I recently came across the Welsh word hiraeth, which describes the nostalgia one feels for the lost places in their past and the yearning for an experience that never was. The ethereal and otherworldly works of Michael Cook align with such feelings. Imagine an alternative scenario in which light and dark skins are swapped, roles and hierarchies are reversed, and conqueror and conquered become interchangeable.

In a bustling Brisbane restaurant, over a snail-paced lunch of chicken and greens, Cook and I discuss the forces that led him to use art as a vehicle for discovering his Aboriginal identity and to cast a contemporary spin on the historical and socio-political experiences of Indigenous Australians. Cook’s own story began in the late 1960s in a small rural Queensland community. An unmarried white woman, all of sixteen, fell pregnant to an Aboriginal man and fled to a hospital to give birth to a boy she named up for adoption. As a parting gift, the teen named her newborn Michael and three weeks later he was adopted into a white family in Harry Bay. His adoptive mother was a local councillor and political activist who fought for the rights of Indigenous Australians.

“My mother gave me a good understanding of my Aboriginal heritage” recalls the artist, who hails of six white children. Cook started noticing this absence of Indigenous people in his community and in mainstream media. “My school didn’t teach Aboriginal history, though they did reference Aboriginal people during Europe’s settlement into Australia. I later realised they were telling false stories.” He would also watch stage on Saturday mornings and wonder: “What if the white people in these music videos were Aborigines? What would that actually look like?”

Interestingly, while Cook identifies himself as “a person with Aboriginal heritage, raised by a white family in a white community,” he often gets mistaken as Greek or Mediterranean for his striking mix of green eyes, onyx hair and coffee skin. “People aren’t easily convinced when I tell them I have Indigenous heritage,” he scoffs. “But you don’t look like one, they’d say.”

After almost thirty years working as a fashion and commercial photographer, Cook decided to pursue self-education and the questions that plagued him during Australia’s colonisation. One of the images he uses to illustrate such feelings is Civilised #2 (2014), a monochromatic work in which identically-dressed businessmen occupy public spaces traditionally ruled by the white Everyman. The piece makes one imagine an alternate reality in which Parliament House is packed with faces resembling Neville Bonner’s or a world in which Cook saw Indigenous role models on TV.

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Cook’s latest body of work, Object (2015), marks Cook’s desire to expand his subject matter to appeal to international audiences, after overseas exhibitions and a New York residency reminded the artist that Australia isn’t the sole site of colonial unrest. Object, which showed as part of Personal Structures: Crossing Borders at the Palazzo Mora in Venice, is a purple-hued tableau that exposes the objectification of slaves by their ‘owners’ in America and Europe in the 1800s. The work portrays lasciviously dressed dark-skinned people sauntering around a nude, white woman who takes the form of a lamp, table, and ashtray and lays its power to its inversion of colonial hierarchies.

“I have Indigenous heritage,” he asserts. “They saw Indigenous people as inferior and uncivilised and [the cross represents] the beliefs they inflicted. But it also [symbolised] their fear.”

In Australia, Aboriginal people make up only four percent of the population yet they dominate the world Cook creates. The Aboriginal man is the new Everyman. The piece makes one imagine an alternate reality in which Parliament House is packed with faces resembling Neville Bonner’s or a world in which Cook saw Indigenous role models on TV.

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But for all the unpleasant truths he raises, Cook, who has been twice named the Deadly Award’s Visual Artist of the Year, believes in using nuance and stylised visuals to get the message across. “I’m not trying to push a story that is in-your-face negative and [my approach] is more subtle,” he proffers, adding that his fashion background has also helped him prioritise his work’s commercial value.

“You could assume that the artist’s previous fashion career means professional models on speed-dial but Cook prefers to cast subjects to whom he’s personally drawn. He’s known Joey, the model who stars in Majority Rule, Civilised and Object, since childhood. “If you look at the characters he plays in my work, his quirkiness always comes through,” he laughs. And Larissa, the character in Civilised and Object, was a Facebook discovery. “She’s a quiet person who drives trucks in the mines for a living.” Larissa also features in Mother, the new series inspired by Cook’s reunion with his biological mother. The work will launch at Art Basel Hong Kong in March and is the artist’s most personal project to date.

When Cook turned 30, he decided – with the blessing of his adoptive mother – to track his biological mother down. The pair have since bonded and his biological mother has moved next door to his Sunshine Coast home. “I still acknowledge my adoptive mother as my true mother because she raised me,” Cook points out, telling me that the union also helped him learn more about his biological father, whom he knew little about. “So I call my biological mother by her name, Val. We’ve got a pretty laid-back relationship now. Val broke the news to her family and contacted my biological father to let him know he had a son but he never replied. I found out who he was and I’ve passed him on the street several times. He doesn’t know it is me. [As] yet.”

“WORKING IN THE FASHION INDUSTRY GAVE ME THE TOOLS TO STYLE A BEAUTIFUL PHOTOGRAPH, AND TO ASSEMBLE A TEAM OF STYLISTS AND MAKE-UP ARTISTS TO ACHIEVE THIS. I WANT MY WORKS TO ALWAYS HAVE A SENSE OF BEAUTY.”

Top
MICHAEL COOK
Court (from Majority Rule series), 2014
inkjet print on archival inkjet printable cotton paper edition of 3 + 1 AP
200 x 140 cm
Opposite
MICHAEL COOK
Bus (from Majority Rule series), 2014
inkjet print on archival inkjet printable cotton paper edition of 3 + 1 AP
200 x 140 cm

Courtesy the artist and Andrew Baker Art Dealer, Brisbane and THIS IS NO FANTASY + dianne tanzer gallery, Melbourne
Mother presents a high-heeled woman that could be plucked out of a 1960s photoshoot in the heart of the Australian desert without a support system or modern facilities. Her only mementos are items such as a pram, bicycle, high chair and roller skates. Devoid of occupants, they signify loss and the longing for an experience that could have been. Although the work broadly refers to Australia’s Stolen Generation, it also speaks to the issues facing contemporary women such as adoption, abortion, infertility and the decision to focus on career rather than family.

“I initially tried to capture what it would feel like for a mother to lose her child,” Cook explains. “But I also wanted to give the audience more rope to travel down in terms of relatable experiences. My adoptive and biological mothers might be white but I portray an Aboriginal woman because these themes transcend race and background. They are universal.”

Although Cook’s journey recalls the nostalgia of almost-experiences, it also hints at future reunions and the promise of the second chance. By re-imagining his own family history, the artist rewrites his own personal narrative and adds a new skin to his old story.

THIS IS NO FANTASY + diinne tanzer gallery will showcase Michael Cook’s Mother series at Art Basel Hong Kong from March 22 to March 26, 2016. Andrew Baker Art Dealer will exhibit these works nationally.

Michael Cook is represented by Andrew Baker Art Dealer, Brisbane and THIS IS NO FANTASY + diinne tanzer gallery, Melbourne.

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