Michael Riley

cloud
cloud was quite a resolved series for me, in that it brought all elements together: my childhood, the Christianity from my childhood, the problems with that, and also histories of Aboriginal peoples. I tried to make connections by showing things like the cow floating in an ethereal sort of sky – a strange animal to Aboriginal people, yet it’s also an animal Aboriginal people would kill when food supplies were running out. Aboriginal people would actually be shot or hunted down for doing these things, for trying to survive, themselves. The feather, almost suspended in the sky, could also be quite a heavy thing. I see the feather, myself, as sort of a messenger, sending messages onto people and community and places.

– Michael Riley
I was always interested in images and liked seeing things around me differently. I remember lying down in the front yard one day and looking up at the telegraph poles and lines, at the power cables cutting across the sky and almost cutting through the clouds – looking at the simplicity of it, looking at things in depth and from a different perspective.

– Michael Riley
With his maverick minimalist approach, his messages are clean, clear and sharp. In this way, Michael paradoxically exposed the complex layers, the realities and concerns of Aboriginal Australia.

– Jonathan Jones
Wiradjuri/Kamilaroi artist Michael Riley was born in 1960 on Talbragar Mission outside Dubbo, in western New South Wales. Riley was a photographer and filmmaker, whose practice spanned the mediums of portraiture, documentary photography, conceptual photography. Throughout his life and artistic career, he maintained a deep connection with the land of his parents’ communities; his mother’s in Moree and father’s in Dubbo, which was a strong source of inspiration for his works. His photographs of family and the Indigenous community documented his contemporary urban Aboriginal community, and provided a counterpoint to the bleak and often negative imagery of Aboriginal people that circulated through the media, challenging non-Indigenous perceptions of Indigenous experience and identity.

In the early 1980s inner-city Sydney, particularly the suburb of Redfern, was a hub for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists and activists from all over Australia. Following the Black Power movement of Australia of the early 1970s, it was a time that saw significant and positive changes made by and for the Indigenous community, such as the establishment of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy opposite the Provisional Parliament House in Canberra in 1972, and the emergence of the National Black Theatre, Redfern Aboriginal Dance Theatre, and the Aboriginal and Islander Dance Theatre (AIDT) in the late 1970s.

I do what I do because I like doing it, I’m not chasing fame . . . Photography is just a medium for me, a way of putting across my views and images to the world. It’s no big deal....

— Michael Riley

Background

I do what I do because I like doing it, I’m not chasing fame . . . Photography is just a medium for me, a way of putting across my views and images to the world. It’s no big deal....

— Michael Riley
Michael Riley’s artistic career began shortly after he moved to Redfern, Sydney in the late 1970s. He was drawn to the energy of the big city and the possibilities that presented to him “[I] wanted to get out and get into the city and do something different and see different things and meet different people.” In search of employment, Riley’s intention was to be an apprentice carpenter. However, after having revisited his photographic leanings more seriously, he soon lost interest in his apprenticeship. In 1982-1983, he enrolled in a photography workshop at the Tin Sheds art workshops and artists’ studios at the University of Sydney, which led to him being offered a job as a darkroom technician in the photography studios at the Sydney College of the Arts. Here, he was encouraged to further pursue photography as a medium that could allow him to combine his artistic vision with his cultural sensibilities, as he documented elements of the world around him and the people in his life.

Riley went on to achieve national and international fame. He was involved in the establishment of Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Co-Operative in 1987, along with nine other urban Indigenous artists (Bronwyn Bancroft, Euphemia Bostock, Brenda L. Croft, Fiona Foley, Fernanda Martins, Arone Samuels). They were a collective of Indigenous artists who made Australian history through their assertion of their identity as urban-based Indigenous Australians through their bold and politically engaging art.

The formation of the collective also came as a result of the exclusion of urban-based Indigenous artists from contemporary exhibitions. The works being produced by urban-based artists such as those of Boomalli were seen as not conforming to what was expected from them as Indigenous artists, and therefore challenging. Brenda L. Croft writes, 'the work of urban and rural Indigenous artists was considered to be the antithesis of the work being created by their peers in traditional communities which, by virtue of the geographical location of its production, was deemed ‘authentic’.'

