

Michael Cook

Broken Dreams

Michael's career began as a commercial photographer which provided him with a lot of contacts; especially with make-up artists and stylists. "Everything I've done, I feel like it's been my training ground to get where I am now," he said. "Everything in the past has given me the keys to the projects I'm doing now. Every job Michael was given in fashion restricted his personal freedom. Whether it's the client, or whether it's your agent, they are controlling the end result. The thing I love about art is that it's my creation from beginning to end, without having to answer to anybody else. As an artist there's still a lot of pressure, but it's my own pressure that I put on myself". Michael reflects on the influence of his soul as an artist as he discovers and explores his Indigenous ancestry.

Michael's adoptive mother [he was adopted at an early age and met his mother in his twenties] was involved in the fight for Aboriginal rights in the 1970s. He grew up in the coastal town of Hervey Bay in Australia and had close contact with his local Indigenous community. His adoptive mother made sure he knew and understood his Aboriginal ancestry. His change of career happened by accident. In 2008 he embarked on a series of highly stylized photo-shoots of brides as a personal project to be used for self promotion.

His first series titled '1942' was photographed at the Brisbane maritime museum using old Brisbane trams that used to operate on Brisbane's streets in the 1960s. The next series was more of a Hollywood production involving the Brisbane Maritime Museum, two models and a stylist. The series, 'Lady Penelope', Michael envisaged a damsel's shipwrecked

journey using imagery reminiscent of the 1800s. With these guidelines in place he could experiment and bring in mythical elements and detail based on a fairy tale for a modern day heroine. Three events happened in 2008 that catapulted Michael into the spotlight in 2008. His lady Penelope series was published by Grace Ormonde magazine and Rangefinder magazine in the USA. He was awarded Visual Artist of the year at the 'Deadly Awards' (National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander awards) at Sydney's Opera House. The combined publicity put him in front of a combined audience in excess of 500,000 readers.

His first serious attempt at breaking into the art world was a series called 'Through my eyes'. He obtained archival portrait photos of the 27 Australian Prime Ministers since Federation in 1901 and overlaid them with portraits of indigenous faces. These Black & White images are highly provocative because they transform the formalised public face of politicians, which, despite the indigenised features; the images remain clearly recognisable as their historical counterparts. The images are slightly blurred and highly disconcerting as a second set of eyes appear to be peering out at the viewer behind darkened skin and broader noses. The images are an inflammatory depiction because many of these politicians were ardent supporters of the White Australia Policy (1901-73). The portraits suggest an Australian history that is haunted by an Aboriginal past and the way in which the nation has failed to deal adequately with a history of neglect and subjugation. Most of his attempts at exhibiting these images failed, probably due to the contentious nature of the treatment. However he had a lucky break with Andrew Baker Gallery in Brisbane, Andrew loved the concept and the exhibition was extremely successful. In fact it was so successful; Andrew also exhibited Undiscovered & Broken Dreams in 2011 as a solo show.

Michael's next series, 'Undiscovered' amused Michael because of the idea that Australia was an uninhabited and undiscovered country before European settlement. His images speak to us on multiple levels as he lampoons the notion of terra nullius in his narratives. They are deliciously irreverent and comedic whilst at the same time full of the tragedy since the white man landed. Indigenous people have been marginalised and are still suffering from the effects of two hundred years of subjugation; his task is to proclaim the history and identity of the aborigines.

The *Undiscovered* series is a monotone grey with a flash of red and blue in the colonial uniform worn by an indigenous man. The sequence shows an indigenous man, holding a musket and dressed in the red uniform of a British Royal Marine, wading ashore. An emu strolls by, perhaps to indicate that this 'undiscovered' land is Australia. A square-rigged vessel appears in the background of several panels suggesting that the man had come by Ship. Michael plays with the viewer as the man appears with a ladder, a bicycle, a wheelbarrow, a flag, gradually losing his clothing, and losing the flag which is abandoned in the surf and trampled by a native animal in the last image. At first glance it appears that this narrative is about Captain James Cook discovering Australia. The images are designed to confuse us because the British Royal Marine in red is indigenous, perhaps this is really Captain Michael Cook and history is being rewritten.

