

**Review in Times Literary Supplement**  
**by Patrick McCaughey**  
**7 October 2011**

**Back to the gum trees**

**How Fred Williams reclaimed the least spectacular features of the Australian landscape**



**“Hamersley landscape”, 1979, by Fred Williams**

**FRED WILLIAMS**

**INFINITE HORIZONS**

**National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, until November 6**

*Fred Williams: Infinite horizons* 240pp.  
National Gallery of Australia.  
Aus\$39.95. 978 0 642 33423 7

At his death in 1982 at the age of fifty-five, Fred Williams had firmly established himself as Australia’s leading artist, the one indisputably major talent in the generation that succeeded Sidney Nolan and Arthur Boyd. Both of them had placed a representative figure against the landscape, be it the outlaw Ned Kelly or the doomed explorers Robert Burke and William Wills (Nolan) or a desperate lover in pursuit of his white bride (Boyd) to create a mythic presence. The sun-drenched plain or the nocturnal bush became a theatre where the aspirations and agonies of the human condition could be acted out. Williams would change all that.

Williams’s decisive turn to the landscape came in 1957 when he returned to Australia after five years in London. The shock of recognition was intense. From his first sight of the bush near Fremantle to settling back into Melbourne, he was determined to paint the landscape and, more specifically, the gum tree, then regarded as a hopelessly outdated subject.

Williams was a Francophile, and Cézanne became an early and obvious guide. More significantly, Williams had seen an important survey of Georges Braque when in London. The latter's Cubist landscapes of 1908–9 aided him in coming to grips with the featureless character of the Australian landscape.

By 1960, Williams was deeply engaged in painting the Australian bush at Sherbrooke Forest in the Dandenong Ranges just outside Melbourne and at Echuca on the River Murray. Horizon-less and without a ground plane, he concentrated on the wall-like quality of the bush. They were bluntly modernist paintings. The massive trunks of the gum trees were painted right up on top of the flat surface. There was no way you could squeeze a bushranger or a demented bride into these airless works. Australian landscape painting was now set in a new key. Yet they were redolent of the bush: you could feel the bark and smell the eucalypt.

Williams broke through in 1963, moving on from his position as a well-regarded painter within the world of art to a nationally acclaimed artist. He was thirty-six years old and had developed a rich pictorial practice. He said of himself: "I was never in a hurry". The paintings which marked the change were the You Yang series, which won him the Helena Rubinstein Travelling Scholarship, then the most prestigious art award in Australia. The You Yangs are a low range of stony, scrubby hills some twenty-five miles south of Melbourne. They look across the dullest stretch of Australian landscape imaginable. Flat as a tack with the drabest colouring from brown to grey, equally boring in summer as winter, it was a distinctly unpromising prospect. Yet Williams took the lack of focus as his prime interest. He saw gum trees collecting along roads and fences and then scattering randomly across paddocks. Flattening the ground behind them, he painted the gum trees with vigorous whorls and touches of paint. They caused another "shock of recognition" – this time on the part of his viewers. They saw the most familiar, least spectacular aspect of the Australian landscape transformed into rich and satisfying works of art, painted with assurance and conviction. For the rest of the decade, one series after another poured out of Williams's studio. The spontaneity of the You Yang paintings gave way to the monumental Upwey Landscapes where the hill and bush of the Dandenongs were treated with classical weightiness. Williams would then react and paint a set of jaunty hillsides whose vertiginous, tilted horizon lines would unsettle the gravitas of the Upwey landscapes.

In this magisterial retrospective at the National Gallery at Australia, Deborah Hart has deftly mixed the classic Williams of the various series with non-anthology works that avoid neat categorization. These are often the most expressive, such as the surging and deeply felt "Red Landscape" (1965–6). Her chapter "Dialogues Across Series" in the accompanying catalogue is one of Hart's most original contributions to our understanding of the artist. This exhibition makes us more aware than ever before of the passion that animates these alternately minimal and monumental landscapes.

