

11 Liking What I Do

Michael Riley

Part I

Interview by Andrew Dewdney 1989

How did you first become interested in photography?

Oh, I don't know. I always wanted to get into the arts somehow, but I was never very good at graphics, painting, or anything like that, so I suppose photography was another way of getting into the arts, another medium really.

Did you do any photography at school?

No.

Did your family encourage you in any way, or have a camera you could use?

No, they couldn't afford one, a decent camera.

Are there snapshots of you?

Yeah, a few; I used to have a Kodak instamatic when I was thirteen or fourteen. I used to play around with that.

Did you think at that time you'd be a photographer?

No.

When did your interest in photography first begin?

In 1982-83 I was doing a short course at the Tin Sheds⁷⁶ with Bruce Hart, who was running a Koori photography class a couple of days a week. A few people came, a few dropped out and I was one of the ones who stuck with him and done the course. He was working at Sydney College of the Arts at the time and he told me they were looking for someone to work as assistant technician in the darkroom at the College. So I sort of got into the College through him and got a traineeship from DEET⁷⁷ to do twelve months training in the darkroom and studio. I also did the first, second and third years in the space of about eighteen months instead of doing a three year course. This was because it was just the photography I was interested in, nothing else and the course was a design course with photography in it. So I just did photography.

What was the approach to photography at the Tin Sheds?

It was practical skills, trying to get Kooris to photograph their own community. Just documenting their own communities.

What was the approach at Sydney College?

I taught myself over there really, because I learnt more working as a technician in the darkroom and studio than I did from going to the classes.

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Did you think at that time of specialising in photography?

Oh yeah. I thought of that. I actually worked as a freelance for two years at Rapport Agency. That was good. Challenging. I did a lot of work for Koori organisations: the Medical Service, stuff for annual reports, Aboriginal fashion parades, portfolios of Koori people wanting to get into modelling or dance, and Aboriginal and Islander dance companies. I also did stuff for the AECG [the NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group]⁷⁸."

How did that come to an end?

I used to send a lot of stuff to *The Bulletin*, other freelance work through the agency. But I like doing stuff for Koori organisations first and foremost.

Did you make a living out of that?

Yeah, I got by OK.

Why did you stop doing that range of stuff?

I haven't really, just that I don't do that much.

Where have you shifted to now?

At the moment I'm very busy doing films, but this year I want to do an exhibition of Aboriginal portraits. But it is very difficult when you've got other things to do as well. So I'm just working on my own projects now, not going out freelance.

How did you get into film?

I was offered a position at Film Australia to do an eighteen months training course out there, which I took. And the first film I did while training was the *Boomalli* film⁷⁹ and after I did that I did the *Dreamings* film.⁸⁰ *Dreamings* was made last year specifically to go with our exhibition in New York in November of the same year and that's still travelling in the States, from New York to Los Angeles and Chicago and is coming back early 1990. It hasn't been screened in Australia, but I think the ABC have bought it. I'm now working on an independent experimental film in which I'm going to borrow a lot from still photographic imagery. This isn't a commission. It's something I want to do, to play around with techniques and explore what I can do in a film. I'm applying to the Australian Film Commission for funding to do this.

Is your time more taken up with film?

Yes.

What do you mean by film techniques?

I want to shoot it in 35mm black and white, similar to Tri-X, and process it on Record Rapid. I want to get the effects I get by spending ages printing a neg how I want it, but on film. So it's going to be difficult transferring the image I want on a photograph to film, to make it move. So what I think I'm going to have to do is set up studio shots, scenes and whatever, and print photos and show the camera person how I want the image. I hope to finish this project by the end of the year.

What's your general aim for Aboriginal photography?

I want to get away from the ethnographic image of Aboriginal people in magazines. A lot of images you see of Aboriginal people are like Aboriginal people living in humpies, or drunk on the street or, Aboriginal people marching in protests. There's nothing wrong with that, but I want to branch off and do things in the studio. I've documented Aboriginal people at protests and gatherings and whatnot all over the country for four to five years and I've got all those images. I was thinking of doing a book but found it too difficult to get off the ground. I've done all that and now I

want to do something with Aboriginal people in the studio.

Aboriginal people have been photographed in the studio for a long time.

Yes, that's right, but a lot of them are ethnographic, set up with spear or skincoat. I just want to show young Aboriginal people in the cities today; a lot of them very sophisticated and lot of them very glamorous. A lot of them have been around the world and have an air of sophistication which you don't see coming across in newspapers and programs. I'm just talking about positive things really, positive images of Aboriginal people.

Sophistication and glamour are associated a lot with fashion photography. Are you trying to straightforwardly reverse typical roles?

No not really. I'm just trying to photograph these people - how they are.

When you're taking pictures do you think about how they are going to be used?