Broken Dreams is a sequence of an indigenous heroine and her parrot. The parrot is to let the viewer know that though you can see England in the background of some images; this is her imagination. The parrot shows you that she is in Australia even though her dreams are of wondering where these visitors have come from. She has seen European women and dreams of travelling to their



The Mission, At the mission



Native receiving rations

The Mission, Native receiving rations



Aboriginal Bride.

The Mission, Aboriginal Bride



The Mission, Heading to a better life



The Mission, Aboriginal in mourning



Broken Dreams #1



Broken Dreams #3



Broken Dreams #6



Broken Dreams #9

world. The dream falls slowly to pieces because European civilisation stifles the woman's spirit. There is a return to her natural state, until she is free of the shackles of colonialism. Her nudity suggests a natural state of innocence as she loses the materialism of a faraway land and connects back to her land. This is the ancestry of a golden age, of a pure and unsullied Australia filled with beautiful people and lovable creatures living in harmony. Both of these works, *Undiscovered*, 2010, and *Broken Dreams*, 2010, are monumental in scale, as each consist of ten large photographic panels which occupy nearly 15 metres of wall space.

Stickman is the universal perception of man drawn by man. In the *Stickman* series, the limbs of the photographed figures are stretched, and rendered translucent, like a memory, a ghost, or a poignant presence of what has gone before. Rock paintings have recorded Aboriginal history for more than 40,000 years. Like the rock paintings of old, *Stickman* records man hunting animals, tribal wars, and white settlement. These historical incidents are projected into the modern era—the final image depicts an Aboriginal man sitting reflectively in a rocking chair in the middle of an unforgiving Australian landscape.

The Mission is a ten-part photographic work which narrates the journey of an Aboriginal woman from her homeland to life on a mission. During this journey we witness key changes as a result of mission life: the introduction of colonial dress and goods (such as tobacco and food rations) as well as the impact of Christianity. The protagonist also marries and has a child. Hundreds of missions and reserves were established throughout Australia from the early nineteenth century onwards. They generally fell under the control of State and Commonwealth protection boards and were administered by various Christian-based denominations. These missions were initially established as buffers against the colonial onslaught whereby Aboriginal



people were either murdered or forced off their lands by colonial pastoralists eager to utilise this land for their own gains. Aboriginal people were usually rounded up and placed in missions and reserves against their wills, or they eventually drifted there because it was their only chance of survival.

Most Aboriginal people recall mission life as a time of great social upheaval, for many it represented a form of cultural genocide. The existence of reserves enabled the implementation of policies by

which children of mixed Aboriginal and European heritage were forcibly removed from Aboriginal societies and placed in 'half-caste' institutions where they were trained for service and assimilation into the vision of a white Australia. These children are known as the Stolen Generations.

For *'The Mission'* series Michael has drawn upon a range of archival imagery, vintage postcards, his own family photographic albums and related material. His photographs explore the impact of

Stickman #7



European settlement on Indigenous Australians historically and through to the present moment and he hopes for a future in which the resilience and dreams of Aboriginal people remain unbroken against the odds.

Michael won the People's Choice Award in the Western Australian Indigenous Art Awards 2011 with his series 'Broken Dreams' and 'Undiscovered'. Michael was also one of 20 indigenous artists featured at the 2nd National Indigenous Art Triennial at the National Gallery of

Australia in May 2012. Michael will be the first photographic artist to be interviewed for an in-depth half hour video in the new interactive Silvershotz online magazine. The interview is FREE and can be watched by clicking on the link found on the home page of www.silvershotz.com

His next major exhibition will be at the October Gallery, 24 Old Gloucester Street, London from October 31st to December 1st.

To view more work visit www.andrew-baker.com www.michaelcook.net.au and www.octobergallery.co.uk

Editor's Note

The word deadly is actually used by Australian indigenous people to mean something that's extremely good; hence the Deadly Awards.

Stickman #2



Stickman #8

October Gallery in association with Andrew Baker Art Dealer, Brisbane, presents

october gallery

MICHAEL COOK

BROKEN DREAMS



1 November - 1 December 2012

This exhibition has been supported by the Queensland Government through the Queensland Indigenous Arts Marketing and Export Agency (QIAMEA), Arts Queensland. QIAMEA promotes Queensland Indigenous arts through marketing and export activity.



www.octobergallery.co.uk

October Gallery, 24 Old Gloucester Street, London WC1N 3AL
art@octobergallery.co.uk Tel: + 44 (0)20 7242 7367 Tues - Sat 12.30-5.30 or by appointment