



# *Mother*

Michael Cook

Education Resource  
for Secondary School Teachers

# *Mother*

## Michael Cook

Tweed Regional Gallery & Margaret Olley Art Centre is thrilled to present *Mother*, a new body of work by Michael Cook that unravels the artist's personal history and explores broader universal ideas of motherhood, belonging and identity.

The Tweed Regional Gallery acknowledges the generous support of collectors Alan Conder and Alan Pigott in presenting this exhibition.

Michael Cook is represented by Andrew Baker Art Dealer, Brisbane and THIS IS NO FANTASY + dianne tanzer gallery, Melbourne.

Exhibition dates 24 August – 11 December 2016

Cover (detail)  
MICHAEL COOK *Mother (Pram)* AP, 2016, inkjet print on paper, 120 x 180cm  
Collection of Alan Conder and Alan Pigott

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## ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

*Cook's emotionally engaging new series **Mother** explores a universal theme that is crucial to the wellbeing of all. The love or absence of a mother is paramount to the development and future of each child the world over.*

*Mother* is a journey through thirteen images of a woman in a deserted Australian landscape.

His 'mother' is always alone, her baby absent, although evidence of a child remains in the empty pram, abandoned toys on the Hopscotch court, the slackness of the skipping rope. These images possess an arrested stillness that speak to a recently bereft status.

Michael Cook has tackled subjects from the political to the historical since he turned to creating art imagery in 2009. In *Mother* we see his most intensely personal work to date. While these images speak directly and poetically to Australia's Stolen Generation, they speak also to a universal experience of disconnection between mother and child. In their power they evoke the essential nature of the relationship between mother and child that is at the heart of human experience. Seductive yet enigmatic, Cook's vignettes construct a psychological mirror between personal experience and political power.



MICHAEL COOK  
*Mother (Merry-Go-Round)* AP, 2016  
inkjet print on paper  
120 x 180cm

## ABOUT THE ARTIST

*Michael Cook is an award-winning photomedia artist of Bidjara heritage. Adopted as a baby by a non-Indigenous family, he was later encouraged to find his birth mother and to explore his Indigenous heritage.*



Originally a successful commercial fashion photographer, Cook's expertise in digital image-making and post-production techniques lends an ethereal quality to his re-visioning of Australian history.

In past series, Cook's photographs restage colonial-focused histories and re-image the contemporary reality of indigenous populations. Touching on the discriminatory nature of society, his images muddle racial and social roles 'painting' a picture of a societal structure reversed. Cook invites viewers to speculate Indigenous cultures living at the forefront, even a majority, rather than manipulated to live within the confines of a white man's world.

Cook's images challenge our ingrained belief systems yet do not offer judgement — they are observational, asking questions without proffering neat prescriptive conclusions.

Considered to be one of Australia's most exciting contemporary Indigenous artists, Cook's *Mother* series was a highlight at the international art fair Art Basel Hong Kong in March 2016. His work has most recently been curated into *Indigenous Australia: enduring civilisation* at the British Museum, London; *Saltwater Country* at AAMU Museum of Contemporary Aboriginal Art, The Netherlands; and *Personal Structures* at Palazzo Mora, Venice during the 56th Venice Biennale. Cook's photographs have also been exhibited in the *19th Biennale of Sydney: You Imagine What You Desire, 2014*; the *2nd National Indigenous Triennial* at the National Gallery of Australia, 2012; and

the *7th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art* at Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art, 2013.

Cook was twice named Winner of the Deadly Awards – Visual Artist of the Year, in 2008 and 2011; he received People's Choice Award at the Western Australian Indigenous Art Awards 2011; and has been a selected finalist in awards including the Olive Cotton Award 2013, Telstra National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Art Awards, 2012, and Josephine Ulrick and Win Schubert Photography Award 2011, 2012 and 2013.

In 2016, Cook's work will be part of an exhibition curated by the Musées de la Civilisation in Québec, Canada, titled *Lifelines: Indigenous Contemporary Art from Australia*.

Cook's work has been acquired by institutions including the National Gallery of Australia, Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art, National Gallery of Victoria, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Art Gallery of Western Australia, National Museum of Australia and Parliament House, Canberra.



## ARTIST STATEMENT

*I create artwork about Indigenous issues, past and present, and how the past relates to the present and eventually moulds the future.*

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 16 years old when she became pregnant. Being a teenage 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 learnt 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 30, knowing that my biological mother would be getting close to 50, 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 realised? 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 16 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 30 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 17.

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 realised 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 realise 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. 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.