I'm just trying to break away from the normal, everyday image of Aboriginal people and putting it up on the wall so people can see them. I've sold about nine pictures: Man, Holly 7, Christian, one of Avril. These are 20" x 24" prints on Record Rapid. Actually Max Dupain bought one of Holly, which was good to have him come up and admire a photo of mine and like it enough to buy it. It was very flattering really.

11-1 Hetti
Michael Riley

Hetti is a good friend of mine, not a model and has beautiful cheekbones, beautiful face and shoulders and I wanted to accentuate those features. I didn't do much setting up. I used one big soft light. I got someone to do her face over, but that's all, otherwise she came like that. Very glamorous. Just the way she is.



How did he come to see the work?

I think he saw it at Glen Murcutt's house who'd bought one of Polly and Christina. I don't have an agent or gallery. It's through personal contacts and I sell them at market prices. But these sales aren't a big part of my income.

Have you ever had a darkroom?

No, I've always used Rapport, Sydney College of the Arts or Tin Sheds, or ACP [Australian Centre for Photography]. We're setting up a darkroom at Boomalli at the moment. I use Rapport's Studio.

I usually use my own cameras, which are Nikons, 35 mm format. I work in black and white, colour doesn't interest me. I don't think the camera's that important really, it's just a machine, as long as you've got a good lens. I use Nikons because they're tough. You can drop them. Whilst at Sydney College of the Arts I bought a second hand Nikon FE. It was great until it got stolen.

Just on some broader issues, do you think non-Aboriginal photographers should photograph Aboriginal people at all?

I don't think you can say that a non-Aboriginal photographer can't work with the Aboriginal community. I think it is up to the communities themselves. But it would be good to see more Aboriginal photographers working with their own communities. There are quite a lot of White photographers around who've worked with the Aboriginal community for years and years. I don't see any of them capturing that essence of Aboriginal people. I haven't ever seen a photograph by a White photographer that is able to do that, they just don't understand our spirituality.

Do you think that spiritual bond exists between urban and traditional people?

Of course, yes, you don't lose your Aboriginality. I do think that Aboriginal photographers can get into certain situations in their own communities where they can take intimate photos where a White photographer can't. On the other hand, if I went to an Aboriginal community I didn't know, it would take time to establish a relationship of trust, which a non-Aboriginal photographer would also have to do.

Photography is just a medium for me, a way of putting across my views and images to the world. There's no big deal. You can rave on and on and on about aesthetics, but when it comes down to it, it is about putting my views to the wider community visually. There is no big mysticism.

I do what I do because I like doing it, I'm not chasing fame. Of course Aboriginal people will have to conform to careers because that's the way people see photography to be. It's survival.

11•2 *Polly*
Michael Riley

Polly is a natural beauty without any makeup, beautiful neck, eyes.



11•3 *Avril*
Michael Riley

Avril is very soft, quietly sophisticated.



Part 2 Interview by Sandra Phillips 1992

Michael could you tell me what you're doing now?

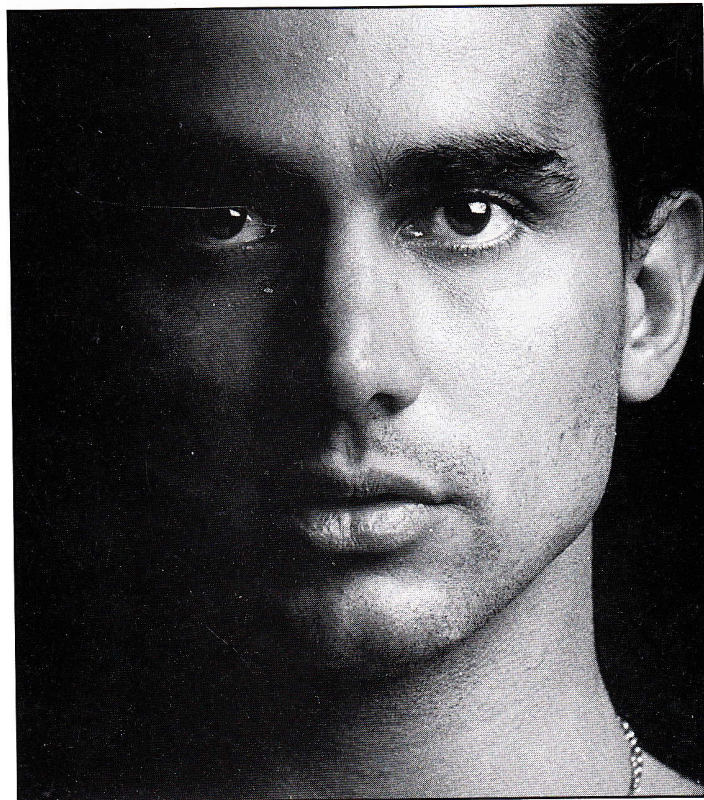
I'm working at the ABC at the Aboriginal Programs Unit making documentaries and also producing and directing a new magazine format series.

