

# MICHAEL RILEY SIGHTS UNSEEN

Read the room brochures to find the answers to the **Reading** questions.

Look at the works of art to answer the **Looking** questions

## EARLY PHOTOGRAPHS AND PORTRAITS

Box A- Wall 1. **Photographs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australia today, 1988.**

### Reading:

- Why was 1988 an important year for initiating recognition of Indigenous culture in Australia?
- What does AIATSIS stand for and what did they commission in 1985?

### Looking:

- Select one of these images and discuss the way Riley documents Indigenous people working or at leisure.

Box A –Wall 2. **Guwany: stories of the Redfern Aboriginal community**

### Reading:

- In an interview with Brad Webb in 1996 read what Riley says about the attitude of Aboriginal people to photographers.

### Looking:

- Look at how Michael Riley captures the energy and life of urban-based Indigenous people in these photographs.

Box A – Wall 3. **NADOC/ No Series**

### Reading:

- Why was the NADOC '86 exhibition significant? What does NADOC stand for?

### Looking:

- Select one of these portraits and discuss the composition, lighting, and mood of the image.
- These are glamorous, sophisticated images. What questions are raised about the more common representation of urban-based Aboriginal people?

Box B Wall 4,7 **Portraits by a window**

### Reading:

- Where were these portraits taken?
- Read the quote by Michael Riley. What was he attempting to reveal in these photographs?

### Looking:

- Examine the composition of a couple of these portraits. Look at how the side lighting emphasises the physicality of the subjects while creating a dramatic mood.
- Which one is your favourite and why?

Box C – Wall 5,6 **A common place: portraits of Moree Murries 1991**

**These are portraits of friends and relations of Michael Riley's mother who came from the Kamilaroi people of Moree.**

### Reading:

- Discuss the following quote in relation to these images:

*'It was in direct opposition to the history of colonial and ethnographic photography that sought to capture the noble savage in their primitive setting. It was also a radical departure from the more recent photorealism that sought to sink the subject into a landscape of grim exploitation and alienation'*

### Looking:

- What sort of relationship is revealed between the photographer and the subjects?
- How does the simple backdrop of a canvas sheet affect these portraits?
- Analyse the portrait of Nanny Wright and dog. Look at the balance of dark and light, textured and plain, still and animated.

Box D – Wall 8 **Yarns from the Talbragar Reserve 1998**  
These are portraits of his father's family who came from the Wiradjuri people of Dubbo

**Reading:**

- Read some of the comments by the subjects of these portraits.

**Looking:**

- Compare the photograph of Florence Nolan from this series with the portrait of Nanny Wright from *A common place :Portraits Moree Murries*. What are the differences between these two photographs in composition and mood, that may convey Riley's relationship with these families?
- What do these two photographs reveal about the everyday lives of these people?
- Discuss how these images can be termed 'autobiographical'. What do they reveal about the personality and values of Michael Riley?

**FILMS**

**Reading:**

Select one of the plasma screens and read the information on the relevant room sheet. Watch the film and think about the particular vision of Michael Riley that makes the film unique.

**LATE SYMBOLIC PHOTOGRAPHS**

Box H Wall 13 **Sacrifice 1992**

**Reading:**

- *'Sacrifice' has a languid, sultry air, bordering on putrefaction; everything seems over-ripe, bleeding- literally, in the image of the stigmata- or about to ferment.'*  
Discuss this statement while examining the photographs.

**Looking:**

- Discuss the link between Christian sacrifice and the political message of these photographs in relation to the effect of Christianity upon Aboriginal culture.
- Define the word 'sacrifice' in relation to the entire series. What have Aboriginal people sacrificed or are they the sacrifice?

Box G – Wall 11,12,15 **flyblown 1998**

**Reading:**

- Which film was shot at the same time as *flyblown*?
- Discuss the statement: *' The images in the series flyblown reflect the ways in which the problems of colonialism persist in our contemporary landscapes.'*

**Looking:**

- Which images in this series suggest the effect of agriculture on the Australian landscape?
- How does colour affect the mood of the three photographs of the Christian Cross? What might these colours symbolise?
- Examine the image of the galah. What might the galah symbolise? Look at how the contrasts in colour and texture affect the pathos of the image.

Box I Wall 14 **cloud 2000**

**Reading:**

- Where has this series been exhibited in the past?
- Discuss the statement: *' His images 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.'*

**Looking:**

- Look at all the photographs and think of a sequence that suggests metaphoric or poetic connections. For example, examine all the images that refer to flight and floating in space. Look also for visual parallels of shape and texture.
- The bible seems to be floating, but note the angle of the cross. What does it suggest and how does it connect with the image of the boomerang?
- The feather suggests death, ceremony, an arrow. Think of other metaphorical meanings for these iconic images.