

Yuriyal Bridgeman: yubilong(mi)bilongyu

21 November 2024 - 15 March 2025

Yuriyal Bridgeman's work is deeply anchored in the traditional cultural practices of his Papua New Guinean community. Born in Redcliffe, Queensland, Bridgeman now lives and works between Kau-in-Kau-in lands of the Niny Niny people on the Redcliffe Peninsula, the Turrbul/Yuggera Country of Kurilpa (West End) in Meanjin/Brisbane and in PNG. Since he completed a Bachelor of Photography at the Queensland College of Art in 2008, Bridgeman has carved out a distinctive presence within the contemporary art landscape of the Asia-Pacific region.

Today, Bridgeman's practice encompasses photography, video, painting, sculpture and installation. His photographic and video works are positioned in portraiture and social commentary, often featuring loved ones and members of his community. His painting and sculpture practice, developed during his time in PNG, draws deeply from the traditions of the Yuri Alaiku men's practices in the Simbu Province.

Bridgeman is also the co-founder of the artist collective Haus Yuriyal, where he plays a key role in developing the group's contemporary art projects, showcased in the 11th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art at Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art (QAGOMA).

Yuriyal Bridgeman: yubilong(mi)bilongyu includes significant new works along with a selection of works surveying the breadth of Bridgeman's career to date.

This exhibition is accompanied by a monograph which offers the first in-depth exploration of Bridgeman's career to date. It presents perspectives on his work from family members, community leaders in PNG, as well as leading artists, writers, and curators, and explores Bridgeman's commitment to creating art within the context of community while also navigating the journey of an individual artist.

Co-curators: Sana Balai and
Angela Goddard

Yuriyal Bridgeman

b.1986 Redcliffe, Queensland. Lives and works in Brisbane, Australia and Waghi Valley, Jiwaka Province, Papua New Guinea

Haus Paia / House Fire 2024

Mural

Courtesy Milani Gallery, Meanjin/Brisbane

Yuriyal Bridgeman

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Godmother's Fish 2024

Digital print on Hahnemuhle cotton rag, mounted to composite panel

Courtesy Milani Gallery, Meanjin/Brisbane

Bridgeman describes the processes involved in his portrait works as 'acts of intimacy' through which he visually honours those close to him.

As artist and educator Pat Hoffie describes:

In *Godmother's Fish*, diagonal bands of light fall across the long limbs of a young man who sits on the edge of the half-emptied, algae-festooned surface of a suburban swimming pool. He gazes downwards, Narcissus-like, at his own reflected perfection and at the perfect pink reef-fish he cradles in his arms. Even after the jungle that surrounds him slowly reveals itself to be a potted and latticed suburban backyard, the image survives as a visualisation of an age-old parable. At the same time, the scene documents specific narrative clues about the artist's personal life: the backyard is his father's; the fish was a gift from his godmother; the Dolphins' jocks were those of the artist, borrowed on a whim.

Bridgeman's photographs capture specific places, contexts and relationships in which his life and his art are enmeshed.

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Uma / Kiss 2023

HD single channel video, sound 16:9, 20 minutes, edition of 3

Uma / Kiss 2023

Digital print on vinyl

Courtesy of Milani Gallery, Meanjin/Brisbane

In the Yuri language, 'Uma' denotes a kiss, characterised by oral and nasal sounds as muscles contract, pucker, and release. This durational video piece features audio recorded with members of Bridgeman's Yuri community in Simbu Province.

In this work, the artist integrates his performative painting practice with the sounds of 'konare,' a traditional courting ceremony known as 'turning of the head.'

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The Fight 2010-20

Three HD video screens, 16:9, colour, sound, 8:10 minutes (on loop)

Courtesy Milani Gallery, Meanjin/Brisbane

Bridgeman's photographic and video works not only reflect on the long history of PNG ethnographic photography but also the possibility of disengaging from it.

