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# UNESCO Observatory Multi-Disciplinary Journal in the Arts



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Indigenous Education In Australia:  
Policy, Participation and Praxis

Marnie O'Bryan, Prof. Mark Rose

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## ABOUT THE E-JOURNAL

*The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal is based within the Graduate School of Education at The University of Melbourne, Australia. The journal promotes multi-disciplinary research in the Arts and Education and arose out of a recognised need for knowledge sharing in the field. The publication of diverse arts and cultural experiences within a multi-disciplinary context informs the development of future initiatives in this expanding field. There are many instances where the arts work successfully in collaboration with formerly non-traditional partners such as the sciences and health care, and this peer-reviewed journal aims to publish examples of excellence.*

*Valuable contributions from international researchers are providing evidence of the impact of the arts on individuals, groups and organisations across all sectors of society. The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal is a clearing house of research which can be used to support advocacy processes; to improve practice; influence policy making, and benefit the integration of the arts in formal and non-formal educational systems across communities, regions and countries.*

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# Volume 4, Issue 1

## Indigenous Education In Australia: Policy, Participation and Praxis

### Guest Editors

*Marnie O'Bryan*

*Prof. Mark Rose*

### THEME

This special edition of the UNESCO Observatory E-Journal focuses on education for and about the First Peoples of Australia and bears witness to the many faces of Indigenous education in Australia. It testifies to a complex landscape; places on a map, places in minds and places in spirit that taken together present a snapshot of the tone and dimension of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education in early 2015.

Indigenous education policy is framed by a bi-partisan commitment to 'closing the gap'. In some instances, Indigenous leaders are framing the debate over how this is best achieved. At the same time, non-Indigenous educators are increasingly becoming aware that equality and mutual respect can only be established once the Australian community opens its mind to the ancient wisdom and the true stories of this place. Many of the articles in this publication identify the 'gap' as an epistemological divide and argue that, like any bridge, education measures aimed at 'closing the gap' need to be constructed simultaneously from both sides. To that end, a number of papers focus on initiatives being developed and explored by mainstream schools to give authentic voice to the perspectives of First Australians for the benefit of non-Indigenous students.

### COVER ART

*Majority Rule*  
Michael Cook

*Courtesy of the artist  
and Andrew Baker  
Art Dealer, Brisbane*

The papers in Volume One, '**Indigenous Education in Australia: Policy, Participation and Praxis**', are all concerned with how Western educational structures and institutions work for and with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Volume Two of the Journal is entitled '**Indigenous Education In Australia: Place, Pedagogy and Epistemic Assumptions**'. Each of the articles in this volume pertains to the education experiences of people living in remote Australia.

The articles in this publication take the reader through a rich multidisciplinary tapestry that points to the breadth and complexity of the Indigenous education landscape in Australia today. The papers are honest and true to the heterogeneous communities that are the First Peoples of Australia. Similarly, the poetry and artworks that appear here bear witness to the breadth, depth and diversity of artistic talent and tradition in this country. Taken together, they challenge the reader to move beyond a simplistic quest for 'the silver bullet' to redress disparity in education outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. They encourage reflection, innovation, reciprocity, respect and empowerment through education.

We recommend each and every article.

Prof. Mark Rose & Marnie O'Bryan  
Guest Editors

# Working with contemporary indigenous art as text: Julie Gough's *Imperial Leather*

**Helen Kent**  
**Susie May**  
**Julie Gough**

## ABSTRACT

This paper will explore Julie Gough's *Imperial Leather* at the National Gallery of Victoria and, in light of the recently implemented Australian Curriculum (English), we will consider some ways in which non-indigenous secondary school English teachers can facilitate meaningful and ethical engagement with contemporary indigenous art as text through Gough's artwork. The authors, two educators and the artist, will consider the ways that "*Imperial Leather*" has provided rich opportunities for students, teachers and the public at large to grapple with difficult issues at the heart of Australian history, through guided questioning and reading of the work.

