

Indigenous Australia rules in Cook's work

By Phil Brown

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IMAGINE an Australia where Aboriginal people are in the majority and white Australians are marginalised. Queensland photographer and artist Michael Cook has done just that with a stunning suite of works to be unveiled at the 19th Biennale of Sydney next March, a major event on the art calendar in the Asia Pacific region.

Most of the works in his Majority Rule series are under wraps until then but Cook has given us a sneak peek at several including Memorial, shot at the Shrine of Remembrance in Brisbane partly as a tribute to Aboriginal soldiers who served in the world wars. It features Aboriginal men (in reality one model multiplied) in suits and bowler hats and is typical Cook fare.

This Queenslander with a growing international reputation has a habit of flipping things, his photographs have featured Aborigines landing and claiming the land. His most audacious series featured photos of Australian prime ministers overlaid with indigenous visages. "Aboriginal people make up a small percentage of the population but I'm looking at role reversal and what it would be like if that wasn't the case," Cook says.

"I've called my new series Majority Rule because the majority always does rule and what it would be like if the majority was black? "A black guy in a suit would have really turned heads once and, actually, you don't even see it much now."

Cook, 45, who has indigenous and European heritage, is in London this week on an ACCELERATE fellowship funded by Arts Queensland and the British Council. He's one of five talented Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders visiting the UK for mentoring and other opportunities.

While there Cook will show a few of his new works and launch a publication about his oeuvre at an exclusive function at Queensland House, care of Agent-General Queensland, Ken Smith, an avowed Cook fan. Smith launched the artist's London exhibition at October Gallery last year.

Cook, a former fashion photographer was featured on the ABC1 program The Art of Australia and his star is certainly on the rise. He has work in the collections of QAGOMA and the National Gallery of Australia and was featured in My Country: I Still Call Australia Home, Contemporary Art from Black Australia at GOMA.

Bruce McLean, head of indigenous art at QAGOMA, says Cook's photographs "operate in an ethereal dream world, a timeless place that traverses colonial and contemporary, sustaining itself on what-ifs and hypothetical situations, a place of Cook's modern dreaming".

Cook himself is a little taken aback by his lightning ascent into the stratosphere of contemporary art but he's enjoying the ride and looking forward to getting back to Brisbane to finish shooting his Majority Rule series.