



Undiscovered #4 Michael Cook ©2010 ANMM Collection

***Undiscovered* by Michael Cook  
Education Resource**

## **ABOUT THIS RESOURCE**

This education resource is designed to be flexible, with optional extensions to the lesson. This resource may be used in conjunction with a visit to the exhibition but this is not necessary.

This education resource provides four sections to engage students' learning:

**UNPACKING THE IMAGE** provides questions to prompt student's visual literacy skills and support their subjective interpretation of the visual text

**CONVERSATION STARTERS** presents discussion provocations to encourage students to objectively consider the meanings in the visual text

**ACTIVITIES** engage students through practical or research-driven exercises

**EXTENSION** provides a more academically rigorous research designed for Stage 6 students to facilitate a deeper engagement with the Artist's practice.

## MEET THE ARTIST

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

Michael Cook belongs to the Bidjara people of south-west Queensland. He was adopted as a child and raised in a non-Aboriginal family, who were active in their support of Indigenous rights in Queensland. The details of his birth were openly shared with him from his earliest years.

His vast career as a photographer included weddings, commercials and portraits before moving into fashion photography. In 2009, Cook engaged with a fine art practice of photography, to conceptually engage with personal and cultural ideas of identity. His artistic practice is a source of self-discovery and allows him to pictorialise the experience of understanding identity.

Cook's photographic series are elaborate in their approach. He merges the imaginary with the historical, the political with the personal, as he reconstructs a tableaux of historical events in Australia's memory. His images require an advanced knowledge of photographic and post production editing techniques. He begins each artwork with an initial idea, which he translates to a photographic image. This original photographic image is his 'canvas' to which he applies layers during the post-production process.

**Hear more from the artist:**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T7Diog9\\_k1I](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T7Diog9_k1I)

## ABOUT THE ARTWORK

*Undiscovered* is a series of ten photographs that provide an Indigenous perspective of British colonisation in Australia, a land that had been occupied by Aboriginal people for thousands of years. The series switches positions and perspectives, prompting us to rethink the ways we consider our history and national identity. Michael Cook's images reference what was always here, what has been introduced and the effect this had on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, their culture and country. *Undiscovered* asks the viewer who really discovered Australia?

*Undiscovered* portrays a serene shoreline setting, from the perspective of Aboriginal people. The photographs look outward to the sea and horizon, which is occasionally interrupted by a tall-masted ship looming in the distance. Throughout the series the man is joined by some of our iconic Australian native animals, alongside modern introduced objects. *Undiscovered* features an Aboriginal man role-switching with the Colonisers. At times he is dressed in British colonial clothing, at other times the colonial clothing is removed revealing the strength and resilience of Indigenous Australians before and after colonisation.

## STAGES 2 – 3

### Australian curriculum Years 3, 4, 5 and 6

#### UNPACKING THE IMAGE

There are ten photographs in this series, select your favourite image. Look at it carefully for one whole minute, without moving your eyes away, notice every small detail in the photograph.

Imagine you were the man in these photographs:

- ◇ What would you be able to hear?
- ◇ What would you feel?
- ◇ What would the weather or temperature feel like?
- ◇ What time of the day were these photographs taken?
- ◇ What might you smell in this place?

#### CONVERSATION STARTERS

Now let's look at the *Undiscovered* series as a whole:

- ◇ List the objects you see.
- ◇ List the animals you can see. Are there any similarities between them?
- ◇ What do you notice about the clothing that the man in the images is wearing?
- ◇ There are ten photographs in this series; what story do you think they tell?
- ◇ Do you think this photograph was taken in the past or present? Why?
- ◇ What is 'out of place' or strange about these images?
- ◇ Do you think this photograph depicts 'real-life'? Or has someone made-up the image? How can we tell?

#### ACTIVITIES

##### Seeing Things from another Perspective

The word 'perspective' describes a point of view, a way of seeing things. Whose perspective do you think this photograph reflects? Why might the artist have decided to view this scene from this perspective?

- ◇ Imagine you are aboard the tall ship in the distance; write a small journal entry describing what you can see.
- ◇ Imagine that you are the man on the beach; describe to a friend what you can see.

##### Always was, Always will be

Michael Cook belongs to the Bidjara nation, locate this language group on a map. <http://www.abc.net.au/indigenous/map/>

Have you ever heard an Acknowledgment of Country at school assemblies or events? Who are the Traditional Owners of the land your school is on? Find out some more about their connection to country.

