



# A painterly vision

## Changing the lie of the land

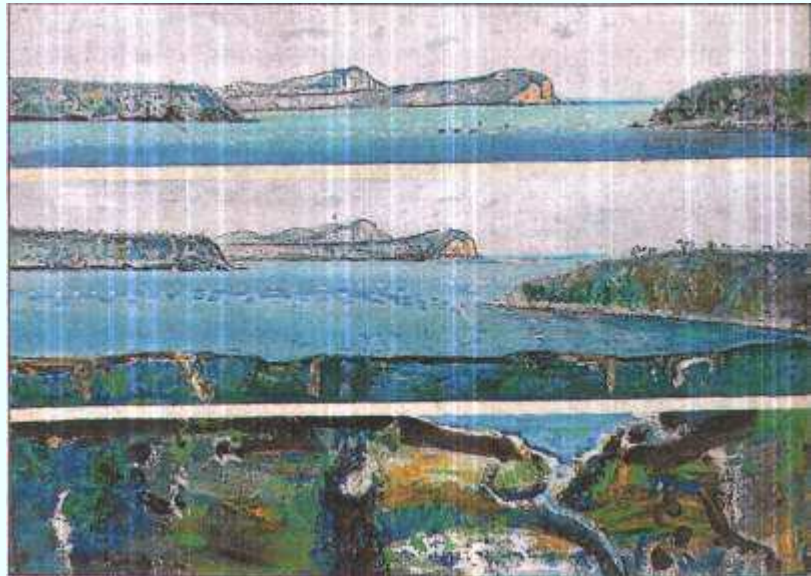
Fred Williams has long been hailed as an original landscape painter; it's time we saw him as one of our greats, writes **Doug Hall**.

As you enter the retrospective *Fred Williams: Infinite Horizons*, at the National Gallery of Australia, there's a wall with five early '70s works by Arthur Boyd. Painted in London, Boyd's allegories are set in the Australian landscape, and are followed by Sidney Nolan's Ned Kelly series, the closest Australia has come to a great modern history painter.

The two mark the end of heroic narrative painting in Australia. From then on, Australian artists began to look to the world; the younger to the United States, where movements as diverse as pop, conceptualism and so-called non-objective painting changed modern art. Well into the new era, however, the third of the big three, Albert Tucker, continued to paint his borderline cheesy nationalism: explorers' heads attacked by parrots; a clunky, Antipodean school of Paris-cum-cubism.

So what might we make of an Australian painter who emerged in the late 1950s and whose interest was in landscape? And, given Australia's burgeoning international outlook, how did Fred Williams connect so readily at home and yet come to be admired internationally (the Tate and MOMA both hold his works)? How did his unique introspection mark out a singular vision that redefined our perception of our own landscape?

Williams was a figurative painter too; an exceptional one. But his interest in the landscape, unencumbered by narrative – to make modern art out of the anonymous Australian bush, or the vastness of smudgy, golden panoramas – received both critical acclaim and respect from artists who had no interest in



**Williams' Murray Pass, Erith Island 1974, from a private collection in Melbourne.**

becoming landscape painters.

There's a Williams one-liner that is often cited: that what he did should be seen in terms of paint; that his subjects allowed him to give expression to his interests as a painter. It's true. But equally, his interest in landscape was the source of the unification of keen observation and distinctive painting.

He knew art history: the work of his favourites – Rembrandt, Corot, Cezanne and Matisse – each in his own way provided enduring inspiration. He would take from them what he needed, but these influences were not stylistic props, they were examples of a way through formal, painterly problems.

Despite their seeming casualness, his paintings are the result of forethought and understanding. As a student in Melbourne in the 1940s, he took what he wanted from the warring camps – Max Meldrum's doctrinaire theories on tonalism (Williams is a great tonal painter); the lessons learnt at the classes of modernism's champion, George Bell, and the National Gallery School under arch-conservative William Dargie. The results of his independence of mind and refusal to be lured into doctrinaire cul-de-sacs

are now brilliantly self-evident.

After five years in London in the '50s, Williams returned to Melbourne, where his reputation as a landscape painter quickly gained momentum. The first galleries of the exhibition feature a group of earthy, close-toned works built up with oil glazes, sometimes tempera; trees, rocks and other elements are outlined in black and give form to a flat architectural landscape.

Among them is *The Half Round Pond 1959*, an oddly prescient, near-abstract composition with no horizon line. Vertical bands are trees, and impasto accents foreshadow what was to become an enduring characteristic, his now familiar painterly abbreviations of landscape features.

If we thought, as many did, that landscape painting had run its course, Williams changed that perception. He saw the landscape as both an experience and an idea from which modern art could be made.

*Hillside 1963-64* is a divided canvas; the horizon is an arc; sky above and, below, a painterly arrangement of summarised observations from a specific location. As with all Williams's landscapes, perspective is irrelevant

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— the bush is scatty, vegetation is irregular — high vantage points offer a vastness from which the isolation of a single depicted feature from the whole is impossible.

His view becomes a prompt for his near-calligraphic touch; like Chinese painting where Western perspective is not a consideration, he invokes an overall quality where observation and painting itself fuse into his emblematic realisation of the Australian landscape.

His reputation could easily rest on the sparse, minimal works from the '60s and early '70s alone. How can works so austere, so all-encapsulating of both an idea about painting and a view of the landscape make the tradition of

picturesque painting and desert modernism seem, well, finished?

In a painting such as *Yellow Landscape 1968-69*, the canvas is glazed-stained and serves as a subtle ground for a simplified schema of marks of gnarled vegetation which is, for Australians, unmistakably local.

When he paints en plein air — gouache on paper — there is a sense of light, atmosphere and features that are topographically identifiable; but it remains about paint. While the lush, painterly skies and clouds are beautifully executed features, they are also part of a complete pictorial ensemble. When Williams returned to the studio and developed his site observations, the works are more considered: grander and sublime.

The show doesn't include Williams's superb printmaking; that's another exhibition in development. If Williams never painted, his etchings alone would secure his reputation as an original landscape artist.

There's much more we need to know about Williams, especially his work from the '50s. But for now, this exhibition, 25 years after his last retrospective, confirms his place in the first rank of Australian painters.

**Fred Williams: Infinite Horizons, NGA, Canberra, August 12 to November 6; National Gallery of Victoria, April 7 to July 22, 2012; Art Gallery of SA, August 31 to November 4, 2012.**