

Jan Murphy Gallery

Michael Cook *Individuation*

Melbourne Art Fair
20 – 23 February 2025
& Jan Murphy Gallery
20 February – 15 March 2025





ARTIST STATEMENT

As with most of my work, there is an autobiographical element woven into the story - I'm in my mid-life now and I don't think I'm alone in seeking out what Indigenous cultures around the world had all along - a deeper connection to country, culture, spirit, community. The things that most of Western society seem to be lacking a little of.

— Michael Cook

Previous: Michael Cook *Conformity* (detail) 2024-25

Above: Michael Cook *Acceptance* 2024-25

Jan Murphy Gallery is excited to present *Individuation* by Michael Cook.

Michael Cook's images have, for over ten years, considered Australian history and its intersection with his own biography, tracing the culture of pre-colonial times imbued with the promise of a different future. With *Individuation* (named for the term coined by psychologist Carl Jung which describes the process of developing an authentic individuality), it is contextualised with Cook's deepening personal interest in what urban dwellers really need. This is at odds with the societal conditioning which turns us outward, toward materiality and external validation.

His luxuriously beautiful – and Balenciaga-studded – imagery probes these drivers, also central to the social and environmental difficulties Western societies face globally. It taps into the knowledges Indigenous societies possessed pre-colonisation, and sums up what Cook, now mid-life, has learned to apply in his own life to achieve greater authenticity.



Michael Cook: *Individuation*

Individuation is largely set in London, one of the globe's most cosmopolitan cities, known for its history at the heart of the British Empire, but also its contemporary architecture, diversity of language, culture, and fashion. The journey of an Aboriginal man (Cook's regular actor/model and childhood friend Joe Gala, 'Joey') from a quiet, pre-colonial existence in the natural environment of his remote community is traced through his summons to visit the Western world. This transfiguration is the subject of *Acceptance*, which sees our protagonist move in a linear representation (like the Darwinian evolution diagram) from beside a campfire across an outback landscape, progressively shedding his body paint, lap-lap and spear to climb into a subway 'portal', fully clad in 'respectful' clothing for the city – a 1960s suit, hat, briefcase and glasses. He remains barefoot (signalling his grounding in Country and culture) as he prepares to enter the metropolis of London.¹

In the second image titled *Persona*, Joey emerges into the street, his suit evoking the era of Australia's 1967 referendum. While his attire and attaché case is adopted to render him inconspicuous, his barefoot status carries his connection to Country. In a maelstrom of people, architecture, and a cityscape full of hard edges, noise and industrial dust, people swirl around him, one staring at his attire, while most are oblivious, in pursuit of their own busyness.

Individuals are clad in edgy high-end couture, their 'looks' extreme, almost alien. Everyone in the image holds a mask in front of their face, all (except Joey's) bearing the visage of a known celebrity, an influence also reflected in the clothing they wear. The masks evoke the inherent inauthenticity that exists within this type of 'individuality', most wearing multiple masks to survive every day. Recognisable celebrity touchstones are liberally scattered throughout this image. On the left, a woman sports platform heels and carries a designer bag; the 'mask' she carries bears the flawless face of Kim Kardashian. On the right, another woman carries a Madonna mask while her outfit echoes a street version of Madonna's iconic Cone Bra. Joey opts for conformity, yet the mask he carries bears his own face, a clue to his strong sense of self. With this image Cook probes the emptiness of celebrity culture, their influence at odds with the parallel promotion of their problems.

In *Consumerism* Cook takes us into the shopping mall, with Joey now sporting Balenciaga garments, accompanied by a horse (eating from the iconic Balenciaga Chip handbag² – it looks no different to adjacent trash potato chip bags). Consumptive excesses range around him – thin young men and women in high end luxury haute couture, 'individuals' mirrored with replicants. The streets are lined with brand names – Prada, Gucci, Dior, Louis Vuitton, Chanel, with the time zone ambiguous – difficult to locate between the contemporary present and an unknown future. Shopping is paralleled with self-fulfilment, urban conditioning toward consumption driven by the brain's dopamine pathways with this pleasure-seeking addiction ultimately interfering with our healthy function as individuals.

Conformity sees our hero lined up with hundreds of replicants lining the cobbled street, all dressed in a green Gucci suit. One man only wears the suit in yellow, yet all other details of his appearance are the same – it's a minor rebellion. In the sky above a flock of birds fly in formation, echoing herd behaviour and drawing a parallel with our own animalistic need for conformity.

Attachment produces the many faces we present to the world, the conflict that is inherent in human nature, and a sense of the way society drives us to seek out relationships that inhibit, restrict or extend us. Joey lies on a beach chair, the only person in this scene who is not driven by internal psychological demands. Over his body a woman has a tug of war with herself, a young man carries himself in the foreground, two men are tied together with 'caution' tape, and on the jetty is Michael Cook himself, looking wistfully across the river while, in a boat in the river below, are two versions of his long term partner Monika Selig. One looks up at him; she is his erstwhile support, ready to assist or cushion his fall.

