



**VAUGHAN MURRAY GRIFFIN**

Earth and Beyond

1 December 2022 – 24 February 2023

LAURINE · DIGGINS · FINE · ART



**The White One 1933**  
coloured linocut 2/13  
28 x 35.5 cm

Vaughan Murray Griffin (1903 – 1992) has made a significant, if somewhat underappreciated, contribution to the story of Australian art through his celebrated modernist prints; his landscape painting and his influence as a teacher.

This small survey of his works highlights how Griffin looked to nature as his inspiration, as seen in his skilled prints of birds and his atmospheric landscapes. A further consideration in his oeuvre is a spiritual influence, with pastor ancestors and his following of anthroposophical philosophy and the teachings of Rudolf Steiner giving a dimension beyond the earthly to his art.



**Owls 1951**  
coloured linocut 21/24  
17.8 x 22.6 cm

In an interview with James Gleeson in 1979, Murray mused, “But he (Steiner) said that art—and I think it’s very true—art is a link between the spiritual in man and the spiritual in the universe. Now, I still think that if it is not that link, it is worthless.” This is particularly evident in his later series, *The Journey*, explaining how one journeys through life’s experiences, “from birth to eternity”. *Resting Angel* with its pious kneeling pose and other-worldly green glow was included in an exhibition of *The Journey* series of paintings, prints and watercolours where Griffin claimed: “We must go beyond the materialistic, to the recognition of the spiritual world and its

development. Expressions of the spiritual world in my painting is very subjective and relates to my feelings of truth and our spiritual origins.” (Gryphon Gallery, The University of Melbourne, 1989) *The Golden Cow* also has an element of religiosity about it with the bovine subject singled out, elevated to the sacred and bathed in a golden light.

Colour is an integral aspect of Griffin’s work and despite his schooling in drawing and his insistence in his teaching to impart the importance of drawing, much of Griffin’s work is primarily concerned with colour, composition and design. Griffin studied at the National Gallery Art School in Melbourne from 1919 – 1923 under Bernard Hall and later taught (at Scotch College, 1936 – 37 and RMIT, 1937 – 1940 and later he was teacher of drawing at the National Gallery of Victoria Art School, 1946 – 53 and Senior Lecturer in Art at RMIT, 1954 – 1968). He held his first solo exhibition in 1926 and undertook commissions in stained glass, murals and the art deco stone panels which can still be admired in the Manchester Building. Griffin was awarded the George Crouch Memorial prize in Ballarat for an oil painting of the landscape and also won the FE Richardson prize, Geelong Art Gallery in 1939 for his coloured print of a spoonbill. He was a finalist in



