



# Liberated by the landscape

Fred Williams set out to paint gum trees and in the end changed how Australians see their country, writes STEVE MEACHAM.

**T**he director of the National Gallery of Australia, Ron Radford, tells a delicious story about the first time Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri stepped inside a leading art museum.

It was 1984 and Radford, then a curator at the Art Gallery of South Australia, was guiding the great indigenous artist and two of his fellow painters from Papunya around the Adelaide institution. None had been to a big city before.

The trio was there to see Clifford Possum's *Man's Love Story*, the first painting from the Western Desert ever to be hung in a state gallery collection. But as Radford showed them canvases by other highly admired artists, they were unimpressed. Until, that is, Possum saw *You Yang Pond*, which Fred Williams had created two decades earlier.

"He good painter," said the artist as he inspected the red-ochre colours and abstract composition.

Clifford Possum and Fred Williams came from vastly different backgrounds and never met. Williams died on April 22, 1982, aged just 55, soon after being diagnosed with inoperable lung cancer. Eulogies and obituaries lauded him as one of the greatest Australian painters of the 20th century, a landscape revolutionary, inventing a new visual language and forever changing how Australians look at the ancient land they have made their home.

The two men also sprang from two distinct art traditions. The Victorian – a city dweller for most of his life – followed in the footsteps of European artists such as Cezanne, Matisse and Braque, while the elder from the west-

ern desert was steeped in the spiritual imagery of his people.

Yet, though entirely coincidental, the parallels between their depictions of country are uncanny.

Like his indigenous contemporaries, Williams deployed a visual vocabulary of dots and dashes and a palette of colours derived from the rocks, dirt and vegetation he saw in nature. Like them, he devised his own perspective, altering the horizon, tilting the plane of view, even imagining the landscape from the air.

"When Fred began using dots in his paintings in the 1960s, [the Papunya artists] hadn't even begun painting," says Deborah Hart, the curator of the first large-scale retrospective of Williams's work in a quarter of a century. "It's going to be very interesting to see how people today look at Fred's paintings now that we are so much more familiar with indigenous art."

One of the biggest surprises for most visitors to the exhibition, Hart acknowledges, will be the number of figurative works. Williams painted portraits throughout his life – usually of family and friends.

Still, since the early '60s, when critic Ronald Millar identified him as the modern Australian most likely "to emerge as the finest landscapist since Tom Roberts", Williams's reputation has been defined by those minimalist abstracts of a vast land devoid of human or animal life. Not just here but internationally. In 1977, Williams became the first Australian to have a solo exhibition at New York's Museum of Modern Art.

But who was Fred Williams? What kind of man was he? And why does the

general public know so much less about him than, say, other postwar giants such as Arthur Boyd, Sidney Nolan, Brett Whiteley or John Olsen?

Unlike Nolan, Whiteley or Olsen, Williams's personal life was without divorce, addictions or controversy. When *The Bulletin* interviewed him in 1966, Williams even apologised to the magazine for being such "poor copy ... I'm sorry I'm not more interesting".

"Fred was a very sociable artist," Hart says. "He loved the company of other artists and writers. The annual artists-versus-writers cricket match was a highlight of his year. But when it came to talking about his work, he struggled. He felt it should speak for itself. He was an innately modest person who found publicity difficult."

Born in 1927 to working-class parents in Melbourne, Williams cut a Billy Bunter-esque figure as a child, avoiding usual boyhood pursuits. His father, an electrical engineer, was so concerned about the hours his son spent drawing he consulted Fred's godfather, who assured him the boy would grow out of it.

"Art was the one thing that made him happy," Hart says.

After leaving school at 14, Fred was apprenticed to a firm of shopfitters and box makers. At night, he studied at Melbourne's National Gallery School until he turned 16 and could study full time, learning from such tutors as William Dargie, George Bell and Max Meldrum. Williams left for London in 1952, remaining there for four years. He



worked for one of the best picture framers in England, once being permitted to take home an original Renoir for the night so he could study the Frenchman's brushwork. He also spent hours in the print room of the British Museum, educating himself on the history of art and favourite painters.

But his epiphany came the moment he saw Australian soil again, as the ship bringing him home docked in Western Australia. Hart says: "Legend has it that when Fred returned to Australia in 1956, John Brack asked him, 'Well, Freddy, what are you going to do?' The reply came back, 'I'm going to paint the gum tree.'"

