



# On new territory

The incomparable Fred Williams was an artist whose work explored and exposed parts of Australia others had yet to exploit, writes JOHN McDONALD.

When the previous retrospective of an artist's work contained no fewer than 417 pieces, it is inevitable that a new exhibition of about 120 pictures will be known as the "smaller" show. That earlier Fred Williams mega-retrospective was held at the National Gallery of Australia in 1987 but I still have a vivid recollection of its impact. Twenty-four years might seem a long time between viewings but it is not so long that the new exhibition manages to completely escape the shadow of its predecessor.

The 1987 retrospective was put together by James Mollison, then director of the NGA, who had the option of including as many works as he liked. The present show is the work of curator Deborah Hart, who, with a much smaller space and budget, had to make many difficult decisions about what pieces best represented her own vision of Williams (1927-82).

Making decisions is a fundamental responsibility of curatorship. One has to argue for a point of view and embrace a form of connoisseurship that is increasingly unfashionable. The connoisseur is not a dandy from a sitcom but an art expert with an acute knowledge of his or her subject. When one puts together a retrospective of an artist as important as Williams, there is no margin for ignorance or idle speculation.

Hart has taken up the challenge, immersing herself in her subject, completing a catalogue that is really a new monograph on Williams, as well as a more fluent piece of writing than the earlier books by Patrick McCaughey and Mollison. But when it comes to the actual exhibition, she has made a number of problematic choices, perhaps through trying too hard to take a different tack from the 1987 show.

First and foremost is the emphasis given to the horizontal strip paintings Williams created throughout the '70s. These are accomplished works but they don't have the authority and presence of his larger oils. In many ways, they come across as exercises in which Williams – the indefatigable experimenter – tried out pictorial ideas. Putting a strip painting on the cover of the catalogue amounts almost to a misrepresentation.

There is also a question mark over the number of portraits in this show, which tends to overemphasise that aspect of Williams's work. He used to say that if you can't

**FRED WILLIAMS:**  
**INFINITE HORIZONS**  
 National Gallery of Australia,  
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paint a portrait, then your art is in trouble but these paintings were only ever a sideline.

Williams's contribution to Australian landscape is monumental but his role as a portraitist is marginal. In this, he is the antithesis of an artist such as Tom Roberts, absurdly called the "father of Australian landscape painting" by his first biographer, R.H. Croll. Roberts was only an incidental landscapist but a portraitist of seminal importance.

The absence of prints, which is a big omission, is partially excused by the fact Mollison is preparing a comprehensive survey.

The first remarkable works in the NGA exhibition are the ground-breaking oils painted around Mittagong in the late '50s, such as *Landscape with Steep Road* (1957-58). The show moves swiftly into the You Yangs series of '61, in which Williams started to explore territory no other Australian artist had broached. Look, for instance, at *You Yangs Landscape* and *You Yang Pond* (both 1963), in which the picture is built up from shifting, uneven slabs and touches of paint, vigorously applied.

By the end of the decade, Williams had plunged into the proto-minimalism of the Lysterfield series and an even more reductive series called *Australian Landscapes*. In this extraordinary sequence, we see the painter responding to the dual stimuli of the landscape and the most recent developments in contemporary art. Throw in the influence of oriental art and you have an idea of the underlying complexity of these deceptively simple works.

Given the power and originality of these first rooms, the show ends in an indecisive way, with a few large paintings from the Pilbara series and host of diverse pictures that gives the very opposite impression to that conveyed by the 1987 show, which was subtitled *A Singular Vision*. The present exhibition might well be called *A Pluralist Vision*.

This is a soft exit when it should have been a triumphant one. The Pilbara paintings are an obvious conclusion because they show Williams engaging for almost the first time with the genuine outback instead of the fringes of suburbia. If there is something a little raw and undigested in these paintings, they convey a tantalising, slightly tragic sense of what Williams might have done, had he lived a normal lifespan.

There is no "late" Williams style, because he died of lung cancer at the age of only 55, a time when most painters enter their prime. It is a career cut short but still magnificent in how he single-handedly revolutionised the way we look at the Australian landscape. Williams took the scrubby, featureless bush that had been so widely derided by colonial observers and gave it a sense of solidity that seems almost miraculous.

To paint the Australian landscape, artists such as Conrad Martens had to superimpose conventional picturesque frameworks. Eugene von Guerard was a more dedicated observer but he still sought a Romantic grandeur in his works. Williams, however, could stand in front of a dry, nondescript paddock and produce a painting that crackled with visual incident.

He did it through a shrewd manipulation of colour and texture, and a sense of composition that could endow a scene with an almost subliminal sense of order. What looks random or abstract at first glance becomes increasingly rigorous as one keeps looking.

This quality is present in his early forest pictures, painted near Colo Vale, and reaches



Distinctive capture of the landscape ... (above) *You Yang Pond* (1963); and (left) Williams's portrait of John Brack (1978-79).

a striking climax in the series that follow, in which staccato dabs of paint create both mass and a sense of distance. What is most striking is the way Williams captured a distinctively Australian atmosphere. Looking at many of his works, we feel they could be painted nowhere else in the world.

Although his qualities as an observer were second to none, Williams was also a highly knowledgeable painter. This is made clear in the parts of the catalogue that record his overseas travels and his enthusiasm for everything from Greek sculpture to medieval stained glass.

In the Louvre, he was equally taken with Ingres and Delacroix, seen as the leaders of the neoclassical and Romantic schools. As a student in Melbourne, he had dabbled with the opposing camps of George Bell school and Max Meldrum. He wanted to learn about everything, absorbing those elements that suited his temperament while discarding the dogma.

No Australian painter has been more single-minded, more devoted to his work, than Fred Williams. Russell Drysdale could

hardly be coaxed into the studio but Williams could not be parted from it.

Few artists have known so much about the technical aspects of painting, or thought so hard about the way their work was developing. If the paintings continued to change during the course of three decades, it was because Williams could never feel satisfied with what he had already achieved. He was fiercely self-critical and spent what he knew would be the last year of his life revising and editing his own back catalogue.

Although this show tends to lose focus in the last sections, there are remarkable works in every room, including pieces such as a pale *You Yangs Landscape* (1963), which was omitted from the 1987 show, and the four oils called *Chalk Creek* (1977), which were painted in a single day. Paintings such as *Landscape with Dry Creek Bed* (1976) are full of subtleties: a black, spidery line creeping across a pale surface in a way that captures an ineffable sense of the bush.

This show will travel next year to the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne (April 7 to July 22), followed by the Art Gallery

of South Australia in Adelaide (August 31 to November 4) but not to Sydney. It is well worth the trip to Canberra, especially in spring, when the city is at its best.

More than most artists, it is impossible to understand Fred Williams's greatness from books and reproductions. Hart has written a long, detailed study, supplemented by an elegant essay by Sebastian Smee, but there is an inevitable monotony in reading about Williams's career. All the action was in the actual painting, all the drama on the board or canvas.

This has led some with short attention spans to complain that Williams's work – if not landscape in general – is boring. So it is, if you think looking at paintings for more than a few seconds is a tiresome business. For anyone with a modicum of sensitivity, however, a picture will soon let one know just how much or how little attention it requires.

Williams's work has the rare ability to stop us in our tracks, time and again. In an age of cheap sensation, his paintings are a perpetual revelation.

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