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Guy and Helen Grey Smith were committed to earning their living from art. To this end Guy had studied ceramics and set up an efficient pottery in Darlington, using local clay and making useful household articles. Helen's textiles were originally hand printed with traditional wood block techniques. She later pioneered silk screen printing as an art form, using hand cut stencils on the long benches set up by Guy to deal with lengths of fabric. Substantial contracts were beginning to appear and they were exhibiting frequently both in Perth and in the Eastern States. They were largely self sufficient, making their own bread, keeping beehives and a goat for milk and growing fruit and vegetables. Guy had a war service pension and, with a little other work, the project was sustainable. He had studied at Chelsea Art School, mingled with the cream of British artists and had an idealistic vision of the life of an artist that he wanted to bring to Perth and to share with others.

His idea of forming The Perth Group was closely related to the existence of the new, spacious and prestigious Skinner Galleries. Growing from his concept of the freedom and autonomy that artists needed, and spurred on by his optimism about the growing art scene, he approached Rose Skinner about hiring the gallery and running the Perth Group

shows themselves, paying rent for the space but paying no commission on sales to the gallery. Rose agreed, thinking that the local artists could never produce the returns that her high profile, national artists had. To her astonishment, the first show in 1959 was a complete sell-out. The second exhibition in 1960 also did well. When Rose was approached for a third show in 1961 tensions appeared. Joe Skinner was protective of Rose and disliked Guy's authoritative and self-absorbed approach. There were tragi-comic scenes of the two of them arguing about the layout of the gallery, pushing and pulling the grand piano. Rose was a practical, wily and astute operator and understood that her survival depended on selling art and having appropriate commercial relationships with artists, to their mutual advantage.

The situation was untenable for Grey Smith. He was unable to operate dispassionately in disruptive situations. The relationship with the Skinner Galleries ended with the 1961 exhibition. He expected the others to stick together and find another way to exhibit. However the situation was very different for each of them. Robert Juniper and Brian McKay felt more vulnerable. Both needed regular jobs to feed their young families and both felt that Rose Skinner was essential for their more fragile artistic careers and that to completely



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alienate her was professional suicide. Grey Smith felt that they were disloyal and had surrendered to commercial interests. Tom Gibbons was more secure as he worked in the English Department at UWA, which was culturally vibrant and active at that time. He soon accepted an invitation to exhibit with Guy and Helen Grey Smith in a show they had organised at the old Christian Brothers College in Adelaide Terrace. However, when

1. Guy Grey Smith, *Zamia Palm*, Oil on board, 107 x 64.5 cm, 1960;
2. Tom Gibbons, *Orbiting Still Lives*, Oil, 70 x 74 cm, 1959;
3. Robert Juniper, *Winter Landscape*, Mixed media on hardboard, 74 x 99 cm, 1958;
4. Brian McKay, *Icon*, Oil on cardboard, 50.5 x 37.5 cm, 1960, Janet Holmes à Court Collection.

### Mundaring Arts Centre

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Opening Hours:  
Weekdays: 10 am – 5 pm  
Weekends: 11 am – 3 pm  
Public Holidays: Closed

he tried to hang his work beside theirs in this new situation, where the group nature of the show was lost, the disparity in their work was too great. He took his paintings to David Foulkes-Taylor, who in order to show them, converted the garage behind his shop opposite the river near the university into the Triangle Gallery.

The existence of The Perth Group was brief. It was loosely organised and the members shared no dogma except the sense of freedom and liberation they found in modernity and their exposure to post war European art. The group fell apart in the face of commercial realities and personality conflicts – not between themselves, but rather with the growing professionalism in the art world. However the group enterprise was an important catalyst for each of the artists. Within the next couple of years each of them had taken a path to a successful career. Robert Juniper became the favoured artist at the Skinner Galleries and benefited from Rose's contacts and expert promotion, as well as trips to Japan and Europe with her. His work was included in the Whitechapel exhibition of 1961 and the Tate exhibition of 1962. Brian McKay left for Greece and London, his life and work transformed by widened horizons and the clarity, energy and passion of political commitment. Tom Gibbons was soon the first artist to exhibit at David Foulkes-Taylor's Triangle Gallery followed by shows at the Undercroft at UWA and a continuous, interesting and substantial career. Guy Grey Smith went on a painting trip to Sri Lanka, followed soon by Bali and later by an official appointment to Cambodia, beginning what was to become a major influence on his work, his career going from strength to strength until his death in 1981.

