



MICHAEL COOK

MAJORITY RULE

*This series is about a conversation...
These images speculate about Aboriginal people being in the majority—
what if Aboriginal people were 96 per cent of the Australian population
and white people defined as the four percent?¹*

MAJORITY RULE

Majority Rule is marked by its aesthetic departure from Michael Cook's previous work. While thematic and conceptual connections with some of his earlier series are evident, the setting of this suite is in contrast to the Australian land- and beach-scapes of earlier images.

This is a depiction of the urbane within the urban. Colonial buildings, the style of solid sandstone architecture which may be seen in almost any city in the Western world, paved streets and a city skyline are the backdrop for a black man, dressed in a suit, carrying a briefcase like the archetypal businessman. His figure, in different attitudes, populates the footpath. He is multiplied (in some scenes up to twenty times), a pointer to the unreality of the scene.

Currently, Australia's Indigenous are a small minority, comprising only three to four percent of the total Australian population. Consequently, black faces have little visibility in Australian capital cities and this series of images defies that reality—yet acknowledges it simultaneously with the use of only one model multiple times to build the crowd because, Cook noted, "The reality is it is hard to find models who look characteristically Indigenous. 'Indigenous' is many things and physical characteristics have little to do with this identification. So while looking Indigenous has nothing to do with Indigeneity, in my aesthetic I seek out a strong character in a model's physicality."²

The multiple versions of the subject populate generic city locations: a subway tunnel, an old-style bus, and city streets. Old Parliament House and Canberra's High Court are more iconic buildings, and take Cook's protagonist to the seat of Australian political power. As such, Cook's imagery challenges our ingrained belief systems, yet these images do not offer judgement—they are observational, asking questions, setting up lively interactions within their scenes, without proffering neat nor prescriptive conclusions.

Cook noted, "I was never taught Aboriginal history at school, only about the European settlement of Australia. What I learnt in school was similar to the first European settlers' beliefs, with words like 'natives' and 'discovery of Australia'. Looking back now, I realise that it was a false way of teaching, and that it hid the truth about the treatment of Aborigines over the past four hundred years."³

The colour of the man's skin is the disjunction that prompts the viewer to wonder, and then wonder at their own wonder. It becomes a gauge for internalised racism. Australian audiences may ponder why this collection of well-dressed black men in a city street strikes a discordant note, an atmospheric that feels wrong, unusual, discomfiting.

1. Michael Cook, Interview with the author, Brisbane, Friday 11 October 2013.

2. Michael Cook, Interview with the author, Brisbane, Friday 11 October 2013.

3. Michael Cook, Artist's Statement in *Michael Cook: Civilised*, Andrew Baker Art Dealer, Bowen Hills, Brisbane, 2012.

The era of the photograph is undefined but feels vintage, retro, with its black and white tonality speaking to our protagonist's clothing—the lapels of his jacket, the flare in his pin-striped trousers, the sober hat, the dark braces over his white shirt and the stately dignity of his bearing, all of which suggest a period up to fifty years ago. Yet there are other references to iconic Western culture – the bowler hat in *Majority Rules (Memorial)* revisits the shape of the anti-hero in the anarchic 1971 Stanley Kubrick film, *A Clockwork Orange*, or a silent Charlie Chaplin-style comedic figure.

In *Majority Rule* Cook poses an insoluble dilemma as he acknowledges the discriminatory nature of society. How it would be if these statistics were reversed? After the explorers arrived in Australia, the Indigenous population was decimated. This was, in part, because Aboriginal people were without immunity to introduced diseases. “The majority always has the rule and the minority doesn’t. Then there is racism that arises as a result.”⁴

There is a formality in these works, with strong architectural lines and perspective to a distant vanishing point. *Majority Rule (Bridge)* is suggestive of Raphael's *School of Athens* (Raphael Sanzio, 1509-11). The synergistic connections between variations on the individual, the vanishing points created with the straight lines of the street, footpath pavers and the collection of rectangular assemblages of city buildings and windows provide a stage-like setting for Cook's individuals. The figures standing in the street appear as if alone, and lacking a social or familial relationship to each other in their physical attitudes, yet are visually bound together. Cook may be positing the kind of anomie or normlessness that isolates individuals within community—the type of First World dysfunction that regularly fills the columns of Australian newspapers.

Another image from the series, *Majority Rule (Tunnel)*, records Cook's model in multiple attitudes, standing, static again, in a public transport space generally characterised by rushing—of people and of the wind that echoes through these underground spaces as trains arrive and leave. Individuals are frozen within their tightly composed cocoon of concrete and tiles. This conformity—of dress, behaviour and social norms—is another theme in this series, particularly evident in *Majority Rule (Memorial)*.