Last year I made two films, one called *Malangi*,⁸¹ about a traditional Aboriginal artist from Arnhem Land and another film called *Poison*,⁸² an experimental film.

Originally, when they did this first interview I was trying to get an experimental film off the ground by using images which I would normally use in photography and transferring that to film and putting some sort of story with it. I actually made the film at the ABC, not through the Australian Film Commission as planned. I finished that last year and it was broadcast January '92.

Poison deals with substance abuse, like heroin and alcohol, and also with self-abuse. It also deals with Aboriginal people coping with 20th Century White Australia, and with the hypocrisies of religion, of Catholicism.

It follows the lives of four young Aboriginal people, drug addicts, who live in a squat. The film follows them around for twenty-four hours looking at what they went through, how they got to being drug addicts.



11•4 Darryl
Michael Riley

Darryl performs with
the Aboriginal
Islander Dance
Company

Did you work with a certain community on this one, or is it a whole range of images from a whole range of places?

It's a range of images. I experimented with manipulating images and seeing how they transfer to a screen, like still photographs in a movie situation with a story put to it.

The film is a visual film, there's about four lines of dialogue at the beginning, the rest is all visual and sound effects. I'm more of a visual person than a writer. I think Aboriginal people are basically visual people, in that they have had to use the visual sense to survive, in gathering food, looking for marking places, making sure they know where certain spots are, where waterholes are.

*So did you get much feedback on *Poison*?*

Yeah, quite a bit, a lot of people were fascinated by it, a lot of people really liked it, some people didn't understand it at all.

*So with *Malangi*, did you spend some time travelling around his country with him?*

Yeah, that's right, David Malangi is a very well respected bark painter from Ramingining in Arnhem Land and it was basically a slice of David's life. The way it was made was very ethereal, it was shot from a plane looking down at the tracks of his land which were actually in his paintings, his life, his philosophy.

We filmed paintings and we filmed at the sites that were represented in his stories in his paintings. We only really touched the tip of the iceberg. There was a lot of information that is secret information that David would not give off because it can't be given off to the public.

Did you have to spend a bit of time with him first to establish a relationship with him?

I'd known David over a couple of years.

Being an Aboriginal filmmaker, do you think he may have presented different things to you that he may not have presented to a non-Aboriginal filmmaker?

Well, I don't think it is quite as black and white as that. I think the most important things are having respect for people that you're filming and photographing. You have to be prepared and well-researched when you go into those communities and have everybody in the community clear of what your intentions are, how you're going to work and what you're going to do with the material. Most importantly, you have to listen to what they say, what they want and how they want to be represented.

*What sort of feedback did you get on *Malangi*?*

We took the film back up to David's family and the community, and they loved it. There was no trouble about what was allowed to be shown because we had talked to people about

what we were and weren't allowed to film, and what we were and weren't allowed to say. We actually got one of David's sons to come down from Ramingining and he translated for us. We had English subtitles on the screen.

I also had an exhibition in August last year in London, at the Rebecca Hossack Gallery and the exhibition was a series of portraits of Aboriginal people from Moree⁸³, called *A Common Place*. It's a record of a certain time and place and a certain people.

I set up a backdrop and invited the people from the community to come and be photographed in front of this backdrop. It was all done in natural light, in the shade, it took about a week to do. It was a cross-section of Aboriginal people living and working in that community.

They just walked in front of the camera, stood or sat in their everyday clothes, however they wanted to sit, in a very dignified manner, no snotty noses, no flies around the eyes. People were just the way they were.

Well, that's what you were saying in the first interview, you were wanting to depict these people as they really were, and to get away from one image of Aboriginal people.

Yeah, that's right, Aboriginal society is very diverse, it's not a blackfella in the bush, or a blackfella in the gutter with the bottle. Very diverse.

Well it sounds to me like you're covering that diversity through your work. Being in a remote community like Ramingining, a rural community like Moree, Poison being city-based, and the portraits that you did a couple of years ago...

