

## Artist Michael Cook gives a retake on history with his Civilised photo series

---

BRONWYN WATSON THE AUSTRALIAN AUGUST 31, 2013 12:00AM



Michael Cook, *Civilised #13*, from the *Civilised* series (2012). Collection Queensland Art Gallery. Purchased 2012. On display in exhibition *My Country, I Still Call Australia Home: Contemporary Art from Black Australia*, Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane, until October 7. Source: Supplied

---

### PUBLIC WORKS

**ON August 23, 1770, when Captain James Cook first visited Australian shores, he wrote in his journal that the Aboriginal people "may appear to some to be the most wretched people upon Earth, but in reality they are far more happier than we Europeans".**

It was this account that inspired artist Michael Cook to examine what might have happened if the British, instead of condemning Aboriginal society, had taken a more accepting approach. Cook asks provocative questions: If the British had realised Aborigines were indeed civilised, would history have been different? Was being civilised about fashion, speech, cultivating the land, having Christian beliefs, or was it to do with someone's skin colour or appearance?

In *Civilised*, a compelling photographic series of dreamscapes, Cook offers a retake on Australian history by imagining the scene of the first encounter between white and black, but with a twist, so that the viewer rethinks the role of the civilised coloniser and the colonised. Cook dresses Aborigines in the period fashions of four countries whose citizens visited Australia in the early days of colonisation: England, France, The Netherlands and Spain. He then places a costumed solitary figure on the beach to say that this would have been the first sighting that Aborigines had of Europeans.

*Civilised* is on display as part of the exhibition *My Country, I Still Call Australia Home: Contemporary Art from Black Australia* at Brisbane's Gallery of Modern Art. In each of these works, Cook explores his identity as an Aborigine who was adopted as a baby and reared in a white foster family. Born in 1968 in Brisbane, Cook says he was raised with a strong understanding of his ancestry thanks to his parents, who fought for Aboriginal rights and encouraged him to find his birth mother. His art practice has allowed him to reconnect with and understand Australian indigenous history.

Before becoming a full-time artist, Cook was a successful commercial fashion photographer. He became

interested in the medium because his brother had a photographic studio in Hervey Bay, Queensland.

Cook grew up developing photographs in his brother's darkroom and then moved into the industry. His background as a fashion photographer has dovetailed nicely into his artistic practice. This is evident in the dramatic staging of works such as *Civilised #13*, featuring an Aboriginal man on horseback dressed in naval clothes and cradling a gun. He takes on the appearance of coloniser, a role very different from those to which we are accustomed.

Cook's photographic subjects are often Aboriginal models or dancers from Bangarra Dance Theatre, but in *Civilised #13* he has used one of his childhood friends from Hervey Bay, who has appeared in every series in which males have featured.

Cook's dramatic stagings and slight touches of humour are among the ways in which the artist draws people in, says Bruce McLean, curator of indigenous Australian art at the Queensland Art Gallery, as we stand before the work.

"The photographs work on many different levels," McLean says. "They are an exploration of identity and they are asking people to recognise the indigenous dialogue. Some Aboriginal people are very firm in their identity, whereas Cook's work is more an exploration of identity.

"I am struck by the way they are so powerfully staged and these Aboriginal people are incredibly bold and very present. For me, there is quite a lot of pride in seeing these images and having the Aboriginal people standing up and taking back a lot of that power in the dynamic of coloniser and colonised. It is interesting to see that reversal of roles."

Michael Cook, *Civilised #13*, From The *Civilised Series* (2012). Collection Queensland Art Gallery. Purchased 2012. On Display In Exhibition *My Country, I Still Call Australia Home: Contemporary Art From Black Australia*, Gallery Of Modern Art, Brisbane, Until October 7.