



## Fred Williams: A Life in Landscape

REPRESENTED IN THE MOST SIGNIFICANT COLLECTIONS AT HOME AND ABROAD, FRED WILLIAMS'S SUSTAINED, SINGULAR ŒUVRE HAS CHANGED THE WAY WE SEE THE AUSTRALIAN LANDSCAPE. SENIOR WRITER JUDITH WHITE SURVEYS HIS CAREER...

### BIOGRAPHY

No artist of the latter part of this century has had a more original vision of the Australian landscape than Fred Williams. He did not, however, set out to be a landscape painter. The son of an electrical engineer and a Richmond housewife, he simply loved, from a very early age, to draw and paint. "I have never had any doubts about what I wanted to be in this life," he said later. "I wanted to be a painter."

Leaving school at 14, Williams was apprenticed to a firm of Melbourne shopfitters and box makers, but he never let go of his passion for art. According to fellow artist Ian Armstrong, one of Williams's first commissions, of which he remained forever proud, was the painting of a steaming pie which graced the window of the Swanston Street pie shop. At the age of 19 he enrolled in night classes at the Art School of the National Gallery of Victoria. He excelled at figure drawing, and he never looked back.

At the end of 1951 he took a one-way ticket on a ship to London, to discover the world of European

art. He lived in penury in a South Kensington bedsit, worked part-time at Savage's picture framers – an apprenticeship he never regretted – and sketched the music hall artistes and battered but defiant characters he saw on the streets of the British capital. He slowly absorbed the influence not only of the great English artists but also, more significantly, of the French painting tradition, most notably Cézanne, the forefather of modern art (a legacy recognised in Williams's inclusion in the major survey exhibition *Seeing Cézanne* at the Art Gallery of New South Wales).

He returned to Australia as a fully-fledged artist in 1956, when his family was able to send him a cheap ticket aboard a ship coming out to pick up visitors to the Melbourne Olympics. From then on he would devote himself entirely to his art. Immediately, the Australian landscape became his subject – not because of any sentimental attachment, but simply because, as he said, "it became obsessive with me... it is monotonous. There is no focal point, and... if there's no focal point in a

landscape it has to be built into the paint. I'm basically an artist who sees things in terms of paint."

His first landscapes, he said, came from "looking at the post-impressionists, and Cézanne in particular". His early paintings of forests and saplings, at Mittagong and Sherbrooke, show a capacity to indicate the space between objects through the use of flat planes of colour, an approach that derives directly from the post-impressionist tradition. His work rapidly became more confident; starting with no money, he persisted in his determination to live entirely from his painting, and in this he had the intelligent support of Lyn Watson, whom he married in 1961 and with whom he had three daughters.

Already one characteristic feature of Williams's work was emerging: he worked on subjects in series, often reworking the same or similar images in different media – drawings, gouaches, etchings, lithographic prints (some of which went through as many as 35 states), acrylics and oils. Of these he might retain one-fifth, sometimes reworking them over a period of several years until he was satisfied, and always referring back to his existing work as a source of development – to such an extent that his first sell-out exhibition, in 1963, left him adrift, so deprived was he of points of reference.

By then a great change had come about in his paintings. In the *You Yangs* series of 1962-64, he developed his characteristic technique of filling the picture plane with landscape, in many cases excluding even the horizon, and representing trees and boulders with carefully worked painterly marks. These paintings represented a breakthrough. Where previous modern artists – Sidney Nolan, Arthur Boyd, Russell Drysdale – had placed figures in landscapes still alien to the viewer, Williams used the landscape itself as a means of formal invention, so absorbed in it that it could fill the entire frame.

