

WILLIAM ROBINSON
LESSONS IN LOOKING

For First Nations peoples, the spiritual significance of Country encompasses the lands, waters, and skies to which they are deeply connected and care for through enduring family ties.

QUT acknowledges the Turrbal and Yugara as the First Nations owners of the lands where QUT now stands. We pay respect to their Elders, lores, customs and creation spirits. We recognise that these lands have always been places of teaching, research and learning. QUT acknowledges the important role Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people play within the QUT community.

WILLIAM ROBINSON
LESSONS IN LOOKING

curated by special guest
ANNE WALLACE

FOREWORD

VANESSA VAN OOYEN
Director, QUT Galleries and Museums

It is exactly one year since I last spoke with William Robinson.

The occasion was the opening of his *Farmyards* exhibition at Philip Bacon Galleries. The exhibition was packed—indeed, overly subscribed—and people moved around the gallery, looking at works and greeting and talking to one another. Bill sat quietly in a corner on his walker. From where he was seated, and being lower than those around him, it seemed difficult for him to engage with the room. I went and crouched down beside him so that we could talk as though I were visiting him in his studio.

I knew it was difficult for Bill to hear me, and the room was overwhelming, even for me. But I was determined to speak to him in the same way I always had. Not to make the conversation about his age or his physical limitations, but to talk about painting, artists, and ideas.

I told him about a conversation I had been having with others about a possible exhibition at the William Robinson Gallery, for which I was thinking of inviting the artist—and his former student—Anne Wallace to act as curator. Bill nodded in agreement.

“She’s a very good painter,” he said. “That would be interesting.”

We continued talking about the importance of inviting different voices into the William Robinson Gallery—artists, writers, former students, and people from beyond the conventional field of curatorship—and of allowing them to consider Bill’s work from their own perspectives.

We had explored this idea previously through *Insights*, which brought together the perspectives of David Malouf, Betty Churcher, and Davida Allen, and through *Inspirations*, guest curated by Dame Quentin Bryce AD CVO. More recently, it has been illuminated through the reflections of former student Maureen Hansen in *Elixir of Light*. One of the great possibilities of a single-artist gallery is precisely this freedom: to keep returning to an artist, to keep asking new questions, and to invite unexpected voices into the conversation.

For me, Anne Wallace felt like the perfect choice.

Anne and I have known each other for many years, having worked together on her major survey exhibition in 2019, *Anne Wallace: Strange Ways*. Through this experience, I was aware of her intellectual generosity and breadth of knowledge, as well as the distinctive relationship she had with Bill as both his student and a fellow painter. I knew she carried with her an extraordinary wealth of memories and insights into William Robinson—not simply as an important Australian artist, but as a teacher, a colleague, and a person who had profoundly influenced the development of her own practice.

I did not realise that my conversation with Bill would be our last.

A month later, on 26 August 2025, William Robinson passed away.

It was a shock to everyone. Although he was 89, Bill was one of those people you somehow imagined would

always be there. His work will, of course, remain. But Bill himself was such a personality and such a presence in the lives of so many people that it was difficult to imagine the world without him in it.

And yet, a year later, here we are.

William Robinson: Lessons in Looking continues a conversation that began with Bill himself. It explores his profound role as an educator and teacher, and the influence he has had on generations of artists.

Anne's contribution to this publication is not a conventional art-historical essay, nor does it attempt to be one. Instead, it is a vivid and generous account of a painter remembering another painter. Through her words, we are transported back to Brisbane in the late 1980s: to a particular cohort of artists and teachers, to a generation of emerging artists who would go on to become established and influential voices in Australian art, and to the rich experience of being taught by William Robinson.

What emerges most powerfully is Anne's description of what Bill taught: a pictorial language grounded in observation.

This idea of teaching through looking is fundamental to understanding Robinson's legacy. His influence was not simply a matter of style or technique. He taught artists to look carefully, intensely, and differently—to observe the world and, through that observation, to discover their own means of translating experience into paint.

Anne's memories give us access to this process from within. Her recollections reveal something of the unique way that Bill saw, thought about, and produced his paintings. In doing so, she also gives us a portrait of an artist through the eyes of someone who learned from him and then developed a distinctive painting language of her own.

There is something fitting about this being the exhibition that follows that final conversation I had with Bill.

As we mark one year since William Robinson's passing, *Lessons in Looking* offers both a tribute and a continuation of his legacy. Through Anne Wallace's reflections, the works gathered here, and the inclusion of *Local café*—the last artwork Robinson produced—this exhibition reminds us that his way of seeing remains profoundly alive. His legacy endures not only in the paintings he created, but also in the generations of artists he taught, the countless people he encouraged to look more carefully at the world around them, and in the continuing conversations his work inspires. In bringing Anne's voice into dialogue with Bill's, this exhibition honours an artist whose greatest lesson was perhaps the simplest and most enduring of all: to pay attention, to remain curious, and to keep looking.



Emerging light, Springbrook 2005
pastel on paper, 71 x 156 cm
Private collection, Brisbane



Evening light, Springbrook 2005
pastel on paper, 69.5 x 152 cm
QUT Art Collection
Purchased through the William Robinson
Art Collection Fund, 2009



William Robertson

WILLIAM ROBINSON: LESSONS IN LOOKING

ANNE WALLACE

Guest Curator

It is a strange and sad feeling to be curating an exhibition of William Robinson's work now that he is no longer here to see it. I think—I hope—he had a sense of how much I valued his tutelage and support while he was alive, but perhaps he might have been surprised by just how vivid my memories are of my formative time as his student. It's a comfort that he did experience a series of appreciations of his life and work at his own gallery by art historians, novelists, friends, and protégés. I was not a close friend by any means, but (as I've heard others say) having been taught by him has given me sustaining thoughts about painting that frequently come back in memory, even now, almost 40 years on.

