



WILLIAM
ROBINSON
GALLERY

Inspirations

WILLIAM ROBINSON

curated by special guest

The Honourable Quentin Bryce AD CVO

INSPIRATIONS

It was an enormous compliment to be asked to curate this exhibition of William Robinson's work, an invitation that I could not resist. In accepting it, I was acutely aware of my amateurism in taking on the challenge. My single claim for any degree of suitability to this task lies in my admiration and respect for this artist whose glorious paintings bring joy, reassurance, beauty and inspiration to my life.

I was introduced to the art of William Robinson in the 1980s, but it wasn't until his retrospective at the Queensland Art Gallery in 2001 that I became aware of the breadth of his innovative paintings, lithographs and other artworks in various media, and its depth and significance in contemporary Australian art.

I wanted to see, to know, and to understand more. I noticed the way that Robinson's exhibitions were attracting huge followings here in Brisbane and interstate. The great originality and the consistent quality of his gorgeous, mysterious rainforest landscapes were making deep impressions. I was exhilarated to have one lent by the National Gallery of Australia for my office at Yarralumla. I wanted the artist to see it there, and I will never forget standing with him—this quiet, self-contained, and spiritual man—in front of the work. Golden, early afternoon light fell across the room as we both looked intently into the divine blues; cockatoos squawking in grand tall gums behind window panes. His wife, Shirley, was there too, and I felt the beginning of a friendship that would be important for me.

Soon after that visit, I borrowed *Evening landscape with pandanus* 2006 for the entrance to Government House, which provided the perfect introduction for visitors.

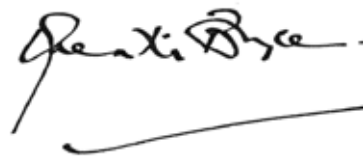
In recent years, my husband Michael and I have shared memorable conversations with Bill and Shirley about drawing and painting, from which I have learnt so much. Oh, the delight of the studio in the heart of a charming Queensland timber home on the edge of Brisbane rainforest.

I am intrigued by the paraphernalia of art—the tubes, the pastels, the brushes. I marvel at the discipline, routine and integrity that signify Bill's days. At present, this is being devoted to vibrant still life pictures—purple tibouchina, orange gerberas that make my heart skip, and I must include the poinciana, with its perfect red.

It has been a privilege to be part of this project, to look across an extraordinary body of work that is constantly evolving, and to explore more than six decades marked by several distinct periods, interspersed by discernible transitions. I wanted to include favourites from each one. What a job it has been. I am indebted by encouraging wise advisors, Vanessa Van Ooyen, Philip Bacon and, of course, Bill and Shirley, whose wit, warmth, hospitality and kindness come in spades.

'Inspiring' is the word used again and again to capture William Robinson's contribution as artist and teacher. I chose the title *Inspirations* to celebrate Bill's role in the halcyon years of a generation of Queensland artists. I also wanted to express my high regard for art teachers in our schools who inspire young artists to believe in themselves.

It's a daunting prospect having to write about all this in an art catalogue. What follows are not the words of an art scholar; rather, some observations and yarns, gathered with affectionate regard, about a great artist.



THE HONOURABLE
Quentin Bryce AD CVO



*True happiness is when we can become
part of creation. William Robinson
allows us to glimpse the scope of this
creation and for a moment it takes our
breath away.*

—Betty Churcher

Moreton Bay, Brisbane 1979
pastel and gouache on paper 62 x 46.5cm
QUT Art Collection
Donated through the Australian Government's
Cultural Gifts Program by William Robinson, 2009





Moreton Bay 1978
gouache on paper 24 x 32cm
Private collection, Brisbane

FOREWORD

In 2014, QUT was proud to welcome The Honourable Quentin Bryce AD CVO to her new office at our Gardens Point campus. Following her six-year term as Governor-General of the Commonwealth of Australia, Quentin Bryce returned to Brisbane to base her official place of work within the Chancellery at QUT. The Chancellery building, which houses the QUT Art Museum, is located opposite Old Government House, home to the William Robinson Gallery.

This new relationship between Quentin Bryce and QUT has grown out of years of interweaving connections between Bryce, Robinson and the University, which go back almost 60 years. Quentin Bryce recalls that she first encountered William Robinson during his performance as a state finalist in the 1957 ABC annual concerto at Brisbane's City Hall. A high-school student at the time, Bryce watched in awe from the front row.

Many years later, during her time as Governor-General of Australia, Quentin Bryce was invited to select artworks from the National Gallery of Australia to be displayed in her office and residence at Government House. Quentin Bryce recounts the joy it gave her to look upon *Springbrook with lifting fog* 1999 each day at Yarralumla; it was a small piece of Queensland in her new Canberra home. The same painting was generously loaned to QUT in 2011 for the major exhibition, *William Robinson: The transfigured landscape*, which was officially opened by Quentin Bryce. The exhibition coincided with the artist's 75th birthday, and was presented across both the William Robinson Gallery and the QUT Art Museum.

QUT is Robinson's alma mater; from 1957 to 1962, he studied at Brisbane's Central Technical College, an early forerunner of the University's Gardens Point campus. During this time, he taught alongside distinguished Queensland artist Betty Quelhurst, who coincidentally also taught at Moreton Bay College while Quentin Bryce attended school there. Robinson's appointment as an art

instructor and subsequently as a lecturer in art at various QUT predecessor institutions continued until 1989, when he resigned from teaching to work full time as an artist.

During this time, Quentin Bryce was also studying and teaching in Brisbane. She graduated with the degrees of Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Laws in 1965, and was a Lecturer and Tutor in Law from 1968 to 1983 at The University of Queensland. Since then, Quentin Bryce has gone on to serve as a community and human-rights advocate, a senior public officer, a university college principal and, of course, a vice-regal representative, first as the Governor of Queensland (2003–2008), and then as Governor-General of Australia (2008–2014). Throughout her distinguished career, she has demonstrated a passion for education and social justice, and an ongoing commitment to community building and leadership.

In 2004, Quentin Bryce was recognised by QUT as an Honorary Doctor of the University, an honour that Robinson had also been bestowed a few years beforehand.

This year, 2015, we are delighted to have Quentin Bryce curating *William Robinson: Inspirations*, which celebrates the artist as a teacher. Quentin Bryce, herself an extraordinary role model and mentor, recognises Robinson's achievements in his years as a senior arts educator and beyond, as one of the most distinguished and inspiring Australian artists of his generation. Both Quentin Bryce and William Robinson are remarkable inspirations for students and for the community at large.

Tim Fairfax AC
CHANCELLOR

Professor Peter Coaldrake AO
VICE-CHANCELLOR



LEFT

Bouquet with Poole and Turkish pots 2014
pastel on paper 65 x 50cm
Private collection, Brisbane

RIGHT

Freesias and geraniums 2014
pastel on paper 65 x 50cm
Private collection, Brisbane

OVERLEAF

Poinciana and fern garden 2015
oil on linen 102 x 168cm
Private collection, Brisbane







INTRODUCTION

Poetry of place

It was as though the sky
had silently kissed the earth,
so that it now had to dream of sky
in shimmers of flowers.

The air went through the fields,
the corn-ears leaned heavy down
the woods swished softly—
so clear with stars was the night

And my soul stretched
its wings out wide,
flew through the silent lands
as though it were flying home.

—Joseph Freiherr von Eichendorff¹

The geography of Brisbane lends itself to a certain type of spatial pattern—the city's identity is based on the arrangement of objects, both natural and man-made. Its undulating hills, gullies, peaks, troughs, and winding river create a place of interconnections, confluences and intersections. David Malouf has eloquently described the impact of this unique topography on the perspectives of Brisbane writers and artists—in particular, William Robinson.²

Rather than being organised by a linear or nucleated arrangement, Brisbane is marked by clusters. Interestingly, the content of William Robinson's paintings can be seen in clusters or discrete constellations—and, indeed, he paints this way, concentrating on one small section of the canvas and progressively moving across it for an exhilaratingly three-dimensional effect. This broken colour technique goes against many conventions; most artists lay colour after colour, building up a ground. However, it's as if Robinson



sees the completed picture in his mind's eye. His technique could be read as Pointillist whereby the viewer's eye optically mixes the individual brushstrokes; in Robinson's case, the discrete vistas within the larger landscape are blended, giving the effect of a multiplicity of vantage points.

Robinson's art is undoubtedly unique in the way it values locale and a sense of place. He allows the viewer to experience what makes a place different from any other. His work stands in contrast to much contemporary art that focuses solely on psychological states, feelings, concepts, or language play, and that is devoid of reference to the sensually experienced and infinitely varied physical world. While he may focus on such inner subjects, the work lets us experience them more profoundly and more authentically because they are rooted in a specific time and locale.

Inspirations, the eighth exhibition to be held at the William Robinson Gallery since its opening in 2009, is curated by special guest, The Honourable Quentin Bryce AD CVO. The exhibition is succinctly summed up as being about 'place'; it is concerned with connections, confluences and overlays that build a rhizome as exceptional as the work of the artist it celebrates. As Quentin mentions in her introductory passage on the following pages, *Inspirations* is about serendipitous connections and the full circle of life. It brings to light the shared histories of two of Australia's leading figures: one of the nation's greatest living landscape painters, who is a profoundly innovative creative force, and our country's most recognised and accomplished woman—Australia's first female Governor-General and a trailblazer within law, education, social, and gender equality.

We are extremely fortunate to have Quentin share stories and describe in delightful detail the profound impact that Robinson has had on her life, and the inspiration he has provided her for over half a century: firstly in the 1950s while an aspiring concert pianist, and then again in 2001 at a major retrospective of his work at Queensland Art Gallery. But it was during her time as Queensland Governor (2003–08) and then Governor-General of Australia (2008–14) that she had the privilege of having

Robinson's artworks under her care, on the walls of her office, available for daily contemplation and enjoyment. During this time, she delighted in introducing visiting dignitaries to Australia through the paintings *Springbrook with lifting fog* 1999 and *Evening landscape with pandanus* 2006. It is fitting that these introductions were made in the presence of the work of an artist for whom place is so deeply important, and who celebrates the uniquely Queensland landscape that has shaped both these individuals' memories and experiences.