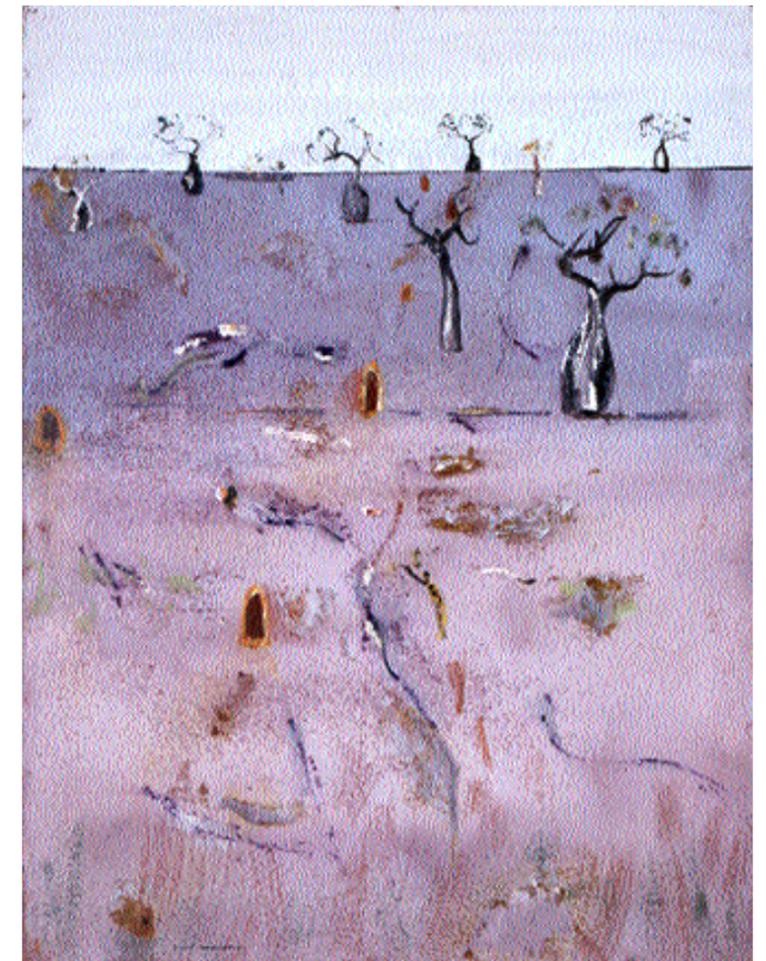
In the *Upwey* and *Lysterfield* series which followed, he continued to develop the use of colour to build form. A bushfire which threatened his Upwey home, lamb hanging in the butcher's shop at Tibooburra, and the bayside area around a holiday house at Mount Martha provided the inspiration for further series, culminating in the silver and grey series of the late 1960s.

During the 1970s his palette continued to develop and he worked on a number of brilliant landscapes in panels or strata. In the mid-1970s a growing fascination with building up a mosaic of colour and light resulted in some of his most famous paintings, notably the *Kew Billabong* and *Werribee Gorge* series.

Open to many influences, in these years he became interested in Chinese art. Although coming from an entirely different painterly tradition to Aboriginal art – that of western art – some of his landscapes with their aerial, map-like quality, their filling of the picture frame and their deliberately-placed marks, are perhaps as close as any non-indigenous artist has come to Aboriginal perceptions of the land.

Williams's art was constantly renewed by his perceptions of newly-experienced landscapes (he constantly worked in the open), and nowhere is this more evident than in his last great works, the *Weipa* and *Pilbara* series, where his use of colour became intense. The paintings were inspired by a light plane trip in the 1970s over the northern part of Australia. Retired judge John Woodward recalls a long lunch at the Adelaide Festival with Williams and his devoted dealer, Rudy Komon, after a flight over the Kimberleys. "He was ecstatic about the bird's-eye view it had given him of the landscape," Woodward

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Fred Williams, *Boababs and Termite Hills, Kimberleys*, 1979. Gouache, 75x57 cm. COLLECTION: NATIONAL GALLERY OF AUSTRALIA, CANBERRA. REPRODUCED WITH COPYRIGHT PERMISSION



Fred Williams, *You Yangs Landscape II*, 1963. Oil tempera on composition board, 182x137 cm. COLLECTION: NATIONAL GALLERY OF AUSTRALIA, CANBERRA. REPRODUCED WITH COPYRIGHT PERMISSION

recalls. "He was almost like a boy, with a child-like excitement about finding a new perspective."

The new decade found Williams exhibiting in Paris and London and serving actively on the boards of artistic institutions such as the council of the then Australian National Gallery and the Visual Art Board or the Australia Council. Despite taking on these obligations, he was working at the height of his powers when, in November 1981, he was diagnosed as having lung cancer. Within six months he was dead.

At his funeral the artist **John Brack**, his oldest friend, gave the eulogy. In an enduring tribute, he said: "Fred brought us a new vision of Australia's landscape at least as valid and impressive as any of the two or three major illuminations which went before it. He changed the way we see our country: an achievement which will live long after all of us are gone."

