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Australian vernacular photography

8 February – 18 May 2014

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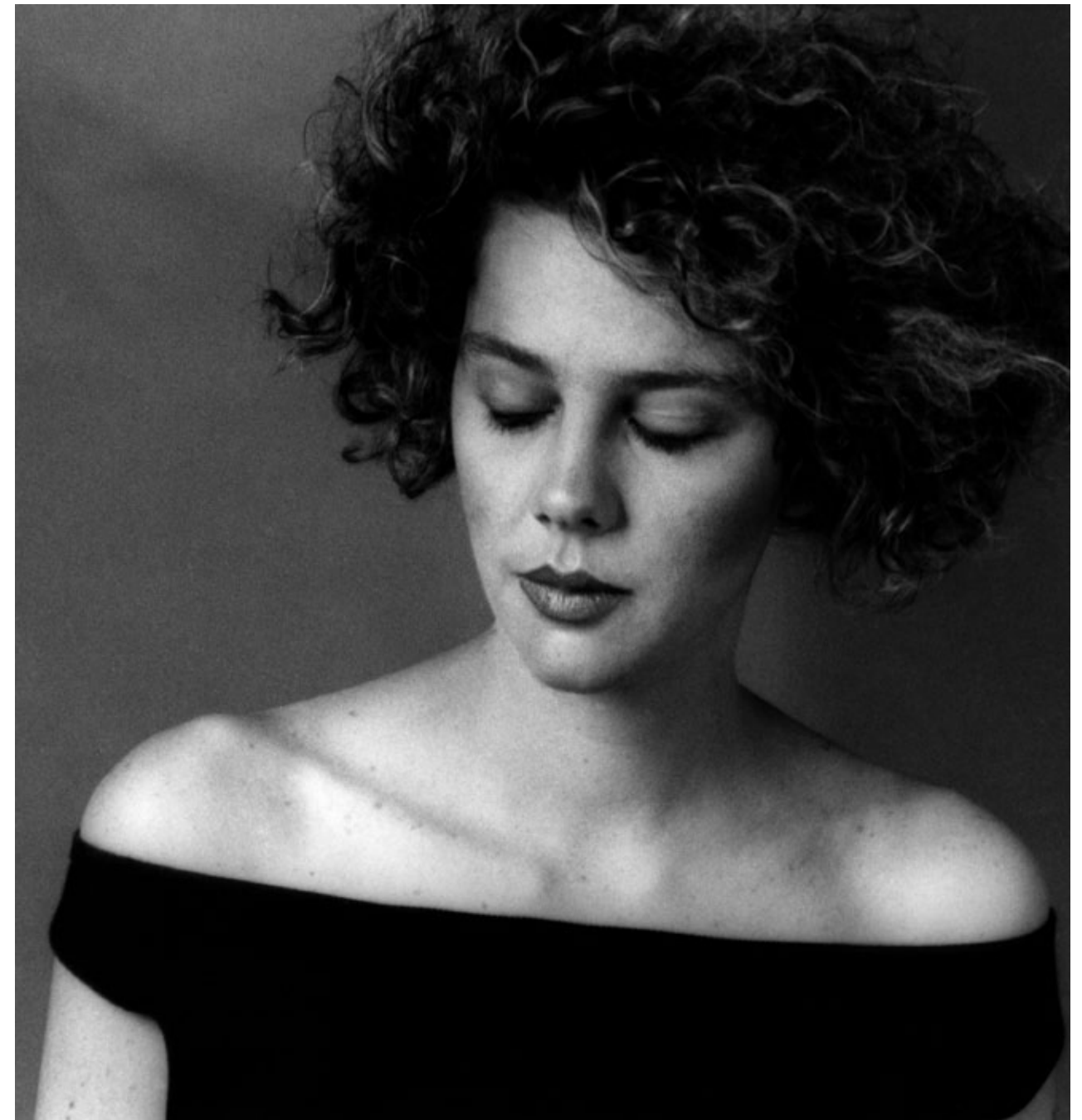
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Marie Shannon (New Zealand 1960–) *The house of parmesan* 1991, gelatin silver photograph, 17.5 x 22.5 cm. Gift of Peter Fay 2006 © Marie Shannon