What is also apparent in *Inspirations* is a shared love of colour. For Robinson, "Colour is everything",³ and Quentin coins the term 'peachie peachie' to describe those areas of the paint surface where the merging of whites, pinks, and purples capture transitions of the landscape—from ocean to shore, or pool to ground—or the atmosphere as it shifts from morning to dusk. As an art teacher, Robinson would instruct his students to take more time mixing colour than applying paint. In his own work, he would never apply a direct pigment. For our guest curator, colour is also one of the fundamental joys of life—something to be embraced—and it is somewhat of a signature theme that she has become renowned for. Quentin understands colour. As Gustave Moreau said:

Note one thing well: you must think through colour, have imagination in it. If you don't have imagination, your colour will never be beautiful. Colour must be thought, dreamed, imagined...⁴

Cerulean blue, French ultramarine, cobalt blue, hooker's green, cadmium green, translucent gouaches, pastels in a cacophony of shades—not limited like the Reeves pastels we received at school, Quentin notes⁵—are the tools that Robinson uses to produce the world Quentin has lovingly immersed herself in during the preparation of the exhibition. It is something Quentin innately understands, as encapsulated in her opening remarks:

Vibrant still life pictures—purple tibouchina, orange gerberas that make my heart skip, and I must include the poinciana, with its perfect red.⁶

Inspirations is about the joy that art can give to life—to lift the spirit and inspire the imagination. This, of course, is not limited

INTRODUCTION

Poetry of place

to the visual arts, and is equally, or more so, true of music, which is not bound by place, space, or resources. In his classes at the Central Technical College, Robinson would make his students listen to Robert Schumann's *Moonlit night* in which the composer set Joseph Freiherr von Eichendorff's 1837 poem of the same title to music. For Robinson, combining music and painting was a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or a 'total work of art'. We often use aural metaphor to try to convey the idea of colour, and one is reminded of the tragedy of Vincent van Gogh, who, as a young talented pianist, compared the notes of the piano with Prussian blue, dark green, dark ochre, and so on, until his teacher refused to instruct him further because he believed him to be mad. After all, there are seven colours of the rainbow and seven notes of the musical scale, and we see this symphonic metaphor time and again throughout Robinson's work.

Perhaps it is also for these reasons that moonlight and rainbows are so recurrent in his works, as evidenced in this exhibition in the early *Starry night* gouaches 1978, *Purling Brook Gorge, moonlight* 1995, *Turkey weather* 1984, and the 'Mountain' series 1992–93. There is even a hidden rainbow in *The rainforest* 1990. Robinson constantly reminds us of the profound interrelationship between painting and music, and the overlapping of these two art forms provides the backdrop for the wonderful story that unfolds in the following pages. Given the artist's significant stylistic developments over the past 20 years, *Inspirations* has also provided a timely opportunity to invite Lynn Fern—who authored the first major monograph published on the artist in 1995—to respond to his work through a new essay in this publication.

At 79, and with over 45 years' experience as a professional exhibiting artist,⁷ Robinson is unrelenting in his enquiry; his works are always deeply theoretical and layered with historical reference. For example, recent works such as *Verandah still life with jacaranda* 2011 give reference to the latest book he is reading, antique ceramics he has collected, or Southeast Asian textiles he has discovered while scouring his favourite antique shops. In this particular work, we see a reference to Swiss artist Ferdinand Hodler, as lying on the table is a book open to a page

with Hodler's *The consecrated one* 1893–94. And, once again, colour is a unifying device—the soft lavender tones in the angels' gowns correlate with the brilliant purple jacaranda tree in the garden beyond.

Importantly, *Inspirations* brings to light the legacy of William Robinson as a teacher and artist. Through a wonderful film project, Quentin has interviewed some of Robinson's previous students as well as school groups visiting the William Robinson Gallery. Through this, we uncover not only Robinson's artistic influence on generations but also the mentoring role he continues to provide for so many. As noted by former students, they still receive a letter of encouragement from Robinson congratulating them on their most recent exhibition and body of work.

As one of Robinson's previous students, Sally L'Estrange, notes: "he sees art education not just for oneself, but knowledge to be shared with others".⁸ Both the artist and the curator of this exhibition instinctively understand the importance of the spirit of generosity, and are deeply committed to sharing their knowledge and experiences as educators and role models in our community. Robinson has taught us that art is more than mark making: it is a way of seeing, exploring and understanding the world around us. Indeed, he has shown us that art is a profound instrument for the acquisition of knowledge.⁹ One only needs to witness the joy on the faces of the school children who participate in the William Robinson Gallery education programs, such as *Drawing life*, when they discover the power of expressing themselves by putting pencil to paper.

Vanessa Van Ooyen

SENIOR CURATOR

WILLIAM ROBINSON GALLERY AND QUT ART MUSEUM

- ¹ David H. Thomas, "Sunday music poem and video," *Buzzing reed—Breathing clarinet & classical music for all* (blog), 26 September 2010, <http://blog.davidhthomas.net/2010/09/sunday-music-poem-and-video-schumann-moonlit-night/#sthash.BEJV2uXi.dpuf>.
- ² See David Malouf's introductory essay in *William Robinson: Paintings and pastels 2006* (Brisbane: Philip Bacon Galleries, 2006), 3–6.
- ³ Lou Klepac, *William Robinson: Paintings 1987–2000* (Sydney: The Beagle Press, 2001), 34.
- ⁴ Gustave Moreau in *Colour: Documents of contemporary art* (London: Whitechapel Gallery and The MIT Press, 2008), 39.
- ⁵ Quentin Bryce, personal communication with the author, 23 April 2015.
- ⁶ Quentin Bryce, "Inspirations," *William Robinson: Inspirations* (Brisbane: William Robinson Gallery, QUT, 2015), 4.
- ⁷ William Robinson held his first solo exhibition at the Design Arts Centre, Brisbane, from 31 July to 19 August 1967.
- ⁸ Sally L'Estrange, interview with Quentin Bryce, 23 June 2015, Brisbane.
- ⁹ Klepac, *William Robinson*, 13.

PREVIOUS SPREAD

Goats and chooks 1980

oil on linen 104.5 x 91cm

QUT Art Collection

Purchased and partial gift of Philip Bacon
Galleries, 2009



LEFT

The yellow hall mat 1975

pastel and graphite on paper 43 x 33.5cm

QUT Art Collection

Gift of Florence Dolan, 1976

RIGHT

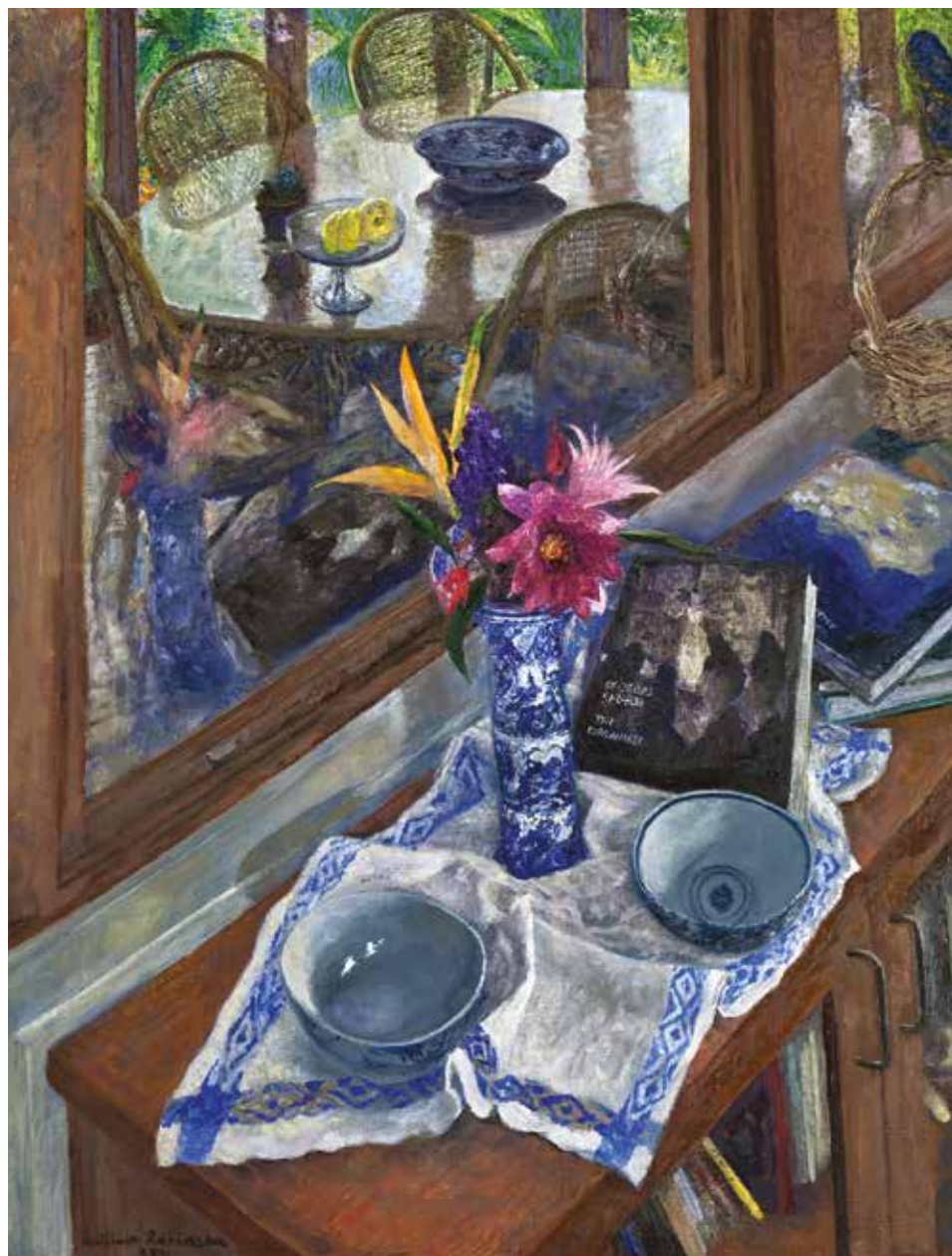
Bedroom with woman putting on lipstick 1977

