

Eric Bridgeman

‘KALA BÜNG (Colours join together)’

In Tok Pisin, *bung* is a common verb used to describe intersections, junctions, crowds, gatherings, congregations, a party, the pooling of water, a body of work or a term for ‘brother’. My use of the word refers to the concentration of *kala* (colour) in forming patterns and visual design. As a racial slur popularised by Australian troops serving in Papua New Guinea in the early twentieth century, the term also sustained a long-term presence in Australian slang, as a scornful blanket term for all Aborigines and Indigenous people. I consider the intersecting journeys of this word while constructing and organising my shield paintings, *olsem* (for example): ‘*yu mipela bung long mambu*’ (let’s all meet at the bamboo); ‘*tingting bilong mipela kres lo taim yu mi bungim tok tok*’ (our thoughts meet when we gather and discuss); or ‘*olgeta kala bung wantaim na mekim renbo*’ (all of the colours join together to make the rainbow).

The fusion of rugby league and Papua New Guinean culture is sweetly entangled with an excitement for conflict, *bilas* (costume), hyper-masculinity and beer sponsorship. My recent work and life is placed nervously between protection and danger; tribal warfare and brotherly love; sorcery and healing; and the living, the dying and dead. The theatre of tribal warfare in the Papua New Guinea Highlands reminds me of the drama, colour and trickery seen in its national sport, rugby league. My people, the Yuri Alaiku clan of the Gumine district in Simbu Province, have crafted *kuman* (shields) with bold, optically stunning motifs for numerous generations. The obsession with NRL and our relationship with sport and violence is no coincidence, but steeped in the historical conscience of tribal conflict and the strategic weaponising of dazzling ‘team’ colours.

In 2017 I developed a *kuman* painting project in Kudjip, Jiwaka Province with uncles and cousins from the Yuri Alaiku clan, using my recently built *kunai* (grass) roundhouse as a base. We spent months sharing knowledge and discussing a possible future for the *tumbuna* (old) shield, a cultural practice outlawed by missionaries and gradually made redundant on the introduction of modern weapons. These happenings are driven by a need

for re-engagement and ownership of our history and culture, and have become an ongoing practice for group members and myself as an individual.

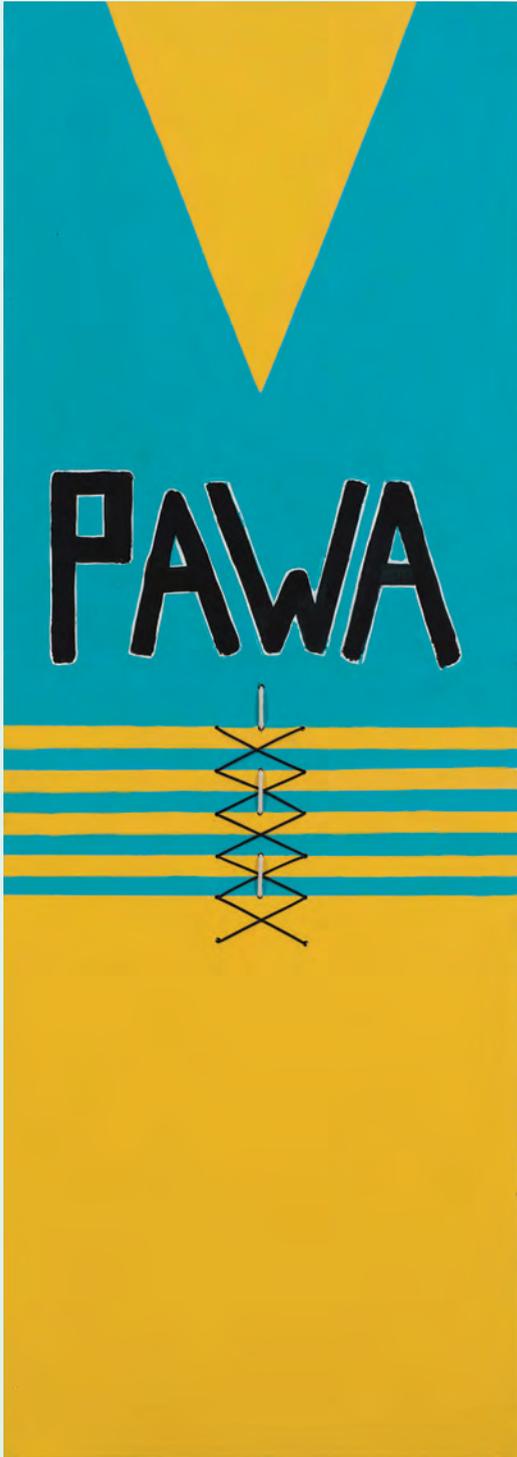
‘Shield paintings’ became the term used to describe what we were creating. My position as the grandson of the late Muka Gelua of Omdara, chief and revered marksman, allowed me to resume this noted form of men’s business. With the blessing of my clan elders I began to engage with the *kuman* and pursue reinterpretations of traditional practices within contemporary platforms. I initiated research, design and fabrication of my individual shield paintings in 2010, in wheelbarrow form, progressing to works on paper, timber and canvas paintings in 2016.

My teachings alerted me to the stratagems behind the *kuman* design in effecting the visual and physical orientation of opponents in close-range battle. Characteristic of flags, signboards and sporting jerseys, each *kuman* also functions as a marker of one’s clan and personal identity. The markings of *kuman* shields can be interpreted as a form of language, a mode of communication and a cryptic channel for storytelling. Tribal belonging and *ples* (home) is central to the designs of traditional *kuman* and forms the skeleton or ‘bone’ of the practice. My generation of Yuriyal (man of the Yuri) is today less concerned with preparing shields for the fighting arena. Although we treat the relic with serious acknowledgement of its past, we understand that the narrative of violence must change, and therefore our engagement with the *kuman* will be part of the change. My set of contemporary shield paintings have been designed and inscribed with stories and personal events, the living and the dead, flora and fauna, popular culture, rugby league, politics and places in the Wahgi region of PNG.

Comprising a new installation of shield paintings on canvas and timber, recent photographic portraits produced in Jiwaka, and a collection of text works, ‘KALA BÜNG (Colours join together)’ is being exhibited at Andrew Baker Art Dealer, Brisbane, from 15 August until 15 September 2018.



Eric Bridgeman, *Kuman (Rooster)*, 2018, archival print on baryta paper, 120 x 100cm, edition of 5; courtesy the artist, Gallerysmith, Melbourne, and Andrew Baker Art Dealer, Brisbane



Eric Bridgeman, *PAWA*, 2018, from 'Shield Painting' series, acrylic, enamel, twine, plywood, 170 x 60 x 5cm; courtesy the artist, Gallerysmith, Melbourne, and Andrew Baker Art Dealer, Brisbane; photo: Ian Hill



Eric Bridgeman, *Mori Kaupa with Kuman*, 2017, archival print on baryta paper, 120 x 100cm, edition of 5; courtesy the artist, Gallerysmith, Melbourne, and Andrew Baker Art Dealer, Brisbane



Bata. Yalkuna. Wanskot. Besti.

Awari emi dai.

Raun lo nambis na paul wantaim botol meri.

Hausik ino fit long rausim dispela sik.

Gilas man traim best long klinim bodi.

Lotu lain bungim pret lo papa antap na save long satan wantaim.

Tok tok no gut bakarapim ting ting,

na ol kilim mama bilong em.



Eric Bridgeman: My Brother and the Beast, 2018, exhibition installation views, Gallerysmith, Melbourne, 2018; images courtesy the artist and Gallerysmith, Melbourne; photos: Ian Hill