



MICHAEL COOK

IDENTITY — *ANDU* (SON)

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I grew up knowing I had Indigenous ancestry, however at the time I didn't 'feel' Aboriginal. At three weeks of age I was adopted by a non-Indigenous family named Cook. Early-on my parents made me aware I was adopted and had Aboriginal heritage, they also told me I was from somewhere in western Queensland. Coincidentally, Cook was also the maiden name of my unmarried biological-mother. At the hospital prior to adoption, my adoptive-parents were asked if they were related to any Cooks in western Queensland. They were informed that if there was even the remotest relationship they would not be able to adopt me.

As the youngest of six children (and the only one adopted) I have never felt anything other than the equal of my siblings. My adoptive-mother knew most of the Aboriginal community in the area where I was raised and she and two close friends were known as 'Charlie's Angels' because they helped local Indigenous kids who were in trouble.

My adoptive-mother had strong views about Aboriginal rights and this gave me a good understanding of my ancestry and the reasons for my adoption. She explained how my biological-mother had only been sixteen when she became pregnant. Being a teen-aged single mother living in a small country town in the late-1960s, conservative views within the community meant she was expected to offer me up for adoption.

My adoptive-mother received a small amount of information about my biological-mother, such as her age and the general area in which she lived. She also learned the name my biological-mother had given me: Michael. My adoptive-mother kept that name.

My adoptive-mother once explained to me that mothers who offer a child for adoption often have regrets later in life, usually around their fifties, as they have always wondered what happened to their child. She said that if I ever wanted to contact my biological-mother she would fully support me. The issue had always been in the back of my mind and when I turned thirty, knowing that my biological-mother would be getting close to fifty, I decided to make contact.

Initially this occurred anonymously through letters delivered by a Queensland adoption agency and we wrote to each other for six months before deciding to meet. I'm not sure why I wanted a meeting. I think it was partly to tell her that I was all right, had a loving family with lots of brothers and sisters, and that she need not worry too much about me. Another reason was to meet and learn more about her.

I also wanted to learn about my Indigenous ancestry; something my adoptive-mother had always nurtured, both personally and politically. In my childhood, the first Aboriginal person I strongly remember was Neville Bonner — standing on our front verandah, around 1970, having a conversation with my adoptive-mother about politics. She knew him well, as they were both members of the One People of Australia League.

My adoptive-mother was always a fighter for her political beliefs. She later spent many years on local council and people either loved or hated her. The haters were usually property developers, over her stance to stop high-rise developments with the intention of protecting foreshore parks in our local area. As a result of her personal efforts, the area continues to retain much of its natural beauty. I now know that my adoptive-mother had a future-vision, rather than that of the money-grabbing developers who simply wanted to fill their own pockets with cash.

I always called my adoptive-mother 'Mum', yet I often wondered who my biological-mother and -father were. Had I passed them in the street? Did they look like me? Had we met and not realized? So, after six months of correspondence, I arranged to meet with my biological-mother in Brisbane. She and her husband met me at the Botanical Gardens, where we talked for about an hour. Many of my childhood questions were answered.

Since that first meeting, I have always approached my biological-mother with a quite laid-back attitude. I think I have done this because to have behaved any other way would have shown disrespect to the family that raised me. I think being male and meeting her in my thirties made a big difference; to this day I still call her by her first name. I just couldn't call her Mum, as this would have been disrespectful to my adoptive-mother who raised me. This doesn't change how close I am to my biological-mother, it's just how I feel.

I now have a very close relationship with my biological-mother and she has lived next-door to me for the past seven years. She told me about her relationship with my biological-father when she was sixteen and how she had never told anyone in her family of seven that she had fallen pregnant to him. She kept it as a secret for thirty years. After I contacted her and we had decided to meet, she resolved to tell her whole family (including her parents and a sister to whom she was very close) that she'd secretly had a child when she was seventeen.