gouache and pastel on paper 76 x 56.5cm

QUT Art Collection

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





LEFT

Still life with Chinese vessels 2011

oil on linen 87 x 68cm

QUT Art Collection

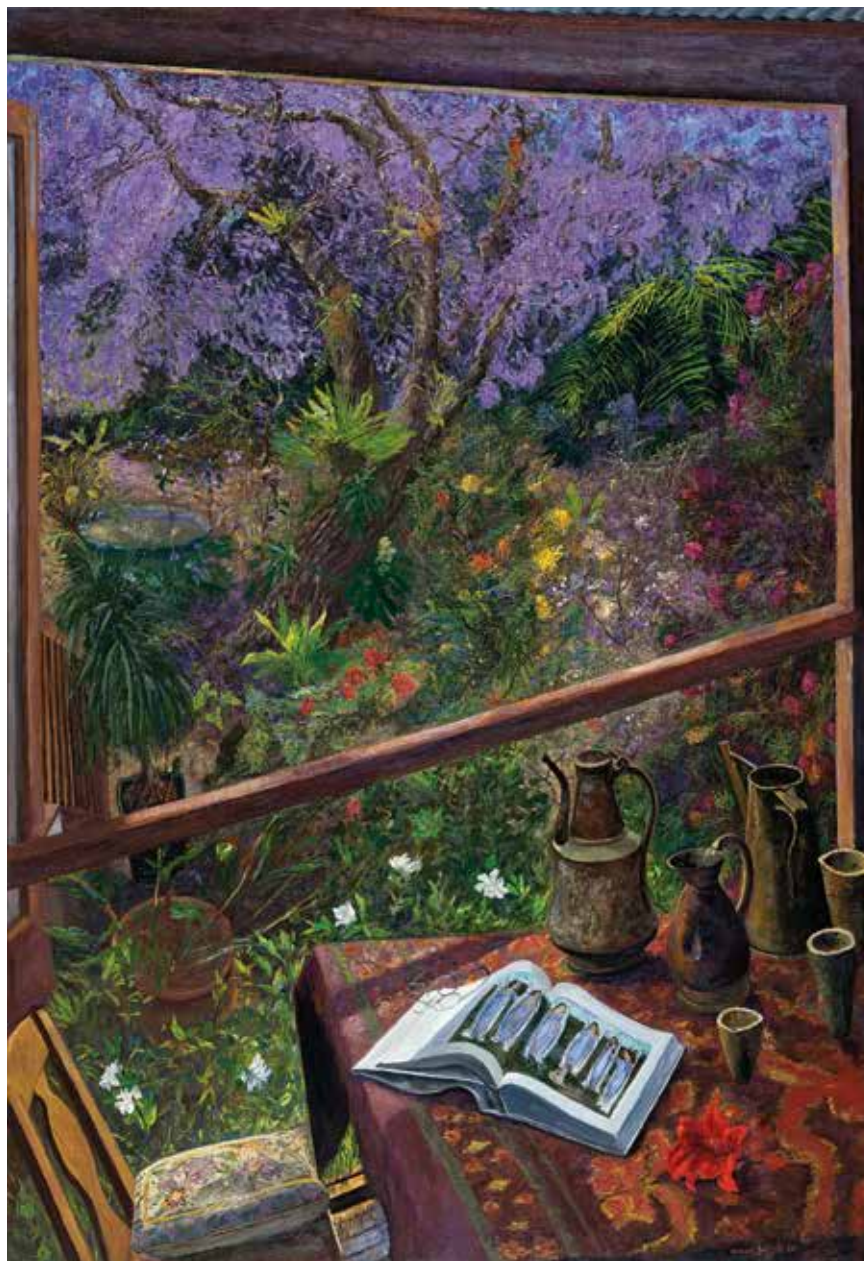
Purchased 2011 through the William Robinson
Art Collection Fund

RIGHT

Verandah still life with jacaranda 2011

oil on linen 160 x 110cm

Private collection, Sydney



WILLIAM ROBINSON

Artist, musician, teacher

Anyone who keeps learning stays young. The greatest thing in life is to keep your mind young.

—Henry Ford¹

As many people who live in Brisbane will know, the lives of those in this city tend to overlap in serendipitous and wonderfully circular ways. I have had the good fortune to have this experience with one of our country's finest painters, William Robinson. In 1957, as a schoolgirl, I attended the ABC's annual concerto and vocal competition at City Hall. It was then the tallest building in Brisbane, its clock tower our landmark. My school pals and I, dressed in our grey tailored going-out suits, gathered in the building's enormous vestibule off King George Square that leads into elegant curving marble corridors. There was a sense of excitement about the evening as we marvelled at the glorious domed ceiling and lustrous chandeliers. We country kids had never seen anything like it. Two by two, we walked down the central aisle to the best seats. Our music teacher, Miss Handley, had queued to secure them in the darkness of early morning at the box office of the ABC in Penny's Building in Queen Street. These days, I feel affectionate nostalgia for Miss Handley (I would never think to call her Oriel) for the myriad ways she instilled in Moreton Bay girls—over decades of teaching—a lifelong enjoyment and appreciation of beautiful music, and the slabs of Shakespeare and poetry that we learnt by heart.

On that Saturday evening, we watched and listened in wonder and delight at the performances. One of these was by a tall, dark, handsome young man, who played Rachmaninov's concerto No.2 in C Minor with the Queensland Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Rudi Pekarek. Little did my friends and I know, as

we sat and were enthralled by this young musician playing the divine Rachmaninov, that he was “mortified by fear”.² William Robinson speaks ruefully of this occasion:

I played the first movement [moderato] of the second Rachmaninov piano concerto extraordinarily badly... I think I played mainly in the cracks. It was far too hard for me—but I did play it from memory. I was unsophisticated and it was a great nerve-wracking experience.³

Unaware of his inner turmoil, we were swept away by that romantic piano music, its drama and intricacy, and in awe of the talent and skill of the pianist's fingers across the octaves. Fortunately for the Australian art world, this performance confirmed for Robinson that the professional concert pianist's life was not for him. It caused him to pursue his other artistic passion: painting.

Although he chose to make visual art his primary profession, Robinson has never left the piano. They feature in several of his artworks, and he has accumulated a clavichord, an electronic piano and a Steinway grand piano throughout the decades.⁴ While he continued to play at home over the years, in 1989, he returned to music tutelage. He received a number of piano lessons from Denise Jones (who had studied under Nadia Reisenberg, a concert pianist who went on to teach at Julliard School of Music in New York), during which he worked through *The well-tempered clavier*.⁵ The importance of this work was recognised as far back as 1860, when the influential German composer and music critic Robert Schumann wrote in *Advice*



Possum dawn ca. 1985
oil on linen 137 x 187cm
Private collection, Brisbane

OVERLEAF

Evening landscape with pandanus 2006
oil on linen 110 x 246.5cm
Private collection, Brisbane





INSPIRATIONS

Artist, musician, teacher

for young musicians: “Practice industriously the fugues of good masters, above all those of Johann Sebastian Bach. Make *The well-tempered clavier* your daily bread; then you will surely be a thorough musician.”⁶

Many have described of the importance of music to the artwork of William Robinson.⁷ Desmond and Bettina MacAulay put it succinctly when they write, “music is integral to William Robinson’s artistic practice”.⁸ He says he needs to listen to music in order to paint. Robinson’s favourite composers, Bach, Handel, and Schubert, take him to a heightened state of consciousness and guide him in creating his compositions. Robinson explicitly references the influence of Bach’s fugues in composing his artworks, and the MacAulays concur that it was his “knowledge and love of Bach’s music that proved so useful to him in working out”⁹ the pictorial space in his multi-perspective paintings of hinterland and rainforest landscapes that emerged post-1989. The MacAulays go further in saying that his musical training has enhanced his aptitude for capturing scenery—from memorising complex sheet music, he has honed his observational skills to a point where he can paint virtually from memory. They write:

The concept of memory was of central importance to Robinson’s early 1990s ‘Mountain’ series of five oils, which he regards as among his most important works: [he said] he wanted to “move away from observing the picture as some sort of representation. I want to sweep the observer down the gullies and up into the sky. The observer is drawn into the landscape—not physically but as a sort of connection with memory.”¹⁰

This “connection” is related to Robinson’s lived experience, and much has been written on the way he has painted the things that are closest to him: his family, his home life, and the landscapes he has found himself surrounded by over the years.¹¹ His Bonnard-inspired interiors, made predominantly in the 1970s, have an intimacy, a familiarity; they are thoughts about domestic life that provoke introspection. For example, the 1974–75 studies of his daughter Sophie in her bedroom are tender and gentle, capturing a little girl’s enjoyment of quiet time on her own, her imagination at play, her pets, her toys, her games. Through the window, through the door, love shines in. Softness exudes these

works, which is to do with the vulnerability and innocence of childhood. I have seen something similar in Hilda Rix Nicholas’s pastels of her little son, and in Joy Roggenkamp’s portrait of Johanna Wilson; the love for a child, the essence of family life.

These interior depictions of the day to day evolved into the chaotic farmyard scenes of the 1980s, based on the Robinson Birkdale hobby farm. Bill notes, “My farm constructions were my own invention and a direct response to my state of life and place of living.”¹² In the Robinson household, it was always his wife Shirley who looked after the animals. A friend of Shirley’s, I listen to her adventurous tales of that time with amazement, marvelling at her closeness to them. In her essay “Light years: William Robinson and the creation story”, Hannah Fink describes the farmyard series “as more allegorical than mystical ... more chaotic than idyllic”.¹³ As Bill said of the farm at Birkdale, “It wasn’t a racehorse stud or anything ... *It was a disaster*.”¹⁴ Goats, cows, hens and ducklings shared the paddock with plenty of broken-down paraphernalia—cars, armchairs, bath tubs, and sheets and curves of corrugated iron. The artist portrays these “days of wonderment”¹⁵ with a touch of comedy that tickles our imaginations, reminders of those classic old black-and-white cartoons. ‘Quirky’ is a word that is often used to describe these works. The *Farmyard* exhibition at The William Robinson Gallery at QUT during 2013–14 drew fascinated attention to these works; they are heart-warming and funny, but with a discernible underlying seriousness. There is so much to see and ponder in each one—gentle humour, engaging detail, brilliant birds, animals with personality.

