



WILLIAM ROBINSON

# The Farmyards

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WILLIAM  
ROBINSON  
GALLERY





# FOREWORD

It has now been four years since the official opening of the William Robinson Gallery at Old Government House, located at the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) Gardens Point campus, and we at QUT are very pleased to launch our sixth exhibition, *William Robinson: The farmyards*. Although mostly known for his landscape paintings, William Robinson's farmyard paintings are among his most loved works. The 'farmyard' period began in the early 1970s when the Robinsons moved to Birkdale, a semi-rural suburb in the bay area south east of Brisbane. During this time, an array of farm animals and family pets, including cows, goats, ducks and chickens, became enduring subjects of Robinson's paintings.

*William Robinson: The farmyards* is the first comprehensive exhibition of this period. It celebrates the artist's whimsical take on his environment and explores a unique painting style and vision that has underpinned Robinson's practice for over four decades.

The exhibition includes many artworks that have been recently acquired by QUT's William Robinson Collection, including the exquisite *Untitled* 1985 pastel work, donated by QUT's Associate Professor Glenn Thomas in memory of his wife Robin; *Four cows* 1979, one of the first painting experiments by Robinson in the oval cow-portrait format, acquired through the William Robinson Acquisition Fund; and the artist's first Archibald Prize for Portraiture entry, *William and Josephine* 1982–83, donated through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program.

With the opening of this new exhibition, QUT has also taken the opportunity to dedicate a gallery space to

display the newly acquired *Blue pools*, *Beechmont to Springbrook* 2000. Acknowledged as one of the artist's most important works, *Blue pools* is the most significant acquisition of a single artwork made by the University and is a major addition to our William Robinson Collection. We are excited that the public can now enjoy this extraordinary painting.

Strategic developments in the Collection will be further showcased in the future as we work to develop a travelling exhibition of William Robinson's work so that all Australians have the opportunity to appreciate one of the nation's most celebrated and gifted artists.

QUT is indebted to many people for their ongoing support, in particular, the private lenders and institutions that make works available for loan to the exhibition program, the generosity of individuals who support the gallery's activities through donation and gifting of artworks, as well as those who make financial contributions to our collecting and program activities. Without this philanthropy, we would have been unable to achieve the successes that we have realised over the past few years, or be able to proceed with our ambitions for the future.

We also especially thank the artist, his wife Shirley, and the Robinson family for their ongoing support, encouragement, openness and generosity, as well as the unfailing support of the University's vision.