## KEYWORDS

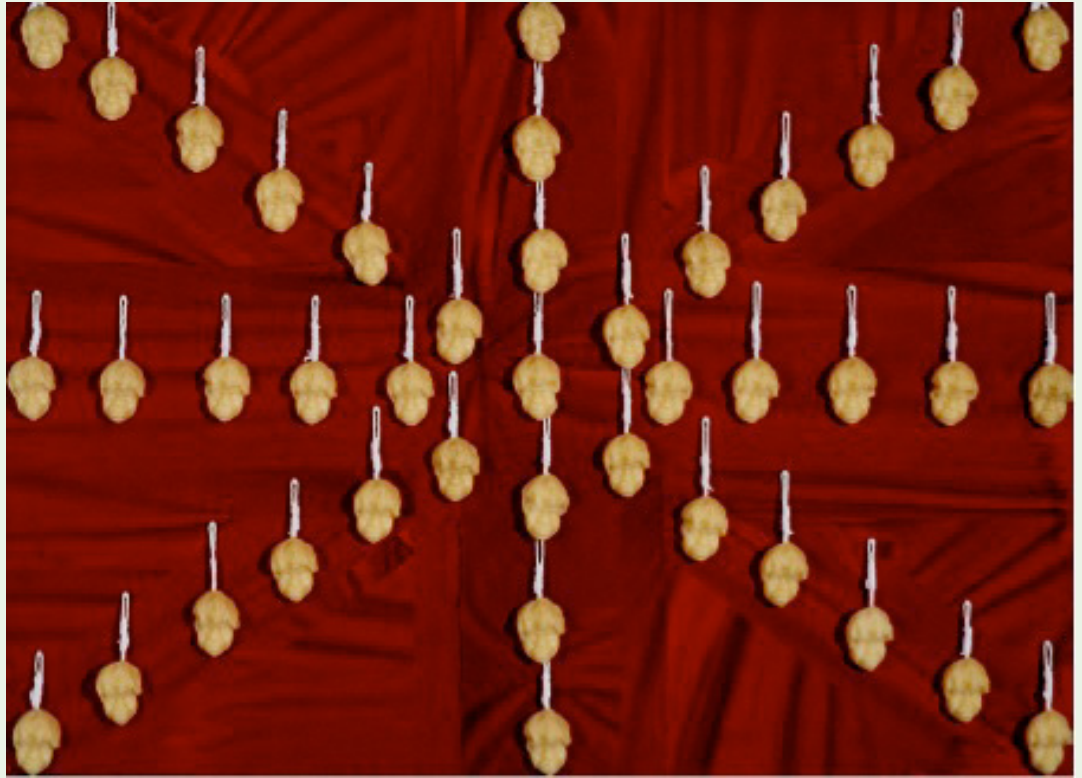
*indigenous art, education, collaboration, text, engagement*

Julie Gough

(Tasmanian  
Aboriginal, born 1965).  
*Imperial Leather*, 1994.  
[wax and cotton rope  
and drawing pins on  
tie-dyed cotton on

composition board]  
149.2 x 204.4 cm.  
National Gallery of  
Victoria, Melbourne.

Presented through  
The Art Foundation of  
Victoria by Gabrielle  
Pizzi, Member,  
1995. Reproduced  
with permission.



## WORKING WITH CONTEMPORARY ABORIGINAL ART AS TEXT: *IMPERIAL LEATHER*

As a non-Indigenous educator working with an Indigenous artist's work and working with primarily non-Indigenous students, I must begin by acknowledging the contested and problematic nature of my position. When "teaching" contemporary artworks such as *Imperial Leather*, I am, like all non-Aboriginal teachers, working in what Nakata describes as the 'cultural interface', a space of tension and negotiation where Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledge systems meet. While Nakata reveals the inherent complexities of this position and insists that explicit ethical and theoretical considerations guide the non-Indigenous educator, he also affirms that working at the "cultural interface" can "(generate) conditions of possibility..... between Indigenous and non-Indigenous subjects, between colonised people and colonial power structures..." (Nakata 2007, cited in Mc Gloin 2009, p. 40).

Gough's *Imperial Leather*, constructed from multiple objects, is inherently multifaceted and complex. By asking students to focus on one material at a time, I hoped to engender a respect for the creation of this particular work but also, more broadly, for the process of viewing art. This pedagogical approach aligns, to some extent, with Yunkaporta and Mc Ginty's "Protocols and Processes at the Cultural Interface" which suggest that Aboriginal pedagogies be utilised when non-Aboriginal teachers are presenting Aboriginal knowledge. (Yunkaporta and McGinty 2007, p. 28-30).

The implementation of the Australian National Curriculum, has proven to be highly controversial. While the curriculum identifies three cross-curricular priorities (currently under review) including "an understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures" (ACARA, 2010), this has been criticised for contributing to the ongoing marginalisation of Aboriginal people, in that the

curriculum "priority" sits outside most curriculum areas and so there is no perceived attempt to integrate Aboriginal perspectives into mainstream curriculum. In subject English the teaching of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander texts is mandated. Yet non-Indigenous teachers are provided with contradictory views on how best to introduce texts created by Aboriginal authors and artists.

In an attempt to reflect upon how I might teach contemporary Indigenous texts with more ethical awareness and, importantly how I might best equip my students to engage in productive learning and knowledge sharing "at the interface", I have become aware of a range of (often contradictory) protocols for non-Indigenous teachers working with Indigenous knowledge. Whilst I recognise that in incorporating any Indigenous knowledge into my classroom necessitates, on my behalf, a "screening... through a filter that positions it (the Indigenous knowledge) to serve (my) educational objectives" and that awareness of this is crucial, I contend that non-Aboriginal teachers need support and streamlined guidelines from the academy in order to assist them to teach Indigenous texts in an ethical and productive way.