On a personal level, the animals in these paintings remind me of the pets that my sisters and I had, each with their own personalities that others were not always able to see. Jersey cows are the dearest creatures, clever, good mothers—and, oh, the cream they produce! My sister Helene’s favourite, Princess, could unlock gates to get into the lucerne where she ate too much, got a bloated stomach and the vet had to be called. Growing up, we learnt about all the breeds of poultry. In recent years, I have sought them out at country shows. I had some



The jellyfish ring 1995
oil on linen 137.5 x 183cm
Private collection, Brisbane

INSPIRATIONS

Artist, musician, teacher

trying times at St Lucia, when my children were little, with a pair of Columbian Wyandotte bantams, Jan and Peter, who came to our garden as chicks. The rooster caused trouble in the neighbourhood, crowing as dawn broke. When we started receiving notices on the front door from the Health Inspector, we sent him to the Baxendells' farm at Birkdale near the Robinsons, since I knew my friends there would keep a good eye on him. The same journey was taken by our duckling, who grew up to be enormous and liked to get into my car in the mornings. When he went to the shops with me, the fruit man put a big basket over him to keep him safe until I could take him home.

Farm animals were an exhilarating part of childhood for many of us and drive us to ensure that our children learn about them. One place to do this is at the 'Ekka'. How smart it was of the Royal National Association to invite Bill to be artist in residence in 2007, where he captured the action and vivacity of this iconic Queensland festival in pencil drawings. These works are held in the John Oxley Library, where children delight in looking at them and participate in special activities built around them.

Importantly, the farmyard works signify the artist 'becoming himself'. Yes, we see the personal, the everyday life on the farm, but we can also get a sense of the religious man who created them. Fink describes the "gifted ordinariness" of the artist's daily routine:

Art for Robinson has always been intensely personal, from the early domestic interiors, lit with love for his family, to the earned intimacy with the wilderness in which he lived for an extended period. Yet the point is less one of sincerity than that of passion, both in its sense of private ardour and, theologically, of religious enthrallment.¹⁶

While the farmyard paintings are well loved, Robinson's best-known works are the grand, monumental landscapes that dominated the 1990s and 2000s. As James Bruce opines, "to see one of his landscapes is to be in it as well, to walk, and maybe to forage, with the painter through gum-thicketed gullies, where any difference between the sky and its reflection is hard to tell and probably unnecessary to know".¹⁷ Another source

recognises, "he does not visit the landscape, but lives in the landscape...his commitment and passion for the landscape, whether it be Springbrook, Beechmont or Kingscliff, is self-evident".¹⁷

In 2008, while I was serving as Governor-General, Robinson's and my life once again overlapped, when I had the good fortune to choose some paintings from the National Gallery of Australia collection for the official residence at Yarralumla. I looked and looked, and then I saw it—blue upon blue upon blue shadow, light and darkness—*Springbrook with lifting fog*. Revelatory, highly theatrical—playful too. The work spills over with depictions of the ancient Antarctic beeches, 60 million years old, that Bill and Shirley looked up to every morning as they walked in Springbrook rainforest.

As Bill recounts of the trees that inspired the work:

When I was looking at them, I was thinking of [the cathedral at] Chartres which at that time wasn't cleaned up. ... It was green in colour and had lots of little plants growing out of it, even some little trees. Inside it was, I thought, the most spiritually beautiful church I had ever been in. ... this great darkness and stillness and iridescent beauty. When I was walking in the rainforest it reminded me of that time.¹⁹

Oh, the mystery, the majesty, the glory of the volcanic ranges, and the rising, tilting, spiralling trees in front, behind, and all around! I couldn't believe it when Ron Radford (Director, National Gallery of Australia 2004-2014) said I could borrow the work, and then that, incredibly, the space on my wall in the Chancery was perfect for it. The view through the Chancery's windows was out to mountains and lake, willows, poplars and maples; I had Sulphur Crested cockatoos peeking in, squawking and flapping on my balcony. I cannot describe the delicious pleasure, happiness, contentment and wonder that this painting gave to me. It took me to the centre of myself, giving me a sense of place, of belonging. In meetings, I would sit in a chair where I could look into the *lifting fog*. It taught me how much a work of great beauty demands and how love grows as you search for its secrets, as it transports you to another dimension.

Though this particular work is not in the current exhibition, there are others of Springbrook and Beechmont in the show that are similarly exhilarating. Part of our upliftment derives from Robinson's sublime use of colour—at times, the paint seems luminescent. I call this the 'peachie peachie effect'. It gleams through the sands and the water in *Evening landscape with pandanus* 2006, where there is restrained glitter even in the bushland. I borrowed this work for the entrance to Yarralumla, and it was placed on the left hand side as one walked in. It looked absolutely perfect there, with Australian flowers always sitting beneath it—banksias, waratahs, kangaroo paw—in an old silver vase on the long elegant hall table. When I greeted guests at the front door and walked beside them into the House, I paused to talk about the painting. It was a marvellous conversation starter for international visitors; just the right introduction for people new to our country, with its colour, ocean, bushlands. It meant a pause between arrival of the motorcade—handshakes and photographs—and moving into the protocol of a diplomatic meeting in the drawing room. The light in the reception hall, looking to the west, would change subtly, minute by minute, throughout the day. Illuminated with the soft peachie gold, the little creatures of the painting—the crabs, oysters, and the blue-faced honey eater—were in clearer focus as the sun went down on a summer afternoon, and shadows stretched across the lawns.

There is so much to see in *Evening landscape with pandanus* when we look at it the way that Betty Churcher taught us; to stop, look and see.²⁰ Director of the British Museum, Neil McGregor, spoke of the way Betty would point out things he had never noticed before in paintings he knew well. We never forget the paintings that truly entrance us; they make an enduring impact. I practice holding them in my mind—sometimes it will be a particular aspect. In *Evening landscape with pandanus*, it's that fine rich violet line across the sand. This work recently arrived at QUT's William Robinson Gallery at Old Government House. It will be at home here on the campus. I am enchanted by having this glorious work near again, knowing I can drop in to see it at any time for quietness and dreaming.

As I gathered my thoughts about my 'curatorial debut',²¹ I searched for a touchstone for this exhibition. So much has been written and spoken about our great artist by experts, with handsome books and wise observations in artistic language:

Observe in the landscapes the upward gaze into a sky-space that is as much a theatre of extravagant happenings as in any Tiepolo, the energy that swirls around inside these wonderfully active paintings and goes pouring out of the frame, the frothy turmoil and fluid interchangeability of forms—of water, foliage, rocks, clouds; the sudden displacement we feel of up for down; the way, as in the real vegetative world of southern Queensland, the process of growth and change in a William Robinson landscape seems so rapid that we can actually see, in a moment of slowed-down time, the passage of one stage in a plant's life to the next.²²

What could I contribute?

During my Canberra years, about 55,000 grade six students came to Yarralumla. They were from every part of our country. I especially tried to meet those from rural and remote schools. It was a thrill to show them the magnificent paintings on the walls; great art, famous painters, right up close. Some will remember forever their experience of seeing these. I liked to explore with these young friends the endearing, attractive theme of 'becoming oneself'—something I talked about earlier in relation to Robinson making his farmyards. Conversation was always lively, sometimes surprising. I also made a point of acknowledging their teachers and the powerful contributions that they make to our country. I feel very deeply about this. We don't accord our schoolteachers the esteem they deserve. Their importance and influence is often unwisely underrated.

During my contemplation of Robinson's life, I kept thinking back to the 32 years he spent teaching. I thought about the challenge, the rigour, the vital significance of those years for the artist and for his students. Indeed, while Robinson is now widely respected and hailed as one of the country's best and most original landscape painters, he spent many years in relative obscurity, supporting his large family mostly from his work as an art teacher and lecturer.²³ It's an aspect of his career that is

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often overlooked. People tend to focus on what came after his resignation from teaching in 1989. Admittedly, he produced some of his best work—and definitely, his grandest—after he was able to commit himself to painting full time. However, it's worth contemplating, and *celebrating*, the fact that Robinson worked as an art teacher and lecturer for over three decades.

His teaching career began after that fateful night of the concerto when he decided to put his music to one side and concentrate on his art. He was initially appointed as an instructor in drawing and colour study at Brisbane's Central Technical College from 1957 to 1962. He went on to several other institutions that were also later amalgamated into QUT in 1990. Specifically, he lectured at Kedron Park Teachers' College from 1963 to 1969; worked as Senior Lecturer in Art at Kelvin Grove Teachers' College from 1970 to 1975, where he taught with those such as Betty Churcher; taught at North Brisbane College of Advanced Education from 1976 to 1981; and was Senior Lecturer at the Brisbane College of Advanced Education from 1982 to 1989.²⁴ As Deborah Hart writes:

...from 1963 until 1989, Robinson exhibited regularly in Brisbane and played a significant role as a teacher. He established enduring friendships and made an impact on his students. In his teaching, Robinson was perturbed by trends that discounted drawing and art history, and he sought to instil these disciplines while at the same time maintaining a lively approach.²⁵

All of this shaped my thinking as I selected the paintings we have gathered for this exhibition. I set out to explore Bill's teaching with some of his students who are practising artists now to get an understanding of his style: What was he like as a teacher? What was his approach? What are their lasting impressions? I was struck by the delight that Bill's former students took in sharing stories about their teacher, how much they learnt from him; in particular, about colour but also the discipline, the rigour, the practice required. As Betty observed, "he was an outstanding teacher, much loved by his students".²⁶

Many of his former students are teachers themselves now. I spoke to some about art teaching, and these conversations led me to invite primary- and secondary-school children to speak to me about their teachers, their art lessons, William Robinson's paintings on the walls. My days spent on these excursions in the William Robinson Gallery were truly enriching and rewarding. I learnt so much by listening, asking questions about things I've always wanted to know. Across my life, I have been utterly fascinated by the talents, ideas and creativity of artists, and more than a little envious. I feel I owe an enormous debt of gratitude to them for the joy and beauty, the intellectual challenge, they bring to my life.