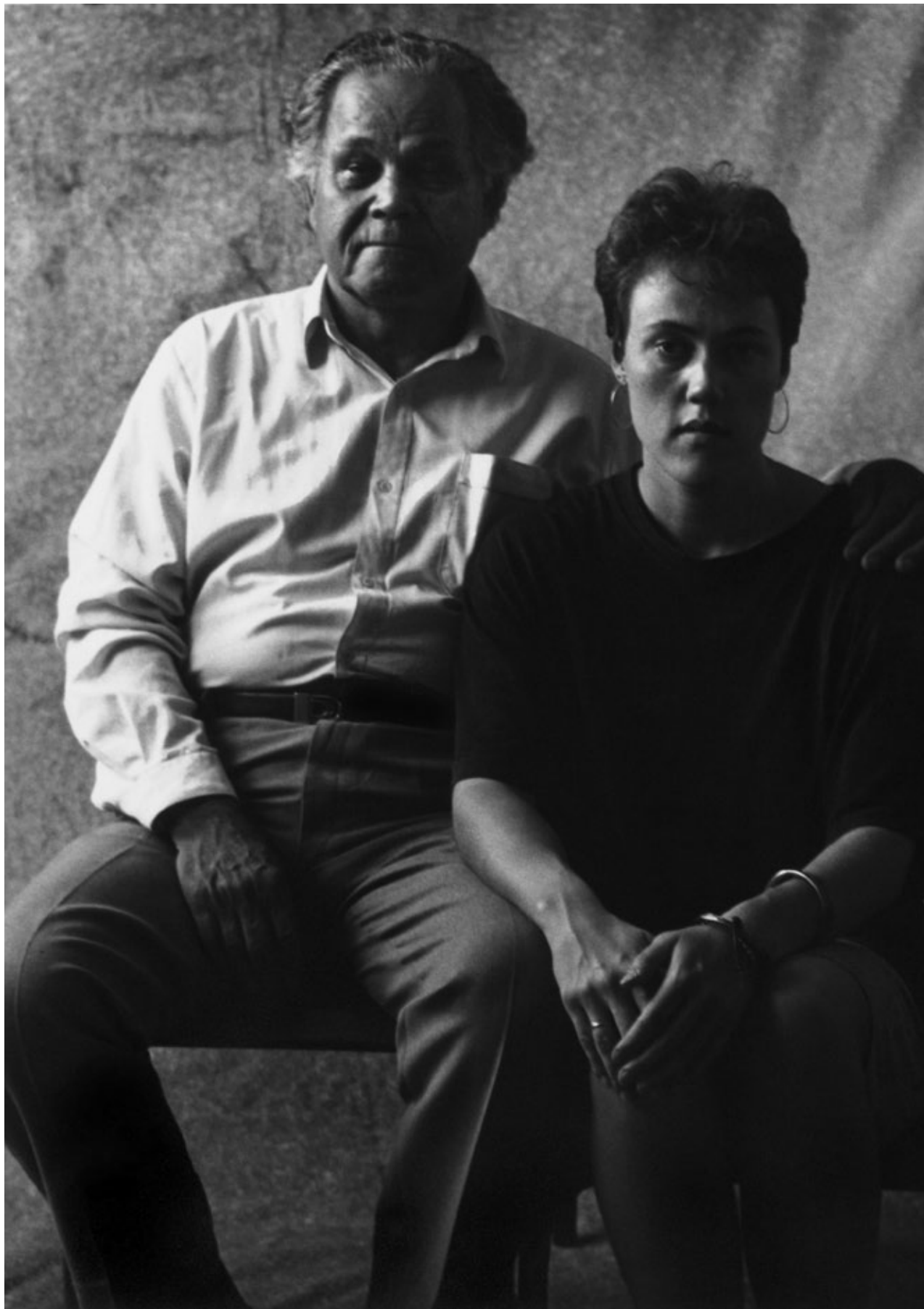


True beauty: Michael Riley's portraits 1984–1990

Text by Brenda L. Croft



Michael Riley Estate, *Hetti*, 1990/2013, from the series 'Portraits by a window', pigment UltraChrome ink on Platine fibre rag, 41 x 43 cm (image), 45.2 x 33.4 cm (frame), courtesy The Commercial, Sydney. © Michael Riley Estate.



Opposite page: Michael Riley Estate, *Joe and Brenda*, 1990/2013, from the series 'Portraits by a window', pigment UltraChrome ink on Platine fibre rag, 53 x 41 cm (image), 55 x 43.4 cm (frame), courtesy The Commercial, Sydney. © Michael Riley Estate.

*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?*¹

It is hard to believe that it is nearly a decade since Michael Riley passed away in 2004 at the untimely

age of 44 following a long battle with renal failure, exacerbated by a childhood bout of rheumatic fever. Michael was a dignified and supremely talented filmmaker and photographic artist whose proud Wiradjuri/Kamilaroi/Gamilaraay heritage formed the bedrock of his artistic practice.

It is not only Michael's family, friends and community who are left to deal with their sense of grief and sorrow, imagining what might have been if he had not left us so soon. It is also Australia's broader arts and culture, which is all the poorer for

his never fully realised creativity. A recent exhibition underscored this sense of what might, should have been. 'Michael Riley: Portraits 1984 – 1990' was shown at The Commercial, a small gem of a space in Michael's old stomping ground of Redfern. The exhibition also announced the transfer of the Michael Riley Foundation and Estate from its previous representative gallery space, with a sublimely arranged selection of his earliest portrait works. I should declare an interest in that a portrait of my late father Joe and I from the 1990 series 'Portraits by a window' was among the 15 works on show.