The recently implemented *Australian Curriculum: English*, in "building upon the educational goals of the Melbourne Declaration" identifies the development of knowledge, understanding and skills relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures as one of three 'cross-curriculum priorities'. These priorities extend across the curriculum as a whole but in English, students are expected to develop "an awareness and appreciation of and respect for the literature of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples including storytelling traditions...as well as contemporary literature" and to "develop respectful critical understandings of the social, historical and cultural contexts associated with different uses of language and textual features". (ACARA, 2010) The content descriptors suggest the places in which this priority may be "covered" and yet artworks are not (at least explicitly) considered texts, in this document. Visual texts are notably absent from suggested ways in which such Indigenous perspectives might be explored by students and explored collaboratively, in a classroom setting. This paper will argue that powerful contemporary works, such as Gough's *Imperial Leather* are ideal texts through which productive if unsettling dialectic classroom discourse can take place and that the strands as outlined in the *Australian Curriculum: English* might be meaningfully integrated and underpinned with the cross-curriculum priority: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and History.

Many non-indigenous (English) teachers express anxiety and trepidation at the prospect of teaching indigenous texts. Harrison and Greenfield (2010) note that teachers are aware of their own lack of knowledge and "therefore question how they can be expected to include Aboriginal perspectives in their programs" (p 3). The authors also point out that this trepidation is often intensified by academics and others who argue that non-indigenous teachers should not be teaching about indigenous cultures, knowledge and identity. Healy-Ingram (2012) reiterates the need for teachers, in order to avoid "act(s) of misappropriation to "think deeply about their approach to Indigenous... education" (p. 70).

Julie Gough's arresting *Imperial Leather* portrays a series (or grid) (Bullock 2005) of identical wax heads arranged in the pattern of the Union Jack flag and all suspended on thick white cord on a crimson towelling background, also presenting a pattern

of the Union Jack. The heads are identical and could be described as caricatures. The creamy wax faces at once demand and repel the viewer's gaze. Gough herself describes scouring op-shops for retro kitsch representations: "My works utilise found and constructed objects and techniques from diverse sources including the visual arts, the museum, the library, the shop, the garden and my heritage." She describes her work as influenced by the "people, stories, places, skills of and connections to (her) maternal Tasmanian heritage". She is deeply interested in "the representation and the questioning of history" (Gough 2014).

The title of the piece, *Imperial Leather* is also the name of a universally sold but originally British brand of soap, first advertised in Australia in the 1950s. Marketed as luxurious from the outset, its most famous Australian television commercial, popular in the 1980s depicted an almost impossibly privileged white family, bathing aboard a private jet. The beautiful wife and mother luxuriates in her creamy bath, flicking nonchalantly through what appears to be a travel magazine. Seductively, she purrs "Tahiti looks nice". Her equally good looking husband immediately puts down his champagne and newspaper and commands of (an invisible) pilot, "Simon: Tahiti" and we see the plane change course, presumably towards Tahiti. (Colonised first by the English)

Aesthetically, the composition of *Imperial Leather* resonates with the (still current) packaging of the iconic soap. The colours inherent in the work are also reminiscent of the Australian Aboriginal flag. These compositional elements and the kitsch heads, recall crude commodification in the form of "soap on rope" and display Gough's melancholic "black humour", as analysed by Marita Bullock (2005). Typical of Gough's work as described in her artist's statement, the soap heads, seemingly innocuous everyday household objects take on "sinister" connotations, leaving the viewer in an "anxious" position. (Gough, 2014). The depiction of soap highlights white Australia's attempts to erase its dark colonial history, "illuminating whiteness, blindness and forgetting" (Bullock 2005, p. 37). Both words, "Imperial" and "Leather" are suggestive of aggressive colonialism, brutality, dark fetishism, possession and control. Judith Ryan describes the piece as a work which "flowers darkly in the imagination of the viewer" (Ryan 2013, p. 70-74). The piece is at once imbued with meaning and cryptic; richly narrative and yet denying the reader of "final closure" (Bullock 2005, p. 37).

All of these elements provide rich material for (student) viewers to discuss. Gough herself has used the metaphor of detective or secret agent. Describing her art practice in 1996 she stated "I work undercover, collecting information by unintentionally eavesdropping as the "invisible Aboriginal catching attitudes from those unaware" (Gough 1996). She emphasises her work as often involving the "uncovering and re-presenting (of) historical stories" (Gough, 2014).

In 2002, the work was hung provocatively alongside Emmanuel Phillip Fox's grandiose *The Landing of Captain Cook at Botany Bay 1770* (1902) and Gough's own *Chase* (2001), a haunting depiction of native forest, blood red cloth tied to some of the tea tree sticks, suggesting a violent chase. I entered this section of the gallery with my class of Year 9 boys and NGV teacher Susie May on an excursion to explore "The Australian Identity".