Michael Cook, 2016

Edited extract from Exhibition Catalogue.  
Reproduced courtesy Andrew Baker Art Dealer, Brisbane  
and THIS IS NO FANTASY + dianne tanzer gallery, Melbourne.

# CONVERSATIONS WITH THE RE-IMAGINED ALTERED/NATIVE

AN ESSAY BY RHODA ROBERTS

*Cook's photographs restage colonial-focused histories and re-image the contemporary reality of Indigenous populations. Touching on the discriminatory nature of society, his images muddle racial and social roles 'painting' a picture of a societal structure.*



A member of the Bundjalung nation, Widjabul and Gidabul clans of Northern NSW and South East QLD, **Rhoda Roberts** is Head of Indigenous Programming, Sydney Opera House, Producer, Vibe Australia, Creative Director, Rhoda Roberts Gallery and Events, and Producer and Festival Director, Boomerang Festival.

Michael Cook was born in 1968 in rural Queensland to a young white woman. While the term illegitimacy is not as widely used today, back in the 1960s it was the ultimate insult for a single pregnant woman — to know her baby would be labelled illegitimate, a bastard.

It was a period of time that viewed unmarried mothers and their unlucky children as deviants. The collective status regarded these young girls as outcasts; they were seen as socially inferior and suffered consequences. Tainted with sexual immorality, many young girls were sent away from all they were familiar with to isolated maternity homes. Families lied to their neighbours, creating scenarios of their daughter on holidays abroad or looking after a sick relative in the city. Too often there was parental rejection and community disapproval. For the mother and child, illegitimacy was to be shamed and shunned. With this type of moral compass, adoption was often the only choice.

The legislation of adoption emphasised the importance of a clean break and provided the secrecy for birth mothers and their families. Knowing Michael's biological father

was Aboriginal confronted even more the very accepted standards of white and black society at the time.

So babies given to their adopted parents would be heirs, raised as if born to them, assuring the newborn and his new approved family a life without the fear of stigma or any interference from the biological mother.

Surprisingly both mothers carried the surname Cook and one of the first questions asked by authorities was if there was any chance of connection between the adoptive family and the Cooks in Western Queensland. They were informed that if there was even the remotest relationship they would not be able to adopt Michael. The answer was none.

The Cook adoptees' household was one of children, love and politics. The family already had five biological children when Michael joined them as a baby. He would be raised as the youngest with his siblings — three sisters and two brothers.

His adopted mother, Ronda Cook — 'Mum' as she is still called by Michael — was a sensitive woman, a local councillor, very

aware of the social humiliations and challenges faced by the Aboriginal community. During his younger years he witnessed her strength and conscience. She spoke of the principles of fairness, becoming a committed fighter for Aboriginal equality and the environment, questioning and protesting. Her vitality ensured the young Michael grew enriched with a permanent memory and understanding of who he was when it came to his Aboriginal heritage.

But it was not a charmed life. School experiences during the 1970s still brought to a head the questions, and many experiences of racism, cloaked in the acceptance of ignorance and fear of the unknown. Michael raised his own internal questions and observed the lack of visibility of others like him.

*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...<sup>1</sup> My story is my story, my work is me and it's my identity, there is no right and wrong I am one of the many Aboriginal adopted, it happened, it's my learning full of layers.<sup>2</sup>*

Michael lost himself in the darkroom. His first photo was dripping water off leaves with sun shining through and getting effects with lens filters. He then used a Chinon 35mm film camera. But it was an early overseas trip to Hong Kong with his brother and sister-in-law at fifteen that gave him a taste for capturing a world of different souls.

His trip was at a time of great change for Hong Kong with the Sino-British Joint Declaration about to occur, a landscape growing with new highrises as one of the world's densest places. It was Victoria Harbour, a saltwater backdrop along

with the ancient craft known as 'junks' and the old tightknit fishing village that captured Michael's attention. Many of the houses are built on stilt structures that are interconnected, creating a strong shared community, with strings of fish drying and loads of culture and movement of a time gone by; it is a photographer's paradise.

Michael's identity and the history of Aboriginal Australia does profoundly inform his artwork. While he has not been back on the Bidjara lands of his father, he has firm affiliations with the Sunshine Coast in South East Queensland. This is the land of the Gubbi Gubbi /Kabi Kabi people. From the pristine mountains to the sea, it's both saltwater and freshwater country where life has adapted but the historical, the socio-political experiences and connection to country remain like many Aboriginal groups in Australia, where a resilience and pride has grown. Gubbi Gubbi /Kabi Kabi populations suffered due to colonisation with some 3000 men, women and children killed after the British arrived in Queensland and established a penal colony in Redcliffe in 1824.

