



Men at Ease Gary Lee

curated by Maurice O'Riordan

23 April - 22 May 2010

Woolloongabba Art Gallery, Brisbane

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Above: Frank, 2006, Lambda print, image size: 42 x 56cm, paper size: 49 x 63cm  
 Front: Self-portrait with Manish II, 2003, digital print on Hahnemuhle paper,  
 image size: 62.19 x 42.2cm, paper size: 69.19 x 49.2cm

## Biography

Gary Lee (b.1952)

Aboriginal nations: Larrakia/Wardaman

Domicile: Canberra

Education: Current Research Fellow (Ph.D), Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies

### Selected Exhibitions:

1993: Member's Show, 24HR Art NT Centre for Contemporary Art, Darwin

1999: *Love Magic: Erotics and Politics in Indigenous Art*, SH Ervin Gallery, Perspecta 99, Sydney

2001: *Campsites*, Darwin Visual Arts Association, Darwin

2005: *Billiamook*, Charles Darwin University Gallery, Darwin

2006: Togart Contemporary Art Award (NT), Parliament House, Darwin

2007: Telstra National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award, Museum and Art Gallery of NT, Darwin

2007: *Territorial*, 24HR Art NT Centre for Contemporary Art, Darwin, and Canberra Contemporary Art Space, Canberra

2007: *Other APT*, RawSpace Galleries, Brisbane 2007, touring Noumea 2008/09.

2008: *More Than My Skin*, Campbelltown Art Centre, Sydney, nationally touring exhibition in 2009

2008: *Maast Maast* (solo exhibition), 24HR Art NT Centre for Contemporary Art, Darwin

2010: *Gayme*, Counihan Gallery, Brunswick, Melbourne

2010: *On the Verge* (solo exhibition), Sheahan Galleries, Clifton

2010: *Day Visitor*, (solo exhibition), Canberra Contemporary Art Space, Canberra

### Commissions / Awards:

1986: Overall winner, Canberra Fashion Awards, Canberra

1998: Photographer, Anti-homophobia campaign poster, Sydney Anti-Violence Committee and Eora Aboriginal TAFE College, Sydney

1999: Photographer, Indigenous Gay Men and Sister Girl Calendar, AFAO, Sydney

1999-2002: Art design, Sydney Harbour Bridge, New Year's Eve Celebrations, City of Sydney, Sydney

### Selected Bibliography:

1998: Artist profile in *Photofile*, No. 55, Australian Centre for Photography, Sydney

2000: Author, 'Picturing: Aboriginal social and political photography', and, 'Black Glory: Aboriginal erotica', in *Artlink: Reconciliation? Indigenous art for the 21st century*, Vol 20, No. 1, Adelaide

2001: O'Riordan, M., 'Photograph as Performative Trace', *Art News Magazine of India*, Vol. 6, No. 4, Mumbai

2003: Artist profile in *Photofile*, No. 68, Australian Centre for Photography, Sydney

2006: Author, 'Oh, boy! The portraits of Gary Lee', *Art Monthly Australia*, June 2006, Canberra

2008: Rannersberger, C., exhibition preview for *Maast Maast*, *Photofile*, No. 84, Sydney

2008: Chapman, C., 'Just about men', *Art Monthly Australia*, May 2008, Canberra

2010: Browning, D., 'Gary Lee: The Outsider', *Artlink: Blak on Blak*, Vol 30, No. 1, Adelaide

2010: Broker D., 'No frills', catalogue essay for *Day Visitor*, Canberra Contemporary Art Space, Canberra

### Collections:

Museum and Art Gallery of the NT, National Gallery of Australia, private collections in Australia, Singapore, India



Men at Ease

Gary Lee

# Men at Ease

I've had the pleasure of observing Gary Lee's 18-year-long photographic career at close range, and been a participant for a small part of it. While 1993 marks Lee's beginning as a photographer, with the start of his *Nice Coloured Boys* series first in Bangladesh, and in Nepal and India soon after, there was some precedence in the photographs he took on his first trip to India around 1970. Back then, he was struck by the familiarity of the diverse-looking men in India with that of Aboriginal/coloured men from his hometown Darwin – men and boys from his own and other longstanding Darwin Aboriginal families. Lee also recalls a touch of the 'hesitant tourist' in these early photographs (fixing on images of children as easy subjects), and of the exotic: 'One of the first male portraits I took there was of a Sikh *malaga*. I said, "Can I have a look at your hair?" He took his turban off and he unrolled his hair, and it was beautiful.'<sup>1</sup>

These earlier photos were lost to oblivion as a result of Cyclone Tracy in Darwin, 1974. In the intervening years, between 1974 and 1993, Lee did visit India again with camera in hand but it wasn't till '93 that these first impressions crystallised into a purposeful art-photographic project. By this time, Lee's professional and aesthetic journey had undergone various twists and turns which all have some bearing on his photography and its simple but disarming political undercurrent: to re-present beauty among coloured/Aboriginal men. Lee's first tertiary undertaking, for example, was as a student at the Sydney College of the Arts in the early '80s. He determined then to make political statements through the medium of glass, fired up by the groundswell of Indigenous protest leading into the 1982 Commonwealth Games in Brisbane. This gave way to a significant stint as a successful fashion designer, a measure of Lee's interest in aesthetics of beauty no doubt, his designs dedicated to evening and cocktail wear for women. Eventually Lee left behind the glitz and gloss of Sydney's fashion world and returned to the NT for work as an Aboriginal arts advisor at Mimi Aboriginal Arts & Crafts in Katherine, a job which eventually led to him undertaking a degree in anthropology, lapping up its broad appreciation of visual culture.

