



INFLUENCE OF BONNARD

William Robinson's early works were strongly influenced by the French Post-Impressionist artist Pierre Bonnard, who famously used luminous colours to paint interior spaces that reflected aspects of daily life. After completing high school, Robinson went on to train as a primary-school teacher, and was later awarded a scholarship to specialise in teaching art. Like most budding artists of the day, Robinson learned by sketching the work of established artists. For Robinson, Bonnard was one such artist.

Training as an artist back in the 1950s meant learning how to draw the human figure through repetitive practice. Students learned to draw ears, eyes, and noses individually, and it wasn't until later that they could progress on to a whole head or body. Practice made perfect, and students often had to draw figures repeatedly until they were accurate. Artists also had to learn to manipulate perspective. Robinson shares Bonnard's pictorial sensibility, with both artists presenting slightly askew compositions. Bonnard's spatial and compositional organisation inspired Robinson, whose later farmyard works often involved large empty spaces on the canvas. The modernist style also influenced his future landscape and farmyard works.

His early interiors were built from flat shapes of colour, bringing the background close to the surface of the painting and thus creating very shallow pictorial space. They often feature flowers, hats, and other still-life elements, as well as patterned rugs, posing figures, and unusual shadows. Like his landscapes and farmyards, Robinson's interior scenes express a deeply personal understanding of the subject matter and often reflect the comforts and domestic intimacy of his life in suburban Brisbane.

ACTIVITY

Look at how Robinson has placed the visual elements within the composition and how he has used a vibrant colour palette. Discuss the advantages of painting an interior space as opposed to a landscape.

Briefly research examples of Pierre Bonnard's paintings, and attempt your own interior painting, keeping in mind both artists' use of colour, texture, and placement of objects and people.

Both Bonnard and Robinson were influenced by still-life paintings. Set up a still life on a table, and include the surrounding room within the painting.

Interior, Birkdale 1976
Colour pastels and gouache on paper 54 x 74cm
QUT Art Collection

Donated through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program by William Robinson, 2009



**WILLIAM
ROBINSON
GALLERY**



Following the construction of Brisbane's Southeast Freeway in 1970, the Robinsons opted for a quieter domestic life and moved from inner Brisbane to a farm in semi-rural Birkdale. Here they kept goats, chooks, and cows, giving many of them names. Josephine and Rosie were two cows that appear in many of the artist's paintings. He did not begin painting farmyard works until 1980, allowing himself time to become familiar with both the animals and the farming lifestyle before distilling these years of observation and experience into the artworks. The time Robinson spent in the company of his animals enabled him to reveal their humorous and whimsical personalities as if they were real characters, and to depict their behaviours as they played on the farm.

Some of Robinson's painted portraits of his cows are complete with oval frames, which parodies examples of nineteenth-century portrait photography. In many of these cow portraits, the animals are viewed from several viewpoints, suggesting connections to photographic documentation. Sometimes, the artist includes himself and his wife Shirley in his farmyard compositions, with Shirley shifting from the domestic scenes portrayed in the early interiors to active involvement on the

farm. The couple don't appear like farmers in charge of their animals; rather, they're on equal footing with the animals, all playing on the farm together.

Robinson recalls some days on the farm as being quite chaotic. He believes that when things get out of hand, all you can do is laugh at yourself, which is why he paints these works with a quirky sense of humour. His farmyard works tend to have flat backgrounds and no horizon line. This means that he can compose the image in a way that spreads the action across the whole canvas, letting us focus on the animals. The feeling of chaos is emphasised by the floating and scattered compositional elements—a shift from his previous 'realistic' Bonnard-style interiors. Often, only parts of the animals are visible, which makes it seem like the paintings are just smaller snapshots of all the activity on the farm. By the time the Robinsons sold their farm, they had 6 cows, 40 chooks, and 70 goats.

ACTIVITY

Robinson is skilled in capturing the movement and commotion of the farmyard in his paintings. Experiment with his techniques and create your own piece, capturing past experiences of a busy and chaotic art classroom.

Robinson has been influenced by many artists throughout his career. Discuss the merits of appropriation. For further discussion, address the negative aspects of appropriation and the notion of originality in the art world.

Many of Robinson's farm animals seem to have their own personalities. Do you feel this is an accurate representation of nature? Why or why not?



SELF PORTRAITS

As with his farmyard paintings, many of Robinson's self portraits are painted with a sense of humour. A number of them are parodies of famous artworks from history. For example, *Equestrian self portrait* 1987 was inspired by the story of Charles IV on horseback, a painting by Francisco de Goya that satirised the eighteenth-century Spanish king. Charles IV was a fat and foolish king who wanted a portrait of himself riding a horse, even though he wasn't known for his horse riding. The equestrian portrait is a long-established mode of portraiture that dates back to classical times. They normally depict respected leaders or military figures, usually in a strong and powerful pose, but Goya painted Charles IV sitting still on a fat, old horse, and didn't make him look very impressive. However, the king didn't realise that Goya's painting was mocking him, and he liked it.

In 1987, William Robinson won the prestigious Archibald Prize with his *Equestrian self portrait*. Since the Archibald Prize shows paintings of important figures in Australian culture, one can see that Robinson is making fun of the seriousness of it all by painting himself as an uncomfortable farmer astride a horse. He won again with his 1995 *Self portrait with stunned mullet*, which references

William Hogarth's *The shrimp girl*, painted in 1740–45.

