

THE AUSTRALIAN

Beauty touched by horror in the photographs of Aboriginal artist Michael Riley

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Michael Riley, *Sacrifice* (1993), collection Queensland Art Gallery. Purchased 2002. On display, Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane, in *My Country, I Still Call Australia Home*, until October 7. Source: Supplied

PUBLIC WORKS

IT'S hard to believe now but during the early 1980s contemporary urban indigenous artists such as Michael Riley, Fiona Foley and Tracey Moffatt were virtually ignored in favour of the dot paintings of Papunya and the bark paintings of Arnhem Land.

To address this, in 1987 a group including Riley, Moffatt, Foley, Bronwyn Bancroft, Brenda L. Croft, Arone Meeks, Euphemia Bostock and Jeffrey Samuels decided to establish a gallery to showcase their work and that of other urban-based artists.

From those early days, I was a regular visitor to the Boomalli gallery in Chippendale, a dynamic place that was creating Australian art history by pushing the boundaries of what was considered authentic Aboriginal art.

Some of those artists who established Boomalli nearly 26 years ago, such as Croft, Foley and Riley, are showing in *My Country, I Still Call Australia Home* at Brisbane's Gallery of Modern Art. The exhibition offers a wonderful array of contemporary art from indigenous Australia, and when I visit I am keen to see *Sacrifice*, one of Riley's most compelling series of photographs.

Riley was born in 1960 on the Talbragar Reserve just outside Dubbo, NSW, and his artistic practice included photography, film and documentary, for which he received international recognition. However, he died in 2004, aged just 44, after being diagnosed with renal failure, a result of the after-effects of childhood poverty.

Sacrifice reveals Riley's fascination with Christianity and what he described as the "sacrifices Aboriginal people made to be Christian". He explores memories from his childhood of Sunday school, the repercussions of an imposed religion and the effects of substance abuse on the community.

The black-and-white images focus on elements such as a crucifix, silver teaspoons, fish, gravestones and stigmata. The series was printed with a colour process that gives it a luscious feeling of shadow and light.

Sacrifice is a "delicate balance between beauty and these horrific stories", says the gallery's curator of indigenous Australian art, Bruce McLean, as we stand before the work.

"It focuses on colonisation and particularly the conflict between Aboriginal people and culture and Christianity, and the way it was imposed upon Aboriginal people and how it had the effect of taking away our religion and spiritual beliefs," he says.

"Michael was able to tell these horrific stories in such a beautiful way, and he shot the series in such an amazing way that people are drawn in.

"It is easy to read them once you see a few of them in a row, the fishes, the spoons, the crucifixes, they all have really important biblical connotations, and then that story just hits you in the face.

"It's incredibly potent work. Michael was one of our most amazing artists and he passed away far too young."

According to McLean, Riley's photograph of the Aboriginal hands extended, with blood oozing from the palms, is a powerful image. But while it could be viewed as sorrowful, McLean considers it a "triumphant" image.

"It is, of course, a reference to crucifixion, having the hands nailed to the cross, and it's a person who is looking at their hands and looking at these scars of what they have been through.

"For me, it is a kind of self-portrait of Michael thinking about the persecution of Aboriginal people, the taking away of land rights, moving from country, taking away of language and law and many other beliefs. But it is also an image that is somewhat triumphant, saying that, despite all of this, Aboriginal people are still here, still alive."

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