



Following a lifetime career as a professional journalist photographer, Mervyn Bishop honours the heroes of his time through timely snaps in the lives of vast numbers of Aboriginal people; both ordinary and famous, in moments of triumph and that of tragedy and simple oral history project (*My Father, My Brother*) and set down the stories of local Aboriginal men from the un-stereotypical environments of working class housing estates of south western Sydney. On another occasion, legendary Aboriginal singer Jimmy Little ran a special singing and song-writing workshop for the Aboriginal people of Dubbo and its daily progression is documented here.

It was magical watching a print that I had made come up in the developer for the first time in my life - I can never forget it.

MERVYN BISHOP, SYDNEY, 1998

MERVYN BISHOP



MICHAEL AIRD

Everyone is important I guess and these are some of the men who I think are important.

MICHAEL AIRD

Michael Aird learnt to love and obtain skills in photography from his mother and grandmother. His mother told him a set of basic rules to taking a good portrait photo. One, don't cut people off at the shins—either put the whole body in or not at all—include their feet or cut them off at the waist. Two, don't have bright sunlight behind the person. Three, always hold the camera steady when the sun gets low in the sky. Four, always photograph children and animals at their eye-level or lower and so you don't appear to look down on them.

Possibly due to his anthropology background, until now he didn't call himself a 'real' photographer, though like many Aboriginal people he studiously recorded and annotated the family and colleagues from his career; capturing warm, reflective moments and special places in their lives. His series of avuncular charming men is spiced and underscored by people in active everyday purpose.

IMAGE FRONT

Michael Aird Vincent Brady leads a protest march from the series *Everybody is Important: Elders, Leaders and Other Important People Brisbane*, 9 December 1987, inkjet print, courtesy the artist

IMAGE LEFT
Mervyn Bishop *Harold Buck Davis*, 2007
lighter print
courtesy the artist

IMAGE RIGHT
Gary Lee *Salli and Gary I, Kathmandu* from the series *Indian Men*, 2002
lamda print
courtesy the artist and Karen Brown Gallery, Darwin

Trips to India were crucial to Lee's artistic and personal advancement. Here one day he felt an immense, revelatory relief, upon suddenly realising his 'brown' skin, which allowed him to be the common, normal person in a 'brown' Indian population; to be just himself. Being visible and present, and yet consistently invisible, in Australia he would always be a 'brown' skin disempowered minority in a 'white' majority population.

None of the photographers included in this exhibition fit the base stereotype of Aboriginality. Larakia artist Gary Lee's self-portraits are most telling and self-analytical. They deal with the heart of present day Aboriginal identity as a male and a member of society; and of the historical disdain of the male beauty of selected non-white populations. Although most Aboriginal people are now of mixed descent and urban living (as are most 'white' Australians), his Asian heritage is both problematical for 'white' Australians and yet a positive enriching attribute given the region Australia is positioned in (Asia). He is triply disempowered in the sense of being an Asian and of belonging to the now urban dwelling Larakia people who exist in the region of the most stereotypical 'traditional' living Aboriginal groups in Australia.

GARY LEE



A photographer has an ambiguous position within the history of a disempowered people. The photographers here show how Aboriginal men are not all alcoholic, violent and unthinking brutes. Jason Wing's set of self-portraits is a direct response to these accusations and political manoeuvres. The every-day common Aboriginal male appears in a variety of roles, many of them positive. What we see are pictures of males in particular moments of action, grace and great expressive humanness.

'We eat cold eels and think distant thoughts'

JACK JOHNSON (BORN MARCH 31ST 1878) IN ANSWER TO THE QUESTION OF WHY WHITE WOMEN WERE ATTRACTED TO BLACK MEN

The exhibition is named from boxer Jack Johnson's enigmatic but amusing words at a turning point in 'western' views of black men and the personal awareness and empowerment of the men themselves. The negritude movement of the 1930s had developed from this period as the 'new negro' who would refuse to take insults and lower positions. 'Black is beautiful', the anthem of the 1960s, was a potent statement, despite being now seen as irrelevant and an almost gratuitous social baggage, has been and is a 'constant' of Australia's history, it's conservatism and shame. Non-white, non-western men are usually cast as effeminate (Asian) or hyper-sexual primitive (African- American) but Aboriginal men are essentially trapped somewhere in between, despite being spread across our national male sporting cavalcade and occasional entertainment scene.