By the early 1990s, urban-based Indigenous artists had a significant foothold in the artworld. In 1984, Riley participated in Koori Art '84, a seminal exhibition of urban Aboriginal art held at Artspace, Sydney (1984) and NADOC '86: Aboriginal and Islander Photographers, the first ever exhibition by Indigenous photographers (curated collaboratively by Ace Bourke and Tracey Moffatt) at the Aboriginal Artists Gallery, Sydney (1986). By staging their own exhibitions, the Boomalli artists were successfully able to create a platform for their art to be seen and their voices to be heard.

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In 2000, Michael Riley produced *cloud*, a conceptual photographic series that explored the intersection of the physical and spirit worlds. It was his last and most acclaimed photographic series. *cloud* is a body of work that speaks through its beauty and subtlety, alluding to the introduction of Christianity into Aboriginal society.

*cloud* was the first of Riley’s series to use digital manipulation, and as a result it takes on a surrealist feel, as the images of a cow, bible, boomerang, feather, marble angel, locust and the wings of a bird lay superimposed against the backdrop of the Australian sky. The work provides an insight into the artist’s perspective on the complex relationship between Christianity and the ancestral storytelling tradition of Indigenous cultures. Tension resides in the symbolism of each image in the *cloud* series, as the photographed objects take on a variety of meanings for Indigenous and European cultures. For example, locusts, a fact of life around Dubbo, are seen as a menace to agriculture, yet have been a nutritious food source for Aboriginal people. They anticipate a change in seasons and are seen as guardian spirits. Also used by Riley is the image of a cow, a symbol of colonisation and pasteurisation that perhaps also symbolises environmental degradation through the physical onslaught of the landscape from the impact of hoofed animals.

Riley’s series references the artist’s upbringing on Talbragar Mission. His parents were religious, and as a child Riley was sent to Sunday school. Riley’s experience is not dissimilar to that of a number of Indigenous Australians who were forced to live on government-run missions as part of the Assimilation policies in Australia at the time. As a result, his work tells an important story of a part of Australian history. On Riley’s *cloud* series, Brenda L. Croft says ‘they resonate with loss, experienced not only by the individual but by entire Indigenous communities: ‘loss’ of culture and land in enforced, and sometimes embraced, ‘exchange’ for Christianity.’

*cloud* premiered at the Australian Centre for Photography, Sydney in 2000, and was then selected for the 2002 Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art at the Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane. It was also shown at Photographica Australis in Spain in 2002, at the 8th Istanbul Biennial: Poetic Justice in 2003 and in 2004 at the 11th Asian Art Biennale in Bangladesh, where Riley was awarded a Grand Prize. Currently, *cloud* is held in the collections at the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra and the Queensland Art Gallery/Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane. It is also now displayed in the Musée du quai Branly, Paris.

**Untitled (left wing)**
**NOTES AND IDEAS:**

Symbols in *cloud* series: boomerang, feather, Bible, cow, locust, marble angel statue, left and right wings, a broken wing

Analyse Michael Riley’s use of symbols in his *cloud* series. Do you think he presents them from a positive or a negative perspective? Discuss your response.

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**IMAGE**

Legacy

Riley passed away in 2004 at the age of 44. His contribution to Australian art and photographic practice has been substantial, and his reputation continues to grow. Riley’s works have been selected for a number of contemporary exhibitions including the major touring exhibition Michael Riley: sights unseen at the National Gallery of Australia curated by Brenda L. Croft, and he was one of eight Aboriginal artists selected to represent Aboriginal Australian contemporary artistic practice at the Musée du quai Branly in Paris in 2006.

Michael Riley’s influence has extended beyond the visual arts. In 2010, his cloud series was the key source of inspiration for Bangarra Dance Theatre’s dance piece, Riley performed as part of the two part performance of Earth and Sky. Riley was choreographed by Daniel Riley, who was a resident dancer at Bangarra Dance Theatre and cousin of the late artist. The performance celebrated the photographic work of Michael Riley by translating the ethereal imagery of the images into the medium of dance. Speaking about the impact that Michael Riley’s work has had on him, Daniel Riley has said: “I was immediately inspired by Michael Riley’s cloud series the first time I saw it at the National Gallery in Canberra . . . They are impossibly suspended, frozen in time, floating in a dreamlike state.” In a review of the production, Dione Joseph of Australian Stage wrote: ‘The ‘Locust’ section was especially powerful as the swarm of dancers inhabited the bodies of the

I was immediately inspired by Michael Riley’s cloud series the first time I saw it . . . The beautiful blue backgrounds, and the symbolic, almost totemic subjects that are floating at the forefront of each image are quite ethereal. They are impossibly suspended, frozen in time, floating in a dreamlike state.