Most Western cities have war memorials and in a particularly poignant image, the black businessman ascends and descends the sandstone steps that surround a rotunda-style war memorial in a city centre. The war memorial is sacrosanct returned servicemen's territory. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders have been involved in fighting for Australia in all wars since the Boer War in 1901 but, while they were paid equally for their work in the armed forces and fought alongside white Australians, on their return home they were subject to the same discrimination they faced before serving their country. Following World War II, only on Anzac Day were they welcomed into returned services league clubs.⁵ (It is interesting to note that the right to vote on a country-wide basis was not granted to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders until 1967.)

4. Michael Cook, Interview with the author, Brisbane, Friday 11 October 2013.

5. On other days of the year, Aboriginals might meet their white comrades for a drink but had to stay outside the building or on the verandah.

Cook's images populate the war memorial with the black faces that have been unacknowledged in Australia's military history. The memorial itself speaks to other colonial buildings in the central business district, its roundness inspired by Grecian classic revival buildings, and Cook's figures occupy the steps, moving up one side and down the other, so as to surround and possess the rotunda.

Cook's use of the bespectacled figure in *Majority Rule (Parliament)* evokes the precedent and dignity of Australia's first Indigenous Member of Parliament, Senator Neville Bonner. In *Majority Rule (Bus)*, a figure at the front reads a vintage magazine titled *WALKABOUT*, noting and satirising the stereotypes that have driven popular expectations.

There is a lean aesthetic and increased contemporary edge in this series. Cook's interest in the impact of Australia's history on its original inhabitants comes into sharp focus, and the highly choreographed images are witty, stylish and slick.

Extract from: Martin-Chew, Louise, *Michael Cook: Majority Rule* [ex. cat.], Andrew Baker Art Dealer, Brisbane, 2014

MICHAEL COOK

Michael Cook is an award-winning photographer who worked commercially both in Australia and overseas for twenty-five years. In 2009, Cook was drawn into art photography by an increasingly urgent desire to learn about his Indigenous ancestry and explore that aspect of his identity. Cook's first solo art exhibition, *Through My Eyes* (2010), contained images of Australian prime ministers overlaid with the faces of Australian Indigenous people. This work explored the potential interconnectedness of generations of Australians and its importance was recognised with selection for the *Western Australian Indigenous Art Awards 2011* at the Art Gallery of Western Australia.

Cook was adopted and brought up in a family who, while not of Indigenous descent, were heavily involved in supporting Indigenous rights. He said, "I was raised with a strong understanding of my Aboriginal ancestry thanks to my parents... When I produce art, I feel a stronger connection with my ancestry. This helps me to understand Australian history in particular, my history." His Aboriginal heritage informs and extends his art.

Cook's photographic practice is unusual. He constructs his images in a manner more akin to painting than the traditional photographic studio or documentary model. Instead he begins with an idea, regarding the image as his blank canvas. Photographic layering is then used to build the image to provide aesthetic depth. Also, he characteristically works in photographic series. Unfolding tableaux offer enigmatic narratives which are not prescribed but left open to interpretation.

In 2011 he exhibited two new series, *Broken Dreams* and *Undiscovered*, together under the title of *Uninhabited*. Their importance was acknowledged when they were acquired by the National Gallery of Australia and shown in its *UnDisclosed: 2nd National Indigenous Art Triennial*. They show Cook's developing artistic vision in their exploration of incidents from Australian colonial history, both real and imagined. Visually striking, technically complex and with sensitive invention, Cook's images occupy a new space in the Australian artistic imagination.

His series *Civilised* (2012) was selected to promote *The 7th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (APT7)* at Queensland Art Gallery/Gallery of Modern Art in 2012, and was included in the ground-breaking *My Country: I Still Call Australia Home: Contemporary Art from Black Australia* (QAGoMA, 2013). Cook's latest body of work, *Majority Rule* (2013), has been selected for inclusion in the international *19th Biennale of Sydney: You Imagine What You Desire*.