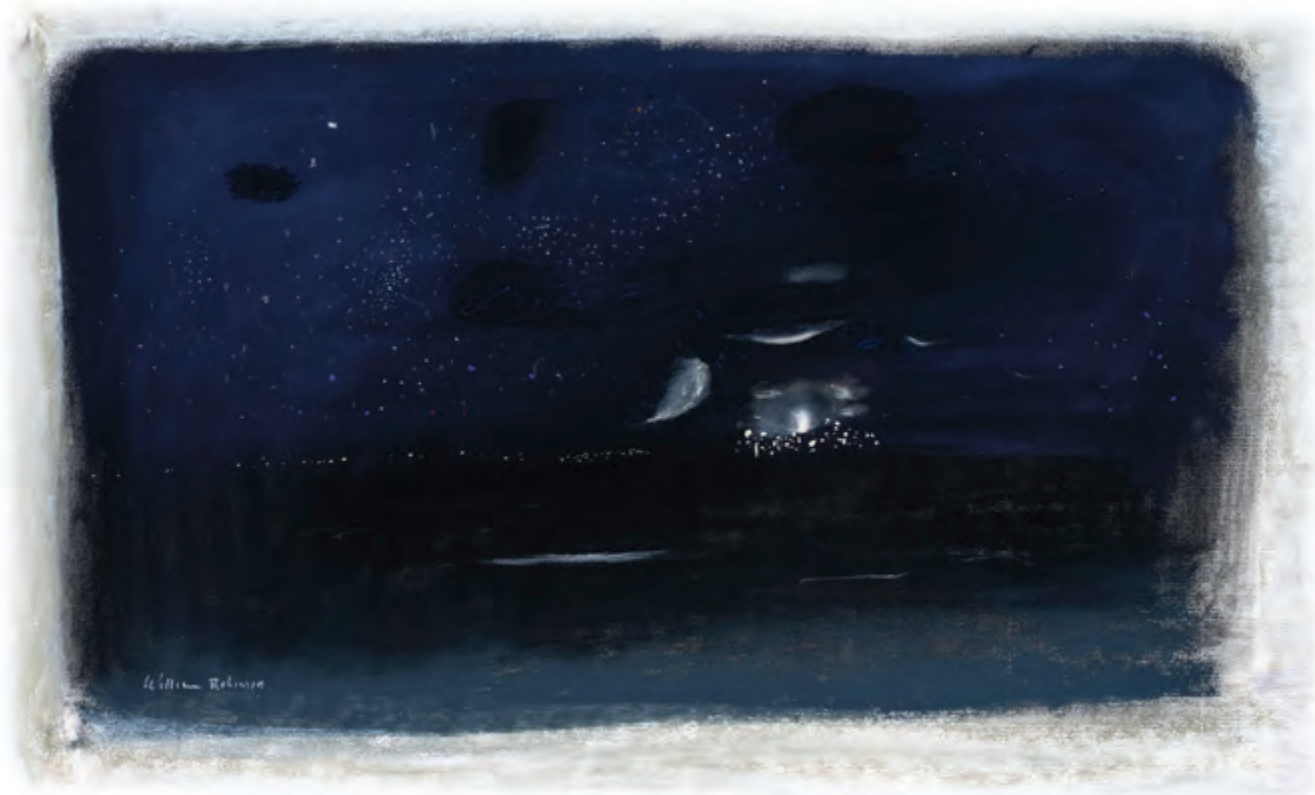
My first sight of an actual 'William Robinson' came in 1987, when I visited the house of my high-school art teacher, Mrs Theobald (later known to me as Bronwyn), who lived up the road from the school in Corinda. That experience—entering a house whose walls were entirely covered in paintings and where art objects fitted in around each other on every available surface, and whose shadowy depths contained rooms filled with yet more art, wooden statues, and sculptures growing out of table-tops, and bookcases stuffed to bursting, all lit by small table lamps—was one of the most important of my life. The place smelt of the oil paint slowly drying on myriad canvases. One of these was a velvet-black, pink, and yellow impastoed Davida Allen of a staring mother and baby, so frank and unsentimental that I had to look away at first. There was a dark painting by Jon Molvig of a solemn schoolgirl, in her 1950s uniform so like mine: 'Daphne' she was called, and she seemed to hover over us from up near the 8-foot-high ceiling. A big colourful Alun Leach Jones hung above a mantelpiece. A series of small, framed works by Sally L'Estrange climbed like a line of beetles up the tongue-and-groove wall. There was a lithograph by Georges Braque; a huge Ian Smith painting festooned with 'Chux' dish cloths that barely clad the figure of a tumescent man in a kitchen; a small paint-and-sand encrusted Dubuffet; and new paintings by Steph—Bronwyn's daughter, a year above me at school and who was now studying art at the Brisbane College of Advanced Education (BCAE), Kelvin Grove. Steph's paintings were portraits of her brothers and

Starry night III 1978
pastel and gouache on paper,
31 x 31 cm
QUT Art Collection
Purchased 2023

herself in scumbled ochre-whites and greenish yellows over dark indigo and umber grounds. But I knew nothing of paint colours back then. Amid the clamour of artworks demanding my attention that afternoon, I eventually perceived a modestly sized gouache and pastel on paper, one of Bill's *Starry night* series, simply propped on a bookshelf. It was of a night so dark that only the barest trace of starlit clouds emerged from the blackness. A work of utter quietude and subtlety, it had the biggest impact of all despite its size and complete lack of showiness. It offered a moment of communication from a 'still, small voice', one that I perhaps foolishly imagined was directed at me, in the reverberating way that some art works mysteriously have. I knew from that moment that I wanted to be involved somehow with painting, with art.

I enrolled at BCAE the following year, having summoned the courage to throw caution to the wind and commence the Bachelor of Arts (Visual Arts) degree. Sentimentally, I've kept the intake forms and timetables from that first year and the sight of them still brings back the queasy fear of that first plunge into the uncertainty, nay absurdity, of studying to become an artist. On a simple human level, there was a great deal for me to catch up on. The previous five years had been spent in the sheltered environs of a private girls' school being a (mostly) dutiful and diligent student, and I was out of my depth in the 'real' world of Kelvin Grove. Many of my more socially adept fellow students had come from co-ed state schools. The most immediately noticeable ones had shaved heads and moved like a pack through the studios, stomping noisily down the echoing cement stairwells in their Doc Martens. I immediately sensed my utter lack of cred. The wild ones turned out to be a group of second years, a gang of friends with Steph among them.

Day one of the course began with an introduction to the crowded studios where I had an easel, small table, and a metal locker at my disposal, up in the ugly, utilitarian concrete building of D Block, overlooking Victoria Park Road. Classes commenced with a sense of the seriousness of the task ahead of us. This seriousness emanated from the tall, bespectacled, bald man who addressed us: William Robinson. Dressed without flair, like a bureaucrat ready for a day in the office, the Head of painting glanced piercingly at us while outlining what we were to do in the first year of the course. Bill's voice was interesting; he enunciated certain words for emphasis in a somehow 'juicy' way. He did not sound like he would suffer many fools. Occasionally, his lower lip would protrude in a sort of pout as he waited, head tilted to one side, to see if anyone had anything to offer. There was no jadedness in his words even though, by the next year, his decades



Starry night I 1978
pastel and gouache on paper, 25 x 46 cm
QUT Art Collection
Purchased 2023

of teaching would come to an end; he spoke as if we all had a chance to do the most interesting thing in the world—which was to become artists. First year required us to turn our hands to a range of techniques and forms of art-making. After that we were expected to specialise in one of the different areas: painting (incorporating drawing), sculpture, media arts (photography), or printmaking. BCAE was an art school that still assumed the separation of the disciplines.

Bill was an unapologetic stickler for teaching via observation, meaning that there was to be an element of the observable, visible world to our productions, at least initially. Drawing from life was an essential part of training the eye, brain, and hand to work in congress, and had to be learned through relentless practice and repetition. He believed that this skill could not be achieved otherwise, and that it was a non-negotiable prerequisite for art-making. In the life drawing room—where models sat and changed poses and we had our drawing pads at our easels or on our laps—Bill would quietly walk around and inspect our work. In the silence, his voice would break in to offer advice and correction; sometimes, he would take up a pencil and demonstrate. We would then gather round, watching as his head, bald as a scrub turkey's, moved up and down, his gleaming dark brown eyes peering intently above and then through the half-moon glasses, glancing from model to page and back again. He held the pencil sensitively, loosely, as if waiting for it to function like a divining rod—the opposite of Pablo Picasso's incisive, bravura marks. There was something almost woolly about the beginnings of these drawings, but as the pencil gathered the information, the figure emerged—not a bland copy of the person posing but rather a kind of sensate equivalent, a drawing that carried with it the history of its own making with the first tentative outlines joined by firmer ones and the permanent trace of that moment in the hushed life room it had taken to make. Watching this process was to observe the work of a highly developed sensibility as it came up against a thing in the world to be recorded, as the brain, eye, and hand communicated together. More than once, we joked about asking him to sign one of these demonstrations, but it wasn't really proper or possible for us students to fool around like that with Bill. He was imparting serious knowledge: the handing on of a pictorial language.

In the painting studios, under Bill's instruction, we learned methods unchanged since at least the 19th century, even the Renaissance. We bought cotton duck from a canvas and tarpaulin wholesaler, and were taught to melt the foul-smelling granules of dried 'rabbit skin glue' over a hotplate to produce the runny substance that would seal or 'size' the canvas. After that came the application

The lattice verandah (detail) 1971–72
oil on canvas, 60 x 75 cm
QUT Art Collection
Gift of Susan Carleton under the
Cultural Gifts Program, 2002



of white gesso, preferably many thin coats to be sanded in between. We took our lists of the paints Bill required us to have to an art shop—and the world of paint colours thus revealed, to me, the true delight of the whole enterprise. Bill's list included titanium white (in itself a modern choice, but he preferred its consistency and non-toxicity, when compared with older whites, such as flake or Cremnitz, which contained lead), lemon yellow, cadmium yellow, Naples yellow, Indian yellow, raw umber, burnt Sienna, yellow ochre, Terre verte, Indian red, alizarin crimson, and French ultramarine. You could mix many colours from a much more restricted range, even just the primaries plus white, if you knew what you were doing, as Bill did. Bill had other unusual colours on his own studio palette at home, too, such as Aureolin, and his special Genuine Rose Madder (talked about by us in hushed tones of awe. It reputedly cost \$50 per small tube. Nowadays, it will set you back \$150 for 40 ml). But most of his colours, cold and warm, pale and vivid, covering the whole spectrum, could be mixed by him from the mandated colours. Using black from a tube was forbidden: it could be produced by combining ultramarine, crimson and Indian yellow, and it was livelier made that way.