### **Blank Canvas**

*I start with a blank canvas. I start with an idea in my head and it's like painting with a camera. I say that is the way that I create layers and we build with those layers to get a final image.*

Quoted by Michael Cook

Michael Cook often describes the first photograph he takes as the blank canvas, which he then adds to using digital techniques. Find your 'blank canvas image'. It might be a photograph of a place that is special to you, or even just one that you are drawn to in a magazine or newspaper. Then add elements of your identity to this image. It could be a cut-out collage of objects, people or memories that are important to you.

### **Identifying identities**

This series questions who really discovered Australia while making reference to what was always here, what has been introduced and the effect this had on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, their culture and country. Using magazines, books, newspapers collect images from the media that represent an Australian identity or nation. Describe the images you find. Do you notice any recurring themes? How are they similar or different to the photographs by Michael Cook?

### **The Past in the Present**

Michael Cook's photographs are inspired by Australia's colonial history, as well as his personal and family histories. What are some ways that we can find out what happened in the past? Think about an event in your family's history, find out five things you didn't know about your family. Share these facts with your class and discuss the ways you learnt them. You could even bring along some 'evidence' such as photographs, documents and letters to show the class.

### **Reading Between the Lines**

Look closely at the photographs in this series and think about why he has used recurring themes such as the ship in the distance, native animals, objects and clothing. How do these images comment on the consequences of British colonisation? Discuss this in small groups and develop a response to share with the class.

## STAGES 4 – 5

### Australian curriculum Years 7-8 and 9-10

#### UNPACKING THE IMAGE

There are ten photographs in the *Undiscovered* series, pick the image you are drawn to the most. Look at it mindfully for one minute without moving your eyes from the image; notice every small detail in the photograph.

Begin by building a word bank of all the ideas and thoughts that come to mind when looking at your selected image and share them with the class. What similarities can be found in the personal responses to the series?

- ◇ How would you describe the colours and tones used in the photographic series? How does it influence the way we interpret the images?
- ◇ How would describe the use of light in the photographs? How does it affect the way you read these images?
- ◇ Is this series placed in the past or the present? What tells you this?
- ◇ Is the man in the images aware of the camera or an onlooker? How would you define the gaze of this photographic series?
- ◇ Were these photographs taken during action or while the man was still?
- ◇ Is the man in the photographs engaged with the landscape around him? Is he aware of what is around him? How can you tell?
- ◇ If you were to place these photographs within a genre of film, what would it be?
- ◇ If this photograph had a soundtrack, what would it sound like?
- ◇ Describe the man in the photographs and how he is behaving.

#### CONVERSATION STARTERS

##### Seeing Things from a Different Perspective

People can see the same situation and understand it in different ways. Consider the perspective that is represented in *Undiscovered*? What is included in the image? What direction is the camera facing? Whose shoes are we standing in? Unpack why the artist may have made these creative decisions.

##### Un/discovered Land

*It is a great shame that Cook failed to recognise the established society of peoples who lived on this land. Their existence is evident in the landscapes and geography of this land that Cook was to rename, as well as in the significance of law already dictating the world of our people. If Cook had recognised and understood this world, would he have hoisted the flag on Possession Island and declared this land terra nullius?*

Alberta Hornsby, Bulgun Warra Bama, Historian

In 1770, Captain James Cook's claim of the east coast of Australia in 1770 for Great Britain was made under the doctrine of *terra nullius*. Using the *Undiscovered* photographic series and the statement above as a starting point, discuss the implications this claim caused for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their relationship to country.

## ACTIVITIES

### ***We know we cannot live in the past but the past lives in us* - Charles Perkins**

**Charles Perkins (1936 – 2000)** was an Aboriginal Rights Activist and a member of the Eastern Arrernte and Kalkadoon Aboriginal communities. He was the first Aboriginal man in Australia to graduate from University in 1966. In 1965 he was a key organiser of the Freedom Ride – a bus journey that exposed its passengers to the racial discrimination experienced Aboriginal people in regional towns in New South Wales, notably Walgett, Moree and Kempsey. He continued to campaign, support and endorse Indigenous and human rights throughout his career and life.

Donna Carstens, the curator of the exhibition, selected the above quote to accompany the *Undiscovered* exhibition. Read it carefully and consider what meaning can we find in the quote. How does it affect the way we read the *Undiscovered* photographic series? Select three historic quotes relating to Australia and consider how each of them would influence the way audiences view the exhibition.

### **Who do you think you are?**

Michael Cook is able to learn about his history through his artistic practice. What does history mean to you? Research your family history. How many generations can you record on your family tree? What significant social and political events occurred during this period and how did they impact your family? Create a visual journal of personal and social histories and present your work to the class. In what ways does your history differ from others in your class?

### **Behind the Lens**

Michael Cook commenced his career as a fashion photographer before moving into fine art. Have a look through some fashion magazines and then take a closer look at the *Undiscovered* series. What are some similarities between the images? What are the conventions of fashion photography? How do you create a narrative in an image?