Partly in preparation for the gallery visit, back at school, I had shown the film “Rabbit Proof Fence” and was horrified by the students’ responses (that, in retrospect, I recognise as barely masked anxiety, but what I read at the time as cultural insensitivity). This occurred during a particularly harrowing scene as they were viewing the film. Set in 1931 and directed by Phillip Noyce, the work is based on a true story inspired by a book of the same name by Doris Pilkington Garimara. The film depicts the journey of three Aboriginal sisters, taken from their homes to be trained as domestic staff. They later escape and begin a fraught and compelling quest to return home. Upon its release in Australia in 2002, it raised awareness and stirred debate about facts surrounding the Stolen Generations, Aboriginal children forcibly removed from their homes and communities. The film remains a popular film text for teaching in middle secondary school in Australia.

In light of the behaviour of my students who laughed at the physical manifestation of grief depicted in the film, I made the flawed decision to abandon the film study and instead launched into a series of didactic and monologic lessons, intended to evoke empathy through the relaying of harsh facts regarding colonisation and ongoing inequity for Aboriginal people. To my dismay this teaching did not in any way promote new understanding and awareness but was instead met with defensive, often ugly resistance. Resentful responses such as: “Why should we say sorry? It’s not our fault” were common and disheartening.

I was therefore bewildered to observe the boys’ thoughtful and often poetic responses to *Imperial Leather*. Stimulated by the interplay between skilled teacher, Susie, and the work itself, the boys produced oral and written responses demonstrating genuine engagement and meaning making. Questions were initially focussed upon the literal: What colours/patterns can you see? What are the cream coloured objects? The students’ responses, however were almost instantly evocative or metaphorical. They described the background as “a frightening kind of red, like blood” and the heads as “creepy in the way they are identical”. Moving the students from literal through to inferential and evaluative or analytical responses, the teacher enabled the students to make their own meaning from the piece, to become active code breakers, text participants, text users and text analysts, which, according to Freebody and Luke (1999), are the practices demonstrated by effective readers. What I observed was essentially the skilled facilitation by the gallery based teacher, of dialogue between the student viewers or readers and *Imperial Leather*.

Students were engaged in acts of “transmediation”, first introduced by Charles Suhor in 1984, a process by which students use one sign system to mediate another, providing opportunity for them to actively construct understanding and to engage in generative and reflective thinking (Siegel 1995). The visual language of *Imperial Leather* stimulated powerful oral and written language.

Prompts which encouraged students to consider the ways in which the materials used contributed to the meaning of the work, to construct similes describing the wax heads and to share the way the piece made them feel, generated responses which were unguarded, often powerfully visceral and offered a dramatic contrast to the responses produced in the classroom. “Heads like cold white ghost brothers”, “The towel has been soaked in blood”, “Soap will never wash off the red hate” “Soaps - strangled and suffocating” were the kernels of what was to become a range of different texts produced out of and inspired by these initial responses.



In After viewing *Imperial Leather* (below) a 10 line free verse poem which was drafted at the gallery and polished in subsequent Year 9 English classes, the student grapples with some of the confronting aspects of the piece, working with strong imagery and metaphorical language in his creative response. He had been exposed to sections of *Macbeth* in previous classes and his poem contains a strong intertextual reference in the final couplet: “Wash this stain from our hands/We wish we could”.

*After viewing Imperial Leather*

*Creamy stares like clean sick toys,  
Daring us not to turn away*

*Blood stained flag, the Union Jack  
Wet with sticky red story*

*Fathers’ Day presents strung  
Soap on a rope all hung*

*Gridded reminder of lost boys  
Mothers and sisters we can’t repay*

*Wash this stain from our hands?  
We wish we could.*

*(Ben)*

Having worked in pairs on individual haikus, another group of students collaborated, sharing their responses to produce a jointly constructed twenty-one line free verse poem, made up of seven haikus. Much rich and dynamic discussion took place as students spread their short written responses out on the classroom floor, explained certain imagery and language to each other and worked together to identify the most powerful order and assemblage of language. The poem they produced, *This Bloody Country*, is again demonstrative of deep affective response and engagement with not only the narrative but the constructed nature of the visual text with which they worked. In particular, the students explore the way Gough uses colour in the work.

