

Octavia Cook

b.1978

Bachelor of 3D Design (Jewellery): Unitec Institute of Technology, Auckland

Octavia Cook is known for work that evidences an encyclopaedic interest in jewellery and its value — monetary, social, sentimental and aesthetic. Her fascination for the discipline she is trained in spans traditional forms like the cameo, mourning brooch and locket, as well as all aspects of the packaging, marketing and provenance of jewels. In particular, she is drawn to the social role of jewellery, especially its identity-projecting possibilities.

In 2002, Cook launched her “fabricated company”, Cook & Co, named partly after the famous global jewellery emporium Tiffany & Co, and partly in celebration of a ‘plain’ surname with special New Zealand resonance. From its inception, Cook & Co pressed ‘The Captain’ (Captain James Cook) into service for the brand. An early pair of over-scale acrylic cameos, *J. Cook and O. Cook (2003)* features ‘his and her’ pony-tailed silhouettes presented in the mode of a double ‘marriage’ portrait. Cook & Co is an empire-building undertaking and as such comes complete with elaborate iconography. In homage to Cook’s first name, an octopus features prominently on the ‘Coat of Arms’ that also bears two Colt .45 revolvers, a jaunty bow and crown. Whether real or fake, the house stone is emerald due to its association with the eight-sided ‘cut’. Cook’s two sisters and her parents also embellish the livery. *The Cook & Co Company Policy Chain (2005)* reads amongst other things, “Cook & Co, by appointment to Mr & Mrs Cook”.

It is hardly surprising, given such interest in the elevating potential of jewels, that Cook has initiated a number of connections between ‘The Company’ and well-known jeweller, Queen Elizabeth II. *Mutual Appreciation Brooches; OC Wearing QEII And QEII Wearing OC* is one of a succession of works that juxtapose Her Majesty and Cook & Co’s founder. *OC v QEII (2006)*, is a ‘reversible’ red and white cameo brooch slung from a large gold acrylic bow featuring the profile of OC on one side and QEII on the other. *A Fine Pair (2007)* are ivory, pink and gold acrylic earrings that Cook describes as “vaguely competitive”, which consist of cameos of OC and QEII dangling from either lobe. The fantastical meeting of Cook and Queen in *Mutual Appreciation Brooches; OC Wearing QEII And QEII Wearing OC* is entirely characteristic. In addition, these two ‘cameo wearing cameos’ underscore Cook’s contention that jewellery should be worn in order to ensure its unique social role.

From a jewellery perspective, Cook’s play on the precious relates to the post-1960s international contemporary jewellery movement, particularly the work of practitioners like Droog designer, Gijs Bakker. This work also represents something of a disruption to the local permutation of the movement that referenced Pacific body adornment practices and employed non-precious materials (often referred to as ‘Bone Stone Shell’, after the title of a 1988 Ministry of Foreign Affairs touring exhibition).

In art terms, Cook’s work relates to autobiographical and idiosyncratic forms that have flourished in the wake of a more earnest ‘identity art’. What may be most notable, however, is the way such imaginative flights of fancy depend on specialised disciplinary knowledge and an immersion in making. Cook’s jewels point to the indivisibility of craft and concept. Despite considerable sensual and material charms, they are objects to be turned over in the mind.

Anna Miles

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Gijs Bakker

Droog

