

VAULT™

NEW ART & CULTURE

ISSUE 13 FEBRUARY 2016

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**MICHAEL
COOK**

AUS \$17.50 NZ \$25.00

ISBN 978-0-9944131-2-3



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MICHAEL COOK

THE SKINS WE LIVE IN

Michael Cook's arresting compositions subvert colonial hierarchies and reclaim the nostalgic half-experiences that are too painful to forget.

By Mariam Arcilla

MICHAEL COOK
Ashtray (from *Object*
series), 2015
inkjet print on
archival Hahnemühle
cotton paper
edition of 8 + 2AP
100 x 70 cm

Courtesy the artist and
Andrew Baker Art Dealer,
Brisbane and THIS IS NO
FANTASY + dianne tanzer
gallery, Melbourne

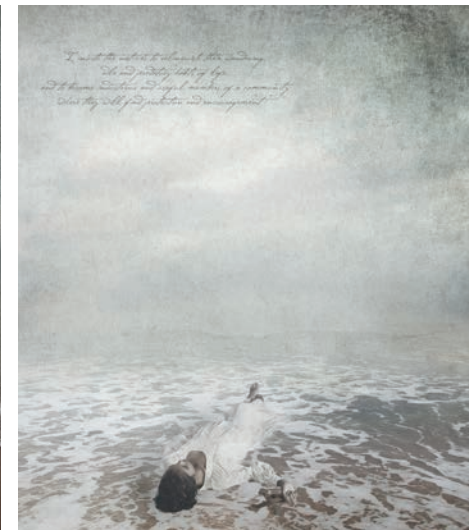
Left to right,
top to bottom
MICHAEL COOK
Civilised #2, 2012
inkjet print on paper
edition of 8
100 x 87 cm

MICHAEL COOK
Civilised #10, 2012
inkjet print on paper
edition of 8
100 x 87 cm

MICHAEL COOK
Civilised #13, 2012
inkjet print on paper
edition of 8
100 x 87 cm

MICHAEL COOK
Civilised #14, 2012
inkjet print on paper
edition of 8
100 x 87 cm

Courtesy the artist
and Andrew Baker Art
Dealer, Brisbane and
THIS IS NO FANTASY
+ dianne tanzer
gallery, Melbourne



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 could not keep. "It was pretty conservative back then," Cook tells me. "Young pregnant women in these situations were expected to offer their baby 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 Hervey Bay. His adoptive mother was a local counsellor 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 from the Bidjara people of southwest Queensland. "She also introduced me to Neville Bonner (the first Indigenous Australian to become a member of the Parliament of Australia), who became the first Aboriginal person I met."

Growing up as the only adopted child in a family of six white children, Cook started noticing the 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 *Rage* on Saturday mornings and wonder: "What if the white people in these music videos were Aboriginal? 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 by venturing into the contemporary art arena in 2010. In the series *Civilised* (2012), Cook explores the hypothetical first impressions between the Europeans and Aboriginal people before and during Australia's colonisation. One of the images sees an elegantly attired Aboriginal man in a creamy, coastal setting, while a Tasmanian devil approaches him with Bambi-like curiosity. The man thrusts south a crucifix to ward the animal off. In this image, Cook ponders the qualities that mark a person out as civilised. Is it their education, the way they dress or their skin colour? If the First People donned wigs and powdered faces, would they have been greeted differently?

"The Europeans were not interested in learning about Aboriginal culture," he asserts. "They saw Indigenous people as inferior and uncivilised and [the cross represents] the beliefs they inflicted. But it also [symbolises] 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 normal in *Majority Rule* (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.

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 lavishly dressed dark-skinned people sauntering around a nude, white woman who takes the form of a lamp, table, and ashtray and owes its power to its inversion of colonial hierarchies.



“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
Hahnemühle cotton paper
edition of 3 + 1 AP
200 x 140 cm

Opposite
MICHAEL COOK
Bus (from *Majority Rule* series), 2014
inkjet print on archival
Hahnemühle 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

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.

"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."

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."



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 on 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 + dianne 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 +** dianne tanzer gallery, Melbourne.

andrew-baker.com
thisisnofantasy.com
michaelcook.net.au

Above
MICHAEL COOK
Bicycle (from
Mother series), 2015
Hahnamühle Photo Rag
with archival inks
80 x 120 cm
edition of 8

Opposite top
MICHAEL COOK
High Chair (from
Mother series), 2015
Hahnamühle Photo Rag
with archival inks
80 x 120 cm
edition of 8

Opposite bottom
MICHAEL COOK
Roller Skating (from
Mother series), 2015
Hahnamühle Photo Rag
with archival inks
80 x 120 cm
edition of 8

Courtesy the artist and
Andrew Baker Art Dealer,
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