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Liking What I Do

Michael Riley

Part I

Interview by Andrew Dewdney 1989

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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.

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
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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.