The short life of The Perth Group was also a moment of insight for the small West Australian audience who were interested in modern art and international culture and who saw that these things could flower on our soil.

Philippa O'Brien

Thank you to:  
Brian McKay, Tom Gibbons, Robert Juniper, Zeke Pervan, Ainslie Edel, Lesley Parker, Ian Parkes, Galerie Düsseldorf, Richard and Lyn Woldendorp, Janet Holmes à Court, Janet Holmes à Court Collection Manager Sharon Tassicker, GFL, Miriam Stannage, Jo McKay and the Shire of Mundaring.



Supported by the Shire of Mundaring and the Department of Culture and the Arts.



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## The Brief History of The Perth Group

Rose Skinner opened the Skinner Galleries on 14 October 1958. It was only the third commercial gallery, as we understand them today, to open in Australia. Until then exhibitions in Perth had been organised by artists in makeshift spaces such as Newspaper House in St George's Terrace and the Adult Education rooms in Howard Street. The philanthropist and art patron Claude Hotchin opened a gallery in Hay Street in 1947 and in 1958 opened another in Boan's Department Store, where the Perth Society of Artists held their annual exhibition. Since his return to Perth in 1948, Guy Grey Smith had exhibited virtually every year in Newspaper House and once, in 1957, in the Adult Education rooms, as well as sending works to Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide to the fledgling, but still stopgap galleries appearing around the country.

Joe Skinner was a property developer and owned some land in Malcolm Street on which he had built flats. By the time he met Rose he was already a collector and interested in modern developments in art and architecture. They were both interested in progressive ideas, had ties to the socialist Workers' Art Group and worked with like-minded friends such as landscape architect John Oldham and wife Ray, Morry Laschberg, Harald Vike and Katharine Susannah Prichard, as well as several of the post war, immigrant architects who were beginning to dominate architecture in Perth. Guy Grey Smith also helped Rose with the development of the gallery.

The new gallery had pale brick walls, polished wooden floors and large, floor-to-ceiling, simply framed windows. It was furnished with a grand piano and a Persian carpet and opened on to a charming courtyard garden. In the beginning there was a cafe and books were for sale in the upstairs gallery. There were occasional music and theatre performances, for example Phillip Parson's productions of Jean Paul Sartre's *No Exit* and Ionesco's *The Lesson*. Rose Skinner brought the most important and influential Australian artists to Perth. Outstanding among the early exhibitions was a show by Sidney Nolan which was opened by the Duke of Edinburgh, from which Rose made ten thousand pounds, enabling her to employ an assistant.

The arrival of a beautiful, purpose-built gallery heralded a new professionalism in the arts in Perth. It synchronised perfectly with Guy Grey Smith's growing confidence and sense of ambition. In 1958 he approached Robert Juniper, Brian McKay and Tom Gibbons, suggesting that they exhibit together as The Perth Group, creating a sense of identity as modernist artists and lending a seriousness and professionalism to their efforts. It had a loose agenda to encourage experimentation and 'non-objective aims'. Grey Smith, Juniper and Gibbons all had direct contact with Modernist art and ideas in the UK. McKay, along with the others, was galvanised by the exhibitions that

came to Perth in the early 1950s – *French Painting Today* (1953) and *Italian Art* (1956) – as well as several important Australian shows. Aware of similar groups in the east, and with an eye on artists in Europe and America, the Perth artists thought they could create a supportive environment where ideas, information, techniques and materials could be shared for their mutual development, realising Grey Smith's Utopian vision of working in a cooperative and sympathetic group.



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There were no catalogues for The Perth Group shows and each artist made his own wall labels with the names of the works and the prices. The Skinner Gallery records only show Guy Grey Smith as the exhibitor, probably because he negotiated with Rose. There are small, typical Grey Smith catalogues for shows at Skinner galleries in these years – a block printed image on a coloured card folder enclosing a cheaply copied list of works – made to accompany his paintings.

