



Title	<i>Conformity, 2024- 2025</i>
Artist's dates	b. 1968 (57 y.o.)
Gallery/source	Jan Murphy Gallery (acquired at Melbourne Art Fair)
Date of purchase	20/02/2025
Buying Committee	Nancy Nossal, Sarah Kremer, Kate Worth
Shadow members	Sarah George, Fiona Hardie, Wendy Kozica
Dimensions (H X W)	71.5 x 122 cm (+ framing)
Medium	Archival pigment print on Hahnemühle 310 gsm photo rag paper, Edition of 8 + 2 AP, Edition 5/8

CONTENT/SUBJECT/AESTHETIC QUALITIES

- Our work *Conformity* sees our hero lined up with hundreds of replicants lining the cobbled street, all dressed in a green Gucci suit. On closer examination it's a Gucci North Face collaboration. 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.
- 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 the way Western societies condition people to behave, turning us outward, toward materiality and external validation.
- The work is from the series *Individuation*, which 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.

TECHNIQUE

- Michael Cook has developed a very distinctive aesthetic style using digital retouching and layering to create compositions that look convincingly real.
- To create this series, the artist photographed his model Joey performing various poses within the frame from a fixed camera on a tripod, which he then constructs digitally to create the final composition.

- He worked commercially in Australia and overseas for twenty-five years before he began to make art photography in 2009, driven by an increasingly urgent desire to explore issues of identity. He is of mixed ancestry – some of which is Indigenous – and works from an Australian base.

CONTEXT

- 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.
- "I grew up with a lot of questions about my identity. I was never taught any First Nations history at school, only about the 'discovery' of Australia. My work continues to question the 'what ifs' of our history and the impacts of colonisation, and I hope that it raises questions for the viewer too. I have a strong narrative element to my work but rather than coming from a place of moralising (or demoralising) I hope that I can highlight the complexity of our layered history. Art is a way of expanding and sharing knowledge, it provokes a different way of thinking about things. I'm proud that I get to tell my story – I've been making work for the past two decades, and hope that my work will still be here long after I'm gone."

COLLECTION STATEMENT

- We were excited to see Michael Cook's new show having an interest in his past works. They seem to have resonated with the group on a number of levels, whilst being an undeniably slick mid-career artist. We set out to learn more about him and as the story unfolds, unsurprisingly, there is a huge strength and depth to his work.
- In his latest series *Individuation* Cook examines his world, his own experience...expressing a personal desire for greater human connection and authenticity.
- Adopted as a baby into a white family, he learnt, as he grew, to use fashion to mask his visual 'difference'. He considers Australian history and its intersection with his own biography, tracing the culture of pre-colonial times imbued with the promise of a different future.
- "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."
- We feel that *Conformity* is a strong work and a wonderful acquisition for our collection.