



# LIVING IN A MATERIAL WORLD

## THE JEWELLERY OF MISS OCTAVIA COOK

**Octavia Cook is a plucky 27-year-old jeweller, based in Auckland. She's been playing, growing up and developing her practice, while moving from the disposable to the highly collectable. From plastic guns to Indian emeralds, Cook's been quietly figuring her empire, writes Anna Dean.**

Octavia Cook's metaphorical *Endeavour* has arrived on the beaches of New Zealand jewellery. With the work she exhibited in *Cook & Co - The Family Jewels* she's flagging new territory, like her namesake Captain James, not for King and Country this time around, but for herself and the future directions of contemporary New Zealand jewellery.

Cook's solo practice has launched into the commercial stratosphere of deluxe jewellery multinationals. This fantasy transformation from solitary artist to Fashion Institution is humorous yet poignant, a form of self-aggrandisement when hammering out your personal income can be such a slow, painstaking process.<sup>1</sup> 'I wanted to play on the idea of "Tiffany & Co" being an ultraluxe multinational, as Cook is such an unglamorous name,'<sup>2</sup> Cook says. In response to a world of mindless mass production, Cook's mock tribute includes a jaunty marketing campaign cum self-branding exercise, with cameo stickers in gold and black, Cook & Co ribbon, monogrammed boxes and the most beautiful jewellery catalogue ever seen in New Zealand.<sup>3</sup> With its branding and its marketing, the entire show resonates as a whole, as Cook raids the back catalogues of American cultural enterprise<sup>4</sup> while placing herself and her family name firmly in the foreground.

In *The Family Jewels*, Mum, Dad and the three sisters reside in a cameo – a Cook family outing

captured in time. Cameos tell little about their subject, but show that the individual portrayed is esteemed and/or loved enough to be created in relief and kept for posterity. Cook believes her drive for family documentation – a genealogical project of sorts – stemmed from her grandmother's collection of brooches. 'I used to love pouring over her heirloom jewellery box. I'd get so excited because it really felt like treasure hunting.'<sup>5</sup> In her past work, Cook's own profile, as founder of Cook & Co, has faced that of Captain James Cook, 'discoverer of New Zealand', in a cameo face-off.

Alongside the personal cameos, Cook has also created Cook & Co monogram chains for neckwear and C-O-O-K-&-C-O earrings. Her long *Cook & Co Company Policy Chain* spells out the company policy, laughing, as it were, all the way to the bank. 'I'm pretty obsessed with the company,' says Cook. 'It functions as a way to give me some power' – an admission of the vulnerability of a solo jewellery-making career.

In early 2005, Cook spent time travelling through India on a jewellery sabbatical. 'I think I was subliminally affected by all the gold, but what I was really affected by, surprisingly, was jewellery dealers' signage and ads in the papers.' This awareness fed into the idea of the family jeweller, and the majestic facades of India's jewellery houses. 'I decided to create my show in an overly pompous manner. The auction house look of the actual installation and the catalogue styled like one from Sotheby's has allowed me to create a semi-real history for things. I have been able to give them a provenance they might not have possessed.' Out of financial necessity, Cook & Co offers faux masterpieces as well as the real thing. Genuine emeralds sourced from Jaipur, India, sit alongside emerald-coloured crystals and synthetic emeralds, in a calculated mix of price and worth. Playing with the idea of costume jewellery, Cook is having a Kenneth Jay Lane<sup>6</sup> moment; both options are available, the real or the fake.

Cook's willingness to incorporate the fake is a direct contrast to the accepted hallmarks of contemporary New Zealand jewellery. The use, since the 1970s, of natural Pacific materials such as bone, stone and shell as a means of engaging with living in the Pacific, is well documented. The triumphs of mature generations (Warwick Freeman et al) are well known. Now, in Cook and her contemporaries, we see a new crowd educated by the pioneers. As jeweller Jivan Astfalck writes in *New Directions in Jewellery*:

A generation of jewellery artists are practicing now who have not only been trained within the tight parameters of a skills-oriented craft, but have also been educated by studio crafts people,



Octavia Cook, *Cook & Co Company Policy Chain*, from *Cook & Co - The Family Jewels*, Anna Miles Gallery, December 2005, 18ct gold and sterling silver. Clasp features three elements from the company's coat of arms: an 18ct gold octopus, a sterling silver crown and two .45 Colt hand guns. Photo: Haru Sameshima, courtesy the artist and Anna Miles Gallery

who themselves revolutionised jewellery design in the 1960s and 1970s. Then, ideas of bourgeois taste and status were challenged by jewellers with a passion for modernist form, sculptural identity and a much wider interest in different materials.<sup>7</sup>

As one of these 'new' jewellers, Cook presents a fresh conceptual approach in both private and public galleries, following the lead of a handful of her predecessors. Saying her piece in a jovial and intelligent, yet quiet and non-threatening manner, her eye is clearly focused on the international, leaving the minefield of 'cultural identity' behind. While the previous generation has investigated colonisation and attempted to locate particular or specific cultural identities through the use of Pacific materials, Cook is looking somewhere else entirely. As a Pakeha with a very British-sounding name, Cook has taken a different angle on the identity debate, blowing the departure lounge wide open with her international appropriation of the world's largest jewellery houses, chuckling at her unavoidable whiteness.