From her I also learnt some things about my birth-father and my extended Indigenous family. Six months after our initial meeting my biological-mother raised the courage to contact him, although I think the shock was too much and I have never heard from him.

After seeing a picture of him, I realized I had walked past him in the street a few years earlier. I remember looking at a man sitting in the window of a cafe and thinking "that could be my birth-father" and now I realize that it was. Since then, I have seen him another four times: either in restaurants or walking past just by coincidence. I'm still not sure if he knows who I am.

I create artwork about Indigenous issues, past and present, and how the past relates to the present and eventually moulds the future. I'm not sure where I belong, or whether I really need to belong anywhere. Put simply, I'm a person of mixed ancestry — some of which is Indigenous.

I'm sure that my understanding of the world and the angles I take in my work come from my adoptive-mother's beliefs and the upbringing she gave me, yet she is white. I have never been to my ancestral country (Bidjara), though this is what gets listed beside my name at every exhibition in which I'm involved. I was raised in Hervey Bay: homeland of the Butchula (people with whom my adoptive-mother had a strong connection) and the place I call home.

Who am I? Where do I belong? Does it really matter? Probably not to me. I have a family and a strong connection with the area where I was raised, I have a biological affiliation to a place I have never seen. Who knows if I would have a connection there? It doesn't really matter to me. I look at the big picture, I am Australian, I tell my stories to Australians of all races and also to those beyond our shores. I am a part of the human race.

This self-portrait is about not feeling Aboriginal enough.

I was adopted at three weeks into a non-Indigenous family yet I always had a good understanding of my Indigenous ancestry. In earlier years I knew I 'was' but never 'felt' Aboriginal. People used to ask me where I was from, thinking I was Italian, Spanish or Greek. I would say, "I'm Aboriginal" and their reply would typically be, "No you're not" or "I thought you were Spanish or something". This made me feel that my Aboriginal ancestry was something to be embarrassed about.

Some people ask why my Indigenous ancestry is so important to me. I was raised to be proud of my origins at a time in Queensland where it was customary to be ridiculed for being Aboriginal or dark-skinned. Though I have always known I am Aboriginal, I don't have a direct connection to that part of my ancestry, therefore I don't feel a real connection. Yet I think it's natural to want to learn more about my history.

I am part of Australia's diverse multicultural population and I know my story echoes those of people like myself as well as those of different backgrounds. Aboriginal people are extremely diverse, our country's history has ensured this — we are who we are. Circumstances from the past have made me who I am today and I'm here to share my story.

To make this image I downloaded a photo from the Internet of a family member from the Aboriginal side of my ancestry. He probably doesn't even know I exist. I then placed some of his features over an image of myself. This family member has very strong facial features — the lack of which is something I have been questioned about whenever queried about my origins.

Third parties constantly associate my artwork with my Bidjara heritage, though I have never been to Bidjara country and have no connection with the community there. Aboriginal people today comprise many diverse groups and gone are the clichés of how we are supposed to appear. This self-portrait shows a connection to my Indigenous origins, Bidjara country, a place I have never visited yet one with which I am constantly associated.

Preferably, I believe I belong to a wider community: humanity.



IDENTITY — ANDU (SON) 2015

Inkjet print (Epson UltraChrome K3™ inks on Hahnemühle Photo Rag® Bright White 310 gsm paper)

62 × 56 cm

MICHAEL COOK

BIOGRAPHY

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

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2015 *Through My Eyes*, KickArts, Cairns, Queensland; Bundaberg Regional Art Gallery, Queensland
Undiscovered: Photographic Works by Michael Cook, Australian National Maritime Museum, Sydney
- 2014 *Majority Rule*, Andrew Baker Art Dealer, Brisbane
Australian Landscapes, La Trobe University Museum of Art, Bundoora, Victoria
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
- 2012–15 *Civilised*, Andrew Baker Art Dealer, Brisbane; Dianne Tanzer Gallery + Projects, Melbourne; The Cat Street Gallery, Hong Kong
- 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