The exhibition presented a window onto Michael's early working life as an artist. These are, indeed, timeless images, a reflection of Michael's ability to capture something intangible and essential about those of us who were lucky enough to be represented in his works. At the June opening – held on a freezing, rain-driven Sydney night that did little to deter people – The Commercial was overflowing with family, friends, mentors and admirers of Michael's work, spilling onto the footpath outside. We were all there to view Michael's stunning snapshots of our youthful visages and, most importantly, to share memories of Michael, his modus operandi and our times together dur-

ing an incredibly creative and innovative period of contemporary Indigenous culture in mid-1980s, early 1990s Sydney.

The images are but a small sample of the hundreds Michael took over three decades, ever since he acquired his first Box Brownie with the savings he made collecting lost golf balls at Dubbo Golf Club when he was a young boy. A number of these works have rightly become icons of the first wave of contemporary Aboriginal art: *Maria* (1985) is the powerful image of Michael's maternal cousin/sister, also known as Polly, whose unflinching gaze remains as fresh today, almost 30 years since it was taken. Her eyes, slightly hooded, assessing the viewer, command complete attention as much now as they did when first displayed in public. This image also commanded the attention of one of Australia's most renowned photographers, Max Dupain, who bought an edition from the seminal exhibition in which it was included, 'NADOC '86: Aboriginal and Islander Photographers' at the Aboriginal Artists Gallery in Sydney, September 1986. *Kristina* (1986), also included in that significant first exhibition of Indigenous photography, and *Darrell* (from 1989/90) continue to seduce the viewer's eye as much now as they did back then. Why?

Michael loved the concept of true beauty – not superficial notions of splendour as represented in the vast dross of advertising and promotional material that we drown in every day, but the dreamlike quality so apparent in images such as *Linda and Binni* (1984) – shown here publicly for the first time, and *Hetti* and *Delores* from Michael's previously mentioned 1990 series 'Portraits by a window'. Michael was able to encapsulate something indefinable about his subjects, particularly his close women friends who, if not actual family, became de-facto sisters – so wonderfully evident in *Kristina (no glasses)* (1984), *Tracey* (1986), and *Avril and Miya* and *Telphia*, (both from 1990).

Charles and Adam (1990) reveals a tender side of activist Charles Perkins, standing proudly alongside his doppelgänger son – one of my favourite images of Charlie, as he was universally known. The image of one of Michael's closest male friends, *Djon* (1990), wearing little more than his Rolex it seems, remains as provocative and cheeky as when it was

¹ These words were written seven years ago for a curatorial essay in *Michael Riley: sights unseen*, a monograph accompanying the retrospective of the same name which I curated during my tenure as senior curator of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art at the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.





Previous spread: Michael Riley Estate, *April*, 1986/2013, from the series 'NADOC '86: Aboriginal and Islander Photographers', pigment UltraChrome ink on Platine fibre rag, 40.9 x 59.5 cm (image), 43.5 x 62 cm (frame), courtesy The Commercial, Sydney. © Michael Riley Estate.



Above: Michael Riley Estate, *Kristina*, 1984/2013, from the series 'Koori Art '84', pigment UltraChrome ink on Platine fibre rag, 41 x 60 cm (image), 43.5 x 62 cm (frame), courtesy The Commercial, Sydney. © Michael Riley Estate.
Opposite page: Michael Riley Estate, *Telphia*, 1990/2013, from the series 'Portraits by a window', pigment UltraChrome ink on Platine fibre rag, 60 x 41 cm (image), 62 x 43.3 cm (frame), courtesy The Commercial, Sydney. © Michael Riley Estate.

taken. On opening night, Djon Mundine shared an emotional tribute to his friend Michael – whom he called brother, and customary brother-in-law – reminiscing about thinking he must ring Michael to discuss some contemporary art issue, only to feel shattered on realising that this is not possible.

I treasure the image of my dad and I. I still recall everything about the day it was taken, including the coffee stains on my father's shirt as if the photo shoot, held around the corner at Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Cooperative's original premises in Chippendale, was only yesterday.

Michael was an artist of rare vision; he truly made a mark through his vital role in establishing Boomalli in 1987 with other rising stars of the time, such as Tracey Moffatt, Fiona Foley and Bronwyn Bancroft among others, and also by championing those who had the great fortune to work with him. He would have been supremely pleased to be back in 'the Fern', as observed one of his closest friends and Chair of the Michael Riley Foundation, New

South Wales Labor MP and Deputy Opposition Leader, Linda Burney. Michael also would have been quietly elated about his ongoing influence resonating in the work of contemporary Indigenous artists such as Daniel Riley McKinley's choreographic piece, *Riley*, for Bangarra Dance Theatre's 2010 program 'of earth & sky'.

Michael would have been really happy that so many of his family and friends were gathered together at the opening of his most recent exhibition. His spirit felt present, and it was easy to imagine him standing quietly in a corner astutely observing everyone, missing nothing, his gifted artist's eyes taking everything in, storing it all up for later. His shy, yet simultaneously wicked giggle was almost audible if you listened hard enough, as we all basked there under the collective gaze of his direction to us all those years ago. Vale Michael, your vision lives on.

'Michael Riley: Portraits 1984 – 1990', The Commercial, Sydney, 28 June – 20 July 2013.