A fifth artist, Maurice Stubbs was the final formal partner in the enterprise. Born in Geraldton in 1924, his abstracted landscapes and strong images fitted well with the group. Like all of them, this was a formative time for him and within a couple of years he had left Perth for good. He settled in Canada and had a highly successful career as both teacher and artist. Guest artists were invited to take part in the group's following exhibitions in 1960 and 1961, including Geoffrey Allen, Tony Underhill, Daryl Hill, Arthur Russell and Kenneth Rowell.

## Setting Their Sights The Perth Group

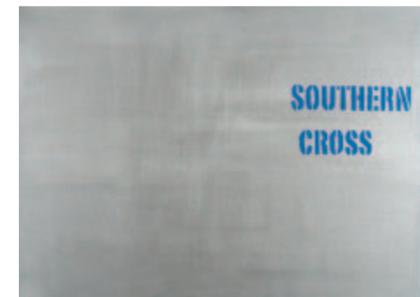
Shire of Mundaring Art Acquisition Exhibition  
Mundaring Arts Centre 3 February -11 March 2012

# Tom Gibbons

Born Salford, Lancashire 1928  
Arrived in Australia 1955

Tom Gibbons' work at the time of The Perth Group drew on the still life tradition and was influenced by his youthful interest in Wyndham Lewis and William Scott, even then balancing the everyday with the universal and the transcendental. When the group broke up he began 'a quarrel with himself', questioning modernism's rejection of past conventions and the overt pessimism of much individualistic abstract expressionism. Rather than tragedy, he was more interested in the comic tradition with its serious morality but light-hearted form and a joie de vivre that blends mysticism with optimism. His *OK Image Factory*, where he became a 'processor of images', emphasised his devotion to craft and 'how things work' and a sort of practical criticism. It accumulated all the everyday materials and images that he recycled, re-organised and transformed into paintings, collages, prints and sculptures, light-heartedly drawing out the ambiguities this produced, seeing the divine in the commonplace material world and suggesting the mysterious cosmic threads that link our everyday lives to the transcendent.

He likens mortality and rebirth to butterflies and hair dye and toasting forks make a model of the circulating planets. Shimmering wheat fields bring to mind the coming of Christianity to Southern Cross and typefaces summon up Nazi de-humanisation and the bombs of his youth. He randomises the letters and the colours for the Zonophone record company, removing himself from the process but creating a select cult of adoring believers who love its music. In *Allsorts*, as in all his work, he gives thanks for plenty and pleasure in his complex, subtle and ever-delighting joko-serious universe.



5. *Homage to Duccio: The Calling of Peter and Andrew*, Hand-coloured airbrushed print, unique state, 82 x 57 cm, 1989; 6. *Southern Cross*, Acrylic on canvas, 46 x 61 cm, 2010; 7. *Allsorts*, Limited edition fine art print, 25 x 25 cm, 1970 / 2010; 8. *Regal Zonophone Variations*, Limited edition fine art print, 25 x 25 cm, 1972 / 2010;



# Guy Grey Smith

Born Wagin 1916  
Died Pemberton 1981

Guy Grey Smith was shot down in WW2 and incarcerated in a POW camp in Germany. He had recently married and his wife Helen, already trained as an artist, sent him books and paints. Recovering from TB in England, he became involved in art therapy which led to his acceptance at Chelsea School of Art where his outstanding teachers included Ceri Richards, Robert Medley and Henry Moore. He returned to Australia with complete commitment to living as artists and to a rigorous programme to develop his art, while supplementing their income with saleable pottery, textiles and prints. He had absorbed the lessons of Cezanne, the Cubists and Matisse and now sought to explore the West Australian landscape in this new language. He was a relentless searcher, always pushing himself to find new painterly ideas and to explore new subjects, travelling every year to places around the state, drawing and sketching in situ and returning to build major, innovative bodies of work in the studios, first in Darlington and later in Pemberton. He and Helen were deeply influenced by Indian and Asian art. Their house in Darlington was an important place for other artists and interested people who enjoyed the generous hospitality and the lively and informed conversation. He contributed much to other artists and made various attempts to set up co-operative arts ventures, including the Contemporary Art Society. He explored the monumentality, and the delicacy, of this landscape and blended his radiant palette with its pure light and opulent colours. He was an artist of great technical power, personal authenticity and idealistic commitment.