Every painter develops their own favourite range of colours, and using them becomes second nature over time. I was seduced early on by many of the names of colours—Cassel brown, *stil de grain* pink, nickel yellow, gamboge, cobalt violet, Prussian blue, manganese blue, cerulean blue, sap green, vermilion, viridian, phthalo blue, rose doré, Paynes grey, cinnabar green, indigo. I have over the years bought and used them all and, as a result, have sadly not retained what Bill taught us about how to make our own colours—but I do have a paint-encrusted palette like his, never wanting to clear all the unused paint off at the end of the day. That practice seems needlessly wasteful, given that some colours are usable for days after exposure to air.

In that first year of learning to paint, we were thrown into the deep end. Subjects were suggested—a still life, a view from the studio windows, or a fellow student, say—and we were to prepare our canvases, lay out our paints as advised, and get to work. As with drawing, you can only learn to paint from observation, by doing it and persisting with it, even when the results long remain woeful. We were warned against muddiness, inaccurate proportion, unpleasant surface qualities. It was clearly going to be a slog. Bill showed us examples of paintings that demonstrated the things he wanted to teach: composition, the arrangement of elements in the picture plane, the place of mass and line and dark and light, the possibilities for mark-making with the brush. In class we became familiar,

through Bill's practiced eye, with the work of the Post-Impressionists—those were the artists who filled his teaching reference library—and could begin to understand something of how it was made.

While we worked in the painting studio, Bill shared with us his passion for Pierre Bonnard. I think beyond the beauty of the paintings, Bill had been taken by the persona of Bonnard himself: the self-effacing, unremarkable-looking man who had found an almost spiritual pictorial language, with each still life and garden view and portrait of Marthe a paean to beauty in the everyday. (Bill distrusted artists who were conspicuously 'arty' and cool: perhaps he associated them with the artist who in his view had let the rot set in, Andy Warhol). He showed us in reproductions the many colours that could be found in the shadows cast by a Bonnard bowl of plums, or on the side of Marthe's face—no pedestrian light and dark there. He showed us pages of Bonnard's small notebooks in which he'd made brief sketches and notes on the weather and urged us to follow suit—drawing in a sketchbook was the one discipline that would reap rewards later. He remarked that on the day Marthe died, Bonnard wrote the single word *beau* in his book, a note about the day's sunny weather. It was a sign of the artist who separates himself from 'normal' responses to human suffering and seeks solace in the visual world.

Teaching alongside Bill in painting was a trio of sympatico women artists—June Tupicoff, Helen Fuller, and Sally L'Estrange—and when joined by Merv Muhling on their tea breaks, they all seemed to be having a whale of a time in the staff room, hooting with laughter and gossiping in a way that was hard to reconcile with Bill's serious and reserved manner in class. Also on the teaching staff were some renegades—the hip young painter Robert Moore, whose work was rock-and-roll in comparison with Bill's Classic FM, and the bearded and semi-silent Robert J. Morris, who had made some of the brightly coloured wooden constructions that I had seen erupting into space at the Theobalds' house. These were artists who were not interested in teaching 'observational' drawing or painting, whose tuition accepted the liberation of art from its old job of recording the optically perceived world. Helen, June, and Sally were those kind of artists too, and yet Bill esteemed them as colleagues as much as if they had been representational oil painters. As Sally noted, what Bill valued in other artists was 'sensitivity and intelligence'.¹

1. QUT Art Museum, 'William Robinson: Inspirations (30 July 2015 - 12 June 2016)', Vimeo video, 10:18, posted 24 October 2019, <https://vimeo.com/368450886>.



Bill taught that in order to progress as an artist, you first had to learn certain disciplines, even if later you abandoned them. What you were really learning was discipline itself, the crucial requirement for a profession that is self-driven. Bill had personally endured a rigorous early training involving mathematical analysis of the picture plane, turning three dimensions into two via rules worked up in the Renaissance. He had learnt the truly old-fashioned techniques that enabled effects of mimesis and verisimilitude. But over the years, he had rebelled from the academic style engendered by this and was, ironically, a far more modern painter than I intended to be. When he saw the ‘moderns’ in books and exhibitions as a young man, he left the old rules behind, and through his Bonnard-influenced works developed his own way of making representational paintings without chiaroscuro. In *The lattice verandah* 1971–72, for example, the contrast between the shady interior and sunlit garden beyond is produced through colour alone—the hibiscus flowers on the foreground table could, in a more ‘realist’ depiction, have been used to cast deep shadows to make the space beyond them recede, and their petals could have been made more three-dimensional with judicious tricks of ‘light and shade’, but he was uninterested in that kind of painting. Similarly, in *Bedroom with woman putting on lipstick* 1977, he uses pure blues and greys to suggest the dim recesses of the lofty-ceilinged, cavernous space typical of an old Queenslander bedroom, the better to animate the effect of the acid-yellow bedspread against the cherry-red handbag that rests on it. The perspective of the room is purposely ‘wonky’, even though Bill had the skills to draw it as accurately as an architect’s plan. The first part of his development as a painter had consisted of a conscious de-skilling.

Bill did not, by any means, expect his students to paint the way he did. He was no Euan Uglow, the master of the life drawing room at the Slade School in London,² who required his students to invest in plumb bobs and use them relentlessly, plotting vertical lines as guides for observational painting. Bill made his enthusiasms known but he also provided guidance to those of us pursuing styles even diametrically opposed to his own—so long as we worked industriously. Personally, I wanted to be able to paint with chiaroscuro, as mimetically as possible but with subjects that pertained to me and my life, not to the past. I was hellbent on learning to paint the way my favourite painters did—Jacques-Louis David, Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, and Eugène Delacroix—and full of the naïve expectation that surely it was achievable. Bill

Bedroom with woman putting on lipstick 1977
gouache and coloured pastels on paper,
76 x 56.5 cm

QUT Art Collection

Purchased with the assistance of the Visual Arts
Board of the Australia Council, 1977

2. Between 1994 and 1996, Wallace earned a Master of Arts (Distinction) at the Slade School of Fine Art, University College, London, while on an Anne and Gordon Samstag International Visual Arts Scholarship.



gave me examples of 20th-century artists who had continued in the vein of this kind of representational painting—Edward Hopper, Charles Sheeler, Balthus, the *Neue Sachlichkeit* artists. I struggled to paint things like hair and skin, having followed Bill's example in using hog hair bristles or other natural kinds more suited to applying colour in impasto dabs—the kind of brush shapes called brights, rounds, or filberts; it was a while before I realised the advantages of a rigger brush for fine lines and a mottler for blending. I hoped to learn how to turn the sludge of paint into something that might trick the eye into believing that what it saw on the canvas was somehow 'real', a very archaic aim. Bill understood and encouraged this.