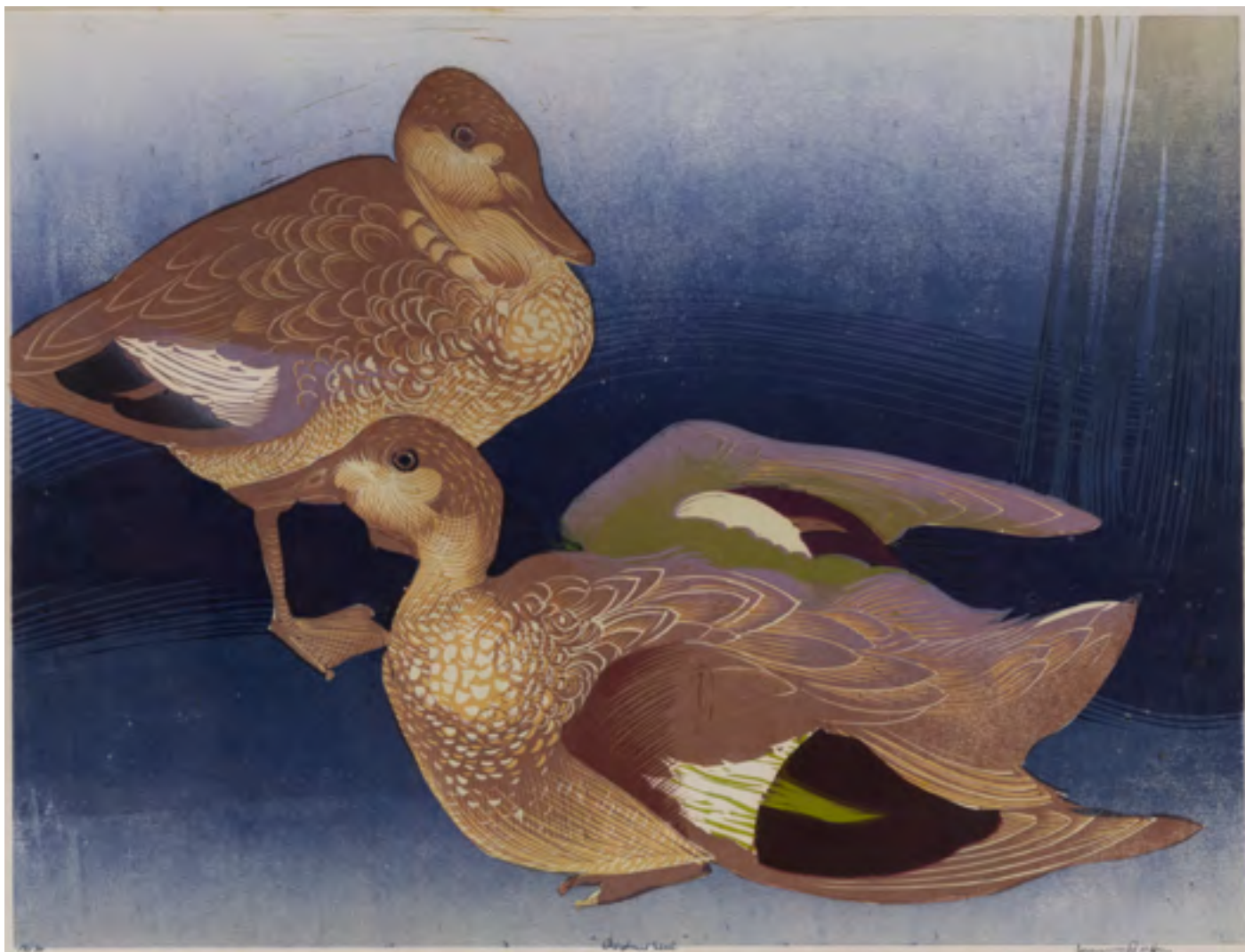
**Landscape**  
oil on composition board  
40.2 x 50 cm



**Dancing Pelican 1951**  
coloured linocut 17/28  
35 x 28 cm



**Brolgas**  
coloured linocut 12/25  
36 x 28 cm



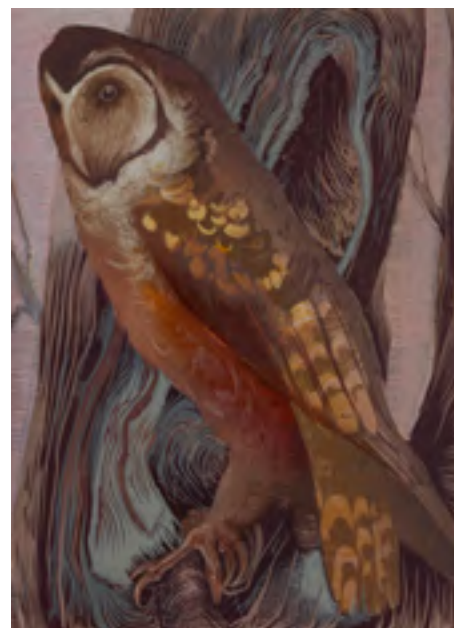
**Chestnut Teal**  
coloured linocut 18/30  
34.5 x 45.5 cm

*“His works are modern,  
original and beautiful.”*

the Archibald in 1938 with a portrait of his wife and later prizes included the print section of the Maude Vizard-Wholohan prize, AGSA, 1957.

Griffin lived all of his life around the Heidelberg area, growing up in a house designed by Walter Burley Griffin who shared his interest in anthroposophy, often painting the surrounding bush landscape en plein air, in the manner of the Australian Impressionists of the Heidelberg School before him. Such works exhibit his use of a broad brush and textural application of paint. The concern was more to capture the essence and spirit of place rather than topographical accuracy. Another favoured area to paint for Griffin was around Mansfield, the likely location of *(Landscape)* with its yellow grasses, green trees and distant hills, where the “flat silhouettes... deliberately and consciously placed give the landscape a monumental quality” (Hall, 1978) Such bright, light and sunny colours are strongly contrasted with the greys and browns, with highlights of red, of *The Wharf*. The more muted colours allow the strong sense of design, with the boxed in viewpoint, to come to the fore.

