



The sunshine painting (Study) 1989
 watercolour on paper, 56 x 76cm
 QUT Art Collection
 Donated through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts
 Program by William Robinson, 2018

**QUT William Robinson
 Gallery**

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William Robinson: Elixir of light
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The garden (detail) 2013
 oil on canvas, 100 x 486.5cm
 QUT Art Collection
 Purchased through the William Robinson Art Collection
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WILLIAM ROBINSON: *Elixir of light*



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William Robison is an alchemist. With a profound understanding of light, his tertiary mixing of greens is rare; he knows how to drive them from deep aquamarine to a pale, minty gold. His meticulous observation of the natural world creates a container that allows the illumination of colour to infuse his paintings with a sense of reverence and meditation.

Painting in an unapologetically Queensland light, Robison is distinguished in Australian art. In his paintings, the night sky is never flat black like in a Sidney Nolan or calligraphic as in a Fred Williams; instead, it is like a glow worm cave pulling the viewer in with deep blues and browns. Colour is reflected and scattered to help lead the eye around the painting, a technique inspired by Robison's artistic influence, French painter Pierre Bonnard.

In his works, small brush strokes of complementary colours bustle in different directions to create form. We see morning and afternoon light fall naturally over mountains and objects; the artist's attention to colour helps preserve the moment of his contemplation of the changing light of day. For example, *Evening shadows*, *Numinbah* 1999 celebrates the quiet distant gold of the dusk. In this painting, delicate orange pinks float in the sky while the scrabbling forest clings to the encroaching dark in browns and deep eucalyptus greens. Often, Robison brings a blaze of orange light from sunset, or electric green from a flash of lightning, or the dramatic effect of a rainbow to show the movement of time. In *Pandanus in afternoon light* 2007, the viewer can sense the closing of the day, with the use of pale gold reflected in the waves gently lapping the shoreline, pushing into the composition from the left. It is as though you have walked through the shadow of the banksias and pandanus trees, and then emerged into the subdued afternoon light. The colours are softened using Naples yellow and raw umber to create a quiet, Australian coastal palette.

It is always darkest before the dawn, and in *Crack of dawn* 1988, Robison uses this power to cut his composition through the middle. The highest contrast in this work is created by the deep blue greens of the range beside the glorious pale pink gold of the dawn through white eucalypts. He has balanced the composition by darkening the lower left corner and pushing light in a steady formation on the right. The eye travels on a circular path that tracks the changing colours of dawn. Through these paintings, Robison finds the eternal in the now.

It is a privilege to be invited by QUT to select works for this exhibition. In 1986, I met William Robison



Garden and cane chair c. 1972
coloured pastels, 48 x 59.5cm
QUT Art Collection
Purchased through the William Robison
Art Collection Fund, 2008

when I was applying for entry to the Bachelor of Fine Arts degree at QIT (now QUT). There were only about thirty places offered that year; the subsequent years doubled, then quadrupled in intake, so I was very fortunate to learn from Bill in an intimate class. This was his final two years of teaching before becoming a full-time artist. At this time, he was painting the farmyard pictures at Birkdale, and showing them at the Ray Hughes Gallery in Brisbane's Red Hill.

An appreciation of colour—especially phosphorous yellows, greens and bright sunlight—separated the work of Queenslanders, like William Robison, Davida Allen, June Tupicoff and Ian Smith, from the Victorian palette of artists such as Max Meldrum or Clarice Beckett. It was the tonalists versus the Fauvists: the wild beasts of colour. In Queensland, closer to the equator, the sun is strong, and it feels as if there are four spotlights on all sides flattening the picture plane into pure colour. In his work, Robison grades darkness to light from blue to yellow, rather than from black to white. When observing the glow on a golden sky, he will include many other colours rather than read the area tonally from dark to light. Having spent several years living on a small farm, Robison has firsthand experience of life in the outdoors. In his landscapes, we can sense these long days; we can sense the artist's patient observation of nature's most dramatic moments in colour.

As an art educator, Robison taught us about sensitivity, feeling and placing the mark on the page. He taught us to spend more time looking than painting, and really make an effort to see things

to the yellow is the yellowest it can be while still being green and the green closest to the blue is the bluest it can be whilst still being green. The two tones around the outside is what happens when you add one dose of white to tone and then a second to fade to white.