I will never forget the boost to my esteem that occurred when, at an end of term 'crit' session, Bill suggested I stop using my 'rubbishy' cotton duck canvas and instead purchase some pre-primed Belgian linen, the kind that he used. Once he had paid me that compliment, I felt duty bound to try it, despite Helen Fuller's mock-aghast response: 'But Bill, she's a student. She has no money! And what about the fact that some artists painted for life on cardboard? Ian Fairweather for instance?' But Bill was unmoved by such objections, and I asked my parents for some oil-primed linen for Christmas that year. I stretched with difficulty the precious rectangle and such was the marvel of the feeling of the brush on the flawless surface that I knew it would be hard to go back. Thus began a fraught relationship with the purveyors of art materials at Oxlades, the oldest of the art supplies shops in Brisbane, located on Wickham St, Fortitude Valley. Inside the darkened, cluttered shop, built in the so-called 'Chicagoesque' style in the early 1920s, awaited an uneasy encounter with the curly-haired shop assistant whose task it was to cut the length of linen off the roll. Knowing I was a mere student, he looked at me as though I must be joking or insane when I made my request. I weakly insisted, and thereafter my visits to Oxlades were stiff with embarrassment as I persisted in using materials unsuited to my station. What an insufferable prig I must have seemed.

In the painting sessions, Helen was permitted to puncture Bill's air of gravitas—she was the ideal counter to him, undermining any presumption of the superiority of oil painting and good for a healthy reminder of the problem of the medium's association with money and commodification, even making playful digs when (later) Bill's prices hit the stratosphere, as though that were a problem in itself—the first time I'd ever heard it put that way. When Bill had recommended a library book on Balthus to me and I enjoyed the colour and texture of the paintings like old frescoes, the semi-abstract walls of rooms empty

Decorative figure 1966
oil on canvas board,
51 x 41 cm
QUT Art Collection
Purchased 1967



Farmyard 9 (Jumping the gate) 2015
gouache on paper, 46 x 61 cm
Private collection, Brisbane



Farmyard 16 (The pose) 2015
gouache on paper, 46 x 61 cm
Private collection, Brisbane



Farmyard 17 (Hay and sunshine) 2015
gouache on paper, 46 x 61 cm
Private collection, Brisbane



Farmyard 19 (Local establishment) 2015
gouache on paper, 46 x 61 cm
Private collection, Brisbane



Farmyard 20 (Easy milking) 2015
gouache on paper, 46 x 61 cm
Private collection, Brisbane



Farmyard 22 (The home yard) 2015
gouache on paper, 46 x 61 cm
Private collection, Brisbane



Farmyard 27 (Bringing in the goats) 2015
gouache on paper, 46 x 61 cm
Private collection, Brisbane



Farmyard 28 (After milking) 2015
gouache on paper, 46 x 61 cm
Private collection, Brisbane



Equestrian self-portrait 1987
oil on linen, 141 x 192 cm
QUT Art Collection
Donated through the Australian Government's
Cultural Gifts Program by William Robinson, 2011

but for a cat or a girl, the bravura treatment of silver, and the fusion of the Renaissance with the modern, Helen had said something wry about an old man painting young girls. The artist she most often spoke to us about in class was the newly dead Joseph Beuys, the way his ‘fat corners’ and piles of felt were in fact another kind of autobiographical art.

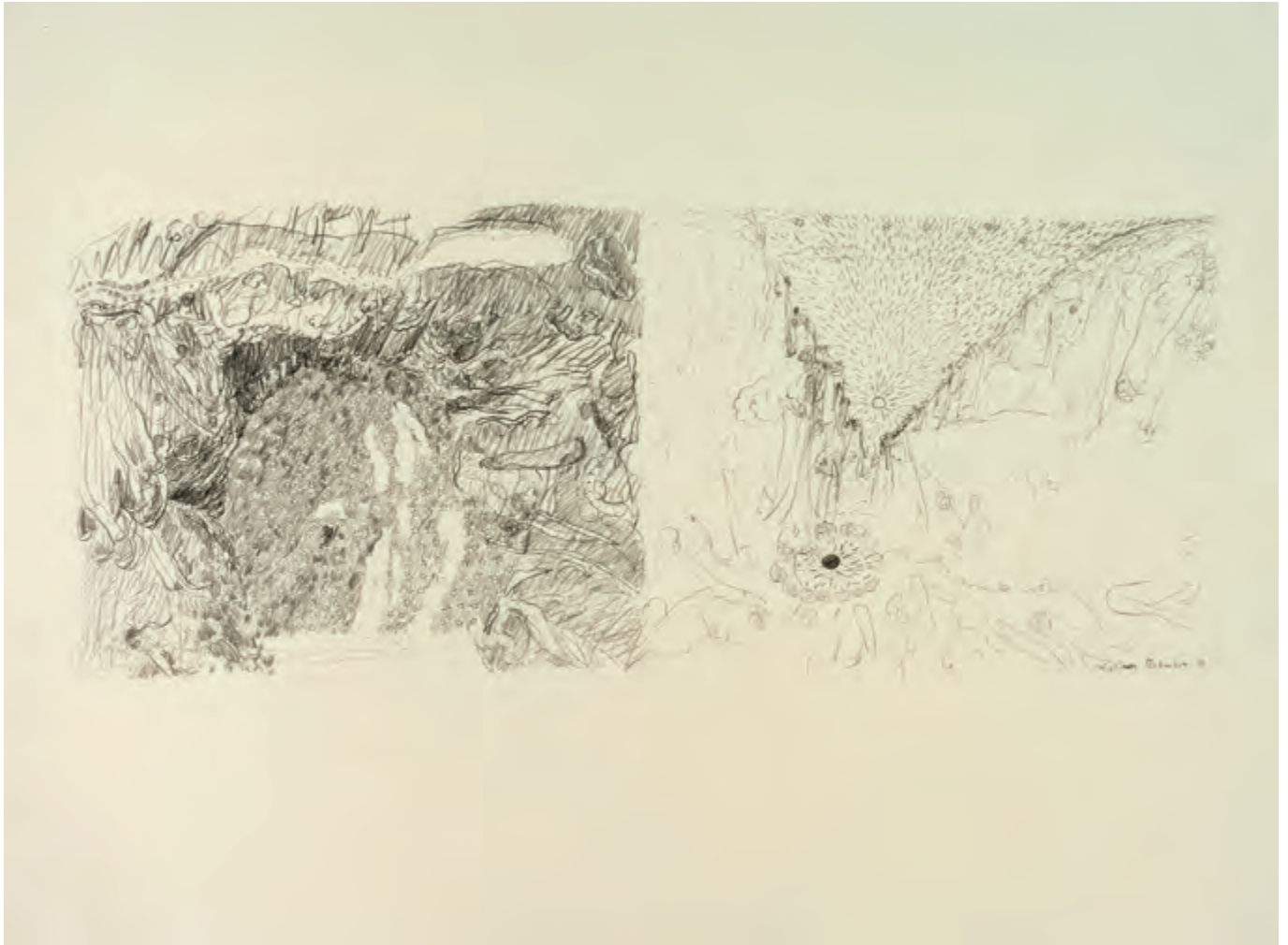
Bill’s air of authority as teacher, effective as it was, was itself a posture. At a certain level, he was unable to take himself seriously, as his many self-portraits attest. When it came to these depictions, he always played the role of fool, from the gormless yokel of the Archibald portraits to the Buster Keaton-esque clown of the farmyards and the Monsieur Hulot-like figure under a floppy hat in the *Summer self portraits* of 2004. And yet the great majority of his work transmits qualities of beauty, depth and stillness that have the power to affect viewers profoundly. The contrast between registers in Bill’s oeuvre brings to mind Alfred Hitchcock and his incongruous appearances, paunchy and unglamorous, in many of even his most serious films. There simply was more to Bill as a person than the ambitious painter who wanted always to challenge and reinvent himself, another side to him that loathed self-importance. At times, critics managed to get to Bill when they saw the buffoonery of the self-portraits and allowed themselves to patronise the rest of his art. But nobody should underestimate his intelligence, or the overriding rigour of his work—he knew exactly what he was doing. He also had the confidence to make mistakes, to acknowledge that not every work was going to be, nor should be, entirely successful. The thing that interested Bill most, perhaps, was the condition of being human, which incorporates failure as much as it does achievement.