Updated with another reenactment in 2020, the video work *The Fight 2010* doubles and recalls extractive ethnographic films. As Bridgeman says:

The film wasn't totally my idea. All the boys and men in the film are from my clan, the Yuri. They all basically wanted to do a dramatic tribal fight scene.

The film initially appears like an ethnographic documentary, but we quickly see smiles, laughing, posturing and play, together disrupting the viewer's expectations. Bridgeman returned ten years later to update the film, with many of the original participants, reflecting a shift in his appreciation of NRL and how his and Haus Yuriyal's art practices exist among these displays of tribal fighting and community sport.

Yuriyal Bridgeman

b.1986 Redcliffe, Queensland. Lives and works in Brisbane, Australia and Waghi Valley, Jiwaka Province, Papua New Guinea

Veronica Gikope

b.1964, Simbu Province. Yuri tribe. Lives and works in Redcliffe, Queensland and Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea

Bengan 2020

Digital print on vinyl

Courtesy Milani Gallery, Meanjin/Brisbane

Simbu is a remote, mountainous province reaching up to 2,400m above sea level. The Yuri tribe has a population estimated between 15,000 and 30,000 people in the southern parts of the region. Jiwaka province, where a portion of the Yuri tribe moved to and now live in diaspora, has over 340,000 inhabitants, is known for the fertile land of the Waghi Valley.

Bridgeman's first visit to his ancestral homeland was at the age of twelve, when he returned to bury his Bubu (grandfather) Muka Gelua, in Bengan village, Omdara, Gumine district of Simbu.

When he is there, Bridgeman is constantly capturing and sharing moments from his family, homeland, daily life, and community through the immediate convenience of digital and iPhone photography, many of which he proudly shares on Instagram. He also uses a high-end film camera (Mamiya RB67) for special moments and exchanges.

Bridgeman's mother Veronica Gikope talks of her deep relationship to her homeland:

Life in Australia is good. Everything you could want is here, but there's always something missing. I always feel like my body is here, but I'm not here. This is a home away from home, not really a forever home. To have my kids follow me back to my country, I feel like God has blessed me with that.

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Wilma Jr 2009

from the series 'The Sport and Fair Play of Aussie Rules' 2008-10

Digital print on Hahnemuhle cotton rag, mounted to composite panel

Courtesy Milani Gallery, Meanjin/Brisbane

A key work from the series 'The Sport and Fair Play of Aussie Rules' (2008–10), *Wilma Jr.* is posed classically, with the bravado and insouciance of a nonchalant David after slaying Goliath.

Wilma Jr. has since been immortalised as a three-dimensional fibreglass cast of the artist's friend, appearing in several exhibitions with new coats of paint and adornments, meeting the audience with a knowing gaze.

Baron Cockyer God of Football 2009

from the series 'The Sport and Fair Play of Aussie Rules' 2008-10

During his photography degree completed at the Queensland College of Art, Griffith University, Bridgeman delved deeply into self-portraiture, exploring the complexities of self-representation. His early staged photographs and video works often featured the artist and close friends, adorned with painted skin and elaborate costumes.

This and other works from this series 'The Sport and Fair Play of Aussie Rules' (2008–10) play and experiment with not only blackface and primitivist stereotypes, but also forms of masculinity, working through conflicting expectations of the consumption and presentation of identity to audiences and institutions.

The exaggerated costumes, searing colour combinations, and theatricality declare Bridgeman's acute awareness and implication of viewers. Bridgeman deliberately skewers stereotypes with glee, often making viewers uncomfortable, just as media revelations of sexist and racist behaviour also shattered the heroic images of adored National Rugby League (NRL) football players in 2009.

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Boi Boi the Labourer 2008

from the series 'The Sport and Fair Play of Aussie Rules' 2008-10

The son of a builder, Bridgeman has often played with the accoutrements and class distinctions of tradespeople or 'tradies'. As artist and educator Pat Hoffie describes:

...Bridgeman deploys both blackface and whiteface in works that are as provocative as they are playful. In *Boi Boi, the Labourer*, he wears the familiar 'tradie' accoutrements that he has continued to employ as signifiers of one aspect of his identity. But in this image, the hard-hat, Jackie Howe singlet, ear protectors, tool pack and steel-capped boots are recontextualised by the objects that surround the artist: a string of plastic sausages, a rubber chicken, and a flokati rug together provide a context that subjects any inferences about the possible heroism and authenticity of the 'worker-as-hero' to a campy challenge.