**Tim Fairfax AM**  
Chancellor

**Professor Peter Coaldrake AO**  
Vice-Chancellor

*William, Josephine and others* (detail) 1982–83

oil on linen 122 x 183.5cm

QUT Art Collection  
Purchased 1984

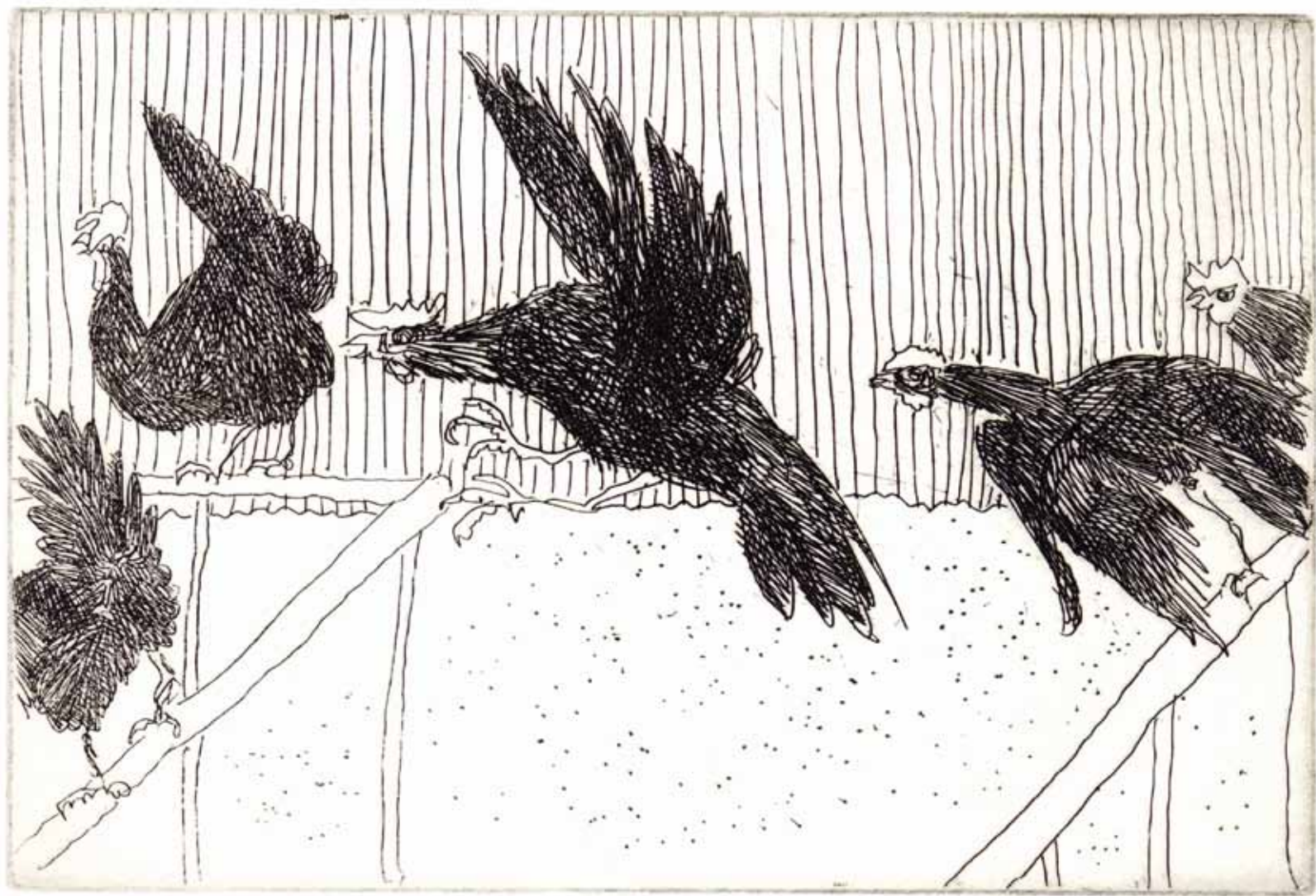












# THE FARMYARDS

The teeming life in William Robinson's farmyard images press forward and nearly tumble onto viewers' laps; the chaos of multiple figures bound across these artworks' surfaces, each playing their part in a symphony orchestrated by the artist. In their uniqueness, these works stand out as a sort of aberration in Australian art, for Robinson is not easy to pin down, stylistically.

Certainly, the subject of the farmyard has its place in art—one only needs to think of seventeenth-century Dutch genre painting or the bucolic farmyards of eighteenth-century English painting—wherein the cow features as a symbol of prosperity. More often than not, works of this subject were confined to the lower ranks of an arbitrary hierarchical system that valued history painting above all. Surprisingly, at times, remnants of these values still persist today albeit in a different guise. This was clearly played out in the mainstream media's reception of William Robinson when he won the Archibald Prize for Portraiture in 1987, all well documented in press and writing of the time.<sup>1</sup> It was easy to describe these distinctive artworks simply as farmer-painting-farm images.

In the 1980s, during the height of postmodern discourse, Robinson clearly didn't fit the dominant conceptions of the time. Despite this, he was included in Australia's premier art event, the Biennale of Sydney. *Origins, Originality + Beyond* sought to explore the postmodern era and included five of Robinson's paintings, one of which was acquired by the esteemed curator, William Lieberman for the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

## Previous

*Farmyard drawing* (detail) c1982

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

Sadly, the inclusion of Robinson's work in this important international art event didn't set the best tone for the reception of his art. Rather, Robinson's practice was described in the Biennale's catalogue in terms of a regionalism and as quasi-naïve:

Though Bill Robinson paints idiosyncratically, in a way that perhaps only a wise "bushie" from Queensland could today do with any authenticity, the spirit of past masters is present.<sup>2</sup>

The farmyard period that stretches from the 1970s to the mid-1980s slowly emerged in Robinson's oeuvre following a move he and his family made to an eight-acre semi-rural farm at Birkdale on Brisbane's outskirts. This move was necessitated by suburban life, which impinged on the needs of a growing family and brood of animals. Yet, it took a number of years for this lifestyle change to seep into Robinson's practice. In 1972, the first farmyard emerged in the form of a small engraving titled *Chook pecking*. Five years later, a series of farmyard etchings, including *Rooster* 1977–78, saw Robinson further experiment with farmyard fowl in the print medium. However, until the late 1970s, interiors and the surrounding coastal area of Moreton Bay remained his primary focus. The Robinson property overlooked Waterloo Bay, a favorite recreational sailing spot, and this vantage point informed a series of works through 1976 and 1977. However, in 1978, the family chickens start to emerge en masse, as seen in a series of small pastels and drawings, such as *Chookyard*, *Birkdale* 1978. With growing confidence, Robinson moved onto larger format works in oil, such as the exquisite *Chookyard* 1979—a wonderful