Present sees people walking across London Bridge, carrying placards as though protesting. Behind them Big Ben and other architectural icons represent colonisation and its pretensions to 'civilisation' while in the centre of the image Joey cooks a fish over a campfire. Remote Aboriginal communities have a different sense of time, spending as long as they need to catch a fish, in marked contrast to the busyness with which urban dwellers validate their identities. The clocks that bookend the bridge read 9 am on the left and 5 pm on the right, alluding to the workaday routine

that conditions our life and the societal mechanisms that encourage us to work hard and fast toward retirement.

Narcissism is amongst the most beautiful of these images and refers to the Greek myth of Narcissus, a figure so self-absorbed that he fell in love with his own reflection. Joey wears a floral suit, and stares dreamily into space, unable to relate to the Western narcissistic tendencies in the women who surround him. Buckingham Palace is a dominant backdrop while, to either side, young women in Ophelia-like floral dresses stare into the pond's reflection and mirrors, oblivious to everything outside their own image. They are lost in reflections that parallel the iPhone screens which have both defined and captured urban individuals. Pigeons range around them, and King Charles looks out one of the windows to oversee the scene without involvement, echoing the royal relationship with distant Australia.

Ego plays out in front of Balenciaga and Gucci stores, with Joey and a young woman crossing the road ahead of a line of luxury vehicles. Both are replicated many times in their gold designer fashion. This image explores the echo of our intertwined identity and ego within our presentation of ourselves, its interaction with perceived status and consumption of goods.

In *Energy* there is a distinct shift. With status symbols in the background, the Ferris Wheel that is ubiquitous in every major city, the crowd dressed in their expensive designer fashion and Maurizio Cattelan's famous artwork Comedian taped to the wall. At the railway station, Joey (in a diamanté-encrusted suit) crouches on top of the train with rays of his torch shining out to connect with the individuals walking on the platform, symptomatic of the way he attracts people in his life, but also the power of our aura and energetic connections to people and place. The train is marked 'Yuendumu' with Joey's transition to a more authentic and culturally connected place in the final image heralded here.

The finale is *Authenticity* with Joey's return home, his suit gradually sheds as he reunites with his Country. The horse walks with him, having abandoned the urban centre to remain with Joey, one of the camp dogs eats from the Balenciaga chip bag, mocking its iconic status in Western society and emphasising its redundancy in this outback environment.



Michael Cook *Consumerism* 2024-25

In many ways this body of work brings Cook's artistic directions over the last ten years into a closer alignment than ever before with his biography. Adopted as a baby into a white family, he learnt, as he grew, to use fashion to mask his visual 'difference'. Now in mid-life, Cook's interest in what he and other people need to thrive – community, family, and connection – sees an acknowledgement of the corrosive societal conditioning which constantly prompts us toward material objects and the status meted out with them.

In this series Cook examines his world, his own experience, and what he has learnt over recent decades – expressing a personal desire for greater human connection and authenticity. He raises the spectre of what might have resulted had Indigenous culture been considered positively during the colonisation period, and contemporary research that suggests that what completes the human experience are the connections and community that traditional Indigenous cultures have possessed – for all time.

— Louise Martin-Chew, 2025

1. Michael Cook notes that Indigenous societies were not given a choice about being co-opted into the Western world. In this series, Michael continues his exploration of the injustice inherent in colonisation, the way Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia were forced into a way of life that offers less connection than traditional societies. Captain James Cook's Endeavour journals describe the tranquillity of Aboriginal peoples' lives, and his awareness that their contact with Europeans would disrupt an unsullied happiness and ecologically balanced existence forever. Captain Cook wrote: 'From what I have said of the Natives of New-Holland they may appear to some to be the most wretched people upon Earth, but in reality they are far more happier than we Europeans; being wholly unacquainted not only with the superfluous but the necessary conveniences so much sought after in Europe, they are happy in not knowing the use of them. They live in a Tranquillity which is not disturb'd by the Inequality of Condition.' (<https://www.nma.gov.au/exhibitions/endeavour-voyage/cooks-journal/new-holland-description>)

2. This handbag has an expensive price tag and sold out internationally after it was seen on the runway at the Met Gala. Made from calfskin it looks like an almost empty bag of corn chips.



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 including at the British Museum, London, UK; Fondation Opal, Switzerland; the Musee d'ethnographie de Geneve, Switzerland; National Gallery of Singapore; AAMU Museum of Contemporary Aboriginal Art, The Netherlands; Musee de la Civilisation, Quebec, Canada. 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.

Opposite: Michael Cook 2024

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