

## Part 2 Interview by Sandra Phillips 1992

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

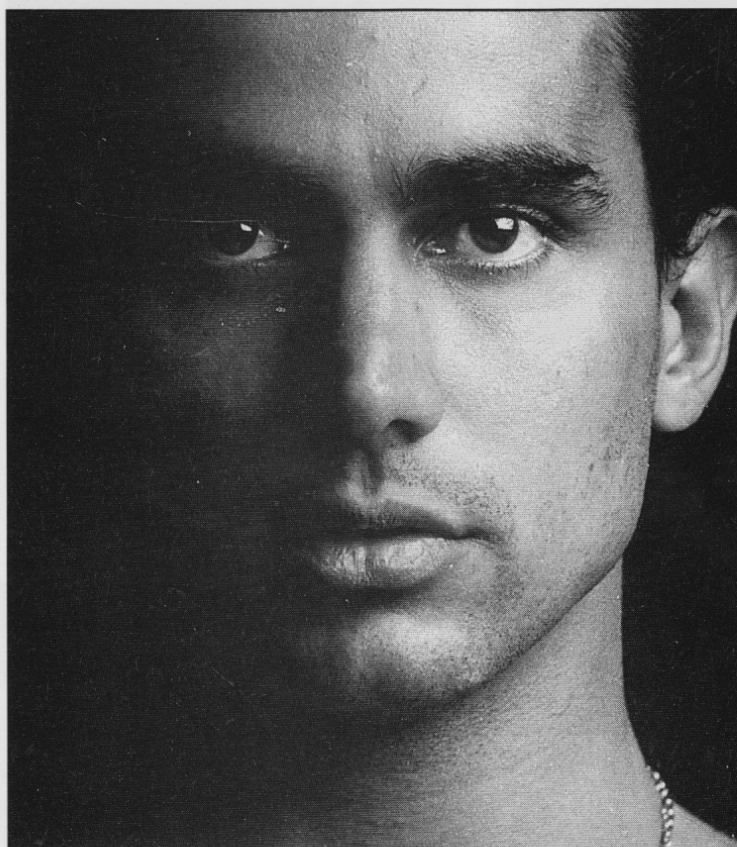
I'm working at the ABC at the Aboriginal Programs Unit making documentaries and also producing and directing a new magazine format series.

Last year I made two films, one called *Malangi*,<sup>81</sup> about a traditional Aboriginal artist from Arnhem Land and another film called *Poison*,<sup>82</sup> 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 Moree<sup>83</sup>, 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.

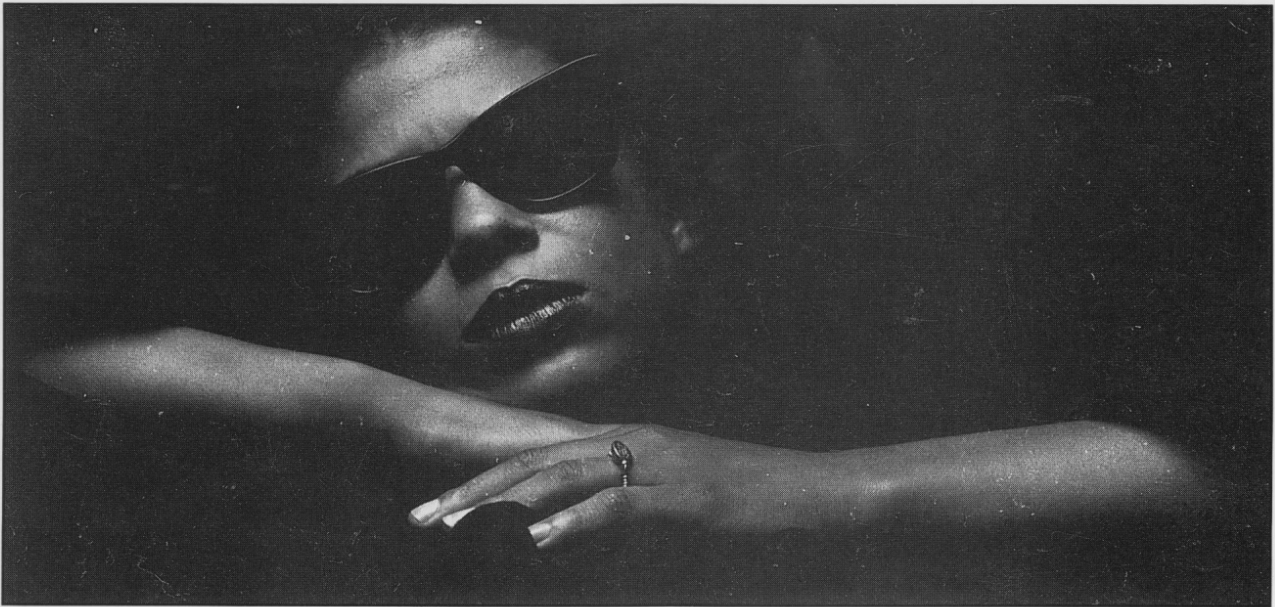
*I'm assuming Moree is your home community, and as a result did you find it different to Ramingining in setting up relationships?*

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 Maynard<sup>84</sup>. 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 Harris<sup>85</sup> and of course Mervyn Bishop<sup>86</sup> 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?