— Daniel Riley

Untitled (feather)
from the series cloud
2000. © Michael Riley
Foundation/Licensed by Viscopy, 2013.
insects as well as those who are affected by it. The striking movements, the buzz and tremor of the landscape as it vibrated with the invasion and defence of these attacks was superbly executed by the ensemble.’

The estate of Michael Riley is protected by the Michael Riley Foundation (MRF), which was established to care for the artistic legacy of the late artist.

As proposed by Michael Riley, the trustees are Linda Burney, Hetti Perkins and Anthony ‘Ace’ Burke. In accordance with the artist’s wishes, the MRF cares for the photographic and film archive of Riley and oversees the printing and publication of his photographs as well as the curation of his work at commercial galleries and art institutions. This ensures that his work can be viewed and enjoyed by audiences today and for generations to come.

Riley’s work is represented by The Commercial, a gallery in Redfern, Sydney, and Viscopy, an organisation that provides copyright services for individuals and companies who wish to use images of artworks in books, websites, magazines, newspapers posters, merchandise, advertising and film. In Australian law, in order to reproduce a work in the public domain, the owner of copyright for the image is required to give permission. The copyright owner is usually, but not always—as copyright can be bought—the artist. The University of Technology Sydney owns copyright to reproduce Michael Riley’s cloud series for educational purposes for a period of 5 years.

Consider how you would create a dance in response to Michael Riley’s cloud series. What sort of movement dynamics and element of dance would you explore? What sort of shapes would you create to illustrate your ideas about the marble statue? How would you convey a split wing (opposite) through dance?

IMAGES

“cloud appears more personal and free. A floating feather; a sweeping wing; a vigilant angel; the cows from ‘the mission’ farm; a single Australian Plague Locust in flight, referring to the cyclical swarm of locusts; a comforting Bible; and a graceful emblematic returning boomerang.
The boomerang is really the only overtly Aboriginal image in the series and the locust is one of the few native species left that is visible that cannot be swept aside. It persists.”

– Djon Mundine
Glossary

**Antithesis** – The direct opposite of something else

**Choreograph** – To compose the sequence of movements for a performance of dance

**Conform** – To behave according to a particular standard

**Curation** – To select, organise and look after the items in a collection or exhibition

**Koori** – A generic name for the Aboriginal people of New South Wales. It is also used in parts of Victoria and Tasmania

**Maverick** – A person who refuses to conform to a particular group

**Paradox** – A situation that combines contradictory qualities

Reviews


Further Reading


UTS ART in collaboration with Bangarra Dance Theatre held workshops on UTS campus in 2012 and 2013. The workshops asked participants to consider how we can ‘read’ artworks. Is the language of art and our response to it historical, verbal, academic, emotional, physical or something else?

Participants viewed Michael Riley’s *cloud* series on display in UTS Gallery. They then discussed the various images Riley chose to use in the works – boomerang, Bible, cow, locust, marble statues, feather and wings and considered why these images were chosen and what the artist’s intention could have been.

The video interview with dancer and choreographer Daniel Riley (following page) was then shown where he explains his first experience seeing the works and how they affected him as a fellow artist and as a cousin of Michael Riley.

Daniel Riley choreographed a dance piece titled *Riley* in response to the works. He speaks about his decisions in choreographing the dancers and how he tried to emulate the power of the photographs and the deep affect they had on him through movement and sound.

This process of non verbal dialogue between a photographer and a dancer, two artists that never met but share the same blood line exemplifies the power of art and artistic practice to communicate across different mediums.

Dancers from Bangarra Dance Theatre shared some movements with participants to allow them to explore dance and physical movement in relation to Michael Riley’s work. This process reflected Daniel Riley’s response to the works through choreography and movement.
Daniel Riley of Bangarra Dance Theatre speaks about the making of his work *Riley*, inspired by Michael Riley’s *cloud*
My name is Daniel Riley McKinley, and I’m a dancer and choreographer at Bangarra Dance Theatre. Last year I was lucky enough to create my first choreographic work for the company titled Riley. The inspiration for this work came from a cousin of mine, Michael Riley, and his photographic series that he created in 2004 titled cloud. The series is a series of ten photographs all with this beautiful blue backdrop of the sky with different cloud formations. On the top of the sky, he’s manipulated using modern-day technologies like computers and Photoshop to layer on these totemic subjects, whether they be locusts or wings, or an angel, a boomerang.

