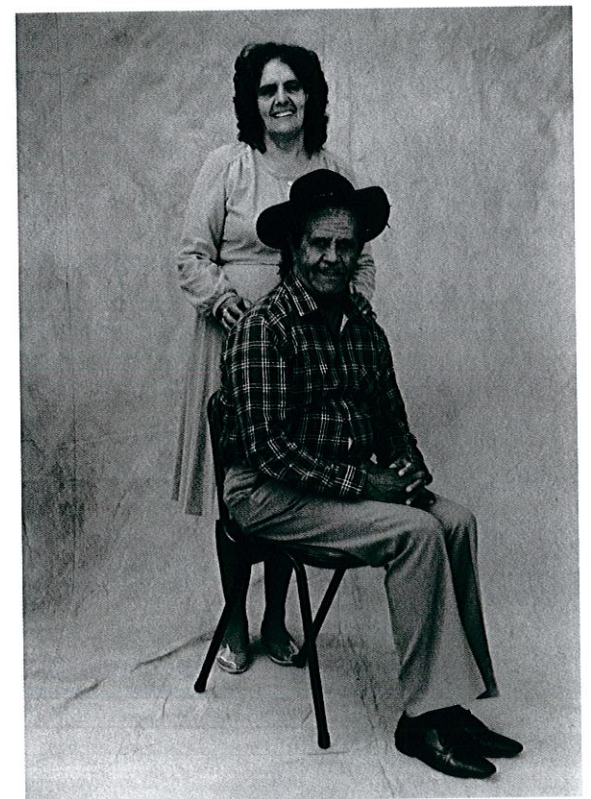
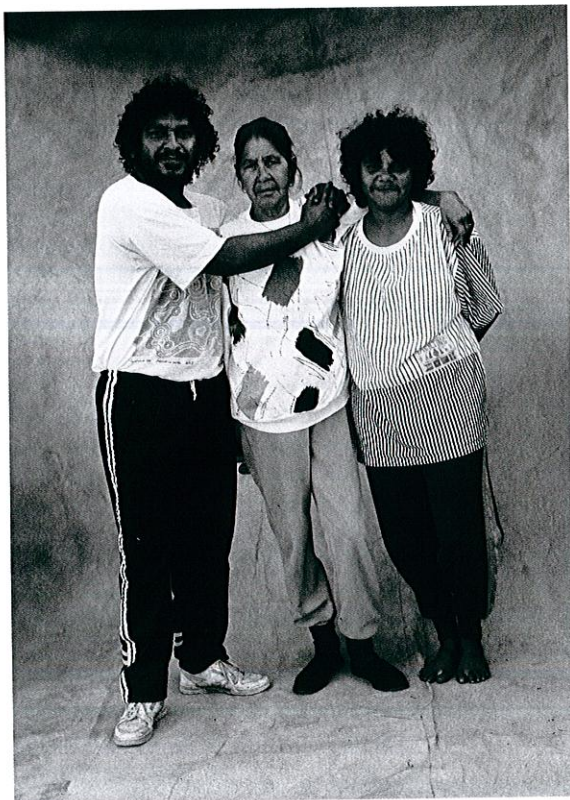
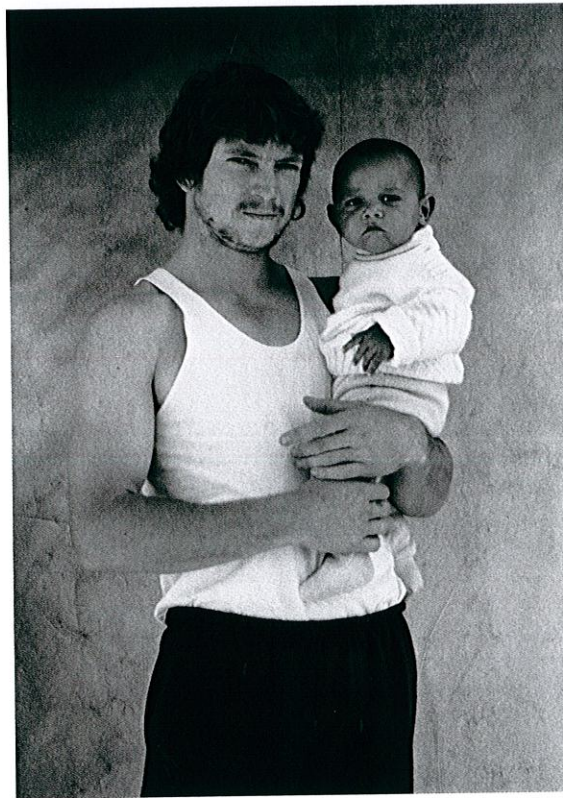
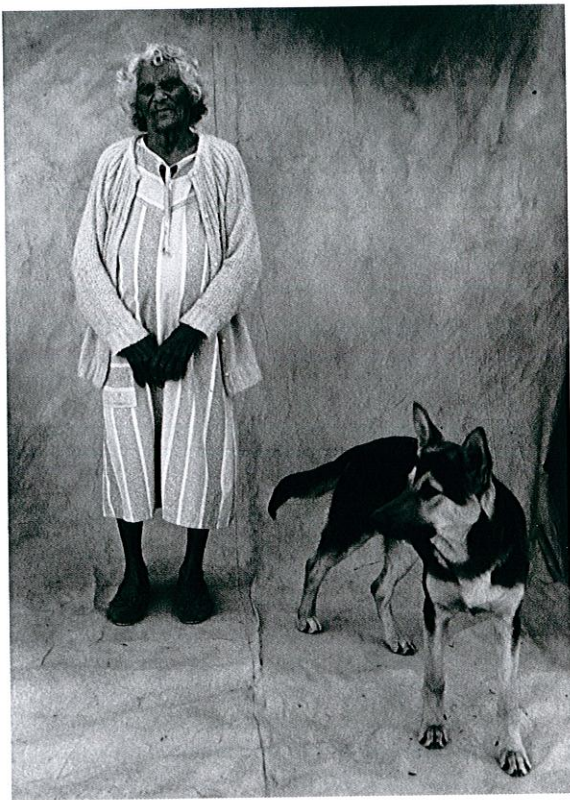
from the series A common place: portraits
of Moree Murries 1990



Jessie and grandkids



Moree women
Michael and Jacko French



Nanny Wright and dog
Mary Stanley with son and daughter-in-law

Glenn and son
The Drifter and The Crow (Trevor Cutmore and Herb Binge)

Jim
Mr and Mrs Lyall Munro