Composition and design are a key feature of Griffin’s striking prints. Proclaimed as a



**The Owl**  
coloured linocut 19/21  
45.7 x 33 cm



**Magpies**

coloured linocut 5/26  
36 x 28 cm

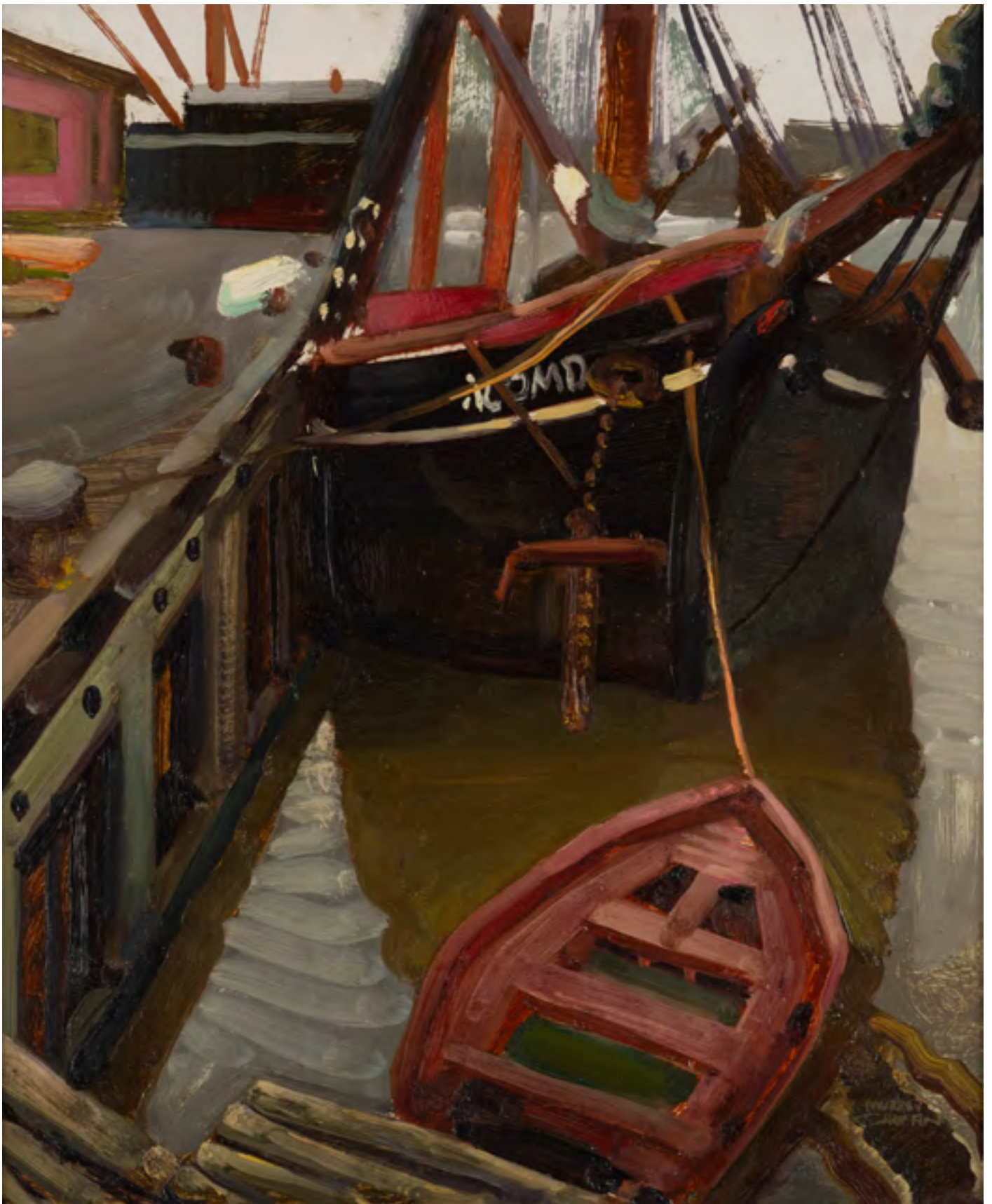
self-taught printmaker, Griffin's technical proficiency with the linocut technique is much admired and acclaimed. In a review of his exhibition in 1934, Arthur Streeton noted that Griffin's prints "place [him] in the very first rank of Australian art... [They] may truly be called masterpieces of colour and form in decoration, with the most convincing drawing and exquisite colour in the background... His works are modern, original and beautiful." (The Argus, 2 October 1934, p. 7)