Listening to the badinage between Bill and his painting colleagues, especially with his close friend June, it was clear that he felt that his painting (and, by extension, the painting he taught us) was in opposition to contemporary art—the way it was made, the way it was written about, the way it caught the eye of ‘the curators’. In first year, we made a field trip down to Sydney to see the 7th Biennale, our excitement dampened only slightly by the overnight journey in which futile attempts were made to sleep on the grimy floor of the Greyhound bus. Out of loyalty to Bill, I sought out the exhibiting artists I knew he would approve of—Balthus, Braque, Bonnard, Max Beckmann, Fernand Léger, Henri Matisse. But I couldn’t avoid looking at—and being impressed by—other things. I was woefully unprepared to understand the cornucopia of contemporary art that was on offer, but some works, especially the big installations, could not be denied: Christian Boltanski, Anselm Kiefer, Hermann Nitsch, and Djon

Mundine's orchestration of the enormous memorial of 200 hollow logs painted by First Nations artists (representing coffins, one for each year of European settlement) that dominated Pier 2/3. Looking at the list now, one marvels at the range of curator Nick Waterlow's choices: Jeff Wall, Gerhard Richter, Isa Genzken, Vivienne Shark LeWitt, Ralph Balson, Colin McCahon, Tony Tuckson, Peter Booth, Brian Eno, Julie Brown-Rrap, Jacky Redgate, Rebecca Horn, Margaret Preston, Willem de Kooning, Toshimitsu Imai, Francis Bacon, Yves Klein—although admittedly, judging from what is documented online (I lost the catalogue long ago), the only non-Western participants were from Ramingining, Arnhem Land, and Japan.

Even though he had himself exhibited in important exhibitions of contemporary art, including the previous Sydney Biennale and the Australian Perspecta of 1983, Bill felt alienated from that world of the 'latest' thinking about and presentation of contemporary art, and from the art itself. For him, even the use of photographs as visual aids in making paintings was a cop out. Sally, whose own work of the time included politically engaged paintings referring to the fall of the Romanian regime of Ceaușescu, suggested he should qualify that prejudice when he stated it, but he did not. You could argue that he was merely blinkered in his views; he certainly had his own convictions about what was good practice. His process was a very old one: working from memory or tiny studies made on location, themselves wonders of verve and economy, later worked up into colour compositions in watercolour, before finally becoming their own worlds in oil paint.

Against the *au courant* view, Bill believed that art was separated into what was aesthetically sound and what was kitsch, and that these categories should remain sacrosanct. He wasn't interested in the fact that the 20th-century avant-gardes had wiped the board clean and started again with a whole new set of non-rules. Before his students came to learn from movements such as conceptual art, performance, installation, and all the other things that had emerged since Bill had himself gone to art school and which he really didn't feel pertained to him, he wanted us to know certain 'truths'. For him, the use of photographs circumvented the cognitive work of 'learning to look' via drawing and robbed the eye and brain of the chance to create something truly new. When I refer to photographs as I paint—never, I hasten to add, by directly tracing, nor using a projector to transfer the image onto the canvas to paint over, but, still, as 'references' I copy by eye—I am haunted by Bill's admonitions that looking at photographs, rather than at your own sketches from life, will deaden your resulting work. But then



Small day and night 1991
pencil on paper, 56 x 76 cm
QUT Art Collection
Donated through the Australian Government's
Cultural Gifts Program by William Robinson, 2018



William R. Brown

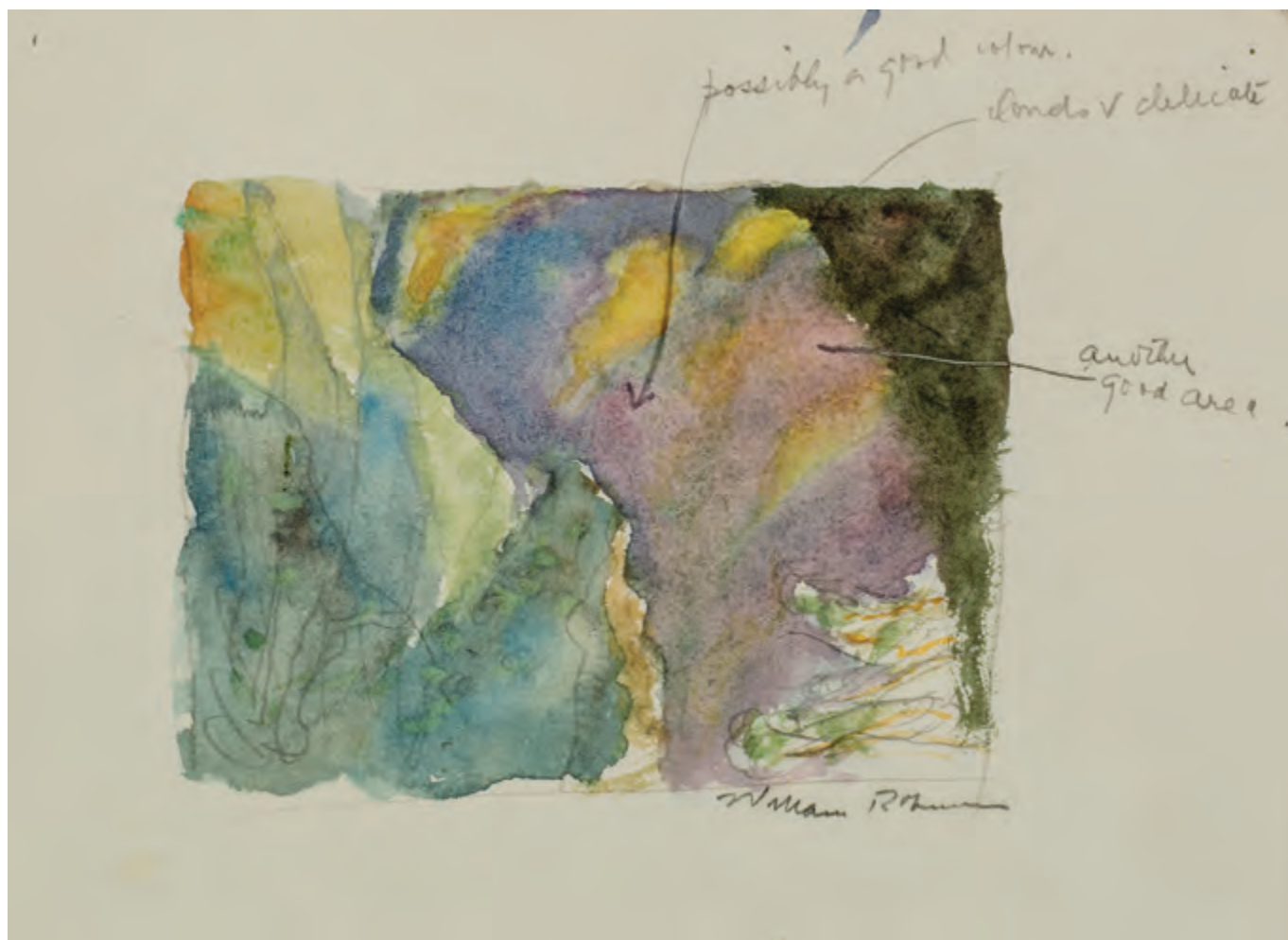


I also have the voices of Delacroix and Degas, who at times worked from photographs as prompts to memory, arguing in my defence. Deep down, I know that Bill is right—but maybe a certain deadening is what I want.

By the time of my second year of college, the former teaching college was now on track to become part of 'The University': it would be incorporated into QUT by the time of my graduation. Probably few then could have known what that new accreditation would mean for the future of the painting department, but I think Bill did. The degree was later to become more theory-heavy, presumably because the painting tuition was seen as not involving enough of the kind of deep thinking that warrants a bachelor's degree. This would disadvantage some future artists whose first language is visual, and for whom reading and writing about art can be tricky and demoralising. But it would also bring the studio teaching up to date with that which was already being taught in the art history and theory classes—an awareness of the 'death of the author' and other notions from post-structuralist theory that began to be disseminated from France into Australia in the late 1970s, and which had reached Brisbane art schools by the late 1980s.

