

Jan Murphy Gallery

Michael Cook *Fake*

28 March – 22 April 2023
Jan Murphy Gallery

31 March – 10 April 2023
Level 1, The Calile Hotel



Jan Murphy Gallery is excited to present 'Fake', our first solo exhibition with Queensland-based artist Michael Cook.

In partnership with The Calile Hotel, the series of 12 large scale works will be exhibited concurrently in the gallery, and on level one of Brisbane's most iconic hotel.

"Michael Cook's new series, Fake, depicts model Magnolia Maymuru, Richard Gala (a frequent collaborator and childhood friend of Cook's), and child model Cassius travelling as a family through remote Australia. It can easily be read as a fictionalised reversal of Cook's childhood: as a baby, he was adopted by a white activist couple, and he would often travel with them to remote areas and towns, where he met people such as Neville Bonner, the first Indigenous Australian elected to parliament. In Fake, a white child is on the road with Aboriginal parents.

Cook's art asks questions without easy answers. As the narrative follows the family into Central Australia, a sense of disconnect permeates the series: the family look away from the viewer, deadpan and remote, disconnected from their psyche and surroundings, and signalling potential inauthenticity. Exploring the psychology of conditioning and pondering what makes an authentic life is a common trope in Cook's work.





In Fake, he explores the connection to Country that has ensured the longevity of Aboriginal culture for millennia, as well as the loss of balance and harmony that was once so crucial for traditional cultures but has been lost in contemporary generations who are more focused on the future than mindful of the present. The beauty of Cook's work lures viewers in, only to reveal the harsh realities of Australia's colonial history.

In making 'fake' the subject of his work, Cook refers to all aspects of physical and intellectual theft. He introduces an element of literal inauthenticity with injections of fake designer fashion. Inspired by Gucci's autumn/winter 2021 collection, Fake Not, Cook cheekily places luxury fashion and accessories, both counterfeit and real, throughout these images. For Cook, the proliferation of fake luxury items is part of an exploration into the broader issue of theft, which includes the stealing of land during colonisation and the use of inauthentic Indigenous motifs in art and souvenirs." Louise Martin-Chew, 2023

"This series is moody and personal, and I hope that it helps people to understand the conditioning that most of us live with," Cook says. "During the family's journey, they discover their connection back to Country and culture, imbued with the importance of community. They find a release from their conditioning within Western society to find a deeper level of belonging. You could say that this reflects my journey in life — and a realisation of what is important in the 'fake' world we seem to be living in." Michael Cook, 2023

Dark Mirror

‘Every photographed object is simply the trace left behind by the disappearance of everything else. It’s almost a perfect crime, an almost total final solution, as it were, for a world which projects only the illusion of this or that object, which the photograph then transforms – absent from the rest of the world – into an unseizable enigma. From the height of this enigmatic object – which, as a radical exception, bears no resemblances, and has no meaning – one has an unobstructed vision of the world.’¹

Michael Cook’s photographic series *Fake* demonstrates his consummate powers of visual storytelling and composition. Cook revels in the postmodern world of free-floating signifiers, generating a feedback loop of indefinite distraction.

Many decades have passed since the publication of *Simulacra and Simulation* by Jean Baudrillard, where he argued that our current society has replaced all reality and meaning with symbols and signs, and that human experience happens within simulations of reality.² Simulacra, generated by an all pervasive mediascape sponsored by globalised capital and urbanisation, he asserted, are not based in a reality nor do they hide a reality, rather they replace it, reality no longer being necessary or relevant to contemporary life. While this may have been seen as extreme in 1981, the contemporary waves of Covid, Trump’s America, Putin’s neo-imperialist Russia, rolling natural disasters, looming recessions and environmental collapse, endless celebrity scandals and scams, saturating tourism and social media campaigns, make it seem prescient and even somewhat obvious with hindsight.

The images of Michael Cook’s series *Fake*, operate as simulacra – surreal collages of gleanings from the mediasphere (carefully and artificially staged, enacted and edited), concocting a family holiday drama. More like stills from a reality tv show than holiday snaps from a family album, the series follows an urbane Aboriginal couple and their adopted white son, all decked out in designer-label fashions, on a visit to Alice Springs and Australia’s red centre.

The family, touring in their white Pontiac convertible, enjoy a stay in an extremely boutique Savoy Hotel. They go shopping in Alice Springs, enjoy an outback horse-ride and a Segway tour around Uluru, and have a car break-down on the way to Yuendumu. The father and son then walk off together, followed by the peacock which they took from the hotel, to a remote place that may be a sacred site of some kind. The final image shows the family celebrating in the open landscape with song, dance, and clapsticks – their designer clothes discarded.

