

Alan Griffiths, WA State Living Treasure

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On October 16th Waringarri artist Alan Griffiths was honoured, along with other senior visual artists, musicians and authors, as a State Living Treasure for his lifetime contribution to arts and culture.

“The 15 exceptional recipients of this year’s awards have made a defining and long-term contribution to Western Australia’s culture, history and arts,” Culture and the Arts minister John Day said; “With careers spanning 40 to 60 years, our Living Treasures have become leaders in their respective fields, providing enjoyment and entertainment to communities throughout the world. Their journeys have also influenced and developed other artists, providing guidance and encouragement through teaching or as a role model.”



Alan Griffiths being presented the 2015 State Living Treasures Award by The Hon. John Day MLA, Minister for Culture and the Arts © Waringarri Aboriginal Arts 2015

This last point is particularly applicable in Alan Griffiths’ case; for the past 40 years he has been dedicated to teaching his community traditional knowledge, dance, song cycles, language, painting and artefact-making. He is a respected cultural leader throughout the Kimberley region of Western Australia and the Daly River region of the Northern Territory. Dance performances under Griffiths’ ownership including the Bali Bali Balga (conveyed to him by the spirit of a deceased friend in 1974) and several Joonba (‘open’ performances sometimes referred to as corroboree); complex interpretations of events, country and culture. His performances are regularly presented throughout the Kimberley and at key events as part of the Darwin Festival.

Born in 1933 into the Ngarinyman/Ngaliwurru language groups at Victoria River Downs Station in the Northern Territory, Griffiths grew up on cattle station stock camps. He began doing manual work at a young age, however with a non-Indigenous father and Indigenous mother he was destined to be taken from his station home and placed in a children’s institution elsewhere. When the authorities came to remove him his maternal grandfather stole him away to a nearby bush camp, where he spent several years learning how to live on the

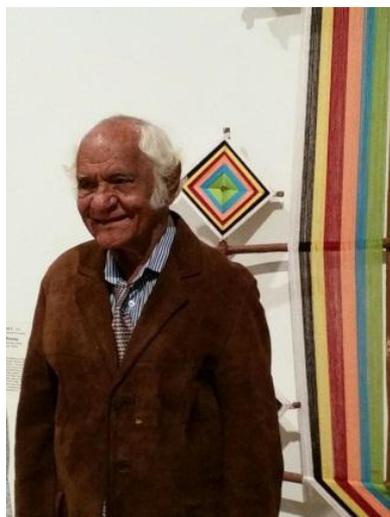
land and acquiring knowledge about his cultural heritage. He cites his grandfather as being his primary inspiration and influence.

Griffiths was too old to be taken to a mission by the time he re-emerged from the bush and instead returned to Victoria Downs station, where he worked as a stockman until 1957. He continued to work in the pastoral industry across northern Australia before becoming head stockman on two iconic properties near Katherine. During this period of his life he often travelled across country during the wet season, exchanging song and dance with other groups along the *Wunan* trade network which extends across the Kimberley and beyond. He eventually moved to Argyle Downs station south of Kununurra around 1965 and married his 'promise' wife, Peggy. After the 1968 Pastoral Industries Equal Pay Legislation, when many Aboriginal people were forced from stations, he sought work on a cotton farm in Kununurra.

Following his retirement in 1981 Griffiths began devoting more time to making didgeridoos and carving boab nuts. His growing interest in art-making coincided with the establishment of Waringarri Art Centre in Kununurra (with which he has been associated ever since) and by mid-1980 had progressed to painting with ochre and pigment on canvas, drawing on memory of his traditional country as well as depictions of secular performance and stories of station life and cattle mustering. These are the themes which have become the mainstay of his art practice.

Griffiths's paintings of country employ the typically cartographic style of the east Kimberley; a planar perspective using dot-outlined block colour to depict important features of country. Given his personal history, it is not surprising that these works often combine post-settlement impositions on the landscape (station tracks, for example) with important cultural landmarks; a visual representation of the integration of two life-ways moulded by Aboriginal stock workers. There are occasional shifts in perspective and mood when he inserts figurative elements such stockmen and camels, shown laterally and often in playful pose.

More recently Griffiths has become well-known for his figurative work, particularly rhythmic renderings of dancers performing his own Bali Bali Balga, the Moonga Moonga women's dance and other Joonba. These works are covered with small jostling male and female figures which undulate across a picture plane punctuated by pulsing flashes of colour representing clothing and sculptural dance emblems known as Balmoora. Griffiths is renowned in the Kimberley for making these sculptural objects; wooden frames of varying dimensions, including cross-pieces around which striking symbolic designs are woven using lengths of brightly-coloured wool. Sometimes 2-3 metres long, they are carried behind male dancers or positioned in the dance ground during performance to great theatrical effect, particularly at night.



*Alan Griffiths standing next to his Balmoora exhibited at AGWA for the 2015 State Living Treasures Award ceremony
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Griffith's work is held in significant national and international public and private collections. His paintings, prints, carvings and cultural artefacts have been included in more than forty group and solo exhibitions since the early 1990s. He has been shown at the Telstra National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Awards on multiple occasions and in 2007 won the East Kimberley Aboriginal Achievement Award for his contribution to art and culture. In 2006, he received a Creative Development Fellowship from the WA Department of Culture and Arts, allowing him to produce a major body of work for the Darwin Festival. This included a residency at Edith Cowan University, as well as at Charles Darwin University in the Northern Territory where he furthered his printmaking skills.

In his ninth decade Griffiths continues to create, perform, and teach. He and his wife continue to work with Waringarri Aboriginal Arts Centre and often collaborate on paintings and cultural works. "The most important thing for me is passing my knowledge on to my sons, daughters and grandchildren the things I learnt when I was growing up...Painting my country and keeping my culture strong is what is important." They have five children, twenty-seven grandchildren and many great-grandchildren.

This is the third Living Treasures Awards following their introduction in 1998 and again in 2004. They have previously recognised Indigenous Western Australian artists Rover Thomas, Jimmy Chi, Paul Sampi, Queenie McKenzie and Janangoo Butcher Cherele. A book commemorating the recipients' cultural contributions to the state was presented at the formal awards ceremony held at the Art Gallery of Western Australia, where two of Alan's Balmoora were exhibited for the occasion.

For artwork images and more information about Alan Griffiths click [here](#).