Bridgeman's first major body of work, the photographic and video series 'The Sport and Fair Play of Aussie Rules', deconstructs gender and racial stereotypes in Australia through costuming, make-up and props.

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Clockwise, from left:

Jalisan with Bilum from the series 'The Trade' 2016

Willy with Bilum 2013

Simeon with Bilum from the series 'The Trade' 2013

David with Bilum 2013

Sharman with Bilum from the series 'The Trade' 2015

Buttons with Bilum 2014

Digital print on Hahnemuhle cotton rag, mounted to composite panel

Courtesy Milani Gallery, Meanjin/Brisbane

In PNG, bilum bags, mostly made by women, are distinguished by their abstract forms and designs. The word bilum means womb, and different clans are identified by different shapes and patterns. This visual language conveys culturally important information, denoting individual families.

Apart from practical applications—for carrying babies, food and other items — they are also used as body adornments, and as a quick identifier of their wearer's cultural identity.

Bridgeman learned the custom of gifting bilum from a young age. These portraits represent moments of exchange between close male friends, yalkuna, living in Australia. As personal objects once gifted to him and then passed on, Bridgeman interprets such profound gestures through romanticised documentation, commemorating an occasion where cultural and personal bonds have been strengthened. The symbolism of this series of photographs is found in the artists acknowledgement and enquiry into his Australian and Papua New Guinean dual heritage, and the relationships he has formed.

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Clockwise, from left:

Ai Yopa, Yuriyal Hausman 2024

Moses Kirua, Yuriyal Hausman 2024

Mondo Munum, Yuriyal Hausman 2024

Rowel Tala, Yuriyal Hausman 2024

Yuwanis Tala, Yuriyal Hausman 2024

Digital print on Hahnemuhle cotton rag, mounted to composite panel

Courtesy Milani Gallery, Meanjin/Brisbane

In around 2015, on land that was given to him by family inlaws, the custodians of the Kondi Kanem tribe of Jiwaka, Bridgeman and his yalkuna—the men who belong to the circle of “timeless intimate friends” who hold significant roles in his life, led by his uncle Moses Mote Kirua—built a roundhouse, made of wood, pit-pit (reed) and kunai grass. Yuri man Joe Kuman outlines the specific cultural space of the men’s house:

In Yuri culture, men’s houses symbolise a sacred place for men where traditional cultures, beliefs, histories, folklores and stories as well as certain livelihood skills and knowledge are shared and passed on to younger generations, especially the male folks.

This house is not just where Bridgeman lives and works while staying in PNG, but the space of the Haus Yuriyal collective, but is located in the space of culture, in a middle ground between the singular contemporary artist and his community.

The Yuriyal Hausman has been an exclusive place for the group members since it was established, kept off limits to outsiders and only open to invited guests. These portraits belong to the first group of photographs released of the interior of the Hausman, a site of great importance in the lives of its members, where they not only work but have built the foundations of a cultural group to which they belong. Bridgeman has photographed these men foremost as kin, members of his family, with a considered approach to documenting the setting in which they have worked and grown together, while revealing a more intimate and peaceful image of Highlands men with their shields.

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Clockwise, from left:

Dua 2024

Mboya (The Cottage) 2019

Abdul (The Cottage) 2019

Dale (The Cottage) 2019

Kuman (Kakaruk/Rooster) 2018

Digital print on Hahnemuhle cotton rag, mounted to composite panel

Courtesy Milani Gallery, Meanjin/Brisbane

The suburban environment and domestic dwelling in which Bridgeman lives and works, between Redcliffe and South Brisbane in Queensland, is of considerable significance to the artist's practice and the materials he chooses. He is closely informed by the setting of where work takes place, and moments that arise within them.