When we look at all of Robison's work, we can see that he sets the opposites against one another to balance the colour values. Purple and gold, green and red, orange and violet brown: Robison uses these colours across his landscapes. He grounds the viewer's eye by using warm umbers and browns; his blacks contain deep blues, greens and purples. In science, we know that a leaf appears green because it absorbs all colours except green; it uses the energy from red and blue light to photosynthesise, and reflects the green colour we see. Although Robison has to physically mix a green, he draws on this natural theory of reflected light by using a number of all colours to create his greens. He incorporates browns and oranges. In fact, the way to construct a green that resembles the colour of Australian eucalypts is to add its opposite—red.

William Robison is an incredible teacher. Years after he taught me, we would correspond by letter; he has always been very supportive. Today, as I paint en plein air, out before nature, I'm reminded of what Bill taught me. As I work through problems in the painting, his knowledge and guidance softly come to me: "Look for the diagonal, lead the eye around the picture, look at the way Cézanne or Matisse bend the picture plane so you look over the table of oranges." His advice falls on me like dust—as long as I am working or thinking about seeing and painting. Bill is a teacher who, like a patient parent, leaves enough space for his students to find the answers for themselves.

A lover of Bach, Robison is no stranger to discipline and structure; he has a Spartan work ethic as evidenced in his colossal landscapes. In this exhibition, I have chosen to focus on these works for their balance of colour opposites and their grandeur. Through these works, the artist has created a magical insight into the study of natural light. Robison's awareness of colour is also evident in his more modest watercolour studies, in which rainbows are a recurring motif. For example, *Landscape 38a* 1989 depicts the artist and his wife on horseback under a colourful arc, and in *Rider* 1989, the rainbow is treated as a prize winning sash of the airborne equestrian. Just as Bill and Shirley may never have actually mounted the potbellied pony and ridden into the sunset, the idea of the rainbow is not exactly literal in Robison's paintings. Bill's rainbows are all about his playful sense of humour in the landscape,

where he and Shirley escape domestic drudgery by sailing over a puddle like a pair of superheroes.

Elixir of light brings together oil paintings, pastels, lithographs, gouache and watercolours that celebrate Robison's extraordinary gift of colour perception. His extensive knowledge of pigments and his skilful application of colour can be seen in each of these mediums. In his early works, Bill's oil paints are mixed with Damar Varnish and pure gum artist turpentine. Very occasionally, a medium containing oil is added to assist the flow of the paint. In more recent works, he uses a commercial Winsor and Newton artists' painting medium. I believe Robison's oil paintings are the most complex contemporary oil paintings in Australia. The palette on display in the William Robison Gallery, which Bill used over the course of several years, resembles a heaving wave of oil pigment. When I paint, I use rice paper as a palette, and build up my colours around the preliminary piles of pigment. This creates a kind of bright coloured goldfish grotto as a palette. The thick nature of oil paint means there is a distinct physicality to placing the paint on the surface. When Bill paints with oils, he places one colour beside another to create a shimmering surface of reflected light.

Working in pastel—a powdered pigment—Bill places marks slowly and methodically on the surface of the paper. Cheap pastels are only ever able to give an artist two or three layers, but Robison uses high quality pastels that are extremely soft and crumbly; these allow him to put more than ten layers of pure pigment into the work. The paper Bill uses is a French cotton rag composed of fabric and paper. When working with watercolour or gouache, he places the paint mark on the page and allows colours to float over one another, encouraging the medium to flow and produce what painters call 'happy accidents'.

A 21st-century alchemist, Robison takes metal from the earth—pure cadmiums, cobalt from lapis lazuli for Matisse blue, Aureolin yellow, transparent gold oxide—arranging these elements in a way that allows one's perception of their environment to be awakened. Audiences have the opportunity to wonder and imagine in front of a Robison painting—the canvas is an expanding universe perceived through the eye of the viewer in a moment of solitude.

In the gallery space, the eyes receive a reprieve from the RGB colours of the electronic screens of phones, computers and televisions. Robison's works are filled with violets and deep ultramarine blues. The eyes are bathed in a light that William Robison has seen. He has studied light, and it moved him to make this wonderful work for us all.

Maureen Hansen
Guest Curator