



BUSH FOCUS

Christopher Allen

Fred Williams

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra,
 until November 6

FRED Williams, surveyed in a new retrospective in Canberra, died almost 30 years ago but remains the most important recent exponent of Australian landscape — the genre that has always been central to the art of this country because it speaks of our relation to a new and initially alien place far away from our European homeland.

The successive stages in the history of Australian landscape can be considered as a story of changing styles and visions, but also entail physical displacement by the artist from one place to another. Thus our first painters naturally represented life in the colony of Sydney; Joseph Lycett published picturesque scenes of a growing society, with handsome houses, roads and other amenities. In Van Diemen's Land John Glover celebrated his own estate and its abundant wheat harvest.

High colonial painters, and especially Eugene von Guerard, as I observed recently, travelled to unexplored wildernesses to discover the essence of Australia; Louis Buvelot moved back to the settled countryside, and the Heidelberg painters discovered a new familiarity and sense of home in the rural outskirts of our big cities. The focus shifted back to the bush with Hans Heysen, who found romance and pathos, and a symbol of the national character, in the giant gum tree.

Heysen was also the first to paint the barren outback in his later pictures of the Flinders Ranges, but it was the generation of Sidney Nolan and Russell Drysdale that discovered the expressive potential of this new setting as emblematic of barrenness and desolation. Nolan's Ned Kelly — an outlaw and wanderer who is like the hardworking and honest selector of Heidelberg turned on his head — rides out into the flat waste of the

desert while the blue sky showing through his empty helmet makes him an antipodean avatar of T.S. Eliot's Hollow Men.

Williams brings the focus to the bush in the vicinity of Melbourne, the sites, with little doubt, of his finest paintings, even though the present exhibition makes a case for reconsidering the pictures from later in his career and other locations across Australia.

His subject is an environment that is neither domesticated and welcoming, nor wild and sublime, or barren, hostile and vacant; and there are certainly no grand or noble trees. His most distinctive and memorable pictures evoke a bushland that seems at once patchy, even scrappy, yet animated with an almost electric sense of life. It is a vision of Australia that remains essentially visual and tactile — Williams is not an intellectual artist — but that is metaphorical and qualitative rather than literally descriptive.

To understand Williams one has to consider that it is not only sites and locations that change in the course of the history of Australian landscape, but also the proximity or distance from which they are viewed. I referred recently to the contrast between von Guerard's vast perspectives and Buvelot's more intimate closeness to the motif. One may also consider the difference between long and close perspectives within the oeuvre of a single painter, such as Arthur Streeton.

In Williams's case we can see, from the very useful early section of the exhibition, that he initially hesitated between close and distant views. This is particularly clear in a couple of fine early works, such as *Treescape* (1958), in which gum forests are seen from far enough away to become rows of thin stalks (still reflecting the novelty of Australian nature the young painter had to rediscover on his return from London in 1957) yet

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still show the trees in full.

In the next stage of Williams's development he adopts a very close-up view, in which the gums are reduced to smooth, pole-like verticals with no crowns, a uniquely Australian experience of nature. There are several important paintings from this period, as well as some beautiful smaller studies of sapling forests in watercolour and gouache that capture the distinctive, almost geometric appeal of their subject, in which spindly verticals are punctuated with the occasional diagonal of a collapsed trunk, scattered with touches of colour from wildflowers.

Williams's mature vision, however, develops with his discovery of distance. It is a long view that turns trees into sparsely scattered flicks and daubs of paint on a flat surface, abolishing internal discriminations of space; it is by reducing everything to what we would normally consider a background that they are flattened into the simultaneity of pattern.

Such distance, as with earlier artists, is eminently significant. It suggests, of course, a certain detachment, which may seem paradoxical in a painter whose work is entirely concerned with nature. However, Williams's detachment does not arise from lack of interest but from the particular vantage point — one could think of what in photography is called focal length — from which the subject can best be apprehended.

In Williams's case, that vantage point can be thought of as an urban one; although he does not paint the city, or even conjoin, as so many landscape painters do, architectural and natural motifs; he represents nature as it is essentially experienced by urban people, which is at a distance, a view, a background.

The power of this vision is manifest, as with all art and literature that speak to our imaginations, in its capacity to shape our experience of nature itself; Williams, like other Australian painters before him, has given us new patterns with which to order the myriad impressions of nature. On the other hand, as with so many modernist artists, his approach is so personal and even

Forest Pond by Fred Williams (1974) from the Art Gallery of South Australia



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idiosyncratic that it cannot be imitated without immediately falling into pastiche.

Yet there is much for painters to learn from his pictures. One could begin with the importance of grounds, which it would have been almost otiose to mention in past centuries when so much of the art — the *techne* — of painting has been forgotten; however, it is worth pausing to consider this important first step. Working directly on a blank canvas is like drawing on a sheet of white paper and colouring in; preparing the whole ground first allows the artist to build up the image out of a living surface in which everything coheres from the beginning.

In the early You Yang landscapes, Williams brushes on a thick and viscous mixture, which he leaves deliberately streaky so that the whole surface is animated even before he begins to create the image.

After his move to Upwey, east of Melbourne, where he lived with his family from 1963 to 1969, he seems to abandon the thick, opaque grounds and instead stains the primed canvas with glazes (transparent pigments), thus increasing the colour of his ground but reducing its body, revealing instead the weave of the canvas.

Stephane Mallarme once said to Edgar Degas, who had told him he had a lot of ideas for poems, that poems are not made with ideas but with words. Williams's pictures remind us that paintings, similarly, are not made with ideas but with colours, or more exactly — for colour is an abstraction — with pigments, which are natural substances or their synthetic substitutes.

