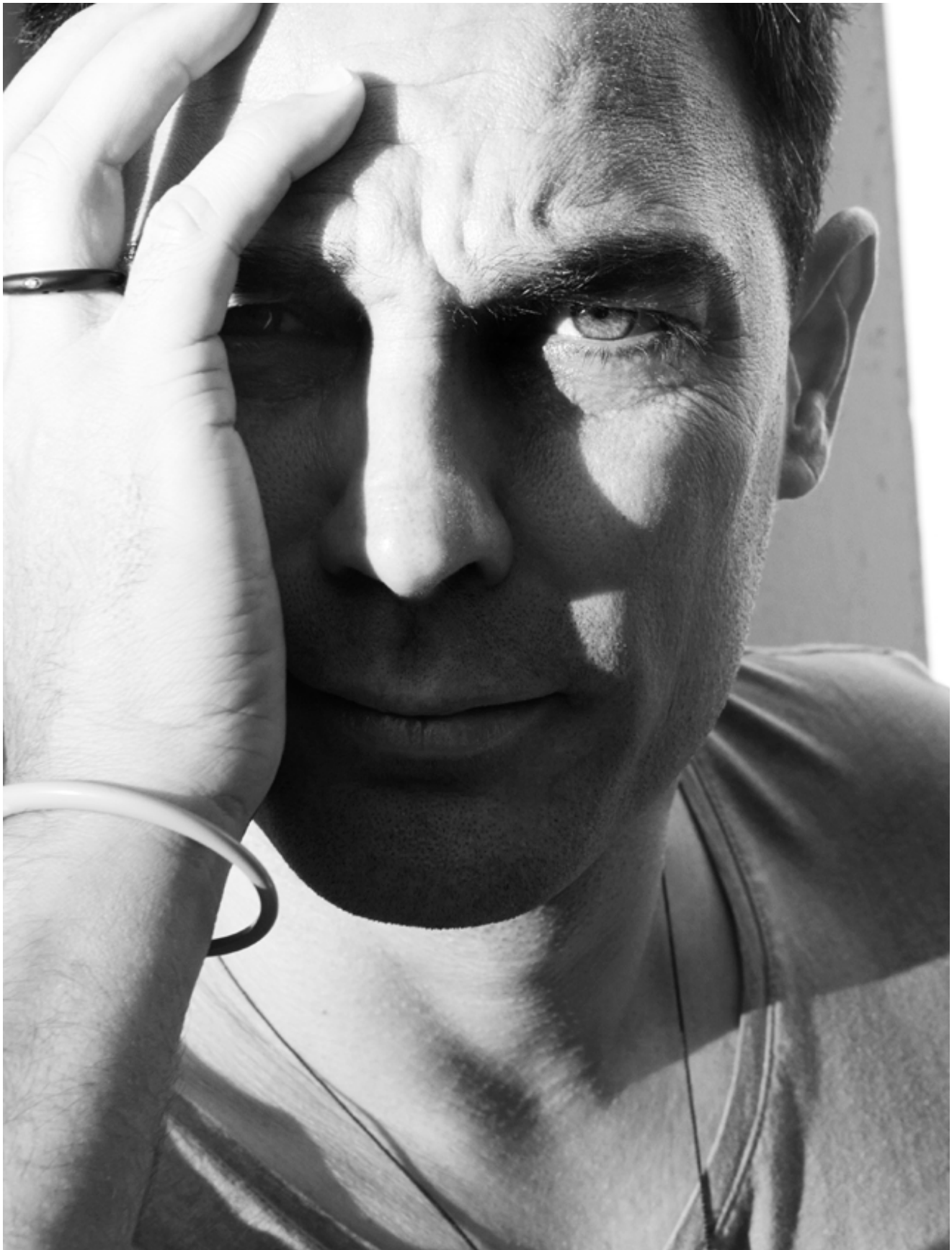


MANUSCRIPT

INTRODUCING: MICHAEL COOK

Brisbane based photographic artist Michael Cook has emerged as one of the country's leading artists.

Alison Kubler



http://www.manuscriptdaily.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/070614_michael_mnscept_0034.jpg

Michael Cook photographed by Jordan Graham.

Queensland-based photographic artist Michael Cook is having a rather good year. He was the critical hit of the largely lacklustre 19th Biennale of Sydney, and at present he is in enjoying three months in residence at the Australia Council studio in New York City. In

addition, he is part of a large exhibition that starts in Queensland before touring to Utrecht in the Netherlands and the United States. *Saltwater Country* looks at the work of Queensland indigenous artists for whom 'country', that most sacred of concepts, is the ocean shore. It's a show that features established artists such as Jenny Watson, Fiona Foley, Daniel Boyd and Vernon Ah Kee.

Mr Cook's work, which blends fiction and historical fact to evocative and poetic effect, takes a political stance without sacrificing aesthetic concerns, and has been included in important contemporary survey exhibitions such as The 7th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art at the Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane, in 2013, and *UnDisclosed: 2nd National Indigenous Art Triennial*, at the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, in 2012.

