

Robert (Bob Henderson Grieve (1924-2006))

...painter, printmaker and art teacher, was born in Brighton, Melbourne, in 1924, son of Robert Grieve, a war veteran who served in Gallipoli, and Rose née Henderson.

Grieve completed his secondary school studies at Wesley College and enrolled at the University of Melbourne, graduating with a degree in bio-chemistry in 1945. His first job was at the State Laboratories, nearby the New Treasury Hotel on Spring Street, which was often frequented by a number of Melbourne artists including Sam Fullbrook and Howard Matthews (from whom Grieve took several formal lessons). Grieve further nourished his artistic interests by joining the Victorian Artists' Society and attending V.A.S evening life-classes alongside artists such as Fred Williams. In 1947 Grieve married his friend Helen Vercoe, although their marriage ended in early 1952.

Grieve presented his first exhibition in 1948 at the Velásquez Gallery in Bourke Street, Melbourne. As the art historian David Ellis recorded in his comprehensive biography of Grieve, George Bell, then an art critic for the Sun newspaper, wrote a positive review of the exhibition and moreover purchased one of the paintings on display. The following year Grieve embarked on a sketching trip in Alice Springs, although the influence of this journey on his art was limited to a few paintings. Upon his return, Grieve continued his profession as a biochemist at the Mental Hospital at Royal Park, where his artistic compulsion manifested itself into several sketches on the back of hospital record sheets.

In 1952 Grieve left Australia for London and remained in Britain for the next two years, interrupted by brief visits to the Continent. David Ellis documented how Grieve was met by Fred Williams upon his arrival at the train station at Paddington, Williams having travelled to England in the prior year. Reminiscent of his earlier art studies, Grieve found a room in South Kensington and attended evening life-classes at the Chelsea Polytechnic, again alongside Williams. Grieve also undertook lithographic studies (1952-54) supervised by Henry Trivick at another polytechnic in Regent Street. During his time in London, Grieve participated in a group show of 'Artists of the Commonwealth' with Williams and Ian Armstrong, at the Imperial Institute in South Kensington.

In 1956, two years after returning to Australia, Grieve acquired a part-time position teaching printmaking at Swinburne Technical College in Hawthorn.

Grieve and Williams' long-time friendship continued as they occasionally went on painting trips to the You-Yangs (hills not far from Melbourne), or to Wilson's

Promontory. Such trips across rural Victoria were only a minor reflection of Grieve's travelling interests, which took him to numerous countries around the world. He embarked on five trips to Japan throughout the 1960s to the late 1980s, China in 1980, Cuba and Mexico in 1985, USSR in 1983, 1984 and 1986, Greece, Yugoslavia and Albania in 1987, Taiwan in 1988, Papua New Guinea in 1990, as well as Madrid, Vienna, Paris, London in the same year. In effect, to describe Grieve as a well-travelled artist is perhaps somewhat of an understatement. Robert Grieve's artistic reputation was also well travelled as his work was featured in several overseas group exhibitions during the 1960s through to the 1980s in South-East Asia, New Zealand, Japan and the USA. In Australia, Robert Grieve exhibited his work in over 50 exhibitions across all states and in the capital.

As Ellis discussed in great detail, Grieve's art was inspired by diverse influences, including Cézanne, Social Realism, the V.A.S., schooling from Matthews and Alfred Stone, Max Meldrum's tonal painting, Stanislaus Rapotec's dynamic compositions, the work of Antoni Tàpies and Ian Fairweather and his own interest in Asian art furthered by his trips to Japan. At the same time, from out of a melting pot of sources Grieve shaped his own idiosyncratic artistic vision, where his rhythmic, abstract compositions seek to communicate on what Grishin described as a 'spiritual level.' His calligraphic paintings, with their oriental quality, belie a didactic, realistic depiction of a scene and rather, use colour and form to abstract and build up a harmonious view. After his visits to Japan in 1970 and 1974, Grieve became interested in making paper and in a group exhibition at The Craft Centre, South Yarra, in 1979, Grieve handmade all the paper for his works on display.

After a significant and extensive artistic career spanning 58 years, Robert Grieve passed away on 15 December 2006 at the age of 82.

In 2010, Robert Grieve's family generously donated the artist's personal printing press to Monash University, Melbourne, where it is used by students of the Faculty of Art & Design. Grieve had purchased the cast iron Japanese etching press new in Japan in the 1970s.

Robert Grieve was the recipient of several awards throughout his career, which included the Cato Prize of the Victorian Artists' Society in 1959, the Maude Vizard-Wholohan Print Prize the following year, the English Speaking Union Prize (Oil) 1966, the Gold Coast Print Prize 1979, Toowoomba Purchase Award 1983 and the Broken Hill Art Prize 1993. Among the companies that commissioned work from Grieve were Comalco Australia, Melbourne (1980) and the Westpac Bank, Sydney (1989).

The art of Robert Grieve is represented in numerous prominent Australian collections including the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra; the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne; the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney; the Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth, the Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane; the Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide; the Bendigo Art Gallery, Bendigo and the Geelong Art Gallery, Geelong. Robert Grieve is also represented in New Zealand collections such as the Dunedin Art Gallery, Waikato Art Museum and the Chartwell Trust Collection.

Sources:

David Ellis, Robert Grieve: Paintings, Drawings & Collage, Roseville East, N.S.W.: Craftsman House, 1995.

Sasha Grishin, 'Foreword' in Robert Grieve: Paintings, Drawings & Collage, Roseville East, N.S.W.: Craftsman House, 1995.

Robert Grieve: Australian Art and Artist Files (AAA), Arts Collection, State Library of Victoria.