Unfortunately, these new notions discredited Bill's faith in individual subjectivity, his humanism, his presumption that personal experience is the proper basis for art making. Bill taught that content should come from life, that our work could and should reflect our own real-life encounters with the world. Life has its own narrative and is reflected in the art you make—not as a thing to be illustrated, necessarily, but as an essence that forms and inflects it. The painter's art is a visual one, one that involves *looking*. The new theory of art, with its borrowings from psychoanalysis and its critique of tradition as bourgeois and bankrupt, did not accept that there was a 'real' to be known as such, nor an autobiographical function for art, and it produced a contemporary art that made concepts from theory—the abject, the uncanny, the gaze, the body, the post-human—its new content. The artist became as much an observer of their own work as was the viewer, and the idea that you could foist your own subjective experience onto the world in the form of an artwork was assumed, at least in the contemporary art world, to be hopelessly antiquated. For some students, the direction that the art school was taking opened up a much wider

Landscape 26 1988
pencil on paper, 56 x 76 cm
QUT Art Collection
Donated through the Australian Government's
Cultural Gifts Program by William Robinson, 2018



Landscape 59 1991
 watercolour on paper, 14 x 19 cm
 QUT Art Collection
 Donated through the Australian Government's
 Cultural Gifts Program by William Robinson, 2018



Numbah 1989
 watercolour on paper, 14 x 19 cm
 QUT Art Collection
 Donated through the Australian Government's
 Cultural Gifts Program by William Robinson, 2018

world of art; but I think Bill felt it acutely as a vote of no confidence in what he had striven to teach over the preceding three decades: 'I was surplus to requirements'.³

When it was announced that Bill would be leaving at the end of 1989, his students wanted to give him a suitable present. Somebody found a pair of fancy chickens—Malay game, possibly—which stood tall in their cage awaiting their release at the Robinson farm.⁴ Back in 1972, Bill had first drawn a hen in the wonderfully titled engraving *Chook pecking*, and since then had relished depicting most poultry species in all their feathered glory. The new birds were given to him at a farewell at the old Queensland Museum building in Bowen Hills, where the third years were holding their graduation exhibition. Photocopies of Bill's face—or rather of the travesty of the official College portrait photograph mounted on his office door, embellished self-mockingly by Bill himself with ludicrous painted-on hair and moustache—were made and distributed, and in unison we held them up in homage. We also gave him a copy of the *Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry*, newly republished that year and in the display window at Folio Books, hoping that his hours from now on would be rich in all ways. And so he left to make up for lost time, beginning his extraordinary mid-career explorations of both the landscape surrounding his home and of the picture planes in his studio. I lost touch with him for a time as I finished my degree and afterwards experienced the new difficulty of trying to paint in the absence of any structure to my days.

In his earlier works, while living a conventional suburban Brisbane life, Bill had depicted his immediate domestic view. Those images, such as *Interior with visiting clergyman* 1977, or *The yellow hall mat* 1975, with their sedately furnished rooms and cast of children and guests at the dining table, remind me not only of Bonnard but of Fairfield Porter: like Bill, a painter with a large family who honed his craft amid the 'debris of life', cereal boxes and all, when his children were young. Bill's early interiors gave way to the growing menageries and broader views of the Birkdale farm, where his work became increasingly flattened as he sought ways of showing a larger canvas, as it were, within the confines of a rectangular picture plane. The central farmhouse in *Farm 1* 1982 is tiny within the frame, and Bill seems impossibly to be flying above it. In the

3. William Robinson cited in Nick Earls, *William Robinson: A New Perspective* (Brisbane: QUT William Robinson Gallery, 2019), 51.

4. In 1970, Bill and his wife, Shirley, moved their family to a three-hectare farm at Birkdale on Brisbane's eastern outskirts. In 1984, they relocated to an 80-hectare farm at Beechmont in Queensland's Gold Coast hinterland.

The yellow hall mat 1975
coloured pastels and graphite,
43 x 33.5 cm
QUT Art Collection
Gift of Florence Dolan, 1976



Birkdale works, we see the leaps and bounds he made—at times, literally—as he became part of a larger family of beasts and birds and assistant animal wrangler to the indefatigable Shirley.

In those farmyard scenes of the early 1980s, such as *William, Josephine and others* 1982–83, we see him inventing new ways of depicting a heaving, noisy, ever-moving environment. He describes this time in his artistic life as being without outside influence from other art: ‘I worked over and over on these images, alone and excited with no external influences... I know the feeling of being completely out on a limb, not really knowing what I was creating or where I was going.’⁵ Nevertheless, his understanding of Cézanne and Cubism must have had some impact on the way he cut up space with his adroit placements of sheets of corrugated iron, their furrows going in impossible directions and creating a sense of controlled chaos.

By the time Bill retired from teaching, he had been living at Beechmont, in the Gold Coast hinterland, for five years. This environment had already introduced a new plenitude of natural forms, flora, and fauna into his subject matter, along with adventures with Shirley as they adapted to and explored their enormous new ‘backyard’ in a remote valley of the Scenic Rim. Initial works, such as *Turkey weather* 1984 and *William and Shirley, flora and fauna* 1985, had retained something of the flat, cartoonish stylisation and comic relief of the Birkdale works, but the paintings inevitably and inexorably changed as he pursued the task of looking at his subject. Bill’s painter’s eye could not help finding new ways of depicting his surroundings. The hovering bird’s eye view of *Farm 1* becomes more complex, and perspective is the thing he experimented with in ever more radical ways. In the vertiginous landscape of Beechmont, he ‘wanted to create the feeling somewhat as though a bird was flying through [the landscape] ... bringing it into some sort of fourth dimension which also included time’.⁶ We can see something of the beginnings of this in *Eagle landscape* 1987. In ever more accomplished and ambitious paintings, such as the *Creation landscape: Darkness and light* series of 1988, Bill sought a way of painting that could carry the viewer into the picture plane alongside him, sharing with us the way the painting has been constructed and letting us experience for a while how it must have felt to him as he worked. More than this, he wanted to feel that he was still in the landscape as he worked, even though it was not possible to paint his surroundings en plein air: ‘I want to paint

5. William Robinson cited in Lou Klepac, *William Robinson* (Sydney: Beagle Press, 2001), 158.

6. HOTA, Home of the Arts, ‘Lyrical Landscapes: William Robinson Interview’, YouTube video, 7:29, posted 23 December 2022, [youtube.com/watch?v=vjggrIxAEKM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vjggrIxAEKM).



Early light, Coomera Gorge 1994
oil on linen, 138 x 182.5 cm

QUT Art Collection

Donated through the Australian Government's
Cultural Gifts Program by Michael Gleeson-White, 2013





Creation landscape: Earth and sea 1995
oil on linen, triptych,
180 x 730.5 cm overall
Collection of S & J Ford



always as though I am literally in the landscape while the brush marks are making it'⁷. In paintings such as *Landscape with night and day* 1989, we are indeed inside the landscape as we explore its depiction: their stylised geometries; their wealth of calligraphic marks replicating the multiplicity of textures of leaf, bark, and rock; their hidden creatures, scaled or feathered; and their invitations for the eye to roam endlessly and in all directions. The almost pointillist, seemingly iridescent brushstrokes both conceal and reveal things and we must also look hard, as though we are in the bush itself, for the presence of stray snakes or fugitive birds.

It was dreadful to learn, in 1992, that Bill and Shirley had lost two children, their eldest daughter, Jane, and their youngest daughter, Sophie, within the space of 18 months. I remember that I was standing in Primrose Terrace, outside the Theobalds' new old house in Paddington (I was by then back at my old high school, employed by Bronwyn as her teacher's aide), when I heard the news from June, who wept as she told us. She worried that the Robinsons might not be able to recover from such a double loss; she particularly worried about Shirley. Perhaps she intuited that eventually, after living awhile in the awful 'realm where laughter had gone', Bill might find consolation in his work, as painters sometimes can.