These images of hyper-reality are layered in complexity. Immediately one is entertained by the obvious role reversals – the cognitive dissonance of seeing Aboriginal people as luxury lifestyle tourists, completely

disconnected from culture and community, a white adopted child in tow. There is a dark humour in this playing out of the end games of colonialism and consumer capitalism, and a high-pitched hilarity as diametrically opposing notions of the beautiful and the exotic, the natural and the cultural, collide and conflate.

On a more fundamental level, this spectacular fakery may also be the inevitable consequence of the displacement that is photography. The photograph is not an image in real time, nor a virtual image, nor even today a purely digital image – it continues to retain the moment of the negative (as something different to the real) – an analogue trace and what Baudrillard has called ‘a moment of disappearance’. Cook’s images keep leading us back to that point, a moment where things dissolve, slipping through our grasp.

The images of *Fake* have no place – everything hinges on signs and brand labels, advertisements and product placements. While the hotel in Alice may actually have a peacock (named Andrew) and yes you can really ride Segways around Uluru, these images are not meant to convince. They have no time and no temperature – they have the charming appearance of vintage postcards from the 1950s and 60s, eliciting implanted memories and a false sense of nostalgia. They have no emotion – the people, like models on a runway, have no expression.

This succession of displacements is unnerving. Cook reminds us that identity is a mask and that photography can never capture a subject. Any truth which Cook may wish us to see lies both outside of (as excess) and ghosted within these deliberately constructed, intensely playful images. He renders vivid the experience that we are all strangers to ourselves, and to capture identity is not to offer resemblance or reality, but rather to hold up the dark mirror of alterity.

One can sense the intensity of creative collaborations at work in these manipulated compositions. Like a reality show, they feel at once in front of the camera and behind the scenes. Autobiographical references also float through the scenography – Cook actually had a pet peacock as a child, took long car journeys with his adoptive family across remote Australia, and dabbled in the world of luxury fashion during his brief foray into celebrity wedding photography as a young man. One can sense this personal



Michael Cook *Broken Down* 2022

authority woven secretly into the fictional imaginings.

While today's mediascape is increasingly a 'look over here' circus of relentless click-bait, Cook's images swirl with an erotic energy of a different kind. Within these photographs, everything is a disconnected object – detailed, idealised, illusory – reality is systematically constructed, manipulated, destroyed, and disappeared, both propelled by and in turn mobilising an insatiable machinic desire. Cook's photography has an obsessive, ecstatic and narcissistic quality. *Fake* does not declare itself as existing outside of the mediascape and the commodifications of an art world. Rather, Cook leads the viewer to potentially see themselves within the simulacrum that is the contemporary art gallery and museum.

Nevertheless, the images of *Fake* ultimately lead outside their frames. Cook's characters seem to find connection and another life journey. What necessarily lies outside these images is the pre-colonial Aboriginal cosmology – where landscape is story and song, creatures are ancestral kin, plants and seasons are signs, winds and stars maps, and everything is linked to Country as part of larger chains of being.

The images are magnificently silent. They are not cinema, television, or advertising. In the very centre of their turbulence, these images recreate an emptiness, a sense of isolation, an outback desert that immobilises appearances. Fantastically, Cook's excessive and extravagant images work to prove that images of God are not God. His works provide a limitlessness which frees subjects from the world and from the circumscriptions of history. Within the dark mirror both beyond and before these images hovers the singular divinity, the radical alterity, of all living beings, people and animals, landscape and Country.

Michael Cook is the master storyteller, the magician and trickster, the shapeshifter and fool. He offers us salvation – his characters leave and we can't follow, we can simply heed the call to stop looking at ourselves and start living.

— Beth Jackson, 2022

1. Jean Baudrillard, *The Art of Disappearance*, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, 1994

2. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, from *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*, ed. Mark Poster. Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1988, pp.166–184.



ABOUT THE ARTIST

In 2022, Michael Cook won the Fisher's Ghost Art Award and the Josephine Ulrick and Win Schubert Photography People's Choice Award and was also a finalist in the Bowness Photography Prize. Cook has exhibited extensively, nationally and internationally. His artworks are held in all major Australian collections, and in significant international collections, including the British Museum, London; Fondation Opale, Switzerland; The Museum of World Cultures, Netherlands; Museum of Contemporary Aboriginal Art, Utrecht; the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles; and the Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection, USA.

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Opposite: Michael Cook

ARTWORK ENQUIRIES

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