*This Bloody Country  
Red like hot spilt blood, gushing  
Like a country sliced  
Inside out, broken*

*Heads like memories  
Which can’t be denied  
They just multiply*

*Staring at us  
Making us look at them  
Turning us away*

*Red like love and pain  
Crimson passion, scarlet hate  
Red like desert earth*

*Red, like fairy tales  
What is this story  
We have not been told?*

*Rope, like a killer  
Who does not admit the crime  
Thinks he can wash it away*

*Dark patches on red  
Show another Union Jack  
We must start listening*

*(Year 9 Students)*

Students were also asked to produce a short “art critic’s review” on the work. I provided them with accessible models from newspapers and art journals and we discussed their generic features. I asked students to describe the materials used, their initial responses to the work, to discuss the ways in which the choice of one or more of the materials used help to make meaning for the viewer and to hypothesise about what they thought the artist might be wanting them to feel or think about. Drawing upon Freebody and Luke (1992), this task enabled students to draw upon the four capabilities of successful readers, in order to produce a written analytical response.

The student piece below displays a willingness to take intellectual risks in his meaning making and to entertain the idea of multiple readings. This student was not confident in either reading or writing, was socially isolated, had been previously reluctant to participate in class and was one of the most resistant to my teaching following *Rabbit Proof Fence*. Here, while not producing one of the strongest pieces in the class, he displays imaginative flair in his connection of the red towelling to the Australian landscape and empathy in his exploration of the accompanying painting *Captain Cook’s landing*. Perhaps most gratifyingly, however, he displays an awareness of the social nature of this type of learning and a respect for the opinions of others.

***Imperial Leather: an art critic’s response***

*Imperial Leather grabs the viewer’s attention immediately. It is presented as part of the collection of Australian art at the brand new gallery at Federation Square, the NGV.*

*The canvas is made of a thick hardboard covered in bright red, toweling type fabric which almost hurts your eyes when you stare at it for long enough. On the towel is an unmistakable pattern – the Union Jack – and on that pattern is another, creepy pattern made up of 41 identical cream coloured wax heads dangling from white cord.*

*At first I just felt confused when I looked at the artwork even though this was mixed with a feeling that the artwork was telling me something was wrong and to listen up and think differently.*

*One of the best things I learned on the excursion was that with talking about your ideas, with art there is not really a right or wrong answers. Good artists like Julie Gough make their artworks so that you might have a different opinion from someone else but you might both be right. The same painting might make two different people feel two very different things. For example, with the bright red towel, even though I have not been to the outback, I thought this could be the dirt in the desert of Australia which is a bright red. Most other people thought it was blood and after a while I could see that too but I did not think I was wrong or they were wrong.*

*Imperial Leather is hung next to a painting of Captain Cook which shows Captain Cook as a hero. He is larger than life and wears a grand uniform. His body language is confident and he does not even look down while one of his men crouches and aims a gun at two Aboriginal people in the distance. He looks like this is not important to him.*

*But the faces in Julie Gough's work tell a different story and I think they represent lost lives of Aboriginal people because of the violence of Captain Cook and all the people who colonised this country. I think she wants everyone who looks at her work to make up their own mind about its meaning but there is no denying she wants us to think more carefully about the stories and history of Australia. She wants us to think about both its good and its shameful parts and she wants us to think about them and explore our feelings.*

*(Tim)*

In the gallery, in front of *Imperial Leather*, trying, with my students, to unravel and read the piece, I took up what West-Pavlov (cited in Healy-Ingram 2011) describes as “a public stance of ignorance (which) is alarming for some students but can lead to some illuminating meta-pedagogic discussions when addressed directly...and connected back to the texts themselves” (Healy-Ingram, p. 79). I became a fellow decoder and meaning maker - a fellow reader, stunned, intrigued and affected by the powerful piece in front of me and its unsettling dialogue with the artworks accompanying it in the gallery. My “stance of ignorance” was, unlike my teaching during the weeks leading up to the excursion, utterly uncontrived.

Like my students, I was (and am still) humbled by the aesthetic and rhetorical elements inherent in *Imperial Leather*, and, writing and reading (guided by a teacher with expertise, experience and intuition) with my students, I was privileged to observe in them an energetic and genuine willingness to read this text and, alongside their reading, an openness and enthusiasm to learn about Australia's dark past and its representation in the artwork. This curiosity, hunger for understanding and willingness in all of us to expose a “stance of ignorance” and shame contributed to a disposition I was relieved to see in these young people as they stood, simultaneously

mesmoris ed and disturbed by the artwork and the affective responses it generated. This was a disposition that, as a beginning teacher, I had recognised as potential in my students but had not managed to bring forth in the classroom and one that I had unintentionally damaged through my previous attempts to teach the history and effects of colonisation in this country, assuming students would take up my position unequivocally and without a medium through which to make their own meaning.

As a teacher and a teacher educator, *Imperial Leather* remains my favourite text with which I work with my Master of Teaching students to explore reading pedagogies. I am grateful to Julie Gough for her extraordinary piece, *Imperial Leather* and to Susie May for introducing me to this work and showing me the power of the effective teaching of visual texts.