The word that came up again and again was 'inspiration'—about Bill's classes in painting and drawing, what he taught and the way he did it, always encouraging, offering sometimes frank and fearless advice.

Anne Wallace, with exceptional foresight, kept contemporaneous hand-written notes of a powerful, motivating address Bill gave to her class at the beginning of her second year at QUT in 1989, urging them to take themselves and their art more seriously. She goes on to say:

Anything I do know about painting was from Bill's teaching. Interestingly, I went right to the centre of 'real' painting at the Slade School of Fine Art (London) and yet, at the post-graduate centre's painting department, there was no sense that you had to use paint...it was funny that way back here in Brisbane someone like Bill held all the knowledge about art and painting and he has transmitted it to so many.²⁷

Wallace spoke in a touching way of his kindness and sensitivity towards her as a very shy first-year student, allowing her to work at home sometimes. Other former students, including Maureen Hansen, Sally L'Estrange, John Honeywill, Graham Nash and Matthew Tobin, frequently referred to Bill as the painter's painter. A particular note of respect they hold for him comes through amusing accounts of their teacher's personal qualities; the self-effacement, the wry humour, the depth of knowledge,



The western heights, Springbrook 2005
oil on linen 51 x 76.5cm
QUT Art Collection
Donated through the Australian Government's
Cultural Gifts Program by Kay Bryan, 2015



Purling Brook Gorge, moonlight 1995
oil on linen 90 x 121cm
On loan from the collection of John B. Reid AO
and Lynn Rainbow Reid

the skill in communication about technique. Bill never misses an opportunity to encourage. He goes to their exhibitions and writes letters of support afterwards. These mean a great deal.

As many have noted, Robinson's "knowledge of art history is exceptional".²⁸ His paintings, in particular the self portraits, make clever references to those such as Francisco de Goya (*Equestrian self portrait* 1987), Hans Holbein (*Self portrait with basket* 2003), and William Hogarth (*Self portrait with stunned mullet* 1994), to name a few. Robinson had himself received rigorous training at the Central Technical College, where the emphasis was on drawing, design and the figure. His diligence and skill were rewarded in the form of the College's Godfrey Rivers Memorial Medal for excellence in painting, sculpture, applied art and drawing in 1956. In 1971, Robinson travelled to Sydney to see an exhibition of work by Pierre Bonnard, which had a profound effect on his output for the next decade (as hinted at above). One can imagine the conservative vacuum that characterised Brisbane in the 1950s, but it was Robinson's constant questioning and thirst for knowledge that enabled him to push his own boundaries and eventually find his own voice in the Australian art world.

Lillie Philipp made a pronouncement on Bach that echoes Robinson's own feelings on art instruction:

If a student wants to fully understand composers, he should read their biographies and letters, as with this knowledge and insight, the study of a composition will be more intelligible. In the study of Bach, who is a demanding master, the student must focus his utmost attention on correct reading. ... With methodical workout, the correct value of notes and rests can be strictly observed, so that the release of each individual hand will be precise. If carelessly practiced, the hands may be released too soon or too late, which in either case diverges from the Bach style.²⁹

Almost uncannily, Philipp's comments on Bach could equally apply to Robinson's artworks; in particular, the sublime landscapes that feature heavily in this exhibition:

Within the confines of strict rules, this greatest of all craftsmen could unlock depths, pour out and express his deepest emotions and attain heights of unequalled grandeur and beauty.³⁰

Clearly, the decades that Robinson has spent training and then passing on that knowledge to others have served him well and moulded him into the painter that he is today—one who familiarises, and indeed immerses, himself in an environment in order to forge a personal response to it. His methodical pace and evolution reveals the excellent teacher and pupil that he is. Lillie Philipp's comments on building up to a musical climax resonate with the evolution of Robinson's output and career as a whole:

[A person] who builds up a piece to the climax, a *fortissimo*, must evaluate his timing, his power and his strength. Say to yourself that there is plenty of time, as the more deliberately you go about it the more effective it will be.³¹

Indeed, this seems to sum up both Robinson's approach—deliberate and measured—and his outcome: supremely effective. Today, at the age of 79, Robinson maintains a relentless curiosity for art history, and is constantly reading and learning as much as he can. For Robinson, life is about learning. I am reminded of John Cotton Dana's famous quote, "He who dares to teach must never cease to learn."³²

Given his life-long passion for learning and the fact that he studied and worked at various institutions that *all* went on to form QUT, it only seems fitting that Robinson's work is now on permanent display at QUT. Betty Churcher noted the wisdom of having his unique landscapes in the state that they were painted. Furthermore, the location of the William Robinson Gallery in Old Government House—one of Queensland's most historically important buildings—is apt. Beautifully restored by QUT and reopened in 2009, Old Government House was originally constructed between 1860 and 1862 as the residence of the first Governor of Queensland, Sir George Bowen. It was Queensland's first public building and the first in the state to be heritage listed.³³

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It is a source of delight—and another one of these serendipitous turns—that his works are housed here, since this is where I find myself these days. From the window of my office in U Block (where my husband Michael had his first lectures as an architecture student), I have a superb view of Old Government House's elegant historic architecture. It is a place that has particular meaning for Michael and me. Like Bill, we both came here for music examinations in the 1950s. Oh, the scary waiting to be called for your turn and then the anxiety of waiting for the results to arrive by mail!

In my office, I rejoice in having some beautiful art from the QUT Art Collection on show. I am thrilled to have William Robinson with me again where I work, and to share with visitors *Eagle landscape* 1987, one of the most lyrical of the Beechmont landscapes. Art is important to this University: two galleries, fine curators on staff, stimulating exhibitions. Outreach and education programs that draw school students from across the state to engage with these precious artworks support these exhibitions. I love to peek in on the classes for students. Last time I looked, a group of primary students were learning about still life painting, lying on their tummies on the carpet.

It has taken 58 years for me to hear William Robinson play the piano again. In June 2015, I went to his lovely timbered home to share affectionate reminiscences about his years teaching with Betty Churcher. I wanted to see the glorious poinciana oil again, which I had seen in its early stages some months earlier, the vibrant still life pastels underway, and a fantastic new frieze of farm animals. Bill played one of Mendelssohn's *Songs without words*, not from memory this time, but with that seriousness of purpose I seldom see escape his expression. The tone of the splendid grand piano—a Steinway Crown Jewels series in Rosewood—was warm, strong and clear. Listening to the piece's inherent emotional qualities, its sweet lyricism, I thought about the discipline of Bill's music life: the daily practice, the finger exercises, the meditation. Standing to the left of the piano stool, I wished I was the page turner. It was a treasured interlude.

THE HONOURABLE

Quentin Bryce AD CVO

- ¹ Quoted in Charles McGuire and Diana Abitz, *The best advice ever for teachers* (Kansas City, USA: Andrews McMeel Publishing, 2012), 159.
- ² William Robinson, quoted in Desmond MacAulay and Bettina MacAulay, "A soul's solace: Art, faith, and music," *William Robinson: The transfigured landscape* (Brisbane: QUT & Piper Press, 2011), 82.
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ Anna King Murdoch, "A still spirit", *The Age*, 21 September 2002.
- ⁵ MacAulay and MacAulay, "A soul's solace," 86.
- ⁶ Quoted in Lillie H. Philipp, *Piano Technique: Tone, Touch, Phrasing and Dynamics*, 2nd ed. (Ontario, Canada: General Publishing, 1982 [1st ed. 1969]), 76.
- ⁷ See Stephen Rainbird, "William Robinson: A personal journey of self-discovery," *William Robinson: Paintings and lithographs 2000–2007* (Brisbane: QUT, 2007), 7–13; John McDonald, "Musical Master," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 May 2011, 14; MacAulay and MacAulay, "A soul's solace," 81–106; Murdoch, "A still spirit."
- ⁸ MacAulay and MacAulay, "A soul's solace," 81.
- ⁹ Ibid., 84.
- ¹⁰ Ibid., 83.
- ¹¹ For excellent overviews of Robinson's evolving oeuvre, please read Deborah Hart, "William Robinson's artistic development: An intimate and expansive journey" and "The journey continues," in *William Robinson: The transfigured landscape*, 23–40
- ¹² Lynne Seear, *Darkness and light: The art of William Robinson* (Brisbane: Queensland Art Gallery, 2001), 69.
- ¹⁴ William Robinson, cited in *ibid.*, 107, my emphasis.
- ¹⁵ Robinson, cited in *ibid.*, 109.
- ¹⁶ Fink, "Light years," 107.
- ¹⁷ James Bruce, "A landscape we thought we knew," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 January 2003.
- ¹⁸ "Robinson: Unique visionary," *Canberra Times*, 21 July 2001, 19.
- ¹⁹ Hart, "William Robinson's artistic development," 37.
- ²⁰ Betty Churcher, *Australian Notebooks* (Melbourne: Miegunyah Press, 2014), 1.
- ²¹ This is Philippa Drynan's expression.
- ²² David Malouf, introductory essay to *William Robinson: Paintings and pastels 2006* (Brisbane: Philip Bacon Galleries, 2006), 3.
- ²³ And their initial reactions are well documented in Michael Brand's chapter "William Robinson and the public eye", *The transfigured landscape*, 139–61.
- ²⁴ See "Chronology," in *Realms of vision: The art of William Robinson* (Brisbane: QUT, 2009), 25–29.
- ²⁵ Hart, "William Robinson's artistic development," 23.
- ²⁶ Churcher, *Australian Notebooks*, 247.
- ²⁷ Anne Wallace, interview with the author, 23 June 2015.
- ²⁸ McDonald, "Musical Master," 14.
- ²⁹ Philipp, *Piano Technique*, 75.
- ³⁰ Ibid.
- ³¹ Ibid.
- ³² A well-known American librarian, Dana reportedly said this in 1912.
- ³³ See "QUT, Old Government House, History of the House," <http://www.ogh.qut.edu.au>.