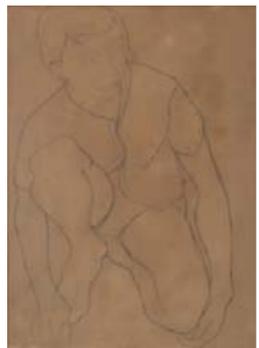
9. *Sygiriya Rock*, Oil on board, 90 x 67 cm, 1963; 10. *Bushfire*, Oil on board, 58 x w 73, 1958; 11. *Tasom Angkor*, Oil on board, 81 x 105 cm, 1970.



# Robert Juniper

Born Merredin 1929

Before going to England with his family in 1936, Robert Juniper's childhood had been spent in the rural West Australian landscape, often along the pipeline to Kalgoorlie on which his father worked. Trapped in England by the war, he went to Beckenham School of Art where he studied Industrial Design. He had the luck to see the European treasures that flooded into England with refugee artist-teachers, and was especially enthralled by paintings by Soutine and Klee. He returned to Australia in 1949 and, after trying to farm the family's land at Cowaramup, shortly found work at Gibbney's Commercial Art firm which brought him into contact with artists in Perth, via John Lunghi. By 1953 he was exhibiting in the Howard Street Gallery and in the next few years won The Perth Prize several times and other major awards. His association with Rose Skinner began with the opening of the gallery and he exhibited there before the The Perth Group was founded and continued until Rose's death in 1979. He moved to Darlington in the late 1950s and has remained there ever since, building three iconic houses. His work is founded in the WA landscape which he elucidates with a personal iconography of lines, dots and marks that define its intellectual and emotional space. His graceful arabesques are balanced by a tense staccato line that fills space with references to plants and animals, the survey lines and scars of mining and the fleeting human presence in an ancient and timeless landscape. Early in his career he began to make sculpture and has major works around Australia. He has also designed for the theatre, notably *Bran Nue Dae*, and illustrated books.



12. *Three Kings Came*, Mixed media on hardboard, 105 x 78 cm, 1962; 13. *Portrait of Clare*, Pencil on paper, 36 x 26.5 cm, 1956.



# Brian McKay

Born Meckering 1926

Brian McKay was blessed with an idyllic childhood in the wheatbelt town of Northam and echoes of this pastoral perfection – the feel of farm machinery, the smells and sounds of nature and the luminous light – have found their way into many aspects of his work. Shortly after The Perth Group disbanded, he was helping Sidney Nolan hang his paintings in the Skinner Galleries, when Nolan suggested that he leave Australia, suggesting Greece as a good place to paint. In 1964, with help from Rose Skinner and others the McKay family spent a year on the Greek island of Kythera and then moved to London, again helped by Rose. In the ten years he was away, McKay sent three exhibitions back to her, maintaining his presence on the gallery's agenda. In London he was galvanised by the politics of the 1960s, especially the plight of Greece after the military coup. With the election of Gough Whitlam and the promise of a more enlightened arts policy, the family returned to Perth. Since then he has been a leader in the establishment of Praxis and then PICA, contemporary art initiatives that are central to the cultural life of the state.

McKay has developed a strong personal geometry, full of traditional associations, mixed with his love of prosaic things and the patinas of age, his craft skills and masterly use of diverse materials and industrial techniques, and his affinity with text in all its forms. His work has a timeless lyricism and stillness. One of his outstanding achievements is his huge, contemplative work in the public space of Central Park in the city, with its seamless integration into the architecture, physical and conceptual grandeur, and opalescent colour refracting off the ever-changing, lustrous, blue and silver metallic surfaces.



14. *Website*, Automotive enamel on etched and sealed aluminium, 110 x 110 cm, 2011, Courtesy Gallery Düsseldorf; 15. *Arno*, Oil on board, 43 x 38 cm, c 1954, Janet Holmes à Court Collection; 16. *Parices*, Oil on board, 60 x 47.5 cm, c 1964; 17. *Rainbow Pavillion*, Auto enamel on etched and sealed stainless steel, 38 x 41 cm, 2007, Courtesy Gallery Düsseldorf; 18. *Capriole*, Oils on etched aluminium, 35 x 52 cm, 2002, Courtesy Gallery Düsseldorf.