My job, what I really enjoyed about it, was getting to explore why he chose certain images. Why did he put the boomerang there? What did it represent? Why did he put the angel there with his back turned? That was a personal choice that Michael made, and I was really interested to see why he made those choices, but to also transfer them to my medium which is dancing and choreography. I wanted to create a work that celebrated Michael and celebrated his career, but also more importantly celebrated this beautiful, ethereal photographic series titled cloud.

One of the photographs that really struck me was the picture of the locust with his wings spread out. He’s almost been scientifically spread out like that on a paper. As a viewer, you’re being able to just look at the lines on his belly and what the patterning on his wings is. For me to transfer this into dance was quite fun actually because I got to use stage patterning. I got to use the idea of swarming and of the way locusts swarm as families in these big clans, like a school of fish, or a flock of...
birds as well. They do the similar, they all move in unison, and they all move at once. There’s usually a lead, I suppose he’s the boss, he’s dad, he leads and he says turn and they all turn at once. There’s this unified cohesion between the whole family of the locusts.

In regards to movement, what I really enjoyed was asking my dancers to really be in the swarm, not to just pretend that they were in it. I asked them what it would be like to embody, to be amongst this huge locust swarm where you can’t see the sky, and you can’t see the ground, having the locusts flying into you and bouncing off your face, and off your skin. Movement-wise we went for this blocking and brushing, trying to brush them off your skin. This natural feeling that you have that humans do when something is on your skin, you naturally brush it away. We used these everyday movements and just extended them to a choreographic point where they don’t just become everyday movements, they became choreography, and then it was just a matter of linking them together, and linking that in with the swarming. I created my own little swarm onstage, I suppose, with the dancers. At times it looked like there was twice as many dancers as I had because they were constantly going off and on, and off and on and in the audience if you’re lucky enough to see the show, we had David Page’s amazing music where it was the sound of a locust but had been electrified, so it was this really annoying little buzz in the audience. I wanted them not only feel that they were looking at it from an outside view, but I wanted them to feel like that they were a part of it too. We had the music really boosted in the audience, so maybe some people naturally wanted to cover their ears because the sound was that strong for them, and that’s what it would be.
like. That’s that natural reaction that would be like to be in the locust swarm.

Another image that I really enjoyed was angel. The particular angel image I’m talking about is the full back of the angel, and he’s got his head turned away from the camera. What I found really interesting was that Michael chose not to shoot the face of the angel, that he chose to shoot the back of the angel. For me after researching Michael’s childhood and his connection to spirituality, that I took it as a symbol of him turning his back on White religion, on Christianity and Catholicism.

During my research of researching Michael and these images, I found that he really struggled with was the idea of white missionaries coming into Aboriginal missions in Moree, Dubbo, western New South Wales area, and denouncing black religions such as Dreaming stories, stories that have passed down from centuries and centuries, as primitive and evil saying, “What you believed for the past 30,000 years is wrong. This is the way. The White way is the right way.” This is what I really connected with Michael, we share this same belief, I suppose, in how that transpired. To transfer this into dance though, being a strong symbol as the angel, I looked at the material of the angel. It looks like it was made of marble or concrete or slate, it’s something strong. It’s something rigid. It’s something that is built to last.

To represent this strength, I chose to choreograph a male-male duo, obviously two males dancing together. Two strong males as Waangenga and Leonard (dancers Waangenga Blanco and Leonard Mickelo) are who do the duo. As strong as they are,
there’s this sensitiveness to it. There’s a strength that is quiet and softness to it. There’s nothing brutal or aggressive about it. There’s nothing soft and girly about it. They see in this area where you’re watching it, it’s a beautiful thing to watch. It’s quite amazing the way that they’re helping each other move and moving as one, and over and on top of each other, and helping each other through.

To research the movement of that, I looked at a lot of old Italian artists such as Caravaggio and Michelangelo. I looked at their depictions of Christ, their depictions of what they painted back in 1600s and 1500s of these religious stories. A lot of those movements that they do have come from certain religious paintings that they move through and really depict what the angel is. It’s a beautiful symbol, I suppose, of a man with wings. It’s a symbol of hope and of something greater, I suppose.