Passage of light from the sea and Numinbah 2002
oil on linen 167.5 x 244cm
Collection of Philip Bacon AM

The cherished sight of a child at play in a light-filled room. Small girls have a way of concentrating on play that shuts out the rest of the world, especially the part that involves parental calls to order—entreaties to bathe or make tidy or to come to the table.

—Lynn Fern

Room with a child 1975
pastel and graphite on paper 62.5 x 63.5cm
QUT Art Collection
Gift of the artist, 1975







LEFT

Starry night 1 1978
gouache on paper 65 x 60cm
Private collection, Brisbane

RIGHT

Starry night 4 1978
gouache on paper 48.5 x 40.5cm
Private collection, Brisbane

*Looking up...is how we become
aware of sky and clouds, the rotation
of the Earth; even more so at night,
when we see clear evidence that we
are part of the Universe in which our
planet is both rotating and circling.*

—Lou Klepac

Starry night 3 1978
gouache on paper 53 x 50cm
Private collection, Brisbane



William Robertson





Farmyard drawing ca. 1982
graphite on paper, three panels each 203 x 112cm
QUT Art Collection
Donated through the Australian Government's
Cultural Gifts Program by William Robinson, 2009

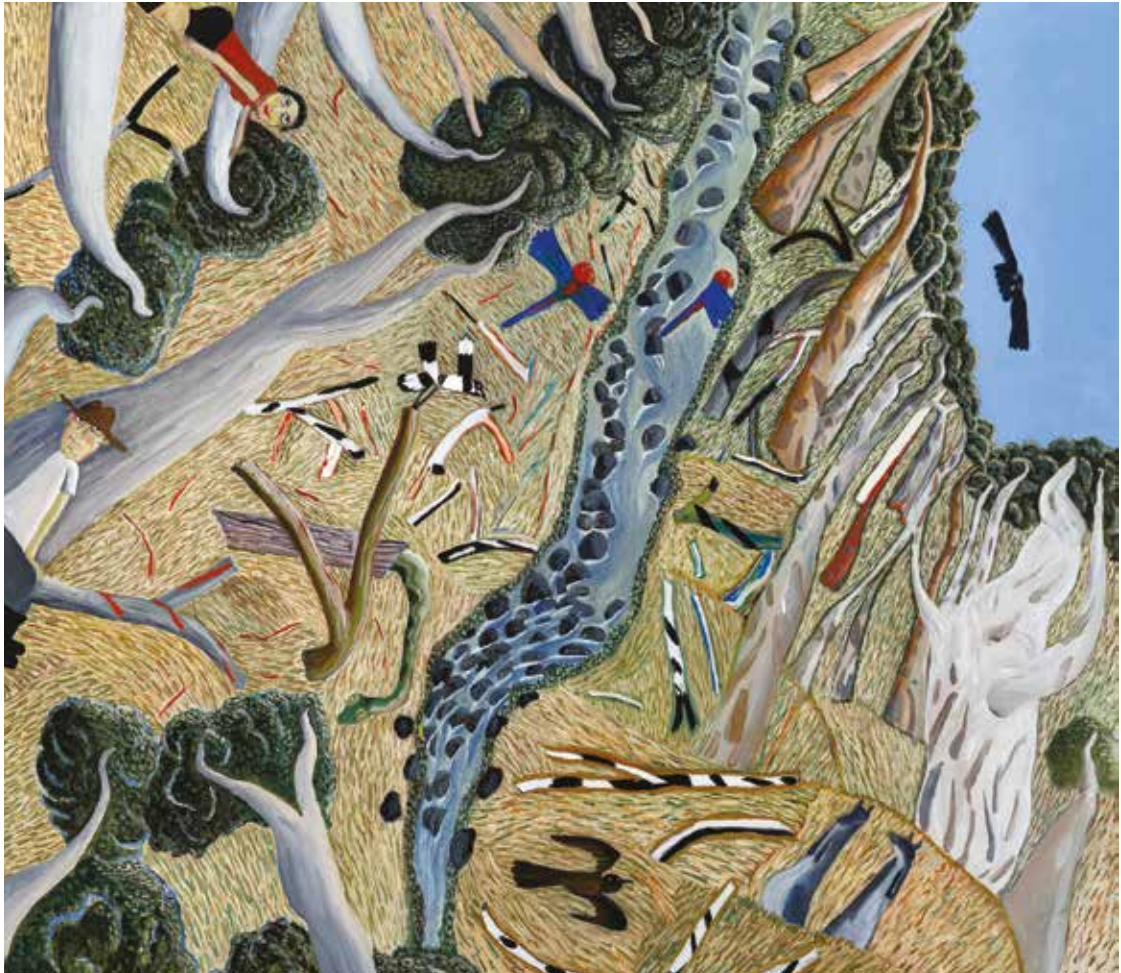
William Robinson has changed the way people look at perspective through his any-which-way placement of the sky in his compositions, and we have consequently changed in our understanding of landscape because of him. As an artist I am excited to have been educated by Bill, and as a bush walker I can no longer look up at tall gum trees, or starry nights, or sunlight seeping through a cloud that makes it turn yellow, without thinking of William Robinson.

—Davida Allen

Untitled 1988

oil on linen 74.5 x 89cm

A gift to the staff of Churchie by William Hayward





ABOVE

Untitled 1986

pastel on paper 41 x 49cm

QUT Art Collection

Gift of Associate Professor Glenn Thomas

in memory of his beloved wife, Robin

RIGHT

Turkey weather 1984

gouache on paper 80.5 x 121cm

Private collection, Brisbane





William, Josephine and others 1982–83
oil on linen 122 x 183.5cm
QUT Art Collection
Purchased 1984



Rainforest with light rain 1990
glazed stoneware vase, wheel thrown by Errol
Barnes 37 x 38cm
QUT Art Collection
Purchased 1990



A day at Canungra 1987
watercolour and pencil on paper 29.5 x 150cm
Ipswich Art Gallery Collection
Acquired with funds donated by CS Energy
through the Ipswich Arts Foundation, 1999





Mt Cougal and Springbrook 1998
watercolour and pencil on paper 23.5 x 33cm
Private collection, Brisbane



Canyon Gorge Springbrook 1998
watercolour and pencil on paper 23.5 x 33cm
Private collection, Brisbane

William and Shirley swimming 1987
oil on linen 76.3 x 111.7cm
Southern Downs Regional Council Art Collection
Acquired Stanthorpe Heritage Art Festival 1988





William Robinson has a miraculous visual memory, working from small 'thumb nail' pencil sketches or more often from the image that he holds in his head. Like a musical composer he knows the orchestral role of each part of the picture, and he is able to project himself into the picture.

—Betty Churcher

Blue pools 2000
lithograph 78 x 94cm
QUT Art Collection
Gift of the artist under the Cultural Gifts
Program, 2002



Twin Falls 2000
lithograph 78 x 94cm
QUT Art Collection
Gift of the artist under the Cultural Gifts
Program, 2002



Tallanbanna II 2000
lithograph 78 x 94cm
QUT Art Collection
Gift of the artist under the Cultural Gifts
Program, 2002

BEYOND MEASURE

The artistic vision of William Robinson

The works in this exhibition, produced over a span of 40 years, represent the remarkable breadth of William Robinson's artistic practice. They include tenderly drawn pastels made of his home and family; vibrant, quirky, high-toned responses to life on the farm; lyrical watercolours of Springbrook; a witty and ironic self-portrait; lyrical still lifes of evanescent flowers; a revisiting of earlier interiors; limpid-surfaced colour lithographs; and the subdued grandeur of the 'Mountain' series, exhibited together for the first time in the William Robinson Gallery.

From 1963 to 1989, Robinson was both a teacher and a practitioner of art. While he has not worked formally as a teacher in the classroom or the lecture hall since 1989, he has continued to do what all artists of significance do: he has taught us how to look.

In the most obvious sense, Robinson has changed the way we look—primarily, but not only, at landscape—through his re-evaluation of perspective. From the late 1980s, he began to re-address the representation of the terrain in which he found himself. With his depiction of landscape came a moving away from the linear perspective that had been the great transforming vision of the Renaissance, a questioning of the unqualified perfection of that particular vision. As his paintings tell us, we do not always experience the world through the ideal frame of a Piero della Francesca or of a Raphael. Moreover, the way we visually experience the world is moderated by the way we experience it with the entire body.

Of course, many artists before Robinson reconsidered spatial representation. However, these earlier artists refuted the primacy of linear perspective by experimenting with flattening the picture plane, with Paul Cézanne perhaps the most significant among them. He was followed by a legion of others, many of whom—such as Georges Braque, Pablo Picasso and other Cubists—also experimented with the use of multiple viewpoints. Later again, abstract multi-perspectival paintings were produced by artists such as Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning and Robert Motherwell.

In Australian landscape painting, the convention of linear perspective was particularly challenged by Fred Williams, who made use of aerial perspective to subvert the potent lateral call of the horizon line. Robinson, too, has experimented with this technique, and one example of his use of the flattened picture plane in this exhibition is the marvellous red-and-white oil *Goats and chooks* 1980. Robinson's disruptions of linear perspective went further still. In his paintings, he demonstrates not only that the world may be perceived from multiple perspectives but also that a painting can express the three-dimensional experience of being in ways that are kinaesthetic as well as visual.

Robinson's landscape paintings from the late 1980s onwards confronted the viewer in ways that at first were not easy to interpret. Their configuration was a product of Robinson's response to the experience of living among the escarpments and gorges of the Lamington Plateau, particularly to the way he had inhabited that landscape. Whether he travelled through it on horseback or on foot, he was both consciously and unconsciously mapping, processing and assimilating the high relief of his surroundings. He has said that he often found this confronting.¹ In many works, he compels the viewer to look up, down and around from multiple points of view in the same time frame, which incites almost a sense of vertigo. Robinson himself experienced the mesmerising power of gravity as he first pioneered and then at last truly settled in those highlands of the McPherson Range. His paintings reveal that by choosing to live in the ambit of these mountains, he had to learn (not without discomfort) to look simultaneously down and up. Here were Gerard Hopkins's "cliffs of fall"—mountains so high and precipices so steep that being amid them was perilous.