## Left

*Untitled (Rooster)* 1977–78

etching 30 x 40cm

QUT Art Collection

Gift of the artist, 1979



example of his mastery of paint, and affecting light and colour. Its comedic portrayal of the Birkdale farm chookyard is shown from an aerial perspective, revealing no horizon line or surrounding environment. The effect is a chaotic image of poultry scattered across the canvas with no single focal point taking priority over another.

In 1979, when Robinson was aged 43, a distinctive stylistic change emerged in his work with the development of the oval cow *conté* drawings. Taking their visual lead from nineteenth-century portrait photography, these works were a radical departure from the Pierre Bonnard-inspired colourist paintings produced earlier. In comparison, Robinson takes a path of limited colour, exploring the possibilities of *chiaroscuro* in this new medium. The artist has noted that *conté* was far better than graphite pencil as it achieved the dark opacity required for the black oval frames, mimicking the richness of early black-and-white photography.<sup>3</sup> According to Robinson, the oval cow-portrait works were the first time he saw himself as creating something entirely original and not informed by other artists.

Upon reflection, Robinson states

I'd gone up a pathway...I had gone up other pathways that were all wrong because they were other artists' pathways...with the cows for the first time I'd created something. I felt a sense of amazement that I'd gone out on a limb and created something I couldn't relate to anybody else's work before, only to old Victorian photos in oval frames.<sup>4</sup>

As a new decade emerged, rather than focus on a single animal or group of them, Robinson began to include all manner of farmyard animal into single works, as seen in *Goats, cows and chooks* 1980. Composition is fundamental and, like the large landscapes paintings of his later career, they experiment in the conception of space—their mayhem and movement belie the fact that they are as equally considered as any other work. Robinson notes these works are not unlike still-life compositions, wherein each element of the arrangement is predetermined to achieve the perfect balance of form, colour and light.<sup>5</sup>

In later works, space is organised in a sophisticated way, such as *Birkdale farm construction with Australorps* 1982–83—with its artful play of line and volume, the geometric patterns created by the squares and triangles of the corrugated iron sheets, the black-and-whites bodies of animals against the painterly variations of the earth. Of course, no one can miss the biting humour of Robinson's farmyard works as his affectionate eye, which seeks out the oddness and individuality of each animal, is balanced by the inclusion of himself looking as bemused as the animals themselves. A slight hand at self-mockery, this would reach its heights in his self-portrait paintings.

The single enduring element throughout William Robinson's practice is the idea of home; a sense of place and belonging. Robinson is never an outside observer, but rather a participant in his art—an approach that distinguishes him from so many of his contemporaries and predecessors. Robinson's practice is an art of the art-of-

*Family portrait (Formal)* 1980

oil on linen 113 x 182cm

QUT Art Collection

Purchased 1980







place. Repeatedly, Robinson appears in his own work and, in many respects, his personal insight of subject matter and his intimate connection, closeness and sensitivity to its nuances has resulted in over-simplified readings of his work that interpret them on face value alone.

To a degree, William Robinson's artworks are not produced with a public audience in mind; they are personal narratives and can make one feel somewhat voyeuristic when looking at them. This is especially true with the farmyard drawings of 1984. They are as much about personal relationships as they are about form and composition. One sees Robinson's wife Shirley confidently managing work on the farm, wielding an axe or milking the cow, while Bill is often found hiding behind a sheet of corrugated iron or dreamingly looking off into the distance. From this it is easy to surmise who is in control of the animal husbandry and who may be the idle observer. Robinson was prolific in producing these drawings, and their responsive quality is in no way an indication that they are secondary works. They were produced when the family left the Birkdale property and relocated to the Beechmont range on the Gold Coast hinterland. At the time, Robinson didn't have a studio and found himself drawing in a confined corrugated iron alcove of the kitchen that previously housed the stove.

