



SERGE AH-WONG

My name is Serge Ah-Wong. I am an artist, curator and Papua New Guinean settler based in Meanjin (Brisbane). I am from the Motuan and Kairuku districts in Papua New Guinea.

My art is shaped by my family, my cultural roots, and growing up in the suburbs of Loganlea and Zillmere. Strong bonds formed through love and hardship influence what I see as important and the kinds of stories I want to tell.

Historically, Indigenous and Pasifika bodies and culture have been appropriated, criminalised and exoticised. The dominant narratives that we are 'damaged' and 'primitive' did not fit with my own experiences and relationships with Black and brown communities. The people in my family and in my neighbourhood were not broken or dysfunctional, nor were they exotic species. They were just human, imperfect, funny, struggling, proud, loud, mischievous, quiet and finding their way through life. I want to capture them in all their complexity and diversity. It is within this backdrop that I turn the focus on local, subjugated stories.

From community organisers fighting colonisation and climate change to the matriarchs in my family, I am interested in learning and sharing stories that expand who we are. With each paint stroke, I want to make visible the fierce love, dignity, survival and self-determination of my communities.

Joining with other Black, Indigenous and People of Colour (BIPOC) artists with shared visions and solidarity has also been integral to my art practice. Collaborating with local creatives - Lisa Viliamu of Conscious Mic, Bindimu, Timothy Harm and Tanya Sinha - and co-creating the exhibition Ctrl+Alt+Del from 2018-2022 was our collective work, telling our stories on our own terms.

Another important collaboration was with fellow Papua New Guinea artists Jeremiah Neuendorf and Yuriyal Eric Bridgeman from early 2021. With Yuriyal's invitation to work from his art studio in West End, we struck up a special bond, creating artwork and holding an open studio event. Just as we were building momentum and a body of work, we were hit by floods that swept through Brisbane in February 2022. The damage to our work was significant and devastating but we are figuring out ways to continue and create. I guess creating through love and hardship is what we do best.

image

Serge Ah-Wong (2019) *Kairuku Sun*, oil on canvas

Photo : Carl Warner



MASELINA

MASELINA is a portrait of Brisbane based Pacific Climate Warriors organiser Mary Maselina Harm who is of Samoan and Chinese descent. It portrays the resistance and resilience of Pasifika women who are at the frontline of action against climate change. *MASELINA*'s story speaks to Pasifika women as protectors and nurturers of the Pacific, its culture, its memory, their way of life and the ocean that connects us all.

‘ Western knowledge systems tell us it’s the ocean that separates us. Pasifika knowledge systems tell us, it’s the ocean that connects us. ’

Mary Maselina Harm

<<<<< image

Serge Ah-Wong (2019) *Maselina*, oil on canvas

Photo : Carl Warner

YURIYAL

YURIYAL is a portrait of Yuriyal Eric Bridgeman, a Papua New Guinean artist from the Yuri Tribe, Simbu Province.

This portrait honours the support and mentorship I received whilst in Yuriyal's studio. I was inspired by the way he works and involves his people in Papua New Guinea. The background reflects Yuriyal's vibrant contemporary *Kuman* (shields) and highlights the symbolism that is deeply connected to the artist.

Yuriyal stands in the foreground protecting what is sacred, he stands as the spearhead but with team spirit.
A protector of culture, cultivator of stories.

Serge Ah-Wong

image >>>>

Serge Ah-Wong (2021) *Yuriyal*, oil and enamel on canvas
Photo : Carl Warner





THE CONQUEROR

My name is Barbara Mala English. *Mala* means 'tongue' in my native Motuan language. I was born in 1963 in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea. I am a Motuan woman from the villages of Hanuabada and Tatana Island.

I was around 26 years old when I noticed small white spots on my face. I didn't know what it was at the time. It was that same year I went to a GP who referred me to a skin specialist and I was diagnosed with the skin disease vitiligo. Even though I was told there was no cure, I tried anything I could get my hands on to try to fix my condition, from steroid creams, online herbal treatments, even UV light treatment which just burnt my skin. It became too expensive to try to find treatments or buy makeup that was the right skin tone for me.

At 40 years old, it became more aggressive to the point it was impossible to try and conceal. It progressed all over my body. I always wore long sleeved clothes with a turtleneck. I was very self conscious about my hands and would avoid shaking people's hands. At this point I was very emotional and depressed and would avoid social events.

I came to terms with my vitiligo when my son painted my portrait. Not entirely, but I became more accepting that this was me. I remember when he approached me and asked if I would like to pose for some photographs for a portrait painting. My first response was to put a bit of makeup on and he said, 'No, I want to paint you as you are.' I don't know why but my first thought was, 'Wow, this is going to be strong.' When I first saw my portrait at his exhibition I think it was the first time I have ever loved an image of myself. I was so proud and happy about it and thought to myself, 'Wow, this is me.'

Barbara Mala English

<<<<< image

Serge Ah-Wong (2018) *The Conqueror*, oil on canvas,
Museum of Brisbane Collection
Photo : Carl Warner