

MICHAEL COOK

ABORIGINAL AUSTRALIAN ARTIST, MICHAEL COOK, SEEKS TO CONSIDERS ALTERNATIVE HISTORIES THROUGH THE 'STAGING' OF INDIGENOUS CULTURE THROUGH THE LENS OF THE WHITE AUSTRALIAN SETTLER.



LEFT TO RIGHT

Undiscovered 3 & 7, Inkjet print on cotton rag, 124 x 100cm.
Courtesy of the artist & THIS IS NO FANTASY.

Australia and South Africa both share many challenges relating to their colonial past. Was this a factor in deciding to exhibit your work in the South African art market?

Each country has a unique culture and history. In my work, I draw on my background as an Aboriginal Australian to reflect on colonialism in Australia. I try to challenge colonial focused histories and ways of presenting history, often through the reversal and restaging of entrenched narratives. I was never taught Aboriginal history at school, only about the European settlement of Australia so scrutinising this perspective and creating works that explore an alternative version of Australian history is important to me.

British colonisation impacted both Australia and South Africa and this commonality does make it interesting to show my work in South Africa. Hopefully, it sparks interesting conversations about the history and ongoing impact of colonisation in both countries.

Your Undiscovered series seeks to address the ongoing effects of colonisation through the depiction of indigenous culture. You also use photography as a method to record history. How do you measure the success of this?

If my work provokes conversation and debate and causes people to reflect on the experiences of Indigenous Australians, that's definitely one marker of its success.

I'm fascinated by the role of art and photography as a method of recording history and shaping cultural memory and try un-pick habitual ways of thinking and seeing in my work. I often blur fiction and fact in my work, which also calls the veracity of photography into question.

Undiscovered looks at the so-called 'discovery' of Australia and its representation in history. It considers the 'staging' of Indigenous culture through the lens of the white Australian settler and seeks to offer up an alternative narrative. Reversing the roles of the Aboriginal man and the colonisers is a way to shift the conversation and question the ongoing effects of colonisation on Aboriginal culture and country.

You have previously stated that you believe you are only called an indigenous artist because you shoot indigenous-themed projects with indigenous people. It must be quite challenging creating the work you do when so many prejudices still exist – how do you navigate this?

You can't control how people perceive your work; as an artist what I do is keep making work that addresses issues that are important to me. I'm proud of my Aboriginal heritage and will continue to draw on it and explore Indigenous issues in my practice.

Your work is important in addressing the injustices of the past and so the audiences you expose the work to are also important. How do ensure the work is presented in the right context to the right audiences – and what kind of collections would you like to see acquiring your work?

I've been fortunate that my work has received a strong critical response both in Australia and also internationally and is regularly curated into institutional exhibitions, which is a fantastic context for it to be seen in. In the past few years it's been shown at galleries including the British Museum, National Gallery of Singapore, National Gallery of Australia, AAMU Museum of Contemporary Aboriginal Art, The Netherlands; and was also shown in Personal Structures – Crossing Borders at Palazzo Mora during the 56th Venice Biennale. I was especially excited when it was acquired by The British Museum, London – what an incredible place to consider our history and the ongoing impacts of British colonisation on Indigenous Australians.