Alison Kubler Although you have been a photographer for some 25 years, you have only been exhibiting as a fine artist since 2010. How did you make the change?

Michael Cook I started in labs running a professional colour darkroom for six years and they also had a studio on site, where I started shooting portraits and also did weddings on weekends. My style was always fashion-orientated and in 2007 I decided to experiment with the use of stylists and make up artists, backed with the idea of planning out a project. By working on these projects, it taught me how to stylise a look, creating the basis of how I approach my art projects now. My choice to go into art full time was to have complete control of the project from beginning to end. The problem with being a fashion photographer is that there is so much competition, not only from Australian photographers, but ones contracted from overseas as well. At the end of the day, I didn't get to shoot what I was passionate about because the agency and client control the end result.



http://www.manuscriptdaily.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Cook_Majority-Rule_Memorial_2014-516x350.jpg

Michael Cook, Majority Rule Memorial, 2014.

AK You have had considerable success since you emerged, having been curated into significant exhibitions such as the Asia Pacific Triennial and the Sydney Biennale. How have you negotiated this rapid ascension?

MC I have had the luck of a good relationship with a very supportive gallery, and I have had to learn the industry quickly. I am really just producing what I feel passionate about and letting the work speak for itself.

AK What has been the most challenging aspect of having your work critically accepted?

MC Having the work accepted is not really challenging as it either happens or it doesn't. The challenging aspect of working as an artist is more personal. Self-doubt is probably the worst feeling that needs to be controlled. A person once told me that being an artist can be a pretty lonely life. I find working alone on ideas can create a lot of doubt, though I do have the support of my fiancé when deciding on whether to take an idea to the next level. Self-doubt can also be positive: it makes me think in depth about each project and to take the time to make sure I get the process right.

AK 2014 has already proved to be something of a huge year for you. As we speak you are in New York in residence at the Australia Council Greene Street studio. How important is this opportunity?

MC This is my first residency and I am finding it very inspirational, though it did take a couple of weeks to settle into the rhythm of New York. I am interested in showing my work internationally and to do so I feel I need to see what is on show in places like New York and London. I also completed the British Council Accelerate program in 2013, which gave me insight into the UK art market. Australia is a very strong market that supports its artists, and even though I want to show my work internationally, exhibiting overseas is more of a long term goal for me and something I don't feel I need to rush, but would rather let happen in time. I don't believe that showing overseas is as important as building a strong foundation in Australia and I feel I will know when it's right to take a certain body of work internationally. Being included in exhibitions like the Sydney Biennale has also created interest from international galleries but I want to wait until I have the right work.



(<http://www.manuscriptdaily.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/majority-rule-bus-michael-cook-2014.png>)

Michael Cook, *Majority Rule Bus*, 2014.

AK Your work was recently featured in the Biennale of Sydney and was roundly received as one of the highlights of the event. Can you describe the work and how you made it?

MC *Majority Rule* is about a role reversal of 96% of Australians being indigenous. I based it around the forties and fifties because during this time in Australia's history it would not have been a common sight to see Aboriginal men going to and from work as described in these images. The series is really about looking at the past so we can see a direction for the future. It asks questions about history and I made the series to create conversation of what was and what could be.

AK Your practice is political in its intent and content and you identify as an indigenous artist. How important is this to the construction of your practice?

MC People are interested in why an artist produces work in a certain way and want to know a little about them. Most people would know that I am adopted and my mother fought for indigenous rights. That's probably where a lot of my ideas come from. My stories are about me discovering a little about my identity and ancestry, though I am constantly growing and changing with where I would like my art practice to go, so may not always be doing indigenous-based work. I believe I am only called an indigenous artist if I am shooting indigenous-themed projects and using indigenous models.

AK Your work melds historical and contemporary truths with fiction to arrive at visually striking imagery. Can you tell me a bit about your technique?

MC I did my training with medium format film cameras and darkroom techniques, though

work completely digital now. I think it's the early experience that transfers through to getting a certain look on a computer.

AK What are you working on at the moment?

MC My objective is to make each project as successful as the last. I am creating something that will connect both in and outside Australia, something that can relate to various cultures, so with a little less of such a direct approach politically to Australia, as seen in some of my other projects. I am looking at different ways of creating images into other forms of art and sculpture, and will probably start to look at film and projections.

Michael Cook (<http://www.michaelcook.net.au>) is represented by Andrew Baker Art Dealer (<http://www.andrew-baker.com>), Brisbane, and Dianne Tanzer Gallery + Projects (<http://diannetanzergallery.net.au>), Melbourne.
His work is on display as part of Saltwater Country
(<http://www.theartscentregc.com.au/whats-on/whats-on-items/saltwater-country>), Gold Coast City Gallery, until 31 August 2014.

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