To cast Aboriginal men as desirable is to see them as human and natural, but this means in effect to relinquish control. And so perhaps the central intent of the exhibition is to see Aboriginal men as just normal males with varying attributes, attitudes, fears, and hopes and dreams for a better future.

Djon Mundine OAM
CURATOR

The science of photography as we know it was created in France in 1839; not so long after the arrival of Europeans on the Australian continent in 1788, the first black and white photographic images of Aboriginal people were taken in 1847. For most of the following history we were at the 'victim' end of the lens. Photographers of these times searched for the stereotyped 'primitive' and posed their Aboriginal subjects accordingly. It was only towards the end of the 1800s early 1900s with a quantum change of technology in scale, cost, and practicality (Kodak Box Brownie and other portable cameras), that some yet unrecognised Aboriginal person moved behind the camera to record his or her own vision.

The concept of this exhibition came from the observation that in the 1980s there were a group of mid-career male photographers who were working independently of each other but with a similar attitude to the role of the camera and the 'truth' of the captured image.

The seven photographers are of two generations: a younger Jason Wing of Aboriginal and Chinese descent; and five mid-career photographers, Michael Aird, Mervyn Bishop, Gary Lee, Peter McKenzie, Ricky Maynard, and the now deceased legendary Michael Riley. The latter group worked mainly with black and white (though some used colour from time to time). Colour and black and white could be said to indicate different messages: black and white for historical authenticity, truth and seriousness as against colour for light, happy subjects and stories. Hollywood and other filmmakers use this device from time to time. In photography today the 'black hole of digital photography' is a recognized phenomenon. In every Aboriginal home, despite the disjointed removals of family members and from place of birth as a result of former government policies, is a set, a wall, 'the tea tin' (Peter McKenzie) or shoeboxes of family photos. Within the lineage of family, extended family (clan), country, and spiritual memory are invested. A most important story but with digital photography a fading practice: the images remaining in the ether of the computer or on the ironically called 'memory stick' (message stick). The latter six male photographer's careers came to fruition prior to the turning point of the digital revolution, 'Photoshop' and computers and to a degree have disdain for their use.

Cold Eels and Distant Thoughts

An exhibition by seven Aboriginal male photographers on Aboriginal men

Curated by DJON MUNDINE OAM

MICHAEL AIRD, MERVYN BISHOP,
GARY LEE, RICKY MAYNARD,
PETER MCKENZIE, MICHAEL RILEY,
JASON WING

Exhibition Dates **4 - 16 JULY 2011**

This exhibition originally appeared in another form as *More Than My Skin* at Campbelltown Art Centre in 2008 and toured the NT during 2009 and Lismore Regional Art Gallery in 2010.



STILLS



THE
WOLLOTUKA
INSTITUTE

THE UNIVERSITY
GALLERY

THE UNIVERSITY OF NEWCASTLE
CALLAGHAN 2308

E gallery@newcastle.edu.au
W www.newcastle.edu.au/universitygallery
T + 61 02 4921 5255
OPEN Monday - Saturday
12 noon - 6pm or by appointment



RICKY MAYNARD

This body of work embraces all of what the endeavour of photography is. In giving compassionate understanding for black deaths in custody, it required truthful accuracy with insight. They carry messages of our survival, not only of man's inhumanity to man, but a feeling of what it's like to be born black.

These pictures will live on in history, showing the moment to itself, showing what needs to be changed and hoping some day we can look back and see how far we have progressed as a society.

