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INTERVIEW // MICHAEL COOK

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EJ Canita interviews Michael Cook.

How did you start your career in photography and what or who got you into it?

My brother gave me my first camera (a Chinon) when I was 14. I started in mini labs for a few years after leaving school and continued into a pro colour darkroom for a further 6 years. The lab I worked in also had a studio where I started shooting portraits and weddings on weekends. This led to opening my first retail studio in the early 90s where I offered makeover fashion style portraits, weddings and commercial photography. It went extremely well but I lost interest and sold the studio after 18 months. For the next few years I worked in and out of the industry concentrating on a mix of commercial and wedding photography while building and renovating houses.

I was never completely satisfied with the retail photography industry and felt that I wanted to leave more of a mark somehow; this is when I decided to embark on a couple of personal projects. I always had an interest in fashion photography and decided that I needed to build a portfolio to show agents so I could get representation. My basis was in weddings and I could easily access high end designers, and because I was still shooting weddings part time these images could double up for advertising purposes.

I decided to create a fashion based story of a damsel in distress called 'Lady Penelope', much of which I photographed at the Brisbane Maritime Museum. I then spent the following weeks capturing beaches, skies, water and waves to create the layers needed to finish the project. The second project was called '1942' which is a story set in U.S. pre-WWII of a woman on a tram. This was shot at the Brisbane tramway museum. Happy with the final result, I then wanted to get these projects published. Sitting at home one afternoon, I decided to phone a couple of magazines in the U.S to see if they were interested. The first phone call was to a NY based publication where the guy on the other end asked me to email some sample images—I said why not pull them up online, to which he did. He then said, 'I'll call you back', click! Ten minutes later the phone rings, it's the editor... "I've just pulled six pages of advertising from the magazine to fit your shoot in, 'how fast can you get the images here!" I get off the phone with some reluctance to whether I am being taken for a ride? A quick call to my makeup artist who started screaming on the other end of the phone after I told her the name of the publication (as I had no idea—I had never heard of them), was one of her favourite magazines, and to my surprise, had a coverage of half a million copies and was sold in over 26 countries.

Still wanting to get into fashion, it was actually a suggestion from my partner to do something within arts that actually put me on a completely different path, and my first series 'Through My Eyes' was created. What these two personal projects had taught me is the steps I need to tell a story. Also, for the first time in my life, I had a renewed excitement of where I was finally heading; I had found a way of telling my story.

How does your previous knowledge and experience with fashion influence your work now?

Looking back at the past 30 years working within the industry I realise that each area I have worked in has given me the tools I need to create my current projects. Weddings taught me how to shoot under any circumstances, how to look for outdoor light and how to communicate with my subject to get the best results. Commercial has taught me to know my equipment inside-out, and fashion taught me how to organise myself, set out a working schedule, and how to bring a team together to create a certain look for a project. Add to this all of life's lessons and this is what goes into producing art.

Who and what are inspirations for your work?

I get inspiration from everywhere. We live in such a creative world that it's all around us all of the time. If I am concentrating on an upcoming project I will see ideas that relate to this project everywhere. It's like buying a new car, suddenly I start seeing the same brand and colour of car everywhere. The car was always driving past me, but now it attracts my attention because I am constantly thinking of it. I am also inspired by photographers from the early 1900s through to the 70s, the type of posing and studio setups and the quality of the old large format cameras. Inspiration for my last project 'Civilised' actually came from a visit to the National Gallery in London. I was amazed with the size, quality and lighting of the old paintings. The backgrounds were always quite soft and subjects very clear, so I decided to reflect this into this project.



Michael Cook 'Through My Eyes #27' 2010



Michael Cook 'Undiscovered #3' 2010

What do you

think are the key issues in Australia right now? Has there been much progress since you came in the industry?

For me, it's about learning Australia's history to create a better future. Through my art I ask questions, 'How would a better understanding of Indigenous culture for the past 200 years affect Aboriginal people today?'. I believe the key to any problem is education, especially for our Indigenous youth, it's about creating opportunities to give kids more focus for the future. Australia is very multicultural, it's about everyone having a little more understanding and not just looking at the whole picture as black-and-white.

Are you working on any projects right now and are there any exhibitions coming up soon? What's next on your plate?

I am currently working on a couple of projects. One is about the South Sea Islanders, how they were brought over as labour for our cane fields and how they played a significant role in building our sugar industry. My next major show is a group exhibition at the Gallery of Modern Art Brisbane called, 'My Country—I Still Call Australia Home: Contemporary Art from Black Australia' (http://www.qagoma.qld.gov.au/exhibitions/current/my_country/), which will be one of Australia's largest Indigenous art exhibitions this year.

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For more information on Michael Cook, please visit [his website](http://www.michaelcook.net.au/) (<http://www.michaelcook.net.au/>).

Ej Canita is an emerging artist based in Brisbane.

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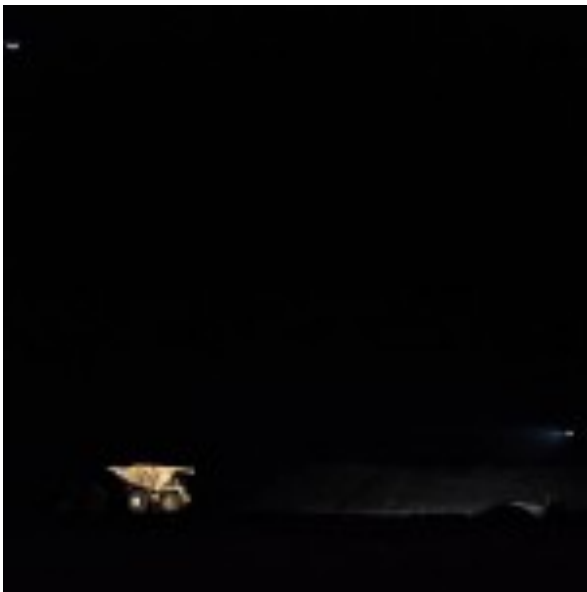
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