

ABOUT THE ARTWORK

Artist: Michael Riley

Title: *Empire*

Date: 1997

Medium: 35mm film transferred to DVD

Duration: 18 minutes

Empire is a film that draws together a succession of images and symbols invoking the British Empire's colonial relationship with Indigenous Australia. The film uses music to link disparate images, and has no narration except for a short archival voice recording at the conclusion of the piece (see below). This lack of narration allows associations between the different images and symbols to remain open to interpretation. Images of fences and roads are intermingled with images of dying native trees and birds. There are no emphatic statements in this film, but it does convey a fractured picture of repression and death interspersed with life and hope. Beautiful images of land, sea and sky strike a contrast with stark images of water tanks and cracked earth. Viewers are left to consider the meaning of these images themselves, and to decide on how they relate to one another. In other words, each viewer must decide on how this 'jigsaw' of images comes together as a story about our country.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Michael Riley's art draws on a broad interest in photographic and documentary film-making media. Riley is descended from the Wiradjuri Aboriginal people whose country is around Dubbo in New South Wales. After moving to Sydney the artist played a key role in the formation of Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Co-operative (formed in 1987). Two aims of this organisation are to promote work by urban and city-based Australian Indigenous artists and to ensure that the marketing and exhibition of Indigenous art remains as much as possible within the control of the artists themselves. In recent years, many Australians have realised the urgent need to recognise past injustices imposed upon Australia's Indigenous people and to reconcile with this colonial past. Riley's practice is committed to this process and draws on the essential spiritual value that the land holds for *all* Australians. The artist's major cinematic work *Empire* expands on these themes, amplifying the significance of the reconciliation process in Australia.

SUGGESTED DISCUSSION TOPICS

- *Empire* presents a succession of images (such as the six film stills shown here) without any narration. This forces the viewer to make connections between the images by reading them as symbols. What is the possible symbolism of a dead native bird on cracked earth? How do you interpret the other five images presented here in the context of this symbolism?
- Colour is used in *Empire* as a form of symbolism. Discuss where and how colour acts as a symbol in each of the six film stills.
- Discuss the effect that a film without dialogue has on the audience.

References:

Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Co-operative.

<www.culture.com.au/boomalli>

Croft, Brenda L. 'Blak Lik Mi'. *Art and Australia*, vol.31, no.1, Spring 1993, pp.63–7.

Dewdney, Andrew and Phillips, Sandra (eds). *Racism Representation and Photography*. Inner City Education Centre Cooperative, Stanmore, NSW, 1994.

Lee, Gary. 'Picturing: Aboriginal social and solitical photography'. *Artlink*, vol.20, no.1, March 2000, pp.45–9.

Quaill, Avril. 'Michael Riley: The extraordinary Mister Riley (Wiradjuri)'. In *Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art 2002* (exhibition catalogue). Queensland Art Gallery, South Brisbane, 2002, pp.92–5.

Reconciliation

Reconciliation Australia.