Working over a half-century before him, the artist Joan Miró undertook a series of paintings for many reasons similar to Robinson. As a grand gesture, Miró began painting what was close to his heart: his Catalan

homeland. These paintings would later be considered among his finest works, including *The farm* 1921–22. With a towering eucalyptus in the centre of the work set against a sun-drenched landscape, obvious parallels to Australian landscape painting can be drawn. Moreover, the subject, intent and use of space are of interest here. As in Robinson's works, in Miró's *The farm*, foreground and background are treated similarly; the mountains don't recede and the buildings don't sit clearly in the foreground to create the illusion of three-dimensional space. Rather, they sit like cardboard cut-outs. Buckets, pails and other farmyard detritus are also scattered throughout the scene, revealing the chaos of farm life. Miró places his farmyard animals on pedestals, reminiscent of sculptural objects such as those found in the Académie or prized stock in a rural show. Miró, like Robinson, sees his farmyard companions as worthy of being immortalised in paint and there is no hierarchy to his subjects: all are equal. According to Miró, *The farm* was a résumé of his life in the country.<sup>6</sup> Although painting decades apart, clearly both artists celebrate a belief in the unity of nature through their work.

If one was to read Robinson's farmyard works in term of a bestiary—an illustrated book of animals, popular in medieval times—one could clearly see the development of a moral story in the creation of each work. For Robinson, the world itself is the world of God and every living thing has its own special meaning. This aspect plays a particularly important role in the development of Robinson's landscape work throughout the 1990s, yet, interestingly, the story of Creation emerges in the

*Farmyard I* 2005

bronze 29 x 57 x 52cm

QUT Art Collection

Purchased 2007 through the William Robinson Art Collection Fund



farmyards over a decade earlier. From the exploration of chooks, cows, goats, the human figure, trees, ground and water, day and night, to the mastery and understanding of all these elements, in many ways, speaks as the artist's personal creation story and, over time, the landscape takes dominance. Cows are still present but Bill and Shirley, often on horseback, as in *Landscape with riders and lunar reflection* 1986, take splendour in their Garden of Eden in awe of the majestic landscape that they are a part of. In these later works, it becomes more apparent how the seemingly inconsequential is deeply imbedded in the natural order of things.

William Robinson's farmyard works cannot be read as simple rustic scenes; the sum of what is merely represented. Honest titles and simple subjects beguile a complexity in the work that is difficult to grasp or to define with any specific "ism". Rather, the works capture an authenticity and honesty that requires people to use their own creative freedom, as Robinson has used in their creation.

**Vanessa Van Ooyen** Senior Curator  
William Robinson Gallery

<sup>1</sup>See Michael Brand, "William Robinson and the public eye", in *William Robinson: The transfigured landscape* (Brisbane and Sydney: Queensland University of Technology and Piper Press, 2011), 139.

<sup>2</sup>Nick Waterlow, *Origins Originality + Beyond* (Sydney: The Biennale of Sydney, 1986), 14.

<sup>3</sup>William Robinson, personal communication with the author, 14 March 2013

<sup>4</sup>Deborah Hart, "William Robinson's artistic development: An intimate and expansive journey", in *William Robinson: The transfigured landscape* (Brisbane and Sydney: Queensland University of Technology and Piper Press, 2011), 23.

<sup>5</sup>Robinson, personal communication with the author, 14 March 2013

<sup>6</sup>Matthew Gale, "Miró's early masterpiece 'The farm' that captivated Ernest Hemingway", *Tate* (blog), 18 March 2011, accessed 31 May 2013, <http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/blogs/miros-early-masterpiece-farm-captivated-ernest-hemingway>.

*Landscape with riders and lunar reflection* 1988  
oil on linen 93 x 109cm  
Private collection, Brisbane













*When you keep animals, you form a connection of care with them. I wouldn't say it's love, but it is care and responsibility. I daren't say that you become like them but you have to become a little bit like them to understand them. All have their own personalities; it doesn't matter whether they're cows, goats or even chooks. There's no common personality; they're all different, just like children are different and we are different. They have their own temperaments.*