Bridgeman's work in portraiture is often the result of relationships developed over a long period of time. In his Yuri language, 'yalkuna' is the term given for close bonds, or timeless friendships between men. This selection of photographic works document personal connections, his mates in front of his paintings, at his studio or suburban home. These bold reflections of masculinity can be viewed as exchanges, while intimate, seek to reveal a tenderness that the artist has come to know of his subjects, his friends.

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Haus Yuriyal

Live and work in Jiwaka and Simbu Provinces, Papua New Guinea

MOSES, POWE 2017

Kuman, Betel Nut 2017

Kaupa, Kondi Kanem country 2017

Digital print on Hahnemuhle cotton rag, mounted to composite panel

Courtesy Milani Gallery, Meanjin/Brisbane

In 2016, Bridgeman conducted his first kuman (shield) project with around thirty local men from the Yuri people, through workshop sessions combining teaching, cultural discussions, and creative work. Bridgeman also addressed the political unrest in the area, the conflicts that arose during the kuman project's creation, and the challenges of balancing individual expression with the collective voice of the group.

These workshops were conducted and led by uncles and elders belonging to the Yuri tribe, and its participants included members of Bridgeman's immediate and extended family, in-laws, local custodians of the land in Jiwaka, and friends from neighbouring provinces. It was the beginnings of the arts collective known as Haus Yuriyal.

The 'shield paintings' created at this time were done so with different intentions to that of traditional shields or 'kuman'. The group dedicated their time to painting, primarily the face or front surface of the shield, where language is embedded. It became a way to learn and remain connected to tribal custom and traditions, while learning about modern art as a way of storytelling as men living in contemporary Papua New Guinea.

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The Premiers 2022

Painted wheelbarrows and plywood

Courtesy Milani Gallery, Meanjin/Brisbane

Might it be the case that any artwork is a weapon of sorts, an intervention into reality or this or that state of affairs? A weapon or a defence? An act of defiance?

.. there may be aberrant forms. In this case, the assemblage of wheelbarrows which come like creatures of the night or creatures along the shore. A hint or a suggestion of crustacean worlds ...

Whatever they are, my first reading was to see them as aspirational, somewhat haunted, uncanny, signs of an obsession, a rubbish dump on the moon. Objects piled up. A hint of dynamism, if not abandonment, a challenge to what is the orderliness of the other assemblages. A death blow, a theft even, a set of spikey entanglements. Louise Bourgeois in the tradie's workplace. They spell out an odd, unprecedented script, a one-off alphabet for a special occasion, muddled letters, a line that should not be crossed, consequences unknown. A future that involves a speculation—a speculative space, somewhat impenetrable.

'Art as Weapon, Art as Defence', John Von Sturmer
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Haus Yuriyal

Live and work in Jiwaka and Simbu Provinces, Papua New Guinea

Shield Painting (House Door/Greenish Blue)
2024

Shield Painting (House Door/Reddish Yellow)
2024

Garage door, steel, enamel, tape

Courtesy Milani Gallery, Meanjin/Brisbane

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From left:

Brother Bear 2024

Enamel on plywood

Courtesy Milani Gallery, Meanjin/Brisbane

Bomai (Kepa Glan/Sweet Potato Mouth) 2020

Enamel on plywood, timber, rope

Griffith University Art Collection. Purchased 2019

Moses (Haus Kapa) 2019

Enamel on plywood

Courtesy Milani Gallery, Meanjin/Brisbane

A.M (Kiau Rop / Egg Vein) 2020

Enamel on plywood, rope and human hair

Griffith University Art Collection. Purchased 2019

Boss 2024

Mbizya 2024

Gold Diamond 2024

J.O (Bilas) 2024

Enamel on plywood

Courtesy Milani Gallery, Meanjin/Brisbane

Bell (Lewa/Heart) 2020

Enamel on plywood, rope

Griffith University Art Collection. Purchased 2019

In 'A Yuri Man's Perspective of the Haus Yuriyal Collective' from *Yuriyal Bridgeman: yubilong(mi)bilongyu*, Joe Kuman describes the place of the Kuman in Yuri culture:

. . . the story behind my name—'Kuman' or 'Kuman-bah', which translates to 'coloured shield'—is deeply interwoven with this tradition. It harks back to a poignant moment on the battlefield when my father, bearing his shield, encountered his brother-in-law mid-combat. Despite the chaos, they managed to communicate discreetly through the shield's handle holes, a testament to the kuman's role beyond mere protection. Their shields, inherited from our grandfathers, were easily recognisable due to their age and distinctive markings, allowing them to identify each other as kin and avoid confrontation. In essence, the kuman is more than a shield; it is a symbol of identity, a protector, and a silent witness to the bonds of family and the complexities of war.

The life and story of the kuman is the story of the Yuri people and the peace initiative. Locally relevant peacebuilding initiatives of YAKA have had a life of their own since 2013, and their ripples are felt across space and time. Peace is a universal value. Haus Yuriyal Collective's artworks bring to fore a wide range of complex, unique and shared stories of triumph, loss, challenges, and inspires hope for a peaceful and interconnected future of all people.

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From left:

Shield Painting (Yuriland, Blue) 2024

Shield Painting (Sanguma, Red) 2024

Shield Painting (House Door, White) 2024

Shield Painting (Origin) 2024

Shield Painting (Boss, Yellow) 2024

Shield Painting (Sugar Diamond) 2024

Enamel on linen

Courtesy Milani Gallery, Meanjin/Brisbane

Bridgeman's bright, abstract visual language is as much an outpouring of very specific cultural signifiers as it is an expression of an innate feel for colour and form.

The shiny, opaque, solid blocks of colour on the wooden shield paintings contrast with Bridgeman's more recent softer and delicate works on unprimed Belgian linen with transparent veils of spray-painted colour, leaving the warm oatmeal linen ground visible.

In this new enquiry into painting, Bridgeman has stripped back his designs into skeletal form, reminiscent of landscapes from home, agricultural plans, structural components of dwellings, as well as a consolidation of rules regarding the traditional shield design from Yuri culture, more widely included in the regional grouping of 'Waghi Shields'.

Bridgeman also refers to these works as his 'breath' or 'perfume' paintings. In comparison to other shield paintings which require heavier materials and intensive labour, this extension of his mark making is positioned in the field of what the artist describes as "soft, romantic action".

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Scrum 2020

Enamel and acrylic on ply

Courtesy Milani Gallery, Meanjin/Brisbane

First exhibited in The National at Carriageworks in 2019, Bridgeman's multi-panel installation is a cluster of many shield paintings coming together to form a Rugby scrum. In Melanesian Tok Pisin (Pidgin English) the work 'bung' is used to describe a multitude of actions, like gathering, intersection, party, or simply when things join together. This term informed much of Bridgeman's process while building this work, as well as his keen interest in watching Rugby League as an admirer of colour and formations.

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Yalkru (Darren) 2024

Enamel on linen,
Fibreglass, enamel, acrylic, boots, socks, shorts, cloth, headgear, rags, bilum

Courtesy Milani Gallery, Meanjin/Brisbane

In Melanesian Tok Pisin (Pidgin English), 'lewa' means one's 'heart'. To refer to your loved one, you will call them 'lewa'.

In Tok Pisin, there is no word for 'love'.

Bridgeman has reworked his original sculpture 'Wilma' (2010-ongoing) for this exhibition. First exhibited as a finalist in the Basil Sellers Art Prize, Ian Potter Museum of Art, Melbourne, the work has undergone many transformations, however as a figure still remains one of the artists ongoing tributes to the sport of Rugby League.

Now named 'Darren' the figure installed is a depiction of a painter, a rugby fan or player, a Bronco. The painting of 'lewa' and jersey reference, presents an intimate moment of self-reflection where the paint has sprayed back on the figure, as he holds an old Broncos bilum in his hand.