His print runs were necessarily limited due to his preferred method of adding colour and then recutting the block to produce multi-block, layered imagery with a subtle building of colour. There is an obvious debt to Japanese printmaking with their flatness and emphasis on decorative and bold design. A further influence was the Austrian artist Norbertine Breslern-Roth, whose animal prints were popular at the time and whose work was exhibited in Sydney in the 1920s. Griffin's print imagery included landscapes; a limited number of figurative works; flowers and animals but he is most recognised for his intuitive prints of birds, for which he studied examples at the zoo and the stuffed animals at the Museum. The examples exhibited



**The Stables 1948**

oil on pulpboard  
34 x 38.5 cm



***The Wharf***  
oil on composition board  
79 x 70 cm

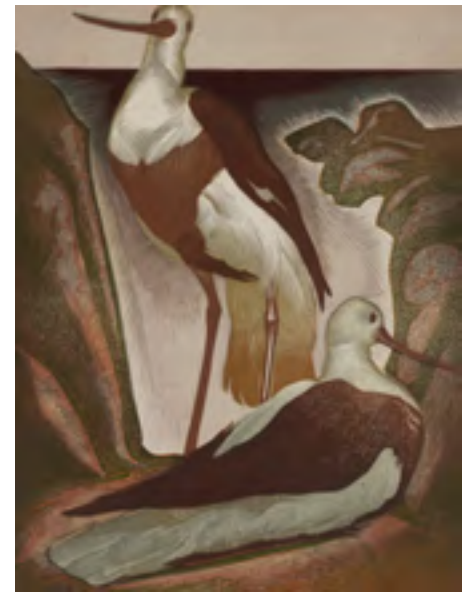


**Resting Angel**  
oil on composition board  
55 x 45 cm

are characteristic of his intricate design, strong use of colour and decisive line. They would have been physically demanding to create, especially given their relatively large size and have a sense of empathy with their subject.

Griffin's work has been celebrated in several retrospective exhibitions (Warrnambool 1978; Castlemaine, 2001; AWM 2017) yet he remains relatively under-recognised. "Griffin was undoubtedly one of the most technically skilled relief printmakers working in Australia in the 20th Century. A consummate colourist, he expanded the potential of linocuts and was one of the very few printmakers to cross the inter-war / post-war division. His paintings, which have received minimal attention, are uniquely poetic and joyous visions of his beloved Australian landscape." (Bunbury, 2001)

His career was interrupted by the war where, as Official War Artist, Griffin was posted to Malaya and imprisoned at the fall of Singapore. Incarcerated in a Changi prison for 3 ½ years, Griffin was still able to continue making art with makeshift materials, creating depictions of prison men and the reality of their daily situations, including the disease, malnutrition



**Banded Silt 1951**  
coloured linocut 5/21  
35 x 27 cm

and despair especially experienced by the emaciated survivors of the Burma - Thailand railway, as well as more literal sketches of inventions and machines, and later turning to more spiritual subjects. Many of these works are included in the collection of the Australian War Memorial. Other collections include the National Gallery of Victoria; the Art Gallery of Ballarat; Castlemaine Art Gallery; Geelong Art Gallery and Warrnambool Art Gallery. On his return to Australia, Griffin resumed teaching and painting and printmaking, cementing his legacy, which we can continue to appreciate today.

– Ruth Lovell

#### REFERENCES:

- *Murray Griffin The Journey, A Retrospective 1922 - 1980*, Castlemaine Art Gallery and Historical Museum, 27 May - 1 July 2001 with essay by Alisa Bunbury
- *The Journey Paintings and prints by Murray Griffin*, Gryphon Gallery, The University of Melbourne, 1989
- James Gleeson interview with Murray Griffin, 2 November 1979, transcript National Library of Australia
- *Murray Griffin Retrospective Exhibition*, Warrnambool Regional Art Gallery, 22 July - 3 September 1978 with essay by Doug Hall
- <https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/griffin-vaughan-murray-30193>
- <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/P10676838>
- <https://anzacportal.dva.gov.au/biographies/vaughan-murray-griffin>



**The Golden Cow 1960s**  
oil on composition board  
58 x 57.5 cm

**COVER**

**The Wharf** (detail)  
oil on composition board  
79 x 70 cm

Catalogue design: Anton Banulski  
Catalogue photography: Nerida Blanche

# LAURAINNE · DIGGINS · FINE · ART

Boonwurrung Country  
5 Malakoff Street  
North Caulfield VIC Australia 3161

T: (+613) 9509 9855  
E: [ausart@diggins.com.au](mailto:ausart@diggins.com.au)  
W: [diggins.com.au](http://diggins.com.au)

Gallery & Exhibition Hours:  
Tues – Friday 10 am – 6 pm  
other hours by appointment