It's become a truism that Bill's work changed as the result of those tragedies and, indeed, it would have been impossible for it not to have. The joyful depictions of the mid-to-late 1980s, such as *Four seasons* 1987 and others featuring Bill and Shirley in their rainforest Eden, gave way to works of a quieter emotional tenor. These new works, the five paintings of the *Mountain* series, were more monumental, less animated than the earlier *Creation* works. It took a while for Bill to put stars back into his skies, and never again would there be the same riotous, child-like showers of them as in the centre panel of *Creation landscape: Darkness and light* 1988. When they do come out again, they are less emphatic, more tremulous, as in the majestic *Clear early night, Numinbah* 1998.

The post-*Mountain* works, such as *The sea with morning sun from Springbrook* 1996 and *Creation landscape: Earth and sea* 1995, have just as much pictorial incident, but they contain more of a sense of vast distance, of abysses and far horizons. Sometimes this is due to having conventional viewpoints, at least in some sections—a horizontal hilltop, for example—and the use of atmospheric perspective tricks of the trade to draw the eye out beyond the foreground and middle distances (paler, cooler colours in the far reaches). But they retain their peculiar sense of

The sea with morning sun from Springbrook 1996
oil on linen, 141.1 x 186.5 cm
QUT Art Collection
Purchased through the William Robinson
Art Collection Fund and partial donation
by Michael Gleeson-White, 2013

7. Robinson, cited in Klepac, *William Robinson*, 105.

motion and of moving us around within them. In works such as *To Beechmont with Bushfire and Approaching Storm* 1998, we are presented with the same sense of moving through a landscape that Dylan Thomas gives us in his 'Poem in October',⁸ notwithstanding the latter's northern hemisphere imagery. The poem changes its vistas constantly, with its weather that 'turns around' after the author heeds 'the morning's beckon' to 'set forth' and walk, such that reading it feels like being taken on a vertiginous journey looking forward, back, up and down without warning. In Bill's paintings, we are with him as he traverses the landscape, climbing and descending, looking back to where he emerged through rainforest, across to escarpments, beyond to distant valleys, impossibly down onto 'rolling clouds' and flying birds—albeit parrots and screeching cockatoos rather than larks and whistling blackbirds.

One memory from Bill's final year at Kelvin Grove comes back to me with great clarity. My own year group had the reputation (perhaps unfairly) of being a 'slow' year; this happens in all educational settings, but never is it more unfortunate than in an art school, where it really helps to have the equivalent of a gold-lamé-jacketed David Hockney coming to class to shake things up. At the beginning of one art history lecture, Joe Airo-Farulla memorably shouted to wake some of us up—and referred to us, in pained frustration, as 'a bunch of stunned mullets'. Maybe we just seemed less intense than the charismatic year above us. Probably it was this perception that resulted in a kind of crisis meeting early in second year. After lunch one day, we were greeted by the sight of Bill, Helen, and June standing amid the easels, each with a certain grimness of countenance. Bill began. Never had he seen such a group of uninspired young people:

You won't survive in the real world. It's all very well waiting around for a piece of paper that says you've graduated but that won't get you anywhere if your art is bad; i.e., if you haven't worked. The opportunity is there, you are only young once, if you don't do things now all you will be left with is regret for a wasted life. The studios are like a barren wasteland; walking through them is like walking through the Simpson desert. This one [by which he meant the third-year studio] at least has a few oases, a few signs of life [he probably meant the workspaces of Robert Brownhall and Scott Whitaker, who were productive even early in that term]. I've never known young people to be so boring. You can't paint if you have dull eyes. It's the ones with fire and sparks inside who will succeed. You've got to be alive.

8. Dylan Thomas, 'Poem in October', *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*, February 1945, 257.

Alive people write poetry, they keep notebooks. If you do this, the ideas will spill out easily on the canvas. Or else you will fail because you haven't tried. Saying you have nothing to paint is no excuse...

As he warmed to his theme, it became evident that Bill had intuited a major stumbling block for some of us, and that was the issue of finding a subject to paint. Bill was adamant:

It's stupid saying you don't know what to paint. I caught the train in this morning and saw enough things to occupy me for three months' work. For example, overheard conversations; children going off to the Independent School; a small boy with a peaked miner's cap and huge backpack being pushed and shoved by older girls on the platform, the like of which I haven't seen in years.

The problem of 'content' was certainly a problem for me. What on earth could I, an unworldly teenager whose only experience of life had been gained second-hand through reading novels and watching movies, have to say about anything? I remember slinking off home after that meeting and writing down what Bill had said while it was fresh in my mind. It gave me pause. I stopped worrying about what to paint and decided to fill my sketchbooks with things that I noticed on my trips into town on the 444 bus—both what was inside it and what went past beyond the windows. It was always a good omen if a certain good-looking boy, privately nicknamed 'The Damned' on account of his black-dyed hair with roots of blond, got on; I ended up working his image into a couple of paintings. The repeated journey became ingrained in my mind and I began to anticipate and look out for things, such as the strip near Toowong Cemetery where an ant bed tennis court stood next to two old wooden houses, both painted a strong yellow green, on the poetically named Valentine Street; the black twisted trunks and small neat leaves of the Hooker's *Bauhinia* trees at the top of the steep hill down to Quinn Park off Milton Road; the great twisting variegated sharp-leafed *Agave Americana* that hove into view at the top of Penrose Street and that grows there still; vacant lots with their weeds; and the dingy park near Eagle Terrace, where once a sad circus elephant stood chained and rocking back and forth above a culvert.

Something about the bus's motion, the unceasing torrent of images before my eyes, made my mind more receptive to my own thoughts. Over the years since then, when spending long hours driving my children around in the car prevents time in the studio, my painter's eye has been kept busy noticing the

cloud formations and wondering how the great sky artists Alexander Cozens, John Martin, John Constable or Louise Hearman—or William Robinson—might tackle them. During his years of teaching, Bill endured countless hours of enforced gazing through a car windscreen, and Nick Earls writes insightfully of the consequence of this in his aptly titled book *William Robinson: A New Perspective*, arguing that Bill's record of watching the world go by as he drove was what enabled him to make the artistic breakthroughs of the late 1980s and the truly original work of his rainforest landscapes. The constant looking out at the changing scene while driving to and from his teaching job was time spent really thinking about how to go about depicting it: 'Perhaps a dramatic change in artistic practice is less likely to come from someone whose eyes are on art all the time, and more likely to come from someone whose gaze is on life, whose hands are on the wheel and held back from painting more hours than not, but whose mind is whirring through what is possible, even if it has never been done before.'⁹

I remember asking Bill after the 'do not waste your life' lecture whether he would make a painting of that small boy he'd observed being pushed around on the train platform and he said 'No, I already have my subject'. At the time, I was surprised by the answer—that he could be satisfied with having a single 'thing' that he worked on exclusively, that admitted nothing new. But at that stage I didn't understand how much complexity there was in the way Bill approached his subject of the landscape. I realise now the multitudes it contains, and can recognise how his thoughts of life and death and time passing and the glory of the Earth in space are held within it. It is a complexity that was achieved over years of hard thinking and constant painting. Bill's work was transformed as his life itself changed, and the course of his physical life can be clearly mapped by following the chronology of his paintings. This does not mean that he was an unthinking 'illustrator' of his life: his development reveals far too much progression and experimentation for that. It is more that he allowed the physical world in which he lived to give him, via his constant observation of it and his interior 'pictorial' thinking, solutions to his quest to represent the world in his own way. Bill's career is unusual in Australian painting for the degree to which he renewed himself, never content to repeat the same painting, to settle into a 'signature' composition as though into a comfortable armchair—as do some of our most well-known artists. In retrospect, Sebastian Smee's 1998 comparison between Bill and John Olsen—that the former is 'a very good Australian painter' but 'no

9. William Robinson cited in Earls, *William Robinson: A New Perspective*, 57.



Le Louvre 2006
colour lithograph, 56.5 x 38.5 cm
QUT Art Collection
Gift of the artist under the Cultural Gifts Program, 2008



painter of masterpieces', and the latter 'a great Australian painter'¹⁰—seems like a simplistic exercise in ranking, as though for an Olympic competition. The word 'masterpiece' can be used very blithely, but even the silver-tongued Smee might struggle to define what it actually means in his weighing of the merits of two quite different artists.