It's this country and its history to which his story belongs and, like him, it's layered; his work re-imagines the colonial story through another lens.

*He works in photographic series rather than single images allowing a story to unfold. The digital layering in each image gives his work a depth and dream like quality that 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 own modern Dreaming.<sup>3</sup>*

I first met Michael many years ago when he was a fashion

photographer. To understand how he works in series of images rather than the one, it's like peeling back an onion — each layer one of many experiences globally. He was awarded a Deadly for his work in the commercial fashion industry. At the time I was thrilled thinking, 'Wow we have someone at that calibre in the international circuit.' Well that was an understatement, if you're not into weddings then you might not have heard of *Grace Ormonde Wedding Style*, a luxury wedding planning publication with a focus on fashion, jewellery, décor and travel. This is the high end of the global bridal market. Early on Michael was photographing models and brides to pay the rent. On a hunch he went online and searched 'wedding magazines'. He rang the New York number, sent his photos, and ten minutes later he was signed for the publication with six pages of his work. You could not ask for better advertising. While there was a healthy pay check, his heart was not in it and there was the stress — it's a high pressured industry. Michael had the hidden desire to work in art and had watched with interest the changes and the topics of reimagining and decolonisation work unfold with other Indigenous artists.

Working with models developed his experience in photography and unique technical capabilities, and established connections with the global industry. He has said, '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.'<sup>4</sup>

His first exhibitions focused on themes relating to first peoples — the cultural assumptions, their dispossession, the value judgement that was placed on Indigenous people in terms of their civilisation and the Early European occupation

<sup>1</sup> Michael Cook, quoted in Andrew Baker Art Dealer, *Michael Cook Identity - Andu (Son)*, (2016), Exhibition catalogue. [http://www.andrew-baker.com/Michael\\_Cook\\_Identity%E2%80%94Andu\\_\(Son\).pdf](http://www.andrew-baker.com/Michael_Cook_Identity%E2%80%94Andu_(Son).pdf)  
<sup>2</sup> Michael Cook in conversation with Rhoda Roberts

<sup>3</sup> Bruce McLean, Curator, QAGOMA quoted in UTS, *Michael Cook* (2014), Education Resource. <http://art.uts.edu.au/index.php/michael-cook/>

<sup>4</sup> Michael Cook, quoted in Arcilla, Mariam, 'Michael Cook The Skins We Live In', *Vault New Art and Culture*, issue 13 (2016): 51. <http://thisisnofantasy.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Michael-Cook-Vault-February-2016.pdf>



and settlement of their lands. Michael's work evokes political power and a reimagined memory of a time past within a framework that embodies the concept of decolonisation. His work gave him the lens to shape who he is now — storyteller and a product of colonisation.

*The way that the Aboriginal people lived in Australia, I mean, it well and truly was civilised but it's how the explorers saw Aboriginal people through their own eyes and what made them civilised was it cultivating the land, was it living in a built up society, was it the clothes that they wear or was it how they looked and the colour of their skin. That is the question 'how did they see them as being civilised?' because they were civilised. So, I wanted to show Aboriginal people in a civilised context in how a European explorer would have seen a civilised person.<sup>5</sup>*

Meeting his biological mother has again changed his life. He was not ready in twenties and did not want to disappoint the woman he had called Mum all his life. He tells me many adopted children feel this way. So when he turned thirty, when he knew his love for the family would always be strong and with the guidance of Ronda, he had taken the open approach to expect anything when meeting his birth mother. Val now lives next door to him and they have a laidback relationship but I wondered about the old psychology debate of 'Nature Versus Nurture'. Were there many innate qualities, personality traits and mannerisms? Yes there were many.

The exhibition *Mother* reflects a universal theme and again the work is layered landscape. There is a starkness — the absence of the baby and an elegance of the mother. Larissa is the young woman who often appears in his work and features across the thirteen pieces that make up the exhibition.

Michael discovered her on Facebook — her day job is as a truck driver in the mines.

*Mother*, inspired by both his mothers, embodies much of his own personal explorations and conflicts. Michael found himself asking the inner question of 'what if?'. What would his life be like if he had been raised with Val? What would his life have been if he had been raised with his Indigenous family? What would his artwork look like?