Extract from: Martin-Chew, Louise, *Michael Cook* [ex. cat.], Andrew Baker Art Dealer, Brisbane, 2013



MAJORITY RULE (BRIDGE) 2014

Large—Inkjet print on paper, 140 x 200 cm, Edition 3 (1 full set, 2 split sets)
\$8,800 each or \$60,000 for a complete set of seven prints

Small—84 x 120 cm, Edition 8 (3 full sets, 5 split sets)
\$4,950 each or \$33,000 for a complete set of seven prints



MAJORITY RULE (TUNNEL) 2014

Large—Inkjet print on paper, 140 x 200 cm, Edition 3 (1 full set, 2 split sets)
\$8,800 each or \$60,000 for a complete set of seven prints

Small—84 x 120 cm, Edition 8 (3 full sets, 5 split sets)
\$4,950 each or \$33,000 for a complete set of seven prints



MAJORITY RULE (MEMORIAL) 2014

Large—Inkjet print on paper, 140 x 200 cm, Edition 3 (1 full set, 2 split sets)
\$8,800 each or \$60,000 for a complete set of seven prints

Small—84 x 120 cm, Edition 8 (3 full sets, 5 split sets)
\$4,950 each or \$33,000 for a complete set of seven prints



MAJORITY RULE (BUS) 2014

Large—Inkjet print on paper, 140 x 200 cm, Edition 3 (1 full set, 2 split sets)
\$8,800 each or \$60,000 for a complete set of seven prints

Small—84 x 120 cm, Edition 8 (3 full sets, 5 split sets)
\$4,950 each or \$33,000 for a complete set of seven prints



MAJORITY RULE (SENATE) 2014

Large—Inkjet print on paper, 140 x 200 cm, Edition 3 (1 full set, 2 split sets)
\$8,800 each or \$60,000 for a complete set of seven prints

Small—84 x 120 cm, Edition 8 (3 full sets, 5 split sets)
\$4,950 each or \$33,000 for a complete set of seven prints



MAJORITY RULE (PARLIAMENT) 2014

Large—Inkjet print on paper, 140 x 200 cm, Edition 3 (1 full set, 2 split sets)
\$8,800 each or \$60,000 for a complete set of seven prints

Small—84 x 120 cm, Edition 8 (3 full sets, 5 split sets)
\$4,950 each or \$33,000 for a complete set of seven prints



MAJORITY RULE (COURT) 2014

Large—Inkjet print on paper, 140 x 200 cm, Edition 3 (1 full set, 2 split sets)
\$8,800 each or \$60,000 for a complete set of seven prints

Small—84 x 120 cm, Edition 8 (3 full sets, 5 split sets)
\$4,950 each or \$33,000 for a complete set of seven prints

MICHAEL COOK

BIOGRAPHY

Born 25 August 1968, Brisbane
Heritage Bidjara people of south-west Queensland

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2014 *Majority Rule*, Andrew Baker Art Dealer, Brisbane
Through My Eyes, Museum of Australian Democracy at Old Parliament House, Canberra

2013 *Hear no... see no... speak no...*, Queensland Centre for Photography at The Depot Gallery, Sydney

2012–13 *Civilised*, Andrew Baker Art Dealer, Brisbane; Dianne Tanzer Gallery + Projects, Melbourne

2012 *Broken Dreams*, October Gallery, London, UK
Through My Eyes, La Trobe University Visual Arts Centre, Bendigo, Victoria
The Mission, Dianne Tanzer Gallery + Projects, Melbourne
Stickman, Dianne Tanzer Gallery + Projects, Melbourne

2011 *Uninhabited*, Andrew Baker Art Dealer, Brisbane

2010 *Through My Eyes*, Andrew Baker Art Dealer, Brisbane

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2014 *The 19th Biennale of Sydney: You Imagine What You Desire*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney
Photo LA: The 23rd International Los Angeles Photographic Art Exposition, L.A. Mart, Los Angeles, USA
Private Assembly: A Contemporary Collection, Tweed Regional Gallery, Murwillumbah, New South Wales
Saltwater Country, Gold Coast City Art Gallery, Queensland

2014–17 *East Coast Encounter*, Australian National Maritime Museum, Sydney; Caloundra Regional Gallery, Queensland; Redland Art Gallery, Queensland; Hervey Bay Regional Gallery, Queensland; Artspace Mackay, Queensland; TYTO Regional Art Gallery, Ingham, Queensland; KickArts, Cairns, Queensland; Pinnacles Gallery, Townsville, Queensland; Caboolture Regional Art Gallery, Queensland; Lockyer Valley Art Gallery, Gatton, Queensland; Coffs Harbour Regional Gallery, New South Wales

2013 *Photo LA: The 22nd International Los Angeles Photographic Art Exposition*, Santa Monica Civic Auditorium, Santa Monica, USA
Debil Debil—Australian Ghosts, Anna Schwartz Gallery, Carriageworks, Sydney
Josephine Ulrick & Win Schubert Photography Award, Gold Coast City Art Gallery, Queensland
The Art of Sound, Caboolture Regional Art Gallery, Queensland