## **SUSIE MAY, EDUCATOR, NATIONAL GALLERY OF VICTORIA:**

The collection of contemporary Aboriginal works at the Ian Potter Centre, NGV Australia continues to provide a rich and constantly changing resource for the study of *Australian Curriculum: English and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures*.

The works of contemporary Aboriginal artists such as Julie Dowling, Christian Bunburra Thompson, Lorraine Connelly-Northey, Yhonnie Scarce Vernon Ah Kee and Gordon Hookey quickly challenge the perception of many students that art is purely an aesthetic statement when they engage with the rich metaphorical elements of works.

Stimulated by visual clues in the works, the students begin to understand that artists construct meaning with art and design elements and principles, such as colour, line, form and composition, in the same way that writers employ descriptive and metaphoric written language.

Observations in the Gallery have suggested that students can experience a more concrete understanding of metaphor through engaging with the messages and meanings in art, which they come to appreciate as a visual expression of metaphor.

Recognition of these parallels in the creative process allows students to appreciate the dual existence of linguistic and visual literacies which complement one another in the meaning making process. (Yenawine 1997). They experience the idea that both mediums fire our imagination and interpretive capacity through the power of imagery.

The idea is reinforced in the Gallery when educators and students read aloud from, and discuss, selected literature by professional writers such as Australian poets Oodgeroo Noonuccal (Kath Walker) and Bruce Dawe which explore the effects of colonisation on Aboriginal peoples that are visualised in the works of art. "Examining literature using the vocabulary of both writing and art also allows students to see intentionality at work" (Jester 2003, p. 10).

Whilst it is possible to work with visual texts in the classroom, the advantages of working with students in the unique atmosphere of the Gallery cannot be overstated. For many students it may be a first time experience and they are entranced by the scale, texture, richness of colour and materials they encounter first hand with original works of art.

Students also benefit from group discussion in front of a work where they experience a previously unseen visual text as a community in which all participants are 'reading' the same work simultaneously and learning from each others' comments and interpretations.

Visual stimuli often elicits responses from students who are generally reluctant to contribute in class; visual learners for example "come alive" in Gallery discussions surprising peers and teachers with their changed behaviour.

'Reading' the potent, emotive and often beautiful language of contemporary Aboriginal art in the Gallery environment can be a transformative experience which challenges students' pre-conceived and often narrow Eurocentric vision of Aboriginal history, heralding a meaningful and enduring dialogue with Aboriginal issues.

## **ARTIST'S RESPONSE: JULIE GOUGH**

Being invited to participate in this written reflection about *Imperial Leather* and its effect on a young audience is a refreshing and unexpected opportunity. Galleries practically adopt artworks, taking over as permanent guardian while the artist is expected to return to their studio to move on, to make more, newer work. My artist statement about *Imperial Leather* was, as is usual, written the year it was made – 1994. While artists do revisit themes, materials and techniques, each artwork and its original artist statement is time capsuled, such that revising the work or statement is practically prohibited. Other people than the artist can review the work. This is the twentieth anniversary of the work's making and it feels great to reclaim it, even temporarily. It has been rewarding to ponder *Imperial Leather's* effect on me and life since, particularly after reading XXXX's own public interactions with the piece. The exhibiting life of a collected work is not usually shared with the artist - where it is installed, neighbouring what other works, context, reception, and thus it is a gift to read student's responses to the work, and their educators' recognition that visual art registers differently than the written word. For many, art offers an otherwise near impossible entry into, in this instance, difficult terrain and the possibility to contribute to discussion, and private and public, future building interactions and exercises.

Reflecting on *Imperial Leather* allows me to realise its role for me personally as an artist and publicly as an interface for approaching colonial and continuing history. It, importantly, was gifted by gallerist Gabrielle Pizzi to the NGV, and I am still represented by this gallery, now run by Gabrielle's daughter, Samantha Pizzi. Having artwork in a renowned state institution was (and is) a critical encouragement that gave me confidence in my ideas, and means of making in an exploratory manner, always seeking and testing the best materials and configurations to express my ideas.

*Imperial Leather* stems from a period, a decade, when I worked with everyday indoor familiar materials and objects that I found or modified. Its institutional collection helped dispel any ideas I had that my work had to look like “Aboriginal art” or look like / refer to other artists work. Its reception also inspired me to continue to work with kitsch/new/recent objects to tell historic stories and to argue that these often silenced, absent, avoided narratives continue to haunt our nation.

The work is a key example of telling a story visually and simply; a story that in 1994 was avoided and not widely encountered in text – widescale removal of Aboriginal children and expected assimilation. I utilised as few components as possible: wax on cotton rope on cotton towelling on board. This paucity assisted me to avoid being too didactic or specific, and I continue to seek material simplicity in my art practice.