### THE BEST WORKS

Williams himself was quite definite in his own opinions of his work. During his final battle with cancer, when he was work-

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ing over some existing paintings, he wrote firmly on the stretcher bar of *Forest of Gum Trees III* (1968-70): "My best painting. Fred Williams". Underpainted in pinkish-orange, and glazed in cobalt and Prussian blue, this hillside treescape is an uninterrupted plane imbued with violet, the trees represented by a great variety of brilliant marks of paint. But most art lovers would rank the crowning achievements of each of his series – the *You Yangs*, *Upwey*, *Lysterfield*, the bushfires, *Kew Billabong*, *Werribee Gorge*, *Weipa* and the *Pilbara* – among his greatest works.

### WHERE TO FIND THE WORKS

Much sought after for private and public collections alike, significant works by Williams are to be found throughout Australia. The largest collections on public view are those of the National Gallery of Victoria and the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra. Victoria's holdings include paintings representative of most of the major Australian series, from *Treescape* (1958) and *Sapling Forest* (1961), through *Upwey Landscape* (1864-65), *You Yangs Landscape* (1967) and *Lysterfield Landscape* (1969) to *Kosciusko* (1975) and *Cape York Bushfire 2* (1977), and more than 500 works on paper.

The National Gallery of Australia holds important works from the artist's mid-career, including *You Yangs Landscape II* (1963), *Lysterfield Triptych* (1967-68), *Silver and Grey* (1969-70) and the *Beachscape with Bathers*, *Queenscliff* series (1971), and from the later years, among them *Landscape '74* (1974-75), *Landscape with a Goose* (1974) and the gouaches *Bushfire in Northern Territory* (1976), *Baobabs and Termite Hills*, *Kimberleys* (1979), *Iron Ore Cliff Face* (1979) and *Iron Ore Landscape* (1979).

The Art Gallery of New South Wales has a number of works including *Sherbrooke Forest I* (1961 – currently touring with the *Seeing Cézanne* exhibition) and *Waterfall Polyptych* (1979). The Queensland Art Gallery has *Yan Yean* (1972).

Overseas, Williams has four major works in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and currently one oil in the Tate Gallery's collection in London. The Museum of Modern Art in New York, the British Museum, and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London all hold gouaches and etchings by Williams while the Archer M Huntington Art Gallery at the University of

Austin in Texas holds the oils *Sapling Forest* (1962) and *Green Cloud and Owl* (1965-66).

Works by Williams feature in some of Australia's finest private and corporate collections. **Rupert Murdoch** is known to own several major works, and the News Limited corporate collection includes *Triptych Landscape I* (1962), *Lysterfield Landscape I* (1965-66) and *Hillside Landscape* (1966). The majority of the *Pilbara* series were commissioned directly by CRA Services Limited. *Strath Creek Falls II* (1979) is in the Holmes à Court collection; the Sussan Corporation has *You Yangs Landscape III* (1963) and *Wild Dog Creek* (1977).

### PRICES AT AUCTION

The highest price so far recorded for a Williams came in the boom of the late 1980s: \$250,000 for the oil painting *Kew Billabong: Old Kite* (1976) at Christie's in Sydney in November 1988. The following year saw \$148,500 change hands at Sotheby's in Melbourne for a work in the same series, *Kew Billabong* (1975).

The general levelling out of prices since notwithstanding, recent years have seen few such major works come on to the market. A notable Williams landscape is not something collectors part with in a hurry. But in the past two to three years a number of drawings have been sold at auction, for prices in the \$10,000-\$25,000 range.

### WHAT'S AVAILABLE, HOW TO START COLLECTING

Because of the proliferation of works relating to each major series by Williams, individual items do from time to time become available, particularly drawings, gouaches, etchings and lithographs – some of them priced at just a few thousand dollars.

The first step for aspiring collectors is to become thoroughly familiar with the body of work. In addition to viewing the works in public collections, there are some excellent published sources, in particular the two major books so far published about the artist: **Patrick McCaughey's** *Fred Williams 1927-1982*, Bay Books 1980 (revised 1987), a detailed, scholarly study; and **James Mollison's** *A Singular Vision: The Art of Fred Williams*, Australian National Gallery 1989, which covers much of the same ground but is informed by an intimate knowledge of the artist's working practices and by a close reading of his unpublished diaries.

Then it is a matter of watching the catalogues of the auction houses – which in recent years have shown a heightened interest in Williams's etchings, drawings and lithographs – and seeking the assistance of a trustworthy dealer. It is unlikely that a purchaser of a true Williams would ever have cause, financial or artistic, to regret the investment. ■