



Interview with Lorraine Brigdale (Yorta Yorta)

By Andrew Stephens

Recipient of the Viva Energy Australia 3D Award

The 8th Koorie Art Show (5 December 2020 – 21 February 2021)

Lorraine Brigdale's love of art-making has always been deeply ingrained. A Yorta Yorta woman, she is a dedicated researcher who loves adding new techniques and methods to her extensive repertoire. The big challenge has often been not *what* to make but *how* to make it, and her new work in the *The 8th Koorie Art Show 2020* bears evidence of her exploration of many artistic pursuits, while remaining solid and focussed.

Brigdale's work *Yenbena Munalibik* won the Viva Energy Australia 3D Award. It consists of three vessels, warmly and individually treated with pigments, whose forms meander gently upwards through vertical space. Even though they were woven in coils with raffia, they reveal a love of hand-formed ceramics in both their construction method and surface treatments: handmade ochre paint, and handmade botanic ink.

"Art has always been part of my life, and the first time I can remember painting was in prep," Brigdale says. On that day, she remembers standing at her easel when relatives came to visit and "I felt like a queen". She had found her calling.

Growing up on a farm also helped instil an artistic nature, she says. "We had such a lovely, imagination-filled life, and we could wander around and make things in the dirt and sand, and make up stories in the wonderful imaginative way that children do," she says. "That continued on. Art has always been a part of my life and it has got in the way of me doing 'serious' things, which is probably a good thing."

Employment wise, she has been fortunate to work in creative industries that have incorporated her suite of skills. "I have always gone to life-drawing classes, wherever I've lived, and gone off in different creative directions." She has explored pottery, clay sculpture-making, painting, weaving, silversmithing, and other art forms. She has even learned to make her own ochre paints and inks. The latter made in an enormous pot where "it is like being a witch stirring the cauldron".

Brigdale says the use of the pigments and ochres in her work is about a connection with her Ancestors, family, heart and Country. The preparation of these materials is somewhat mystical and brings a sense of peace and what she describes as "deep listening". In that moment of timelessness, preparing ochres with materials collected from Country – she always asks



the Ancestors' permission to do so – is a very special process for her. She says it is “Country’s way of calling me home”.

These strong feelings of connection with nature, and a sense that she was searching for something through her creativity, began to make sense to her many years ago, during her mid-teens, when her grandmother died in the mid-1980s; an event that led to the family discovering that this much-loved woman was one of the Stolen Generation.

While there had been hints that there was “something” in the family background Brigdale and her siblings had not been told, it wasn’t until her grandmother’s funeral that the urge to learn the truth was ignited. “There were Blak people there,” she says.

This led to research about the family history and the revelation that her nan was Yorta Yorta and had lived on the Cummeragunja Mission near Echuca. On leaving there, she was forced to sign a Certificate of Exemption that meant she would not be allowed to speak her family’s language or have communications with other Aboriginal people. She moved to south Gippsland with her husband and “never admitted she was Aboriginal after that”, Brigdale says.

The discovery of these stories was in many ways a relief, but also provoked anxieties about being accepted as an Aboriginal person. “They are complicated feelings you don’t understand unless you’ve experienced them,” she says. While she was living overseas, one of her siblings dug deeper into the research and found out more about the family origins. Then, by chance at a Bendigo exhibition opening one day, Brigdale met an uncle: his mother was her grandmother’s sister.

“He told us his mother had been fretting for her sister all her life, and he never thought the day would come that he would connect with us.”

All of these new connections, though, led to a significant turn in Brigdale’s art practice: she started learning about ochres just as she was learning about the family history. This led to her making her own ochre paints, and using Australian acacia gum and botanical inks. Eventually, this all led to bringing the various strands of her art-making together, using the beautiful ochre colours on objects she was making, in particular coil-woven raffia vessels such as *Yenbena Munalibik*.

“I came to the idea that this work is about me and my art and connection to Country,” she says. “My connection to Country, the Ancestors and current relations were all growing together at the same time that the artwork was growing. Winning this Award is not so much about the winning, but the



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embracing I have had from my community. It has made me float – that pure love of people being happy for me.”

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Lorrain Brigdale (Yorta Yorta), *Yenbena Munalibik* 2020, raffia coil weave, handmade ochre paint, handmade botanic ink and river stone. Viva Energy Australia 3D Award 2020.