- Silver*, Museum of Brisbane, Queensland
- Olive Cotton Award for Photographic Portraiture*, Tweed River Art Gallery, Murwillumbah, New South Wales
- 2013–14 *My Country, I still Call Australia Home: Contemporary Art from Black Australia*, Queensland Art Gallery/Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane; Auckland Art Gallery | Toi o Tamaki, New Zealand
- 2012 *The 7th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (APT7)*, Queensland Art Gallery/GoMA, Brisbane
- 29th Telstra National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Art Award*, Museums and Art Galleries of the Northern Territory, Darwin
- My Country: Works from Indigenous communities that celebrate their heritage*, University of Western Sydney Art Gallery, New South Wales
- Josephine Ulrick & Win Schubert Photography Award*, Gold Coast City Art Gallery, Queensland
- SCAP 2D 2012: Sunshine Coast Art Prize 2D*, Caloundra Regional Gallery, Queensland
- Omission*, Linden Centre for Contemporary Arts, Melbourne
- Where the art leads: new explorations by Queensland Indigenous artists*, Cairns Regional Gallery, Queensland
- All I need is everything*, Rockhampton Art Gallery, Queensland
- Pairs*, Dianne Tanzer Gallery + Projects, Melbourne
- 2012–13 *UnDisclosed: 2nd National Indigenous Art Triennial*, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra; Cairns Regional Gallery, Queensland; Anne & Gordon Samstag Museum of Art, University of South Australian, Adelaide; Western Plains Cultural Centre, Dubbo, New South Wales
- 2011 *Western Australian Indigenous Art Awards 2011*, Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth
- Face Up: A Look at portraits from the collection*, Gold Coast City Art Gallery, Queensland
- Josephine Ulrick & Win Schubert Photography Award*, Gold Coast City Art Gallery, Queensland
- 2010 *15th Redlands Westpac Art Prize*, Mosman Art Gallery, Sydney
- AWARDS**
- 2014 Recipient, *Australia Council Greene Street Studio Residency*, New York, NY, USA
- 2013 Recipient, *ACCELERATE*, British Council, London, UK
- Finalist, *Josephine Ulrick & Win Schubert Photography Award*, Gold Coast City Art Gallery, Queensland
- Finalist, *Olive Cotton Award for Photographic Portraiture*, Tweed River Art Gallery, Murwillumbah, New South Wales
- 2012 Finalist, *29th Telstra National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Art Award*, Museums and Art Galleries of the Northern Territory, Darwin
- Finalist, *SCAP 2D 2012: Sunshine Coast Art Prize 2D*, Caloundra Regional Gallery, Queensland

- Finalist, *Josephine Ulrick & Win Schubert Photography Award*, Gold Coast City Art Gallery, Queensland
- 2011 Winner, 'People's Choice Award', *Western Australian Indigenous Art Awards 2011*, Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth
- Winner, 'Visual Artist of the Year', *17th Annual Deadly Awards—the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Awards*
- Finalist, *Western Australian Indigenous Art Awards 2011*, Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth
- Finalist, *Josephine Ulrick & Win Schubert Photography Award*, Gold Coast City Art Gallery, Queensland
- 2008 Winner, 'Visual Artist of the Year', *14th Annual Deadly Awards—the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Awards*

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- Anon. 'Contemporary Acquisition: Michael Cook's Civilised #12', *Newsletter*, Summer 2013, McMaster University Museum of Art, Hamilton, ON, Canada
- Anon. 'In the quest for beauty', *Deadly Vibe*, October 2011
- Anon. 'Michael Cook: Uninhabited', *National Indigenous Times*, 12 May 2011
- Anon. 'Memphis School', *Culture*, Volume 12, Number 2, April/May 2010
- Anon. 'Reclaiming our identity', *Caloundra Weekly*, 11 May 2011
- ARTAND Australia*, Issue No. 51.3, 2014
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- Baum, Tina. 'Michael Cook: Undiscovered', *Artonview*, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Autumn 2011 | 65
- Brown, Phil. 'Deception exposed: Turning the lens from fashion to fine arts, this photographer confronts the history of Australia', *Brisbane News*, 18–24 May 2011
- Brown, Phil. 'Enhanced Image', *Brisbane News*, 5 November 2008
- Brown, Phil. 'Star Performers: 14 Michael Cook, 44, Artist', *Qweekend: The Courier-Mail*, 8–9 December 2012
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Dauber, Dr Christine. 'Michael Cook—Broken Dreams a Journey of Discovery', *Michael Cook: Broken Dreams* [ex. cat.], Andrew Baker Art Dealer, Brisbane and October Gallery, London, 2012