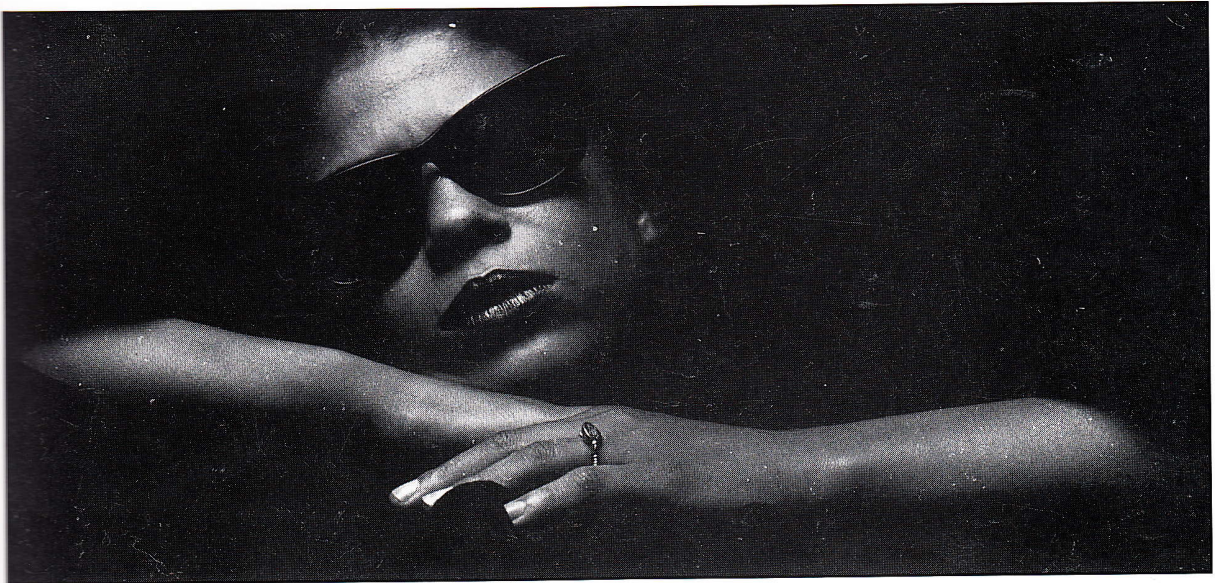
Yeah, I think that's right, although I didn't plan it like that.

I'm assuming Moree is your home community, and as a result did you find it different to Ramingining in setting up relationships?

I didn't grow up in Moree; my mother comes from Moree and my father comes from Dubbo but that association with Moree, my grandmother's in Moree, was very helpful in helping me get the exhibition together. Everybody knew who I was, knew what I was doing, so there was no problem in getting those images, in getting the exhibition together.

Common Place got a good response in London, a positive, critical half page with about five images in *The Independent* newspaper. It was the first time that the Rebecca Hossack Gallery had shown an Aboriginal photographer. She said it was the best response she'd ever got from showing an Australian artist at this gallery. I plan to send another exhibition across next year.

This response was interesting because I'd actually had *Common Place* in Sydney a few months earlier at the Hogarth



11.5 *Unknown in sunglasses*
Michael Riley

Gallery, and we didn't seem to get as much attention as we did overseas.

Has your career snowballed in the last couple of years?

I wouldn't say it's snowballed, I wouldn't say I'm standing still either. I'm just plugging away doing what I like doing, not trying to be aggressive in trying to carve out a career for myself. I just like doing the work that I do and if something good comes of it, then that's fine.

Just in terms of the development of other Koori people in photography and film, have you seen much growth since you've been involved?

Well, over the last couple of years I have seen quite a number of Aboriginal photographers developing, like Ricky Maynard⁸⁴. I think Ricky's an excellent documentary photographer, a Black documentary photographer is really well-needed in this country. There's been a bit of a time lag between Black documentary photographers and Black documentary filmmakers. Other photographers who immediately come to mind are Alana Harris⁸⁵ and of course Mervyn Bishop⁸⁶ who's been around for years.

I think it's interesting that you think that documentary photography and film-making is important in this country.

Yes, I do. I think it is very important, it's very easy to criticise an ethnographic or documentary filmmaker and for people to say that they're tired of seeing Aboriginal people represented in documentaries or in ethnographic films and that Aboriginal people should be making films in a different type of way, in a new type of way. I think that's correct in a certain sense but documentary filmmaking has been around for a long time and it's going to stay for a long time in the form that it's in. I think that if they are done properly, what it does is it leaves a record, a statement of a certain time and place.

You mentioned about there being a gap in that area of Black documentary photographers and Black documentary filmmakers. I suppose that gap was taken up to some extent by White or non-Aboriginal photographers and filmmakers.

That's right. First on the question of White people photographing or filming Aboriginal people, I think if there's a request from a certain community for a White filmmaker to make a film about their community, fine. I don't see any problem with that.

When I'm making films a lot of the technical crew that I use - they're White people. But because I'm producing, directing and writing, it's coming from me and coming from the people that I'm working with. And the technical people are directed by you as a Black filmmaker. You can tell them what to do, they've got expertise so you use them. It's like using a camera, or a pencil, they're tools to be used. And if you've got it right, how can it go wrong?