In February 1968, Williams and his family were living in Upwey. After a drought-ridden summer and a week of extreme heat, a bush fire encircled the Dandenongs. Lyn Williams, the artist's wife, had to evacuate the children and Fred was left with his neighbours to defend their homes as best they could. In the event Williams's house was spared, although nearby houses were burnt to the ground. Just days afterwards, he went out into the fire-scarred landscape and painted it. "It was like living in a war", he said, and the gouaches depicted the bush as a battlefield. Out of the devastated landscape he drew and painted the ancient tree ferns budding and bursting from their burnt shells, regenerated by the fire. They led to his sparest landscapes. Birds, branches, twigs, tree trunks were suspended on matt olive grey and blue grounds. In 1969–70 he painted the most abstract landscapes of his career. Partially under the influence of colour field painting – rampant in Australia in the 1960s – he divided large flat surfaces into panels and added the smallest, most fugitive touches of paint. Originally titled "Divided Landscapes", then "Gum Trees in a Landscape", they were known finally as "Australian Landscapes". They summed up his 1960s and gave voice to his interesting and challenging belief that all Australian landscapes had a commonality to them – dry, extensive, featureless. Ironically, he would spend the following decade disproving this belief.

"A Sea Change", as Deborah Hart aptly calls it, came over his art in the early 1970s. A burst of marine painting starting in 1971 dramatically altered his palette from the subdued tonalities of "classic Williams" to a brilliant and sparkling range of blues, purples, reds, acid greens and startling yellows. Williams relished the idea of painting in colour as he had rarely done before. The other agent of change was the dramatic expansion of sites and subjects. From 1960 to 1970, he had rarely worked outside Victoria and then never very far from where he lived. In the 70s, he would roam from the islands in Bass Strait to Weipa at the tip of Cape York in Queensland to the heat-ridden Murray River landscape of South Australia and finally to the far northwest, the iron ore country of the Pilbara.

The new range of landscapes led him to increasingly dramatic subjects or motifs, such as the snow-and rockbound heights of Mt Kosciuszko or the precipitous gorges west of Melbourne, or the massive basalt blocks of the St Agnes falls in South Gippsland. There was no conscious reaching for "an Australian sublime", but the sheer grandeur of these landscapes released an expressive power within Williams hitherto latent within his work. They were painted with an intensity and even speed quite different from the more deliberative approach of the 60s, when a major painting could be mulled over for months, if not years.

Williams was increasingly drawn to extreme conditions in the landscape. At Weipa he produced a series of gouaches showing the heat-ridden tiers of the bauxite mines in swimming hues of red and burnt sienna – handsomely shown in this exhibition. Paralleling this group he painted the Gulf of Carpentaria at Weipa. Save for a tiny strip of land at the top

edge of the sheet, the entire work was given over to a dense and barely inflected wash of blue, waveless and motionless, compared to the swirls and slithering of the bauxite mines. You could hardly credit that such extreme conditions of dryness and water could proceed at the same creative moment.

From the start Williams had eschewed painting “views” of the landscape. The purely pictorial qualities of painting mattered to him as much as realizing the image. As he laconically observed once: “I only use the subject to hang the picture on”. In the 70s he became a different kind of landscape painter. The elements of nature, the shaping of the landscape by one element working on another, provided a deeper theme in his work. He focused on how the action of water on rock and earth, sea on land, determines the form of the landscape. The minimalist of the 60s had become the master of the elements in the 70s. The coup of the exhibition is a brilliant, hitherto virtually unknown painting, “Lightning Storm, Waratah Bay” (1971–2), where Williams brings together in a single work the classical elements of fire, air, water and earth.

His final series of the Pilbara in the remote northwest of the continent was completed the year before his death. Williams loved the Pilbara, remarking that “anybody who could not paint this particular country is probably in the wrong profession”. True to his nature, he avoided the sublime version of outback Australia as a place of awe and desolation as practised by Russell Drysdale and Sidney Nolan. Instead he painted the splendour of its iron ridges, its flat-topped mesas, precipitous gorges, its immense distances and changing light with a “rapturous intimacy” as though he felt perfectly at home amid its vastness. The entire series now resides in the National Gallery of Victoria, the gift of Rio Tinto, the mining giant and original owner of the group.

Fred Williams deserves to be more widely recognized outside Australia. During his lifetime, the Museum of Modern Art in New York gave him a solo show of his gouaches. In 2003, the British Museum mounted a survey of works on paper. He has had posthumously successful commercial exhibitions at the Marlborough Gallery in London and, more recently, LA Louver in Venice, California. Sir Nicholas Serota secured the gift of seven major oil paintings from the artist’s estate for the Tate in 2006.

Everything is poised for the international recognition of Williams as a major twentieth-century landscape painter nearly thirty years after his death. It took a similar amount of time for those eminent American landscape painters, John Marin and Edward Hopper, to receive their full dues internationally. If a version of this great exhibition were shown outside Australia, it would secure a lasting international reputation for Fred Williams.

Patrick McCaughey