Almost all of the landscapes in this exhibition are emblematic of this distinctive vision, which is one independent of mood. *Possum dawn* 1985 charms with its rose-toned warmth and humorous self-deprecation. Yet, this apparently carefree representation of family life operates at various levels. The artist conveys that the farmer, his wife and their horse, riding jauntily

among the cliffs and crags, must nonetheless be intrepid to navigate their way through these precarious heights. This work expresses Robinson's painterly pleasure in depicting a narrative of family life on the farm. How blithe are the trotting trio. They move through the picture plane with brio. Yet, a solemnity underlies the light-hearted fore-story. The figures move along the high mountain path with a quixotic gallantry. Behind them (and above and below) range the heights and the depths of the ever present mountains—lit, in this painting, by the rim of the imminent transforming sun. Above the mountains turn the wheeling heavens. Can we be sure, the artist asks, which way is up and which is down? Riders and horse journey through both a real and a metaphorical landscape. It is no accident that in this work, and so many others, the figures are represented as both pivotal and at the same time small against the vastness of the natural world.

Some of the earlier farmyard paintings anticipate this altered vision. These works capture Robinson's ironic view of the chaotic life of the farm. For example, a certain detached levity is demonstrated well in the pastel *Untitled farmyard* 1986, and oil *Untitled* 1988. Impressively colourful and vital, these works are also interesting from a technical point of view because of the way in which Robinson has managed to combine both his own multi-point perspective and a certain flatness of surface borrowed from the abstract paintings of the mid-20th century.

These works exhibit a light-heartedness (and indeed a sense of comedy) in the portrayal of the daily tasks of the farm. At first examination, it seems that Robinson's consciousness of the mighty backdrop of the mountains is momentarily left aside. Yet, even in these works where Robinson is at his most droll, and where he uses the steep slopes to suggest the potential for slapstick tumbles down slippery slopes, there is still an intimation of the power of hidden vectors of nature. Robinson uses the destabilising force of multiple points of view as he directs our gaze to the roiling heights above.

The five works in the 'Mountain' series paintings of 1992 and 1993 were painted during a period when the artist, his wife Shirley, and their family were undergoing a time of great personal loss. The artist has spoken about how the paintings brought him through a period of despair to a time when he could begin to feel hope again. These paintings, which possess a sombre majesty, trace a journey.

In the first painting in the series *Landscape with extinct volcano* 1992, the mountains are vast, implacable, anonymous. The volcano is not an actual mountain, but an imagined one. It is based on Mount Warning, the plug of an ancient shield volcano, which sat in the midst of a great ring of mountains formed by it. The land conformation painted by William Robinson is similar but not an image of that mountain. In the bottom half of the composition, there is an assertion of some meaning for individual experience, with trees reaching up to the sunlight out of the valleys, and sky to be found at the vertiginous bottom right corner of the picture plane—a sky in which green lorikeets abound.

In *Green mountains* 1992, the mountains are painted with a dark intensity. They recede and continue towards infinity. The closer ones are massive, dark and foreboding. In the distance, they are shrouded in cloud. Their massive presence fills the picture plane, lit in the distance by a band of livid sky. It is a work of great power and profound darkness.

With *Sunset, flying fox and beyond* 1992, Robinson returns to the depiction of experienced landscape³ in the curves of forest, top right and centre forward of the painting. The trees move up as you look down into the valley. This somehow familiar territory mitigates against the sheer force of the implacable cliff face. There is promise of warmth in the apocryphal light—an augury, perhaps, of consolation to come.

The last two works in the series show a return of hope. The title of *Passing storm, late afternoon, Beechmont* 1993 is in itself



Landscape with extinct volcano
'Mountain' series, first of five 1992
oil on linen 137 x 183cm
Private collection, Brisbane



Green mountains
'Mountain' series, second of five 1992
oil on linen 137 x 183cm
Private collection, Brisbane

BEYOND MEASURE

The artistic vision of William Robinson

a kind of promise, and although the rainbow arching over the storm-lit mountains is pale and fugitive, it is nonetheless there. *Sunset and misty moon, Beechmont* 1993, the final work in the series, sees a return to the harmony of diurnal rhythms—setting sun and rising moon abide over the restored challenge of the dynamic landscape, indicating the promise of ongoing days.

In the ‘Mountain’ series, Robinson chronicles an omnipotent but fathomless creator, silent and remote. These works encompass a feeling of an iron desolation. The artist has painted a world where a grand and implacable continuum endures: these endless mountains are a place of majestic indifference to human feeling.

After 1993, Robinson began to paint again the harmonies of the natural world, as evidenced by *Purlingbrook Gorge, moonlight* 1995. While suffused with a soft and lambent light, the forms of the landscape are not idealised. Even with the convoluted and tortuous representations of trees and hill and vale, this sylvan work, infused with hints of violet indigo, is an ode to the landscape that William Robinson has come to know so well. Process has long been central to Robinson’s artistic practice. He has consistently used a wide range of media, because of the pleasure he derives from them—whether oil, gouache, pastel, graphite, pencil. The list provides an indication of the depth and breadth of Robinson’s mastery in the matching of subject and medium during his life-long practice of the alchemy that is the making of art.

He has expressed a preference for pastel in recent times; he finds it faster to work with than oil. He has said that he feels less comfortable with watercolour,⁴ although this would seem to be belied by the exquisite four-panel watercolour in this exhibition, *A day at Canungra* 1987.

The portrait in this exhibition, *Professor John Robinson and brother William* 1992, has gained new resonance because

‘brother William’ has himself joined the ranks of academia, with Honorary Doctorates awarded by his alma mater QUT in 1998 (where his red sash is very similar to the one worn by his brother in the portrait), the University of Southern Queensland in 2002, and by Griffith University in 2007. At the time that this sensuous oil was painted, Robinson’s attitude to the formalities of academic life seemed mildly subversive. The portrait affords full dignity to Professor John Robinson, a mathematician who creates mathematical patterns in the field of biometrics. Standing beside him, William, the artist, in pyjamas and dressing gown, seems mildly hapless. Yet, his dressing gown is a rich red kimono from Singapore⁵ that easily holds its ground against John’s academic robe and scarlet sash.

Curiously, the parodic contrast in their dress diminishes neither figure in the painting. They stand in equal dignity, each resplendent (in very different ways) against the numinous sky behind them. This portrait operates through ambivalence, questioning assumptions but not giving answers. It is a rich and beautiful work, full of both stillness and tension. While telling us a little about the brothers Robinson, it is a work of perfect visual balance.

Noteworthy among Robinson’s techniques is his use of scale. Robinson has painted on a grand scale for a long time. His ‘Creation’ series paintings 1988–2004 are over seven metres long. But they are triptychs, and they almost always ask us to look into the distance. We can learn much by examining two paintings in this exhibition at opposite ends of the scale continuum. The first is the massive two-panel oil painting *The rainforest* 1990, the winner of that year’s Wynne Prize. It is a monumental work, 183 x 489cm, and richly detailed. In it, Robinson’s focuses both on what is near to hand and on the distant sky—if it is the sky—glimpsed through the rainforest canopy. Perhaps what we see is a reflection of the sky in one of the rainforest pools. The painting compels the viewer to

constantly change focus—to move in, to observe the light caught in the fine spray of the waterfall, and then to stand back and follow the winding of the creek through the picture. The experience of looking is one of immersion in the ecosphere. Robinson conveys the shadowed depths of the rainforest by making use of a rich dark-green palette—tones of palm and fern and moss, of emerald and malachite and jade—enhanced by shafts of yellow light. He uses this vast scale to explore the visual complexities of the entwined and entangled foliage as he immerses the viewer in the cloistered lushness of the rainforest. This immediacy of representation is so powerfully engaging that the viewer almost becomes part of the rainforest, standing within the sinuous windings of the foliage under the changing dappled light. The artist has painted the work so that the viewer looks up through the canopy to the sky and down to the creek that winds its way through the picture. He makes use of the altering magnifications of microscope and telescope to illuminate the rainforest. In this large work, Robinson wants us to experience the rainforest bathed in iridescent light.

In contrast to the immersive grandeur of the massive *Rainforest* painting, Robinson has used a small frame to capture the sweep of the mountainscape at Springbrook. This was a place with which Robinson was intimately connected as he had a studio there for years. *Tallanbanna with yellow robin* 2002 is an exquisite oil, measuring only 31 x 41cm. Despite being one of the smaller works in the exhibition, it encompasses vast distances. Here, Robinson has made use of a much more conventional perspective—and the painting is no less powerful for that. He has deployed a warm palette of browns and yellows, richer and more varied in the foreground, cooler and quieter in the background. The immediacy and detail of the foreground is emphasised by the distant majesty of the mountains in the background. The eye is led towards the mountains through the triangular fork of the trees. It lingers briefly on the forest—suffused in diaphanous golden light—but it is pulled back

endlessly to the pivotal point of the painting: the splash of yellow that is the robin. That brushstroke of yellow, contrasted with the dark foliage immediately behind it, stands out so that the eye is drawn to it from every part of the painting. The bird is the painting's epicentre—a tiny marvel of nature set against the immensity of the mountains. Robinson has used it to address the infinite through the intimate.⁶

Blue pools 2000 is one of three colour lithographs in this exhibition, and they are hanging in the house of Quentin Bryce, the curator of this exhibition. *Blue pools*, which Robinson made in Paris, is based on the larger oil painting of the same name. It is a radiant work, enamel-like in its jewelled surface. Colour lithography is a medium that Robinson has used since the early 1990s when he worked in the Victorian Print Workshop with Neil Levison. More recently, the artist worked in the Paris workshop of Franck Bordas, the grandson of Fernand Mourlot, printmaker to Henri Matisse, Pierre Bonnard, Joan Miró and Pablo Picasso.