There are elements of Lee's anthropological 'gaze' with his beginnings in street/ snapshot photography for *Nice Coloured Boys*, one of four discrete but related series (including *Skin*, *Darwin Lads* and *On the Verge 2*) which form the basis of this exhibition, *Men at Ease*. Studying anthropology gave Lee greater awareness of the extent to which photography served colonisation in Australia and beyond, of the medium's power in contemporary popular culture and its subversive potential. In researching the history of his own people, the Larrakia (traditional owners of the Darwin and Cox Peninsula regions), Lee became familiar with the substantial body of work by the 'amateur' colonial photographer Paul Foelsche (Darwin's first police inspector). Notably, Lee has appropriated two of Foelsche's images of Larrakia people (including an 1887 portrait of his great, great grandmother, Minnie Duwun) in a pair of diptych portraits which juxtapose Foelsche's portraits with those of Lee's nephew, Shannon (Shaba), and his

niece, Mei Kim, to suggest both the importance of ancestry and the dynamics of cultural change.<sup>2</sup>

*Men at Ease* obviously centres on Lee's portraits of men, which is the prime focus of his photographic work per se. One of Woolloongabba Art Gallery Director Bob Mercer's initial comments in accepting this show was that he appreciated the singularity of Lee's focus – not to imply that Lee's photographs all say the same thing but that there's an admirable integrity about their overall vision. As much as these portraits collectively build a picture of masculinity, or maleness – with their intriguing inflections of cultural milieu and boy-to-manhood trajectory – they also celebrate individuality over type. They offer the connection of a real person directly facing the viewer in what was/is an actual, momentary setting. Much is made of the present-day ubiquity of photography – a signal of both user-friendly democracy and rampant surveillance. Yes, anyone can take a portrait, and Lee entertains no pretensions about his low-tech, point-and-shoot approach to the medium. But it takes a certain amount of courage to solicit a stranger, and a good deal of heart to turn these solicitations into the stuff of meaningful exchange, the substance of art.

My curatorial intention with *Men at Ease* is to give a sense, a 'snapshot', of the span of Lee's photographic achievement. Time-wise, the works span from his first body of portraits in 1993 to his most recent series, *On the Verge 2*, which pairs the summery portraits of 'boys' from coastal Bulli, NSW, taken at the end of 2009, with those of similar aged boys from his time in wintry Varanasi, India, earlier this year. Included is an image of *Bablu, Boatboy* (1997), Lee's first published photograph which was reproduced as part of a larger narrative series in a thematic *Happy Snaps* edition (1998) of *Photofile* magazine. The softer, 'faraway' tone of this image, along with other earlier works in Lee's *Nice Coloured Boys* series, reveals a contrast of technologies; the earlier analogue photographs were generally printed in India, and scanned from prints for later digital reproduction.

The exhibition also conveys the span of Lee's subjects: from the largely street photographic impulse of *Nice Coloured Boys* to the more deliberately constructed *Skin* series (also from India and Nepal) with Lee's play on ethnic camouflage in front of the lens; and closer to home with diverse Aboriginal male beauty and tropical splendour inspiring *Darwin Lads*, and his recent attention to white boys and youth with *On the Verge 2*. Increasingly, Lee's photography has moved away from the anonymity of the street, though he still rises to this challenge, enjoying the spontaneity of life's continuum. Undercutting the layers of 'skin', setting and gender for his portraits, and perhaps the most overlooked dimension of his practice, is Lee's unique aesthetic. With an eye for the beauty and drama of the seemingly ordinary, his aesthetic may easily be dismissed, as though locked within the 'natural' or 'artless' appearance of the image. By force of its subtlety and lack of artifice, and in tune with his overall artistic concepts, Lee's aesthetic emerges totally at ease.

**Maurice O'Riordan, 2010**



TOP: Golu 19, 2010; ABOVE: Cal 17, 2009. Digital prints on Hahnemuhle paper, dimensions: image size 42.2 x 56.27cm, paper size: 49.2 x 63.27cm

#### Notes:

1. Gary Lee, 2010. 'Malaga' is Aboriginal English for 'man', with common usage in Darwin/the Top End, and origins in Central Desert Aboriginal languages.
2. Lee's portrait diptych, *Mei Kim and Minnie* (2006), is reproduced in John Odgen's *Portraits from a Land Without People: A Pictorial Anthology of Indigenous Australia, 1847-2008*, Cyclops Press, Sydney, 2009.