Dauber, Dr Christine, 'Michael Cook: A singular vision of cultural dissonance', *Hear no... see no... speak no...* [ex. cat.], Queensland Centre for Photography, Brisbane

Desmond, Michael. 'Wistful Humour: Michael Cook's Antipodean Garden of Eden', *FormelInforme* (on-line journal), Brisbane, June 2012

Donald, Sally. 'Michael Cook', *R.E.A.C.H. Teacher Resource/CIAF*, Cairns, 2012

Etchart, Julio. 'Michael Cook: Broken Dreams at the October Gallery', *The Reporter*, 12 November 2012

Gibson, Prue. 'Under 5k: Michael Cook', *Art Collector*, Issue 65, July–September 2013

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Johnson, Susan. 'Mutable Signs: Australian artists in the seventh Asia Pacific Triennial examine the shifting beauty and terror of the unknown', *Qweekend, The Courier-Mail*, 1–2 December 2012

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Lauth, Laura. 'Deadly art coup for fresh view', *Sunshine Coast Daily*, 8 October 2011

Low, Claire. 'A celebration of culture', *The Canberra Times*, 12 May 2012

McLean, Bruce. 'Michael Cook', in Lane, Carly and Cubillo, Franchesca, *unDisclosed: 2nd National Indigenous Art Triennial* [ex. cat.], National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 2012

McLean, Bruce. 'Michael Cook', *My Country, I Still Call Australia Home: Contemporary Art from Black Australia* [ex. cat.] Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 2013

McCulloch, Susan (ed.). *McCulloch's Indigenous Art Diary 2012*, McCulloch & McCulloch Australian Art Books, Balnarring, 2011

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Martin-Chew, Louise. 'Majority Rule, 2014', in *Michael Cook* [ex. cat.], Andrew Baker Art Dealer, Brisbane, 2013

Michael Cook [ex. cat.], Andrew Baker Art Dealer, Brisbane, 2013

Michael Cook: Broken Dreams [ex. cat.], Andrew Baker Art Dealer, Brisbane and October Gallery, London, 2012

Michael Cook: Civilised [ex. cat.], Andrew Baker Art Dealer, Brisbane, 2012

Michael Cook: Majority Rule [ex. cat.], Andrew Baker Art Dealer, Brisbane, 2014

Michael Cook: Uninhabited [ex. cat.], Andrew Baker Art Dealer, Brisbane, 2011

Michael Cook: Through My Eyes [ex. cat.], Andrew Baker Art Dealer, Brisbane, 2010

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O'Riordan, Maurice. 'Mission impossible: The poetic narratives of Michael Cook', *Art & Australia*, 49, No. 4, 2012

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Waring-Flood, Clive. 'Michael Cook: Broken Dreams', *Silvershotz*, Volume 8, Edition 4, International Edition, 2012

Zou, Shall. 'Flamboyance Never Fade', *Life Element*, Theme Issue, #116

COLLECTIONS

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
National Museum of Australia, Canberra
Australian National Maritime Museum, Sydney
Parliament House, Canberra
Artbank, Sydney
Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth
Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
Artspace Mackay, Queensland
Bendigo Art Gallery, Victoria
Brisbane Grammar School, Brisbane
Caboolture Regional Art Gallery, Queensland
Gold Coast City Art Gallery, Queensland
Ipswich Art Gallery, Queensland
La Trobe University, Melbourne
McMaster Museum of Art, Hamilton, ON, Canada
Monash Gallery of Art, Melbourne
Newcastle Art Gallery, New South Wales
Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane
Rockhampton Art Gallery, Queensland
University of Western Sydney, New South Wales
University of Wollongong, New South Wales
The Macquarie Group Collection, Sydney
Westpac Corporate Art Collection, Sydney
Alex Mackay Collection of Erotic Art, Brisbane
Alstonville Art Collective, New South Wales
Dr Clinton Ng Collection, Sydney
Corrigan Collection, Sydney
Daryl Hewson Collection, Brisbane
TEWRR Collection, Brisbane
The Bowerman Collection, Brisbane
The Gene and Brian Sherman Collection, Sydney
The M Collection, Melbourne
The Owen and Wagner Collection of Australian Aboriginal Art, Chapel Hill, NC, USA

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