## STAGE 6 / EXTENSION

### Post-colonialism

Michael Cook has stated '*I create artwork about Indigenous issues, past and present, about how the past relates to the present and, eventually, moulds the future*'. The term 'post-colonialism' describes ways of looking critically at colonisation and its impacts, legacies and consequences. Supported by the historical texts provided and additional research into post-colonialism, write a response that discusses how and why Michael Cook's work responds to colonisation in Australia.

### Badtjala Song

*Gabrin wunu'la yaneen, Areeram □ Ngun'gu'ni wiinj gunj' milung □ Nyundal wun'yamba dhali dahk'kin'bar, Gebeer barine Moomoo gumbir'l'im bundi burree, Yauwa dhan man'ngur Yuang yangu moomoo gumbir, Billi'ngunda □ Tin'gera dan'da gung'mungalum minya??*

Translation:

*Strangers are travelling with a cloud, Areeram!! It has fire inside, must be a bad water spirit. It's stupid maybe? It's going directly to that rainbow serpent place, this is the truth that I bring. It is breathing rhythmically from its rear, must be song men and sorcerers. Coming up and going back with the wind at its rear, like a sand crab. The sea carries this ship here. Why??*

On 20 May 1770, the Badtjala people viewed the Endeavour sailing along the coast of K'Gari/Fraser Island. They passed on a rich description of the event through oral history and song. Badtjala linguist Gemma Cronin has translated the song, telling of the encounter.

### Watkin Tench, January, 1788

*Found the natives tolerably numerous as we advanced up the river, and even at the harbour's mouth we had reason to conclude the country more populous than Mr Cook thought it. For on the Supply's arrival in the [Botany] bay on the 18th of the month they assembled on the beach of the south shore to the number of not less than forty persons, shouting and making many uncouth signs and gestures.*

*This appearance whetted curiosity to its utmost, but as prudence forbade a few people to venture wantonly among so great a number, and a party of only six men was observed on the north shore, the governor immediately proceeded to land on that side in order to take possession of this new territory and bring about an intercourse between its new and old masters.*

**Watkin Tench (1758-1833)** was a British marine officer. In 1786 he volunteered for a three-year tour of service with the convict settlement about to be formed at Botany Bay. He sailed in the transport *Charlotte* on 13 May 1787 and arrived in Botany Bay on 20 January 1788. He is renowned for his two journals

(*Narrative of the Expedition to Botany Bay and Complete Account of the Settlement at Port Jackson*) that documented his observations and experiences during the first four years of colonisation in Sydney.

## GLOSSARY

**Badtjala:** Language group from the present day south-east Queensland, including the coastal areas surrounding Fraser Island and Hervey Bay.

**Bidjara:** Language group from the present day south-west Queensland, situated on the Drummond Ranges.

**Colony:** (1) a group of people who leave their native country to form a settlement in a new land.

**Colony:** (2) the country or district settled or colonised.

**Colonialism:** The policy of a nation seeking to extend its authority over other peoples or territories. In Australia, British colonization effectively disregarded the existence of Indigenous people and their long standing connection and traditional ownership of areas of the country.

**Country:** The term 'country' to Indigenous Australians represents an all-encompassing concept, connecting lands and waters, flora and fauna, elements, cosmology and communities all of which have been formed by the actions and pathways of the ancestors.

**Indigenous Australians:** The first Australians, includes both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

**Land rights:** a political movement instigated by Aboriginal Activists for social justice and self-determination, for Indigenous people through the means of government recognition of their sovereignty and prior land ownership.

**Language Group:** Australia is home to over 100 language groups, which are sovereign nations that uphold political, social and religious systems that have been formed over countless generations. As a result, Australian Indigenous culture is the world's oldest living culture. It has been estimated that at the time of colonisation in 1788, there were between 500 and 800 language dialects, often maintaining linguistic relationships with their regional neighbours.

**Self Determination:** the right of Aboriginal people to independently determine their political status and pursue their economic, social and cultural development.

**Terra Nullius:** a Latin term and legal doctrine that translates as "land belonging to no-one". This classification was used by the British Government to justify the dispossession of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and claim sovereignty over Australia. The British Empire disregarded the rights of Indigenous people who had lived there for at least 60,000 years and denied the evidence of Indigenous land use and ownership.

On the 3<sup>rd</sup> June 1992, the Australian High Court's judgement on the Native Title or 'Mabo' Case, overturned the “legal fiction” of terra nullius, which formed the foundation of British claims to land ownership in Australia.

**Traditional Owners:** Any Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander group or nation that is connected by decent to a certain territory of land and holds custodial connections (AGNSW).