Colour lithography is a complicated and time-consuming process. Robinson uses stone printing blocks and a greasy crayon, which then have to be covered with a weak solution of nitric acid overnight. Each colour for the lithograph is drawn on a different plate by the artist and printed successively. Moreover, when the drawing is done on stone or plate, it has to be drawn in reverse, so that, when it is printed, it will print the right way round. The following morning, the acid is then washed off with water and turpentine. When ready for printing, the stone is moistened and an oil-based ink is used to make the print. Bordas has eighteen presses—which gives some indication of the intricacy of the process. Despite its complexity, Robinson found this to be a very luminous process, feeling it akin to Pointillism because the presses build up the print on the paper with tiny dots of colour.⁷



Sunset, flying fox and beyond
'Mountain' series, third of five 1992
oil on linen 137 x 183cm
Private collection, Brisbane



Passing storm, late afternoon, Beechmont
'Mountain' series, fourth of five 1993
oil on linen 137 x 183cm
Private collection, Brisbane

The paint application in small strokes is really a direct response to being in the landscape and walking over it. In some ways it is constructed like a map...In an atlas a map seems to be always shown with the North towards the top, but take away the lettering and the boundaries and the land is free to be interpreted in anyway.

—William Robinson

Sunset and misty moon, Beechmont
'Mountain' series, fifth of five 1993
oil on linen 137 x 183cm
Private collection, Brisbane



BEYOND MEASURE

The artistic vision of William Robinson

In *Blue pools*, the result is a brilliant image of blue pools on a ridge suspended between the deep valley far below and the blue firmament above. As this lithograph is one in which Robinson has used his multiple-viewpoint perspective, the sky, at the bottom right of the painting, already awash with stars, is a cloisonné jewel of ultramarine and cobalt violet reflected in muted form in the pools that give the work its name.

The verandah, that wonderful connecting space between open air and enfolding interior, is a recurring feature in Robinson's paintings. In this exhibition, the 2011 pastel *Verandah still life with jacaranda* is emblematic of this subject. The work is a hymn to colour. The pale purple of the jacaranda effervesces at the top of the picture frame. Yet, it is held in balance by the still life at the bottom. The tapestry cushion on the chair echoes the hues above. The rich weaving of the tablecloth is adorned by the positioning of the single red hibiscus. A pair of reading glasses rests on the open pages of a book where six white angels float above the earth. Six white gardenias float in the green below and six stone vessels anchor the tablecloth—and the composition—as they lead the eye from the still interior to the flower garden beyond. Interior and exterior are divided by the strong diagonal of the window frame, which only serves to reinforce the harmonies of each space. It is a work of amplitude and tranquillity.

Two more pastels in this exhibition should be noted—not only for their mastery but also for their significance to Quentin Bryce. They are *Bouquet with Poole and Turkish pots* and *Freesias and geraniums* both painted in 2014. The Turkish pots in the painting were given to Robinson by Bryce, and the works are imbued with their personal connection and friendship. The works provide a seeming riot of colour: the red and blue of the Turkish pots, the reds, blues, yellows, oranges and mauves of the flowers. And this blaze of colour only serves to emphasise the serenity of these works; a joyful harmony bathed in opalescent light.

The work in this exhibition is diverse: in period, in medium, in colour and in form. All of it attests to William Robinson's vision as an artist and to his discovery that, in rendering in detail his observations of the world around him, his paintings—so tactile of surface, so rich in colour, so balanced in form—can tell us universal truths.

Lynn Fern

- ¹ William Robinson, conversation with author, June 2015.
- ² Gerard Manley Hopkins, "Pitched Past Grief," in *Gerard Manley Hopkins: Poems and Prose*, ed. W.H. Gardner (London: Penguin, 1985), 61.
- ³ Perhaps only someone who has climbed up and down the perpendicular slopes of the McPherson ranges can fully recognise what Robinson expresses in his landscapes. Robinson paints not only a visual record of the landscape, but also what is felt as one travels within it: the experience of unsettling vertigo as one ascends the heights and plummets into the shadowed depths below; the feeling of disorientation experienced as the brain processes conflicting information from eyes, joints, muscles and centre of balance (the vestibular system).
- ⁴ William Robinson, conversation with the author, May 2015.
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ For me, this magical splash of paint that betokens a bird alludes to the idea of infinity as expressed in William Blake's *Auguries of Innocence* (ca. 1863):
To see a world in a grain of sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour.
Excerpt from *Poets of the English Language*, ed. W. H. Auden and Norman Holmes Pearson (New York: Viking Press, 1950).
- ⁷ William Robinson, conversation with the author, May 2015.

OVERLEAF

The rainforest 1990

oil on linen, diptych 183 x 489cm overall

Gold Coast City Gallery

Purchased 1991 with funds raised by the Gold Coast business and art-loving community







Flame tree and Wonga Pigeon 2003

oil on linen 30 x 40.5cm

QUT Art Collection

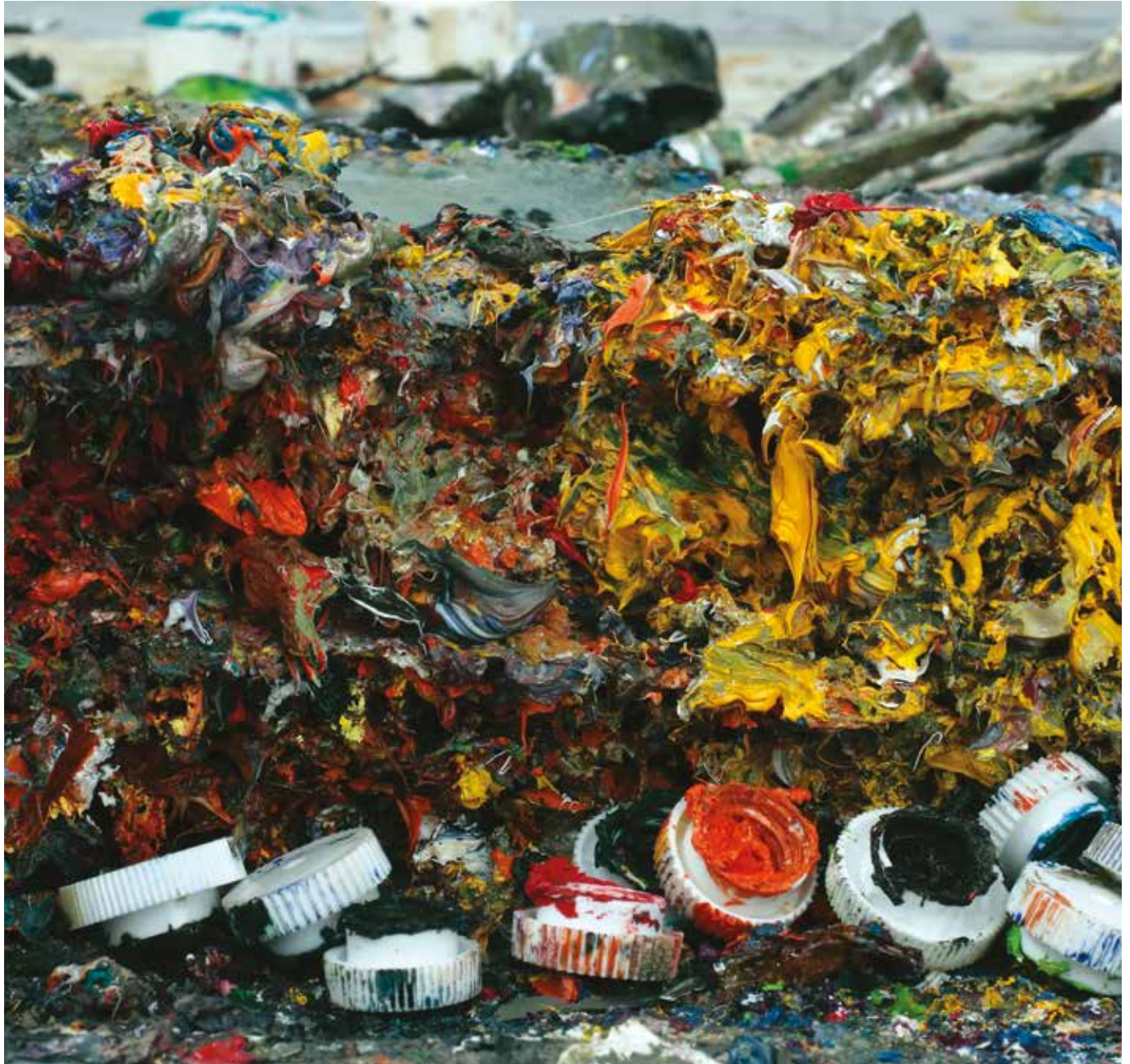
Donated through the Australian Government's
Cultural Gifts Program by Kay Bryan, 2015



Tallanbanna with Yellow Robin 2002
oil on linen 30 x 40.5cm
QUT Art Collection
Donated through the Australian Government's
Cultural Gifts Program by Kay Bryan, 2015



Professor John Robinson and brother William 1992
oil on linen 198.5 x 138cm
QUT Art Collection
Donated through the Australian Government's
Cultural Gifts Program by William Robinson, 2011



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QUT
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Queensland 4001 Australia
www.ogh.qut.edu.au/wrgallery

Exhibition Guest Curator

The Honourable Quentin Bryce AD CVO

Staff

Executive Director Professor Susan Street AO

Senior Curator Vanessa Van Ooyen

Curator (Public Programs) Megan Williams

Collection/Exhibitions Officer Sheryn Smith

Education Program Officer Sarah Barron

Curatorial Assistant Katherine Dionysius

Administration Assistant Emma Cain

Printers ColourChiefs, Brisbane

Designer Dougal Morrison

Editor Evie Franzidis

Contributors

The Honourable Quentin Bryce AD CVO

Tim Fairfax AC

Professor Peter Coaldrake AO

Lynn Fern

Vanessa Van Ooyen

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COVER

Evening landscape with pandanus 2006

oil on linen 110 x 246.5cm

Private collection, Brisbane

PREVIOUS

William Robinson's palette (detail)

Brisbane, 2008

QUT Art Collection