

'Inside looking out'

Enigmas and variations in Fred Williams

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FRED WILLIAMS: INFINITE HORIZONS

by Deborah Hart

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The writers of two books about Fred Williams published in the 1980s, Patrick McCaughey and James Mollison, were friends of the artist, and involved with him in their roles as art critic/historian and gallery director. Their respect for Williams led them to write against the grain of their usual modes. Mollison, professionally always on the knife-edge of making judgement, held back, exploring with great precision within the factual boundaries of materials and processes, numbers, dates, and sequences. McCaughey, too, looked between art and artist rather than to mainstream contemporary art. In a new chapter written for the 2008 edition of his book, McCaughey endorsed the insights of younger writers, thereby providing a springboard for Deborah Hart.

This third monograph (a book, in lieu of a catalogue) is in conjunction with a retrospective organised by the National Gallery of Australia, which could explain why Hart, too, chooses to explore the paintings rather than develop an historical argument. Her persuasive reason would be that it was Williams's own practice to refrain from placing his art within a style or phase of art. Williams habitually pointed to multiple possibilities, enthusiastically accepted many influences on his art, and, with great aplomb, disregarded the idea (so powerful in his time) that the history of art, followed a line of innovation whereby one idea or paradigm eventually created another. Hart's contribution is to show Williams working in several directions simultaneously, coalescing questions of style, processes of making, and subject matter. Thus, between 1967

and 1969, 'along with the prevailing interest in Minimalism, four aspects are of particular relevance to the ways in which Williams's art developed': the Lysterfield landscape, a first encounter with the outback, his emotional response to a bushfire that scarified the country near his Upwey home, and an affinity he discerned between Minimalist painting and a Chinese and Japanese aesthetic.

To illustrate how the balancing of form and subject resolved in works of art, take *Forest of gum trees III* (1968–70), which Williams judged 'My Best Painting'. A landscape both typically Australian and universal, the work also has a presence purely in terms of paint and canvas. For Williams, who produced many such beautiful works, this one may be special for the way it interacts with natural light. Its colours are those of earth and air. In changing light, the airy cobalt and Prussian-blue glazes show bluer or pinker, hiding or revealing the dusky pink-orange ground; and the tree forms brushed between, over, and under the glazes take on colour, edge, and substance where ridges of paint catch the light. A different balance between form and content is achieved in *Fire burning on the ridge* (1969), where smoke rising vertically from the horizon



Fred Williams, *Forest of gum trees III*, 1968–70
Private collection, © estate of Fred Williams

reads like a crease or slit in the canvas, while in the other orientation ordinary, depth-swallowing perspective crams a multitude of distance into the black horizon.

To Craig McGregor in 1969 Williams postulated that there was or should be a fundamental agreement between nature and art: 'This is how the landscape should be, even if it isn't ... I want to isolate those marks, turn them into handwriting. They become an alphabet like hieroglyphics.' At the basic level of mark-making, 'writing' a landscape, was, for art, what Noam Chomsky's generative grammar was for language. At not quite the same deep level, ideograms spoke of particular landscapes and cultures. In China in 1976, Williams observed that the dragon ideogram matched the country's curving rivers. He may have been thinking along those lines when, in *Landscape with a steep road* (1957–58), he created

a motif – the road – whose shape, the unusual way it stops before the top of the hill, even the positioning of objects off the lower bend, corresponds with an ancestral road pictured in 1946 by the Yolngu painter Mawalan (in the Berndt collection).

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According to Mollison, Williams was fascinated by the idea that the ideographs of Aboriginal art reciprocated distinctive forms in the landscape. Wishing to write a hieroglyphics of the land, the artist made the line of a watercourse the motif for his Australian *Riverbed* series. Extending the experiment, he consulted Professor E. Sherbon Hills's *Physiography of Victoria: An Introduction to Geomorphology* (1975) and painted a dozen or more waterfalls within a day's reach of Melbourne. The *Waterfall Polyptych* (1979) describes the rock wall of the Lal Lal falls over which hang narrow white rods of water. The exposed rock, irregular, even ugly in shape, is painted near-black on near-white and the motif is repeated on four large canvases arrayed side by side, positively forcing one's attention. *Stump II* (1976), another visual enigma, had been interpreted by critics and art historians as an archetypal Antipodean Head. Williams, who had *not* encouraged that Antipodean reading, studied the waterfall, perhaps for a sign indicative of Australia.