Pigments have hue, intensity, tonal value and temperature. Tone gives structure, hue establishes chromatic harmonies and tensions, and temperature concerns the balance between warm and cool hues. Williams, especially in his most powerful and confident works, has the same sort of instinctive feel for all of these qualities that a musician has for the character and timbre of the sound produced by his particular instrument.

Spending a little time with the Upwey pictures, for example, one can see not only how he uses tone in the composition but how warm and cool pigments are balanced or allowed to predominate to varying extents.

One picture, *You Yang Landscape* (1963), is mainly warm earth colours relieved by cool

patches; another, *Upwey Landscape* (1965), is dark and cool with warm notes. Again, the ground is used to set the underlying temperature of the picture and to ensure its pictorial unity.

Different as these compositions may be from classical landscape, they too remind us that a painting is something made from, not found in, nature. It is never a matter of copying what already exists but of starting with pigments, compositional devices, the underlying geometry of the pictorial surface itself, and working towards a meeting point with the world that we can see and whose beauty or mystery provokes the urge to make a picture in the first place.

Williams achieves his most cogent works in the mid to late 60s, and his masterpieces include the beautiful *Circle Landscape* of 1965-66, in which the geometric matrix of horizontal and vertical axes is constantly recalled even in a circular composition dominated by the diagonal of a hillside, while the chromatic effects are far more delicate, ethereal and at the same time disciplined than the reproduction in the catalogue can convey.

Towards the end of the decade, with the rise of abstraction and the fashion for flat or post-painterly abstraction, Williams is drawn by the gravitational pull of this pictorial black hole but never quite succumbs. Instead, he develops a minimal version of his own style which at its best, as in the *Lysterfield Triptych* (1967-68), recalls Japanese painted screens.

But there is a price to pay. When he decides to return to a more full-bodied style of painting in the early 70s, he seems to have forgotten how to find his way back, how to recover his own particular point of equilibrium between the abstraction of painterly marks and reference to the world. In *Cannon's Creek Jetty* (1976), the literal rendering of the boat and wharf are surprisingly illustrative, and this in turn makes the familiar marks and dabs suddenly look vacuous and mannered.

In other pictures, the palette becomes more colourful and diverse, but never recovers the precise calibration of the earlier works; forms and marks become scratchy rather than confident, and the image wavers in an unresolved manner between abstraction and anecdotal realism. Of course these late pictures are still the work of a master, but the thesis of the exhibition, that they should be considered on a par with what one

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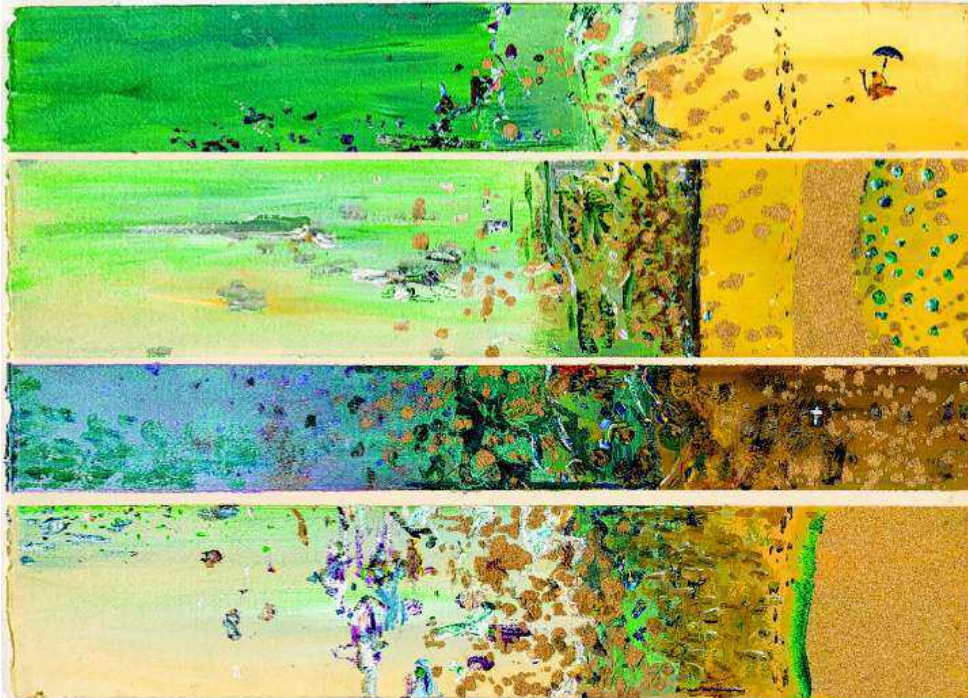
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of the rooms calls “classic Williams”, is not sustainable.

Some of the coastal views are beautiful, but they are not profound. The late images of the Pilbara, such as *Iron Ore Landscape* (1981), with their vast expanses of red speckled with dabs of colour, are simplistic compared with the sophistication of the

earlier paintings. Perhaps the viewing distance here is simply too great; and perhaps after all Williams was at his best as a John Constable-like chronicler of his own familiar territory. In any case, the artist himself was aware of the difference: late in life, we are told, he wrote on the stretcher bar of *Forest of Gum Trees III* (1968-70), “my best picture”.



Beachscape, Erith Island I (1974), above, gouache and sand on paper from the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra; *Iron Ore Landscape* (1981), oil on canvas from the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne



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