Painting gum trees, by then, had become an artistic cliché and Brack dismissed his friend's ambition as yet another diversion. But Williams had found his true calling.

"It was when he sailed back into Fremantle that it hit him," Hart says. "The light, the trees, the distinctiveness of the Australian landscape. From that moment on, the Australian landscape provided him with the freedom to be the artist he wanted to be."

By 1958, critics such as the influential Alan McCulloch were praising the way Williams had given "the tree fresh vigour and an altogether new life". Many of his paintings, such as *Echuca Landscape* (1961), appeared abstract and minimalist but were closely based on what he had actually sketched or photographed in nature.

As Hart puts it, his oils and gouaches of the time can be seen as visual haiku, as if he was interpreting the bush through a Japanese aesthetic.

Soon after marrying Lyn in 1961, Williams discovered two bushland areas he would return to time and again, the You Yangs (granite ridges near Geelong) and Upwey, part of the Yarra Ranges to the east of Melbourne, where the newlyweds lived for a time after 1963.

Intimate knowledge of country was another quality Williams shared with Clifford Possum. "Fred didn't like to be seen as a regional painter but he was, in a way," Hart says. "When you look at the paintings in the 1960s which formed his reputation, they were all done close to his home.

"Yet people who look at his Upwey works or his You Yangs works don't go, 'That's regional Victoria!' They say, 'That's the Australian bush!' Fred achieved what he set out to achieve."

Meanwhile, his use of colour was changing. Most of his early work – with a few exceptions, such as *My Garden* – was crafted in the sombre, restrained hues he'd learnt from tonal tutors such as Dargie and Bell. Then, suddenly, his increasing confidence with lighter shades and bolder colours came to the fore, inspired by Asian art after visiting China in 1976.

Equally apparent is his fascination with water. "We usually think of Fred as being a painter of dry landscapes," Hart says, pointing out the revelatory work he did after seeing the vast virgin landscapes of the Pilbara for the first time in 1979. "But he also loved painting water – beaches, seascapes, billabongs, waterfalls." Some of those works – particularly his wonderfully minimalist strip gouaches and his oils such as *Lightning Storm*, *Waratah Bay* or *Forest Pond* –

have a vibrant luminosity.

The Pulitzer Prize-winning critic Sebastian Smee claims "the two artists who can be most profitably compared with Williams are Australia's two other great postwar landscape painters, Sidney Nolan and John Olsen".

But where Nolan was a prolific risk-taker, sometimes to the detriment of his art, Williams was patient and meticulous. Often he would turn canvases to the wall and refuse to look at them for months, the better to reflect on how each might be finished.

Olsen and Williams, closer in age, often competed against each other for the same prizes and appear to have much more in common. But Smee argues that Olsen's work conveys "a sense of movement and transformation in the landscape... [while Williams] has a reserve and integrity found nowhere else in Australian art".

Olsen describes Williams as "an incredibly important artist", noting that when the National Gallery of Victoria mounted its first Williams exhibition in 1970, it paired him with Streeton – an amazing honour for a relatively young living artist.

"There was a similarity in their direct approach to the landscape and their shared enjoyment of painting en plein air," Olsen says. "Fred belongs to the Heidelberg tradition but added a freshness and directness to it. It was a most successful exhibition and put Fred Williams on the map."