Williams's structural image of the Australian landscape lacked Nolan's and Drysdale's romance of authenticity. Rubbish on the riverside, quarries, axes cutting into the 'prettiness' of Lysterfield and Upwey, excavation eating the Pilbara, were facts to be acknowledged – only the axe was expressed emotively. His worst moment must have been in New York in 1977, when his gouaches at MOMA were seen, crassly, as indebted to American 'stripe-painting of the 1960s' and, like Drysdale and Nolan, peddling the myth of the

'ancient continent'. Williams came back with a subtle retort: 'It would be impossible for me to paint anywhere else. I must be inside looking out – not outside looking in.'

'Inside/outside' was how, in his diaries, he couched the disparate situations of his art: studio and outdoor painting; creativity driven by processes of craft, creativity which came instinctively; the claims of a single work, the interaction between closely related works; and, now, an outside view of Australia and a view from inside.

Thirty years after this great artist's death, it is time to ask where he fits historically. The first thing to account for is Williams's evasive stance. The German-trained art historian Ursula Hoff – in whose study room at the National Gallery of Victoria the young Williams first examined prints and drawings by the great European masters – observed that he shared a strategy with his friend John Brack. 'Neither has shut his eyes to the work of other painters, here or overseas; no-one could be better informed on the scene of present-day art; but both have been reluctant "disciples"; they have never suffered from wholesale conversion.' Brack, in 1960, described their epiphany when, as students in Melbourne in the postwar 1940s, they realised that modern art was 'not confined to one direction but the endorsement of any. A liberation from all the rules, that is how it appeared.' By comparison, the 'dogmas' by which embattled senior artists and their peers claimed authority for their art seemed unnecessarily limiting. And so they refused to go along with the idea that innovation along a 'right direction' governed the progress of art.

Yet Williams made choices that were critical for his career. He elected to study under teachers of opposed ideologies, acquiring a style of tonal painting from William Dargie and ideas about formal structure from George Bell (both of lasting significance for his art). Moving to London soon after Russell Drysdale and Sidney Nolan shot to fame there with red-hot images of the Australian outback, he attended lectures by the socialist art critic John Berger and explored music-hall figure

subjects (sub-Sickert) and landscape (sub-Paul Nash). Returning home, he committed himself to painting gum-trees: a decision based, I think, on what the Australian public wanted, and the success of Drysdale and Nolan. Within a few years, he endorsed a pure language of art: Guy Stuart, of the 1960s generation, commented that Williams was the only artist to thereby bridge a significant generation gap. Those choices, not to forget the intelligence that lay behind them, laid the groundwork for Williams's Australian achievement – a new image of the landscape expressed in the pared-down terms of his medium; an achievement which, besides its significance for the artist, also brought unpopular modern art within the pale of popular approval.

In 2003, twenty years after the artist's death, an exhibition of his works on paper at the British Museum had an enthusiastic and informed reception, pointing to the ongoing relevance of his strategic art. Artists who studied the works, and the critics who wrote about the exhibition, responded to the process-driven creativity that married the observation of the outside subject to the structuring work of the artist's hand and mind. The final goal for Williams was to unify. He wrote on one happy occasion, 'Once there were "outside" and "inside" paintings – now there is no difference.'

A mark of the curator's eye for detail: the sequence of images in *Waterfall Polyptych* and *Chalk Creek*, and the orientation of *Weipa III* and *Weipa IV*, have been corrected (in book and exhibition) from previous publications. ■

Fred Williams: Infinite Horizons, the exhibition, is at the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, until November 2011, before moving to Melbourne and Adelaide in 2012.

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