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Under the Skin

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'Fred Williams: Infinite Horizons'

[Peter Conrad](#) [1]

Until not long ago, Australian nature seemed averse to art. The trees were unkempt and drab, the vistas flat and dry, the colours industrial not organic. In European painting, man – represented, for instance, by John Constable's farmers – enjoys dominion over a world that has been cleared, tamed, cultivated. In American painting, man – represented by the contemplative figures who pause on precipices in the landscapes of the Hudson River School – is both challenged and piously humbled by the infinitudes he surveys: this, after all, is God's own country. But in Australia, it seemed, there was nothing to look at except the entangled, indiscriminate bush or the vacant, lethal outback.

In 1947 the art historian Kenneth Clark sympathised with Sidney Nolan's early efforts to paint "the Australian countryside (if one can call that inhospitable fringe between sea and desert by such a reassuring name)". Clark suspected that art, with its play of bright but not blinding light and soft shadow, was disabled because Australia contained "no dark woods ... no thick, sappy substances", no excuse for pictorial impasto.

A decade later, Fred Williams returned to Melbourne after spending six years as a student in London and began to prove Clark wrong. The work Williams had done in England – mostly figurative, with wistful urban vignettes of buskers and beggars, or souvenirs of the desperately jaunty acrobats and comedians in the last remaining music halls – proved to be a false start. In Australia the land was starkly depopulated bush, with no workers tidily pruning the trees, as seen in one of his English etchings, and no church steeples to organise and sanctify the view. The

affectionately downtrodden rural scenery of Constable seemed irrelevant, as did Turner's frothy sublimity. On a trip to Kosciuszko National Park, Williams discovered something quite unlike the Alps that had excited the European Romantics. Storm clouds pummelled the Australian mountains in an aerial bombardment and snow, as it settled onto rock, sketched grotesque, leering faces.

The geometrical boulders painted by Cézanne were of some help, because they reminded Williams to consider what the land was made of, but his visual education did little to prepare him for his first expeditions to Mittagong in the Southern Highlands, New South Wales, and Upwey in the Dandenongs, Victoria. He was bewildered by the lack of a skyline, and by the eye's inability to find a track through the mess of scrub: perspective is an urban convenience, allowing us to travel to the horizon in a straight line, and Australian space refused to be regulated.

As disconcerted as the earliest colonial painters, Williams thought Australian trees were "irrational", not calmed by their anchorage to the ground, and he often painted them as if they were growing upside down, hovering above the earth. In a 1979 gouache, some boabs in the Kimberleys look like a coven of pregnant witches, with swollen bellies and mad, flailing arms that mock the dusty, defensive architecture of the termite hills around them. An etching of what Williams called "chopped trees" makes the truncated stumps and discarded logs resemble massacred meat, oozing – thanks to a blurred, bubbly aquatint – in the corner of an abattoir.

Williams found the bush "hostile", and could "only take it for four or five hours at a time". His initial sense of haunted alarm – "the ministry of fear", as Wordsworth called it – produced some jittery nocturnes. In *Landscape with Green Cloud and Owl*, the charred gums are spectral, guarding a valley where smudges of purple and red seem to mark the sites of stifled fires. Green, usually the prerogative of the fertile earth, has fled to the sky, attached to the underbelly of a cloud that is passing through at speed; the owl, scarcely visible in the gloom, gives the image an eerie imagined soundtrack.

Eventually Williams relaxed to produce some glorious prints of fresh saplings thrusting proudly upright towards the sun. *Red Trees*, a watercolour made in 1962 in the You Yangs, Victoria, reminds me of the scandalised question Helen Garner was once asked by a Parisian friend to whom she showed a postcard of her alien, almost Martian homeland: "Les arbres sont rouges?" Williams felt no such dismay, so the vertical image of those pink trunks is as decorative as wallpaper.

At Queenscliff in 1971 he experimented with a horizontal format that is equally benign and all-embracing. The beach in this series of gouaches is a burnished stripe, washed by a light that changes throughout the day; instead of the scribbled debris that litters Williams' earliest versions of the bush, the dots denote bathers who are happily buoyed by the surf. American colour-field painters such as Helen Frankenthaler and Kenneth Noland thought of their work as an abstraction from the visible world. Adapted by Williams, the style became a depiction of Australian nature: what is the beach – or, for that matter, the desert – but a field for the display of colour?

Perhaps Williams' most profound understanding of the land, and his most heartening reconciliation with it, came in 1968 after a bushfire at Upwey. In 1976 he was to suffer the consequences of an urban blaze when the paintings and gouaches he had stored in the Barrett

Malt Factory at Richmond were damaged or destroyed by fire; although in 1968 he came close to losing his house, that fire – as he saw when he returned – was a necessary agent of cauterising change and renewal, merciful despite its disrespect for human beings and their property.

The first in his series of 'Burnt Landscape' is a cemetery of blackened cinders, with trees reduced to skeletons, though even here is a sudden, almost disrespectfully premature resurgence of greenery, like laughter at a funeral. Already in the next gouache of the series the refledged trunks are springy, elastic, and seem to fling bunches of foliage into the air in celebration. In 1970 Williams studied the process more closely when he etched *Regenerating Ferns*. The harshness of Australia warned him against anthropomorphising, but it's impossible to look at the furry tendrils here without thinking of an infant's squashy fingers uncurling to explore the world and assert the right to be alive in it. A gouache of *Mangrove Needles*, made after a visit to Bedarra Island on the Great Barrier Reef in 1973, ponders the same germinative mystery: these tenuous shrubs can procreate in water, burrowing into a deposit of dirt if they are lucky enough to locate some.

"In the end," Patrick White avowed at the end of *The Tree of Man*, "there were the trees." But Williams showed that those trees were detachable, insecurely rooted. Other continents are earthier than ours, where the sandy topsoil can be easily eroded or blown away; Williams, studying the terrain from a plane as if it were laid flat on an operating table, said he could imagine the land with the skin peeled off. His vision of Australia is literally anatomical. Scrub resembles hair sprouting in bodily crevices, and he makes a muddy stagnant pond in a forest at Kallista look like an internal organ, with its reservoir of blood or bile. Another pond in the You Yangs is a blackened bruise, and the Werribee Gorge resembles a surgical scar freshly stitched to clamp together the thin folds of livid flesh. Instead of the sappy substances Kenneth Clark looked for, Williams, when he flays Australia, exposes bone, as in the iron face cliffs of the Kimberleys that he painted between 1979 and 1981, near the end of his life. He first flew over the Pilbara at the invitation of Rod Carnegie, then working for Comalco, which – to use Williams' metaphor – removed the skin from the land to extract bauxite and alumina; Rio Tinto, as Comalco was renamed after a corporate takeover, happens to be the main sponsor of a current Williams retrospective at the National Gallery of Australia. In the end, whether or not any trees remain, there will be the minerals.

Fred Williams: *Infinite Horizons will be held at the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, from 12 August to 6 November 2011.*

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Images:



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