*Imperial Leather* is an early example of my preference to utilise multiples (objects or text) in works, including within recent film pieces, as a means to motivate, and ideally captivate, a viewer. Multiples almost forcibly instruct a viewer’s eyes to travel constantly around a work, seeking some form of resolution, that in my works is not forthcoming. Holding a viewer as long as possible is one of my key aims. Helen Kent and Susie May’s revelations that students engaged long enough to reach into *Imperial Leather’s* dark depths to pull out insights I could hardly hope for is incredibly inspiring and a hugely motivational affirmation.

Helen Kent and Susie May’s open engagement with students and artist empowers us to give voice to our different experiences with the work. This multivalent iteration enriches the possibilities for institutionalised art, beyond the strangely private interactions public galleries routinely expect between a viewer and a work. Realised here in new ways, this written text becomes part of the ongoing history of the artwork and, beyond this, attests to the stimulating possibilities for educators, writers, curators, artists, students, public to collaborate in new ways - yet to be devised, developed and implemented.

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- Christian Bunburra Thompson, <http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/col/artist/12314>)
- Lorraine Connelly-Northey  
[http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/crossingborders/interview/lorraine\\_interview.html](http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/crossingborders/interview/lorraine_interview.html)  
and <http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/melbournenow/artists/connelly-northey>

Yhonnie Scarce

<http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/melbournenow/artists/yhonnie-scarce>

Vernon Ah Kee

<http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/explore/ngv-collection/william-barak/vernon-ah-kee> and

<http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/col/work/73371>



## ABOUT THE COVER

*Majority Rule*  
Michael Cook

*Courtesy of the artist  
and Andrew Baker  
Art Dealer, Brisbane*



Michael Cook is an award-winning photographer who worked commercially both in Australia and overseas for twenty-five years. In 2009, Cook was drawn into art photography by an increasingly urgent desire to learn about his Indigenous ancestry and explore that aspect of his identity. Cook's first solo art exhibition, *Through My Eyes* (2010), contained images of Australian prime ministers overlaid with the faces of Australian Indigenous. This work explored the potential interconnectedness of generations of Australians and its importance was recognised with selection for the Western Australian Indigenous Art Awards 2011 at the Art Gallery of Western Australia.

Cook was adopted and brought up in a family who, while not of Indigenous descent, were heavily involved in supporting Indigenous rights. He said, "I was raised with a strong understanding of my Aboriginal ancestry thanks to my parents... When I produce art, I feel a stronger connection with my ancestry. This helps me to understand Australian history-in particular, my history." His Aboriginal heritage informs and extends his art.

Cook's photographic practice is unusual. He constructs his images in a manner more akin to painting than the traditional photographic studio or documentary model. Instead he begins with an idea, regarding the image as his blank canvas. Photographic layering is then used to build the image to provide aesthetic depth. Also, he characteristically works in photographic series. Unfolding tableaux offer enigmatic narratives which are not prescribed but left open to interpretation.

In 2011 he exhibited two new series, *Broken Dreams* and *Undiscovered*, together under the title of *Uninhabited*. Their importance was acknowledged when they were acquired by the National Gallery of Australia and shown in its *UnDisclosed: 2nd National Indigenous Art Triennial*. They show Cook's developing artistic vision in their exploration of incidents from Australian colonial history, both real

and imagined. Visually striking, technically complex and with sensitive invention, Cook's images occupy a new space in the Australian artistic imagination.

His series *Civilised* (2012) was selected to promote The 7th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (APT7) at Queensland Art Gallery/Gallery of Modern Art in 2012, and was included in the ground-breaking *My Country: I Still Call Australia Home: Contemporary Art from Black Australia* (QAGoMA, 2013). Cook's latest body of work, *Majority Rule* (2013), has been selected for inclusion in the international 19th Biennale of Sydney: *You Imagine What You Desire*.

Extract from: Martin-Chew, Louise, *Michael Cook* [ex. cat.], Andrew Baker Art Dealer, Brisbane, 2013

## MAJORITY RULE- DESCRIPTION

*Majority Rule* is marked by its aesthetic departure from Michael Cook's previous work. While thematic and conceptual connections with some of his earlier series are evident, the setting of this suite is in contrast to the Australian land- and beach-scapes of earlier images.

This is a depiction of the urbane within the urban. Colonial buildings, the style of solid sandstone architecture which may be seen in almost any city in the Western world, paved streets and a city skyline are the backdrop for a black man, dressed in a suit, carrying a briefcase like the archetypal businessman. His figure, in different attitudes, populates the footpath. He is multiplied (in some scenes up to twenty times), a pointer to the unreality of the scene.

Currently, Australia's Indigenous are a small minority, comprising only three to four percent of the total Australian population. Consequently, black faces have little visibility in Australian capital cities and this series of images defies that reality—yet acknowledges it simultaneously with the use of only one model multiple times to build the crowd because, Cook noted, “The reality is it is hard to find models who look characteristically Indigenous. ‘Indigenous’ is many things and physical characteristics have little to do with this identification. So while looking Indigenous has nothing to do with Indigeneity, in my aesthetic I seek out a strong character in a model's physicality.”