<www.reconciliationaustralia.org>

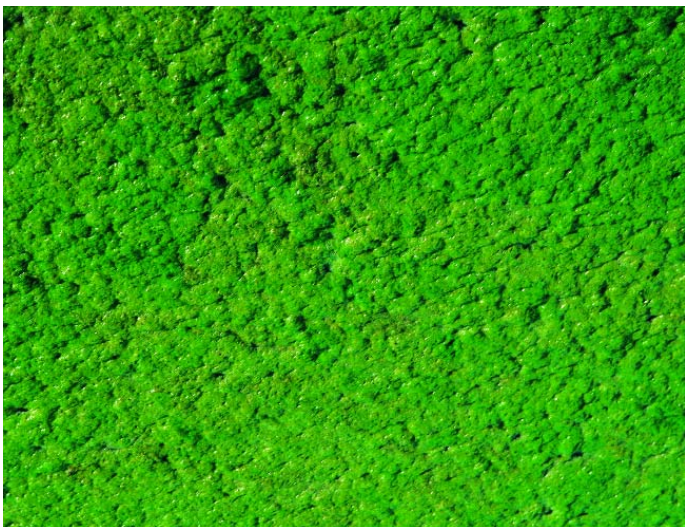
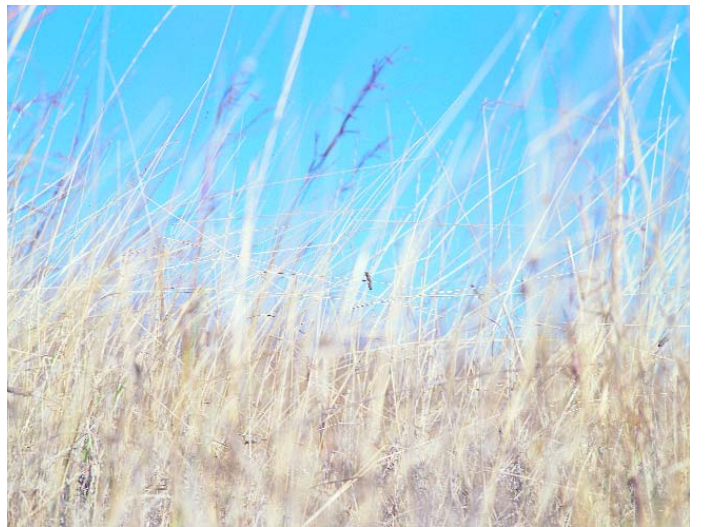
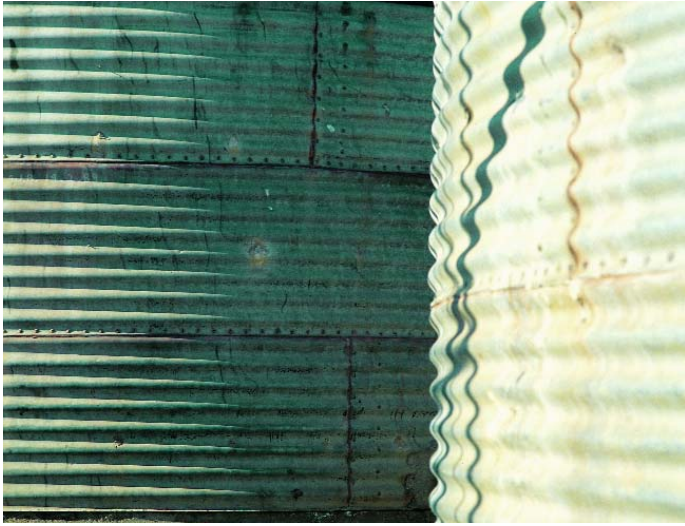
Over: Michael Riley Wiradjuri/Gamilaroi people Australia b.1960 *Empire* 1997 Six stills of 18 min. 35mm film transferred to DVD, sound
Composer: Antony Partos Courtesy: Indigenous Programs Unit, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, Sydney

The following voice recording appears at the conclusion of the film *Empire*. Its scratchy quality and formal manner suggest that it originates in the early twentieth century; however, no information is supplied to the viewer about who is speaking, or when.

'... keeping untouched natives away from white settlements where they would quickly perish like moths in a light. Replacing the (state?) which their ancient beliefs gave them by a higher faith — a Christian faith. Training them in a benevolent segregation . . . gradually to make them fit into an Australian community.'



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Michael Riley has a background in filmmaking and photography. He was one of a group of Indigenous artists who began the Boomali Aboriginal Arts Cooperative in Sydney. The role of artist in Indigenous Australia has changed over time. The style of artworks and also the contexts of various works are also evolving in relation to contemporary art. Riley's work explores and expands on the theme of reconciliation. His works document the enduring nature of Aboriginal heritage and culture and their resilience and survival.

Websites

<http://www.nga.gov.au/Retake/artists/000000a.htm>
<http://abcasiapacific.com/apt/artists/riley.htm>
<http://www.realtimearts.net/rt50/riley.html>

ACTIVITY

Michael Riley comes from the Wiradjuri/Gamilaroi people. Research the changing role of art in these groups or in other Indigenous groups.

ACTIVITY

Indigenous Australian art has been the subject of considerable cultural appropriation (where images and other identifiable visual iconography is used in contexts other than those for which they were developed).

Find visual examples of the way Aboriginal icons and artwork have been used in the media. Try to interview or email some Indigenous artists to gather their views on cultural appropriation of images. Most states have an Aboriginal art curator attached to the state art gallery and there are many Aboriginal art collectives that can be contacted either in person or over the Internet. Hold a class debate on the pros and cons of image appropriation.

ACTIVITY

Look at a range of works by Michael Riley. List recurring imagery and ideas in his work. Research where artists get their ideas.

Choose an artist in your local community. If possible, interview them, visit their studio and look at a range of their work. Document the source of their ideas. Consider what has influenced the artist both in the past and the present and the way their work may have changed over time.

Think about your own art-making. Where do you get your ideas? Record the sources of your ideas in your visual arts process diaries (VAPD) or art journal.

ACTIVITY

Many contemporary Asian–Pacific artists often struggle to find a place for their ideas somewhere between their background culture and contemporary culture. Indigenous artists may struggle to locate their work in a climate of continuous change. In this way, tradition can be both a source of inspiration and a burden. Discuss this idea in relation to Michael Riley's work and that of other indigenous artists.

ACTIVITY

Read this quote from Alison Carroll's forthcoming book *Asian Art 1900–2000*.

'The capacity to be able to search for a personal and original response to the world, through different sources than those accepted by one's own culture as normal, was empowering not only to individual practice, but to society more broadly. It is what artists, at their best, can offer us as their greater legacy.'

Debate this idea in relation to Aboriginal art and issues of national reconciliation. To what extent can art be used to foster a greater understanding of the identity of Aboriginal Australians?



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