One of the valuable aspects of the collection of Bill's work at the William Robinson Gallery is that it gives us access to the sometimes uneven development of a real artist, one who is not afraid to make mistakes and who has many moods, like most of us. Sometimes it would seem that Bill's excursions into comic relief—the clownishness of the self portraits—are a little too disarming for some critics to overlook, and the oeuvre as a whole becomes suspect. I'm reminded of a wounding remark made by a critic about another of my favourite painters, the Englishman Carel Weight (who also loved Bonnard), whose mysterious, unsettling works were sometimes enlivened by the inclusion of a witch flying on a broomstick through a suburban street:

He paints few indifferent pictures but quite a number of weak ones where the atmosphere, it seems to me, is literary in the contrived sense... on these occasions Weight appears as a minor provincial surrealist, or even lower down the scale, as cute and folksy: the Chagall of South London. [...] As an admirer of Carel Weight I send him (mental) postcards from time to time, simple directives like NO WITCHES, PLEASE written on them in capital letters.¹¹

But the best artists do not censor what they do with a view to placate individual critics, or for what it might mean for their future auction records if they do something contrarian. Bill was a person who preferred to choose humour over misery, and who once said, 'One thing I don't like to paint, and I don't think I've ever painted it, is anguish.'¹² Perhaps it was because Bill was of a generation that did not believe in self-pity, and who held that certain sacred griefs should be kept private.

I saw Bill only a handful of times after his retirement from teaching over the years, and spoke with him occasionally—and, to my regret, increasingly rarely—on the phone. In 1993, he agreed to write a reference for me when I applied to study overseas—an act of generosity that was the single-most consequential of

Still life with Chinese vessels 2011
oil on linen, 87 x 68 cm

QUT Art Collection

Purchased through the William Robinson
Art Collection Fund, 2011

10. Sebastian Smee, 'Worlds Apart', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 April 1998, 58.

11. Grey Gowrie, 'A consideration of Carel Weight', in *Carel Weight* (London: Bernard Jacobsen Gallery, 1988).

12. William Robinson, cited in Earls, *William Robinson: A New Perspective*, 58.

my career—and in 1994, my sister Miranda, then an art history student at the University of Queensland, worked on a small exhibition of Bill's work for Nancy Underhill's University Art Museum. She and I travelled to Springbrook where I chatted with the softly spoken, brown-eyed Shirley (obviously as 'sensitive and intelligent' in the ways of art-making as any of Bill's artist friends), while my sister and Bill talked about painting (and thereafter, the first thing Bill would ask me whenever we spoke would be 'and how is the lovely Miranda?').

Shirley and Bill travelled to Paris the following year to work at the lithography workshop of Franck Bordas, when Steph, Miranda, and I—at that stage, all living in London—visited them. They had survived the unthinkable and their lives were to be full of grandchildren and new experiences, and as ever, for Bill, new work. He was enjoying himself immensely, supervising as a pale lilac ink was mixed for one stage of a many-coloured lithograph: they were printing an image of yellow sunlight streaming down onto the surface of a dark purplish sea for *Creation series: Earth and sea II*. Back home in Australia, I saw every exhibition of his that I could and marvelled at the continuing development, the experimentation, the evidence of a kind of devotion to nature that was different from any landscape painting I knew. In later years, he explored the genre of still life, and his enjoyment is evident in the complex compositions, often with a technically challenging combination of many textured and coloured foreground objects and a detailed interior or garden beyond, almost like scaled-down versions of his mountain landscapes. It was impressive that, despite failing eyesight and increasing arthritis, he delighted in populating his early 2020s *Esplanade* series—working now on necessarily smaller canvases—with teeming multitudes of tiny L. S. Lowry-like figures, disporting themselves across the parks and mudflats of Brisbane's bayside suburbs. He was still drawing right up until he died. *Beau*.

Bill was able to reflect, late in life, on the import of what he was grappling with in the studio:

We haven't taken enough notice of the planet. And landscape went from contemporary art when it should have been the political issue at the time. It is an artist's responsibility to feel, with the intensity that they can have in the work, a communication with other people. The revolving Earth, the seasons, some of my big pictures have a linear read to them as though the earth is spinning but, in the end, I didn't convince as much as I would have liked to in that direction before old age crept up on me.¹³

13. William Robinson cited in Louise Martin-Chew, 'William Robinson' [interview], *Artist Profile*, issue 41, 2017.



William Robinson 2020



Corner café 2020
oil on linen, 20 x 30 cm
Private collection, Brisbane



Local café 2025
oil pastel on paper, 25 x 30 cm
Private collection, Brisbane

But you are wrong about not convincing, Bill. What you achieved were paintings that recreate, not merely depict, the world; that live again in the brushstrokes, reverberating as long as the canvases will last, on into a life after death. Yours is a sort of reinvigoration of painting as a devotional form, such as it had been in the Renaissance, long after it had lost that function in the West and gone spiralling off into self-exploration. The Earth and time spin on in your canvases, from the fall of the mid-air branch of leaves in one to the plummet of water at Purlingbrook in another, from Sophie as a little girl in Birkdale to Shirley floating in a pool of stars at Beechmont in another, and on to the sea and clouds and sky beyond reach, and will do so as long as there are eyes to see them.

Finally, I thought I'd reminisce once more, one last memory from Kelvin Grove. One afternoon, when the discordance of music leaking from headphones or blaring blatantly from stereo speakers in the studios became too much for Bill, he took it upon himself to expose us to some 'real' music. The usual cacophony in D Block was a combination of rock, pop, reggae, electronica—the sounds of youth. He was, of course, looking at us from the distance of age and experience, and from his total devotion to classical music. We were ushered into a small room where a VHS recording of a young German baritone singing Schumann Lieder played on the TV. Smugly, I recognised that music and knew that I already loved it, even if I lacked the courage at age 19 to admit so publicly; it had been played in my childhood, although I hadn't listened to it much since us kids took over the record player at home. But my parents still sometimes sat together in the darkened lounge room after dinner and listened to Kathleen Ferrier or Janet Baker or Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau singing to simple piano accompaniment. And when the news of Bill's death reached me last year, I played one of the songs that Olaf Bär had sung that day on the television, from the *Liederkreis* song cycle op 39, the one called *Mondnacht*. It brings back to me the 'still, small voice' that I first heard when I saw Bill's *Starry night* in 1987:

<i>Und meine Seele spannte</i>	[And my soul spread
<i>Weit ihre Flügel aus,</i>	Its wings out wide,
<i>Flog durch die stillen Lande,</i>	Flew across the silent land,
<i>Als flöge sie nach Haus.</i>	As though flying home.] ¹⁴

14. Robert Schumann, 'Mondnacht', track 5 of *Liederkreis* op. 39, 1840, reproduced in *The Book of Lieder*, trans. Richard Stokes (London: Faber, 2005).





Room with a child 1975
coloured pastels and graphite, 62.5 x 63.5 cm
QUT Art Collection
Gift of the artist, 1975



Starry night VI 1978
pastel and gouache on paper, 23 x 25 cm
QUT Art Collection
Purchased 2023



William Robinson 2005



The western heights, Springbrook 2005
oil on linen, 51 x 76.5 cm
QUT Art Collection
Donated through the Australian Government's
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Cover image:

Early light, Coomera Gorge (detail) 1994
oil on linen, 138 x 182.5 cm

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