Although many of Robinson's self portraits use humour and parody, they can sometimes be very personal, giving the artist the opportunity to express how he sees himself or how he wants the rest of the world to see him. In doing so, he is able to reveal a more multi-layered aspect of himself through his oscillation between seriousness and wry humour. He is also able to make bold statements about the human condition under the guise of silliness. In *Self portrait with goose feathers* 1989, for instance, Robinson looks a lot like a goose himself, but his face is solemn and the painting has a dream-like quality. Thus, although the artist presents himself as a fool, something deeper underpins the painting. By camouflaging himself with different guises and costumes, Robinson can expose emotions and intimate feelings in a less confronting manner.

ACTIVITY

In pairs, discuss the advantages versus the disadvantages of presenting confronting and intimate emotions through camouflage.

*Compare and contrast Robinson's **Self portrait with basket** and **Professor John Robinson and brother William** in terms of their humour and seriousness. Now create your own piece that addresses both these characteristics.*

Why do you think William Robinson bases many of his self portraits on famous artworks from history?

Equestrian self portrait 1987
Winner Archibald Prize for portraiture 1987
Oil on linen 141 x 192cm
QUT Art Collection

Donated through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program by William Robinson, 2011



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In 1984, Robinson and his family moved to a farm at Beechmont in the Gold Coast hinterland. He remained there for the next 10 years, producing dramatic landscape paintings. Framed by steep cliffs and subtropical rainforest, the Robinsons' property and its surrounds were a great source of inspiration to the artist.

During Robinson's long walks in the rainforest, he would observe the way light moves throughout the day, which he incorporated into his paintings. Sometimes, the morning sky would be painted in one corner, with the darker evening or night sky painted in another, reflecting the enormity and immersive quality of nature. This also captures the feeling of time passing. In 1994, when he moved to Kingscliff, a coastal town in New South Wales, he continued to explore the possibilities of conveying time by painting the ocean tide in its various states. Robinson's love of art and music helped him transition from the sparseness of the farmyard compositions to his multiple-perspective rainforest works. Drawing inspiration from the music of Bach, which sometimes goes off on tangents or takes unexpected directions, Robinson allowed himself to not define a focal point. Rather, he would use random compositional elements in these works.

Like many Australian landscapes painters, such as Sidney Nolan, John Olsen, and Fred Williams, Robinson is interested in multiple-point perspective, meaning that there is no single vanishing point in his paintings. In this way, he can represent more of the environment, expressing his knowledge and appreciation of the rainforest, while also emphasising the vastness of the Australian landscape. By not representing the landscape realistically, Robinson is able to depict the passage of time and the magnitude of the rainforest more so than if he created a 'traditional' landscape painting. He wants us to see and understand the landscape the way he does. He does this not by presenting viewers with an insight into cultural identity, but rather allowing his paintings to act as portals into his personal identity.

ACTIVITY

*Robinson claims his work abandons the 'traditional' arid representation of the landscape. What are the similarities and differences between Russell Drysdale's **Man reading a paper** and Robinson's **The blue pools, Springbrook to Beechmont**?*

Drawing on Robinson's depiction of the passing of time within his paintings, create your own piece that reflects one whole day within the same painting. Pay attention to how each different part of the day can flow seamlessly into the next.

Think about your own artistic practice. Do you bring past experiences and influences to your work? If so, why might this be beneficial for your practice?



CREATION LANDSCAPE SERIES

Many of William Robinson's works carry biblical references, particularly the *Creation landscape* series, which is made up of seven multi-panelled works made between 1988 and 2003. In these works, Robinson expresses a sense of wonder at creation itself. Exploring the relationship between humans, earth, sky, and sea, he raises the question of humans' relation to their universe.

Creation landscape: Darkness and light 1988 begins the story of creation as told in the book of Genesis; however, the artist tends to focus on his own spiritual experience rather than literal readings of the Bible. He holds a pantheistic view of the landscape, and, as such, is very interested in Indigenous peoples' deep connection to the landscape and their sense of place in nature. In the middle panel of *Creation landscape: Darkness and light*, Robinson has used a large coiling shape that looks a bit like a river or a serpent. The serpent is a significant character in the story of Adam and Eve, but it is also a reference to the Rainbow Serpent, who represents both destruction and creation in Indigenous culture. Each panel addresses the forces of creation and destruction, with the work depicting fire, the sun, the moon, and the passing of

time from day to night, again expressing the enormity and power of nature.

The works present a transition from the artist's previous whimsical and humorous landscapes to a more serious insight into the natural environment, with a focus on the intrinsic human experiences of sorrow, happiness, and grief. Robinson's intention is to capture God's creation and his eternal presence by presenting what Robinson sees as the transcendent quality of the rainforest.

ACTIVITY

Research Robinson's **Creation landscape** series and attempt to note all the biblical references alluded to in these paintings.

Research another artist whose spiritual beliefs inform their practice and discuss, in pairs, how your own beliefs could affect your practice.

Many artists throughout history have dealt with themes of spirituality or the Divine. Why do you think people express their spiritual beliefs and experiences through art?

Creation landscape: Darkness and light (study) 1988
Pastel on paper 69 x 77cm
QUT Art Collection
Purchased through the William Robinson Art Collection Fund
and partial donation by Phillip Bacon, 2010



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