RICKY MAYNARD, JUNE 1998

Aboriginal people are recorded officially as being wiped out through the islands' British colonization. This is false and has quickly been refuted and disproved. From a marginalised position as a Tasmanian Aboriginal man, Ricky Maynard's images are powerful in scale and present an uncompromising social reality where people struggle to retain some form of personal identity and dignity.

IMAGE LEFT

Ricky Maynard *Untitled* from the series *No More Than What You See*, 1994
gelatin silver FB print, ed. AP
courtesy the artist and Stills Gallery, Sydney



PETER MCKENZIE

I saw humour, dedication, effort and pure willpower exhibited from the players that sometimes went beyond extremes of physical pain and common sense.

I found that the conventional 'frozen moment in time' concept was not enough, the bigger picture was much more exciting and 'being there' was a far better reward for my effort than I had expected, I guess I was watching boys turn into men.

PETER YANADA MCKENZIE, 2009

Sport remains a well-followed path allowing Aboriginal males to break, and cross, economic and social barriers. Aboriginal football players feature prominently as major stars across all codes and states in Australia. Peter McKenzie's set captures that great modern test; the male gladiatorial moment, the football grand final. A portrait is a field that is taller than it is wide. Portraits pass us by; of the tense, the nervous, grit, pain, and just plain scared in the series of that common, local, unglamorous, unheralded contest.

IMAGE RIGHT

Peter McKenzie *It's a man's game #10*, 1991
gelatin silver print
courtesy the artist



MICHAEL RILEY

They get drunk... oh, they're real big drinkers, all of 'em - you know that - and bang; someone's lyn' in the gutter. Oh, nobody's blaming them for it. That's the way they are! By nature! You know what I mean? VIOLENT!

JUROR #10: TWELVE ANGRY MEN, 1957, DIRECTOR SIDNEY LUMET

Aboriginal males still register high in numbers in incarceration statistics. Often incarcerated into the 'men's camp' for petty or nuisance crimes committed out of boredom and a pointless life expectancy, once within the system what can ever be normality again? People react in various ways under pressure in order to survive and to make sense of the insanity of their disempowered lives. Do you wear this experience as a badge of honour or an embarrassing scar you can never be clear of?

I found that I wanted to tell stories and get stories from Aboriginal people.

MICHAEL RILEY

Michael Riley's poignant 'Catholic' frames express a search for an historical spirituality lost - the 'dreaming' - and if lost what replaces this guiding core of our lives? These considerations aren't the stuff of general pub conversation or of the brute stereotype even for 'white' Australian males. Riley searched for an answering form of spirituality through differing forms of Christianity, Buddhism, and Aboriginal-Wiradjuri 'dreaming' imagery well before his terminal illness overcame him. It would seem his practice was following Aboriginal traditional practice in life in a sense if not a preparation is a journey toward death and re-entry to the spirit 'real' world.

IMAGE LEFT

Michael Riley *Untitled VII* from *Sacrifice*, 1992
chromogenic pigment print, edition of 10, courtesy Stills Gallery
© Michael Riley/Michael Riley Foundation. Licensed by Viscopy, 2011.

JASON WING

During one of Jane Elliott's *Blue Eyes, Brown Eyes* workshops, a 'white' blue-eyed participant stormed out to escape her perceived unfair intimidation. Elliott pointed out to the remaining class that the aggrieved colleague had the privilege of being able to leave the uncomfortable situation but that designated social and racial minorities do not have that privilege.

Jason Wing's *An Australian Government Initiative* self portrait triptych was a response to the Howard Government's Intervention into Aboriginal communities and societies in the Northern Territory. In this political stunt all Aboriginal men were stereotyped and demonized by politicians and press as violent, drunken, rapists and paedophiles. At a number of showings of these images he handed out such 'breast-plates' for males in the audience to wear.



IMAGE RIGHT

Jason Wing *An Australian Government initiative*, 2011
ink on paper
image by Adam Hollingworth