The final section of my work was titled “Feather.” It was titled “Feather” because the image is of a feather. It’s a lone single feather floating against this beautiful blue sky. I researched what the feather meant in Wiradjuri culture being that Michael and I both wereWiradjuri men. This is what really brought me to the work and to Michael is this shared blood and this shared land. I thought I would research our shared culture.

A feather in Wiradjuri culture represents many things. One, it can represent the embryological cord connecting mother to child. It represents this connection, this continual loop of, born, you live your life and then you die. I’ve taken mother as Mother Earth so it’s this link between Indigenous people and their
connection to the land. They’re born out of the land but they pass away back into it to feed the land for the next generation. It could also represent a marking of spiritual journey. It can represent the presence of a happy spirit, of a guiding spirit. If you’re walking through the bush and you come across a feather on the floor, it’s a calling card of a spirit. It’s a calling card of someone who’s guiding you to, that you’re going the right way. There’s someone looking out for you so you don’t need to fret and worry. You are going the right direction. It’s a really beautiful symbol of just this one feather, and what it’s come from.

In terms of movement, I looked at obviously those three things, this connection, and so the dancers are very low in their legs. There’s this sense of a family continually connected to the ground, but there’s also this flow of movement intersection almost as though you grab a feather and you drop it from a height, it doesn’t fall like a rock. It floats really subtly so in the movement, there’s this continual energy from all the dancers. They’re all moving as one and they disconnect from each other but they come back to one. At the end of the section, they drop a line of feathers which connects at the back of the stage, there’s the image of the feather which I took as being Michael. To me, that’s Michael being present in the work. This line of feathers connects the feather to offstage to where the dancers have gone. There’s this continual connection between Michael, the stage, and the dancers, and between Michael and me, and our culture. I thought it was a really beautiful way to end the work.

– Daniel Riley 2012
Selected earlier works Sacrifice

Michael Riley moved to the suburb of Redfern, Sydney from the country town of Dubbo in the late 1970s. Drawn to the energy of the big city and the political activism taking place in Redfern at the time, he was interested in the possibilities of populated city living.

“(I) wanted to.... get out and get into the city and do something different and see different things and meet different people.”

In 1992 Riley produced Sacrifice his first conceptual photographic series. The series consists of signs and symbols representing various aspects of the degradation of Aboriginal culture, including the conflict between Aboriginal spirituality and Christianity, substance abuse and introduced foods and flora.

This series is the first time Riley references Christianity in his work, which becomes a major theme in his proceeding photographic series, including the renowned cloud series.
As Aboriginal people, we have to sacrifice ourselves, something of ourselves, all the time to be a bit more like what non-Aboriginal people want us to be. *Sacrifice* was the first conceptual exhibition; the first time I had reflected on Christianity, and history of mission life, Aboriginal missions. I was exploring images from childhood – being sent to Sunday School and wondering what the hell this strange concept of religion is for an Aboriginal kid growing up in the bush. It’s about history, about how Aboriginal people were thrown onto reserves and missions and told not to speak languages, not to conduct ceremony or song.

- Michael Riley
Selected earlier works *Maria & Kristina*

In the 1980s Michael made a series of portraits of young urban Aboriginal people, “who were doing their own thing, mixing into society, trying to break the stereotype of who Aboriginal people are.”

Riley also wanted to break the negative stereotype of Aboriginal people propagated in the media. His contribution was to take photographs of the exciting and creative group of people that surrounded him, his friends and family.

*Maria* (right) is a portrait of Michael’s cousin Polly (also known as Maria). His style of portrait taking was very disengaged and casual “letting events take their natural course.” *Maria* exemplifies a comfort and trust that Polly felt in Riley’s presence resulting in a frank and engaging gaze back at the camera.

*Maria* was first exhibited in 1986 during NAIDOC week at the Aboriginal Artists Gallery, Sydney. It was part of a series of five portraits of Indigenous women, including *Kristina* (opposite), each referencing different genres of female portraiture.
This resource has been written by Tahjoe Moar, Indigenous Art Consultant and Alice McAuliffe, Education and Outreach Coordinator, UTS ART.
All images by Michael Riley courtesy The Michael Riley Foundation and The Commercial, Sydney
Thanks to Bangarra Dance Theatre and Daniel Riley
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