This suite of photographs was presented at Art Basel Hong Kong in March 2016, which seems very fitting remembering his journey through the lens as a fifteen year old. His growth both personally, adapting to the reality of his life, and as an artist has created a maturity, a sense of being much more centred. Michael says that when he produces art, he feels a stronger connection with his ancestry.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Michael Cook, quoted in UTS, Michael Cook (2014), Education Resource.  
<http://art.uts.edu.au/index.php/michael-cook/>

<sup>6</sup> Michael Cook



MICHAEL COOK *Mother (Rocking Horse)* AP, 2016, inkjet print on paper, 120 x 180cm





MICHAEL COOK *Mother (Merry-Go-Round)* AP, 2016, inkjet print on paper, 120 x 180cm





MICHAEL COOK *Mother (Skipping Rope)* AP, 2016, inkjet print on paper, 120 x 180cm





MICHAEL COOK *Mother (Pram)* AP, 2016, inkjet print on paper, 120 x 180cm



## NOTES FOR TEACHERS

*Teachers can utilise the following activities and discussion points in the classroom to further investigate Michael Cook's practice. Within each frame, these could provide a starting point for further research projects, critical writing assessments or the development of a body of work.*

SUBJECTIVE FRAME	STRUCTURAL FRAME	CULTURAL FRAME	POSTMODERN FRAME
<p>Students can:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• share their responses to the photographs to identify any personal meanings the works may hold for them</li><li>• reflect on the idea that <i>the love or absence of a mother is paramount to the development and future of each child the world over</i><sup>1</sup></li><li>• propose a body of work to reflect the theme of 'mother' related to their own personal histories</li></ul> <p><sup>1</sup> <a href="http://thisisnofantasy.com/art-fairs/art-basel-hong-kong/">http://thisisnofantasy.com/art-fairs/art-basel-hong-kong/</a></p>	<p>Students can:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• analyse the signs and symbols embedded in the artwork and propose meanings that are being communicated to the viewer</li><li>• identify the devices that the artist has employed in each photograph to create a coherent body of work</li><li>• make a list of tasks and processes that Cook would have undertaken to prepare and then complete this photographic shoot</li><li>• explain the digital editing tools that Cook may have used to create the 'look and feel' of the final photographs</li></ul>	<p>Students can:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• read Cook's artist statement and reflect on the experience of the 'mother' in this photographic series – then and now</li><li>• discuss ways in which Cook reimagines both Australian history and his personal history in his practice (referring to <i>Mother</i> and other series such as <i>Majority Rule</i>, <i>Civilised</i> or <i>The Mission</i>)</li><li>• research other Indigenous Australian artists who use photography to explore Aboriginal identity and history – including Brook Andrew, Bindi Cole, Fiona Foley, Tracey Moffatt, Destiny Deacon and Christian Thompson – and compare their approaches</li></ul>	<p>Students can:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• research contemporary Indigenous photography from the 1980s – including the work of Mervyn Bishop, Michael Riley and Tracey Moffatt – and reflect on the social, political and cultural climate of the time and the impact of this on their work</li><li>• reflect on other photographic series by Michael Cook and discuss some of the postmodern approaches he employs in his practice</li><li>• propose a body of work to reinterpret or appropriate Cook's <i>Mother</i> series according to their own notion of motherhood in a modern world</li></ul>

## FURTHER READING

- > **FULL ARTIST CV** <http://thisisnofantasy.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Michael-Cook-CV-TINF-2016.pdf>
- > **WEBSITES**
  - <https://www.michaelcook.net.au>
  - <http://thisisnofantasy.com/artist/michael-cook>
  - <http://www.andrew-baker.com/mc.html>
- > **ARTICLES**
  - <http://thisisnofantasy.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Michael-Cook-Vault-February-2016.pdf>
  - <http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/michael-cooks-mother-series-captures-the-longing-of-the-stolen-generation-20160321-gnm69.html>

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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The Tweed Regional Gallery acknowledges the generous support of collectors Alan Conder and Alan Pigott in presenting this exhibition.

Tweed Regional Gallery & Margaret Olley Art Centre would like to thank Michael Cook and Rhoda Roberts for their contributions to this resource.

Tweed Regional Gallery has recently been gifted two major series of work by Michael Cook, *Object* and *The Mission*. We are very grateful for this generous gift and look forward to sharing these photographs with audiences in the future. Pending donation through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program, 2016.

Design by Rick Shearman, Range Creative Studio [rangestudio.com](http://rangestudio.com)

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**TWEED REGIONAL GALLERY**  
& MARGARET OLLEY ART CENTRE | MURWILLUMBAH

Open 10am – 5pm (DST)  
Wed – Sun, Free admission

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