- 2015 *Indigenous Australia: enduring civilisation*, The British Museum, London, UK
Encounters: Revealing stories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander objects from the British Museum, National Museum of Australia, Canberra
Personal Structures: Time Space Existence, Palazzo Mora, Venice, Italy
Photo LA: The 24th International Los Angeles Photographic Art Exposition, The Reef/L.A. Mart, Los Angeles, CA, USA
Photo Independent: The International Exposition of Contemporary Photography, Raleigh Studios, Hollywood, CA, USA
Resistance, Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth
Encounters, National Museum of Australia, Canberra
Photo Contemporary, Raleigh Studios, Hollywood, CA, USA
The New Black: Contemporary Indigenous works from the collection, Artspace Mackay, Queensland

Cross Pose: Body language against the grain, UQ Art Museum, The University of Queensland, Brisbane

New Sensation: Recent Acquisitions, Artspace Mackay, Queensland

Feeling for Place: Moreton Bay Regional Council Art Collection—Recent Acquisitions, Caboolture Regional Art Gallery, Queensland

Discerning Judgement, Supreme Court Library Queensland, Brisbane

National Self-Portrait Prize, UQ Art Museum, The University of Queensland, Brisbane

2014

The 19th Biennale of Sydney: You Imagine What You Desire, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney

Episodes: Australia Photography Now, 13th Dong Gang International Photo Festival, Yeongwol, South Korea

Kyoto Hanga: International Print Exhibition Japan and Australia, Kyoto Municipal Museum of Art, Japan; Fukuyama Museum of Art, Japan

Photo LA: The 23rd International Los Angeles Photographic Art Exposition, L.A. Mart, Los Angeles, CA, USA

Mother and Child, McMaster University Museum of Art, Hamilton, ON, Canada

New Passports, New Photography, Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth

Novocastria, Newcastle Art Gallery, New South Wales

Private Assembly: A Contemporary Collection, Tweed Regional Gallery, Murwillumbah, New South Wales

Monuments to the Frontier Wars, Damien Minton Gallery, Sydney

Courting Blakness: Recalibrating Knowledge in the Sandstone University, The University of Queensland, Brisbane

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

2014–17

Saltwater Country, Gold Coast City Gallery, Queensland; Australian Embassy, Washington DC, USA; AAMU, Museum of Contemporary Aboriginal Art, Utrecht, Netherlands; Manly Art Gallery and Museum, New South Wales; Gladstone Regional Art Gallery & Museum, Queensland; Cairns Regional Gallery, Queensland; Grafton Regional Art Gallery, New South Wales; Mornington Peninsula Regional Gallery, Victoria; Tandanya National Aboriginal Cultural Institute, South Australia; Bunbury Regional Art Galleries, Western Australia; Western Plains Cultural Centre, Dubbo, New South Wales; Lake Macquarie City Art Gallery, New South Wales; State Library of Queensland, Brisbane

- 2013 *Photo LA: The 22nd International Los Angeles Photographic Art Exposition*, Santa Monica Civic Auditorium, Santa Monica, CA, 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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Brown, Phil. 'Through My Eyes', *Queensland Life—The Courier-Mail*, 5 April 2014

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Brown, Phil. 'Star Performers: 14 Michael Cook, 44, Artist', *Qweekend: The Courier-Mail*, 8–9 December 2012

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

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COLLECTIONS

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

National Museum of Australia, Canberra

Australian National Maritime Museum, Sydney

Australian War Memorial, Canberra

Museum of Australian Democracy at Old Parliament House, Canberra

Parliament House, Canberra

Artbank, Sydney

Art Gallery of New South Wales, 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

Redland Art Gallery, Queensland

Rockhampton Art Gallery, Queensland

The University of Queensland, Brisbane

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
Mather 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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