For Cook, the Victorian period holds an instinctual fascination – with a name like 'Octavia', how could she ignore it? Victorian jewellery, known for its fine detailing and elaborate adornment, is an appropriate reaction to the material sensibilities of stone, bone and shell for a young Pakeha New Zealand jeweller at the dawn of a new century. During the Victorian period, sentimental symbolism was at its peak. Crosses for faith, anchors for hope, serpents for eternity: finery proliferated in the new enthusiasm for medievalism.<sup>8</sup> This era also marked the rise of the silver love brooch; silver collars and lockets, bows and chains; and collections of small animals crafted from gemstones and silver.

'Decoration in general is not that loved in the modern world, so I like the idea of bringing it back and having things that are quite useless and purely decorative and seeing how far I can push it,'<sup>9</sup> explains Cook. Like contemporary German jeweller Vera Siemund, Cook borrows from the past, creating 'Pop' versions of traditional style. As Toni Greenbaum writes, Siemund's work displays a 'respectful irony',<sup>10</sup> a sensibility that underpins Cook's own practice.

To the watchful eye, the recurring motifs in Cook's work are loaded with referential irony. The Cook & Co bow echoes the Cartier panther – Cartier, the 150-year-old, family-run firm, as in Paris, London, New York ... Cook winks at us. Less Boucheron, more Vera Siemund, the bows are, 'a symbol of pure decoration, and I like making something that's supposed to be floppy and feminine in a super shiny hard metal'.<sup>11</sup>

Similarly, the cameo looms large in Cook's work. A common sight in antique jewellery, Cook has refigured the idea in Pop candy colours: prosthetic pink, lawn green, cobalt blue, blood red and even tangerine. In past collections, these costume jewellery backgrounds have hosted a range of parrots, skulls, female figures, anchors – all images from a romanticised, swashbuckling past.

2006 will see Cook's work at exhibitions in Wellington and Christchurch, while the evolution of the cameo will continue: 'I'm not finished with them yet, as I'm now thinking of layering them up to create more dialogue within each piece. The two-figure cameo of Mum and Dad worked so well, I think I'll have to make some more.' ■■■■

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1. As Kobi Bosshard writes on the reality of a working jeweller's time, 'Most of our working days ... are spent in producing work that will ensure our economic survival'. *The Second New Zealand Jewellery Biennial Same but Different*, Dowse Art Museum, New Zealand, 1996.
2. Octavia Cook, in conversation with the author, for 'Driving Miss Octavia', *Staple Magazine*, March/April/May 2005.
3. Created by Inhouse Design, funded by Creative New Zealand, available from the Anna Miles Gallery, see [www.annamilesgallery.com](http://www.annamilesgallery.com). Also included in *The Family Jewels* was a coveted back catalogue of Cook's work since 2001. Showcasing her versatility and conceptual experiments, items ranged from Cook's Fabergé moments (repoussé, paper-thin silver boxes in animal shapes), to her successful collaborations with New Zealand fashion designer Natalija Kucija.
4. Just as the famous jewellery house Cartier did to the iconographies of China, Japan, India and Egypt last century.
5. Cook immortalised her grandmother's collection with her *Better than the Real Thing* 2001 collection and her *(Bigger &) Better than the Real Thing* 2002 collection, a series of photocopied and laminated photographs of Victorian-era jewellery.
6. Kenneth Jay Lane is one of the world's most successful designers of costume jewellery. See Kenneth Jay Lang, *Kenneth Jay Lane Faking It*, Harry N. Abrams Inc, New York, 1996.
7. Jivan Astfalck, 'Jewellery as a fine art practice', in *New Directions in Jewellery*, Black Dog Publishing, London, 2005, p. 19. See also her definition of 'Jewellery art', *ibid.*, pp. 18–21.
8. Ginny Redington Dawes and Corinne Davidow, *Victorian Jewellery Unexplored Treasures*, Abbeville Press, New York, 1991.
9. Andrew Clifford, 'Passion for the peculiar', *New Zealand Herald*, 8 August 2004.
10. Toni Greenbaum, 'An argument for ornament: the jewellery of Vera Siemund', *Metalsmith*, Fall 2005, pp. 26–33.
11. Octavia Cook, in conversation with the author, *op. cit.*



Octavia Cook, *Lots 9, 10, 11 and 13*, from *Eight Bows of Christmas*, 2004; and *Bow Brooch with Spider and Fly Pendant*, 2004, silver. Photo: Haru Sameshima, courtesy the artist and Anna Miles Gallery



Octavia Cook, *J Cook and O Cook*, 2004, acrylic and sterling silver. Photo: Haru Sameshima, courtesy the artist and Anna Miles Gallery