**Fred Williams: Infinite Horizons opens at the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, on Friday.**



Single-minded ... Self-portrait at Easel, 1960-61. © estate of Fred Williams

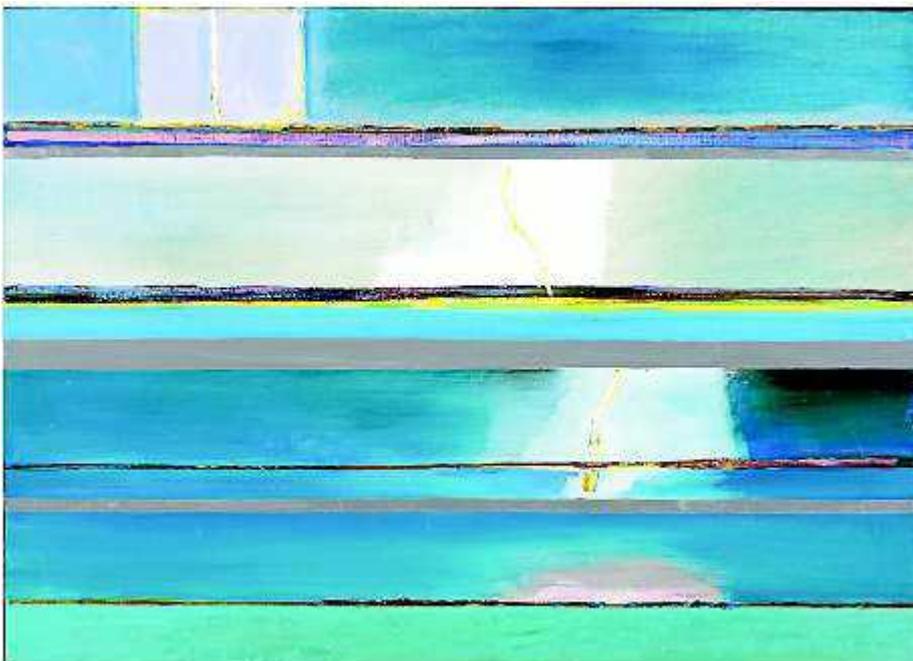


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See a gallery of paintings from the exhibition.



Minimalist abstracts ... Williams's *My Garden*, 1965-67; below, *Lightning Storm, Waratah Bay*, 1971-72. © Estate of Fred Williams





## Generous spirit

Fred Williams's widow, Lyn, looks back on life with the artist.

### **How would you describe Fred's personality?**

Unassuming, determined, single-minded, ambitious for his art, unpretentious. A private person who did not seek the limelight. He was quick-witted, had a great sense of humour, was self-conscious about his weight and generous with his time for younger artists. He also had a strong sense of art history and was a good judge of art.

### **Is it true Fred used painting your portrait as a form of courtship?**

The portrait was certainly the way we got to know each other. When we married a year later, he took it back, cut it down and "finished" it as it is today. In the late 1970s, when he had been painting some portrait commissions, he wanted all the family to sit for him again. Sadly for us all, it did not happen in time.

### **How did Fred balance the demands of family and a painting career?**

The options were not what they are today. I was a school teacher and became a stay-at-home mother when the children were born. This meant more financial pressures for us in the early years. Fred had his studio at home. Although protective of his painting time, he was always around for the girls.

### **What were family holidays like?**

In later years, school holidays became a

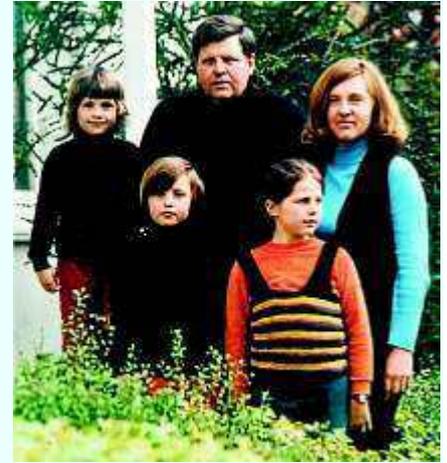
great time to combine with painting trips. We all appreciated the chance to visit such remote places as the Bass Strait islands, Erith and Flinders islands, Queensland and the Pilbara. Everyone helped Fred set up for the day before going off to swim and explore. The girls still remember these trips vividly. Fred's idea of relaxation was to visit an unfamiliar place to paint.

### **Did Fred see any similarities or parallels between the language he invented for the Australian landscape and that of the Papunya artists from the Western Desert?**

Indigenous art from Papunya didn't really emerge until the late 1970s. Fred would have seen the work as a council member of the National Gallery of Australia but we were much more familiar with Aboriginal bark painting. He would have seen similarities, just as he [did] in Chinese art and other Western artists.

### **How do you think the new exhibition will change the public's perception of his work?**

This exhibition concentrates on lesser-known aspects of his work, particularly of the 1970s. He had fewer commercial exhibitions during those years when he was experimenting with colour, changing



**Portrait ... Fred and Lyn Williams with their daughters in 1973.** Photo: James Fitzpatrick

formats and the seascapes. The breadth of it may surprise.

### **Where did Fred see himself fitting into the Australian history of art and painters? As the natural successor to Streeton and Roberts?**

Fred was always ambitious to be an achiever in the ongoing story in Australian art, not just of landscape painting. Among his favourite Australian artists were Hugh Ramsay and Rupert Bunny, neither especially noted for their landscapes.

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