The multiple versions of the subject populate generic city locations: a subway tunnel, an old-style bus, and city streets. Old Parliament House and Canberra's High Court are more iconic buildings, and take Cook's protagonist to the seat of Australian political power. As such, Cook's imagery challenges our ingrained belief systems, yet these images do not offer judgement—they are observational, asking questions, setting up lively interactions within their scenes, without proffering neat nor prescriptive conclusions.

Cook noted, “I was never taught Aboriginal history at school, only about the European settlement of Australia. What I learnt in school was similar to the first European settlers' beliefs, with words like ‘natives’ and ‘discovery of Australia’. Looking back now, I realise that it was a false way of teaching, and that it hid the truth about the treatment of Aborigines over the past four hundred years.”

The colour of the man's skin is the disjunction that prompts the viewer to wonder, and then wonder at their own wonder. It becomes a gauge for internalised racism. Australian audiences may ponder why this collection of well-dressed black men in a city street strikes a discordant note, an atmospheric that feels wrong, unusual, discomfiting. The era of the photograph is undefined but feels vintage, retro, with its black and white tonality speaking to our protagonist's clothing—the lapels of his jacket, the flare in his pin-striped trousers, the sober hat, the dark braces over his white shirt and the stately dignity of his bearing, all of which suggest a period up to fifty years ago. Yet there are other references to iconic Western culture—the bowler hat in *Majority Rules (Memorial)* revisits the shape of the anti-hero in the anarchic 1971 Stanley Kubrick film, *A Clockwork Orange*, or a silent Charlie Chaplin-style comedic figure.

In *Majority Rule* Cook poses an insoluble dilemma as he acknowledges the discriminatory nature of society. How it would be if these statistics were reversed? After the explorers arrived in Australia, the Indigenous population was decimated. This was, in part, because Aboriginal people were without immunity to introduced diseases. “The majority always has the rule and the minority doesn't. Then there is racism that arises as a result.”

There is a formality in these works, with strong architectural lines and perspective to a distant vanishing point. *Majority Rule (Bridge)* is suggestive of Raphael's *School of Athens* (Raphael Sanzio, 1509-11). The synergistic connections between variations on the individual, the vanishing points created with the straight lines of the street, footpath pavers and the collection of rectangular assemblages of city buildings and windows provide a stage-like setting for Cook's individuals. The figures standing in the street appear as if alone, and lacking a social or familial relationship to each other in their physical attitudes, yet are visually bound together. Cook may be positing the kind of anomie or normlessness that isolates individuals within community—the type of First World dysfunction that regularly fills the columns of Australian newspapers.

Another image from the series, *Majority Rule (Tunnel)*, records Cook's model in multiple attitudes, standing, static again, in a public transport space generally characterised by rushing—of people and of the wind that echoes through these underground spaces as trains arrive and leave. Individuals are frozen within their tightly composed cocoon of concrete and tiles. This conformity—of dress, behaviour and social norms—is another theme in this series, particularly evident in *Majority Rule (Memorial)*.

Most Western cities have war memorials and in a particularly poignant image, the black businessman ascends and descends the sandstone steps that surround a rotunda-style war memorial in a city centre. The war memorial is sacrosanct returned servicemen's territory. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders have been involved in fighting for Australia in all wars since the Boer War in 1901 but, while they were paid equally for their work in the armed forces and fought alongside white Australians, on their return home they were subject to the same discrimination they faced before serving their country. Following World War II, only on Anzac Day were they welcomed into returned services league clubs. On other days of the year, Aboriginals might meet their white comrades for a drink but had to stay outside

the building or on the verandah. (It is interesting to note that the right to vote on a country-wide basis was not granted to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders until 1967.)

Cook's images populate the war memorial with the black faces that have been unacknowledged in Australia's military history. The memorial itself speaks to other colonial buildings in the central business district, its roundness inspired by Grecian classic revival buildings, and Cook's figures occupy the steps, moving up one side and down the other, so as to surround and possess the rotunda.

Cook's use of the bespectacled figure in *Majority Rule* (Parliament) evokes the precedent and dignity of Australia's first Indigenous Member of Parliament, Senator Neville Bonner. In *Majority Rule* (Bus), a figure at the front reads a vintage magazine titled *WALKABOUT*, noting and satirising the stereotypes that have driven popular expectations.

There is a lean aesthetic and increased contemporary edge in this series. Cook's interest in the impact of Australia's history on its original inhabitants comes into sharp focus, and the highly choreographed images are witty, stylish and slick.

LOUISE MARTIN-CHEW, FEBRUARY 2014