

MICHAEL RILEY, *A COMMON PLACE: PORTRAITS OF MOREE MURRIES*, 1990

text by Cathy Craigie, May 2016

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'The Big M' as Moree is affectionately referred to by Moree Murries, is a major agricultural centre sitting in the rich black soils of North-West New South Wales. In 2010, Paul Mann from National Geographic's online magazine claimed Moree was "*Australia's Richest Rural Shire.*" "*To understand the town you must first understand that Moree is diversity. Moree is cattle. Moree is sheep. Moree is cotton. Moree is wheat. Moree is soybeans. Moree is sorghum. Moree is sunflowers. Moree is money.*"

Wherever you go in this place you will hear the same advice from dozens of different sources, sometimes given cheerfully, sometimes with a smug, knowing smile: "If you haven't got a quid in Moree you must be mad. Money sprouts from the ground."

What a pity that a large part of the townspeople do not share in the wealth. I once had a discussion with a former Moree Town Clerk who said that Moree's problem was that they could not see that one of their biggest assets was sitting right in front of them. The asset he was talking about was the Aboriginal community.

Wherever you go in Moree, the presence of Aboriginal people is highly visible and historically this has made other people in the town uncomfortable. The 2011 Census, counted Moree's Aboriginal population as 1,843 people and Murris comprised 22.8% of Shire's population, which is higher than the NSW average (2.5%).

Over the years there have been a number of incidents that have had national media coverage and this led to Moree gaining a reputation as a hot bed of racism and conflict. As a Moree Murri, I see this as a community being proud of their heritage and strong in their beliefs. It is a community that stands up for its rights and it is a community that is a vocal. Sometimes this does not bode well, especially in a country town.

But it is these characteristics that attracted Michael Riley to embrace his mother's country. Moree is in Gamilaroi country, a people known for their flamboyance and strength.

His mother came from the Wright family who were known for their sporting prowess and their artistic talents. They were also known for the red hair and green eyes which was smattered through the family line. When the whole Wright family gathered, you could not hear yourself. They were a feisty bunch when they were together. Michael always loved this rowdiness. He loved the extremes in his Moree family.

In the common Aboriginal kid's game "Who's Your Cousin?" numbers counted so I always knew we had cousins in Dubbo. The Rileys came to visit mainly in the school holidays and at Christmas but it wasn't until we were both adults that we became closer and shared journey.

I still remember the day Riley came back into my life. I was living in Sydney, sharing a flat with our mutual cousin, Polly (Maria) and my brother, Yurry. It must have been mid afternoon as the sun was streaming through the stained glass windows and my vision was blurred. When I opened my front door all I could see was a halo of wild, reddy, brown hair followed by a flannelette shirt. I must have looked puzzled because the voice soon told me that he was 'Michael, (followed by an expletive) Michael Riley, Dotty's son". I soon came to love those flanno shirts and the swearing too and Michael became a regular visitor to our flat (and our fridge). At the time my brother was working at the Australian Centre for Photography and he

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reignited the love of photography in Michael. I believe that this was the beginning of Michael's desire to capture the images of his own people. Yurry and Chocko (as Michael was called by the Moree mob) would shoot everyone and anything. Both of them were invited by Tracey Moffatt to be part of the landmark exhibition - *NADOC '86 exhibition of Aboriginal and Islander photographers*. I have many images from this time and when I look at these now, I realise they captured a special time and place in Sydney. There was a renaissance of Aboriginal arts simmering just below the surface. The Black Theatre had closed but left its legacy in the 1980s with the establishment of a national Aboriginal dance school in Glebe. By the time I had moved to Glebe, the suburb was a hot pot of Aboriginal artistic talent. Heavily influenced at the time by the likes of Bob Marley and Black America, young Kooris and Murris were bursting at the seams to explore their own cultures. We hung out with a lot of Moree mob who were into the same things as us. Yurindalli, an Aboriginal arts cooperative was operating in Moree at the time and people like Laurence Leslie, his cousin Gav Duncan and others were also making a name for themselves as visual artists. Moree was a little hub of creativity. Riley was swept up into this environment and started to explore his Moree side at the same time

He made many friends in Moree and became a regular visitor. He would stay at our Nan's on the Mission or at my brother Yurry's house. Michael and whoever he could con to go with him, would drive all over the area snapping photos. You would become the assistant on the trip and people recollected having to handle dead carcasses and fly blown animal body parts - all in the name of art!

I remember a trip we took to Terri Hie Hie, an old Aboriginal reserve just outside of Moree. Many of Murris in town had family links with the reserve but never really visited the area much back then. We had been told many stories about the place and knew that there was a bora ring in the scrub behind the old settlement. Michael drove in his old, gold Holden station wagon that doubled as his wardrobe and place of abode. As we drove down the road towards the area where the sites were, we heard gun shots. Michael turned that car around so fast!

He would often be snapping at the Moree Boomerangs games. He would get caught up in the passion and fervour of the locals. I was living in London in the mid 1980s and Michael took his first overseas trip to see me. The NSW Aboriginal Knockout was on while we there and we ran up phone bills to see how the 'Boomies' were going. Once we heard that they had made the grand final we spent the entire night calling everyone to get reports. When they won and also won the right to host the next year's Knockout, Michael and I celebrated thousands of miles away.

While we were in London Michael had been invited to have lunch with Roslyn Poignant. Her husband, famed photographer, Axel had recently passed away. I tagged along with Michael and it was after this that I understood that Michael not only wanted to document real life but he also wanted to create art. He wanted to explore ways to present his people in a different way to previous photographers. He wanted to know more and sought out people who could take him where he wanted to go. He also met Rebecca Hossack which led to *A Common Place; Portraits of Moree Murrises*, being exhibited in her gallery in 1991.

It was on this trip that Michael learned of his father's passing. *Moree Murrises* portrait series honoured his mother's family and he would later do the same with his father's family in Dubbo with *Yarns from the Talbragar Reserve* in 1998.

I spent some time in Moree when Michael was working on *Moree Murrises* and sometimes acted as his 'finder'. When the trickle of people slowed at different times of the day, I would go out and round up sitters. So many photos were taken during that time but only a small number made it in the exhibition. Many of the people who sat for Michael have since passed away. Moree Murrises is a beautiful memory of a certain time in Moree. Seeing our Aunty Ruthy holding up a photo in memory of one of our old aunts from Boggabilla, seeing the Drifter and

the Crow mucking around, seeing my great Aunty Phyllis sitting with a shawl on her shoulders, brings me instantly back to Moree. For me, the images captured their characters. Both my grandmothers appear, one with a dog and the other one with a handbag. My Nanny Wright never wandered far without her dogs and my Mum Maude (my mother's mum) never went anywhere without her handbag.

These images are straight forward but also intimate. People, sometimes without realising it, showed Michael the photographer, a little bit of themselves. There was a lot of laughter coming from the back of the Moree Plains Gallery. They were relaxed. Maybe this was because they knew one of their own was behind the camera and that this was his gift to *Moree Murries*.