**William Robinson**

**Previous**

*Untitled 2 (Farmyard) and Untitled 3 (Farmyard)* 1984

pencil on paper 56 x 76cm

Private collection, Brisbane

**Left**

*Peggety* 1985

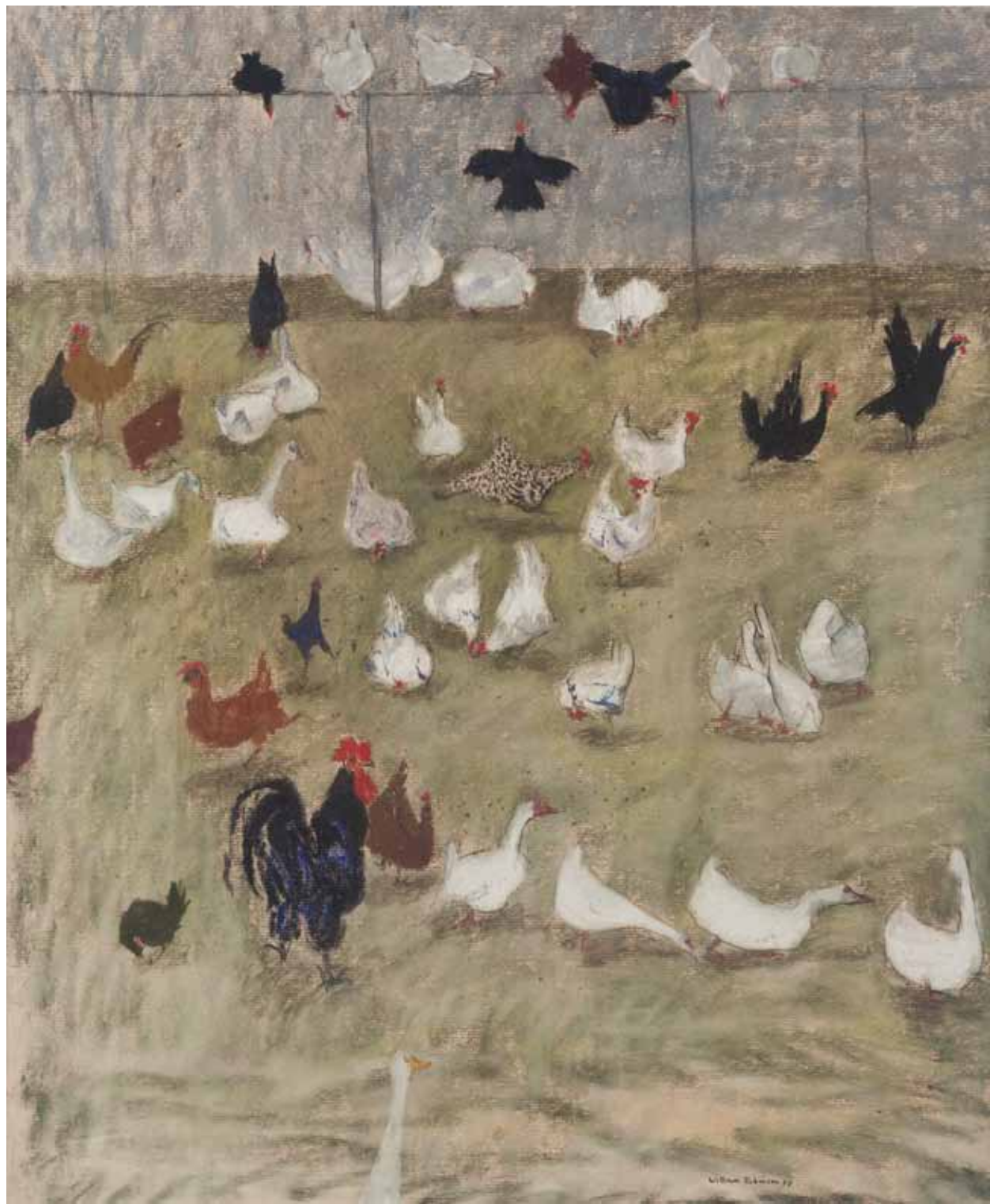
pastel on paper 56 x 76cm

Private collection, Brisbane

*This work is one of the important pictures from the beginning of my farmyard period. At the time, I remember I really didn't think I had any idea of what I was doing but, in hindsight, I did have some sense of direction. In this picture, the ducks are marching out to a point where they are virtually stopped by the right frame of the picture. Formally, there are diagonal constructions as well as vertical thrusts—such as the chicken that's flying up to the perch at the very top of the picture. When I started these pictures, I realised that the arrangement is vital as it tells the story of the drama between the animals. From a construction point of view, this is the moment I moved away from the illusion of three dimensions and towards two dimensions.*

*Chookyard, Birkdale 1978*  
pastel and pencil on paper 64.8 x 50cm  
Private collection, Brisbane









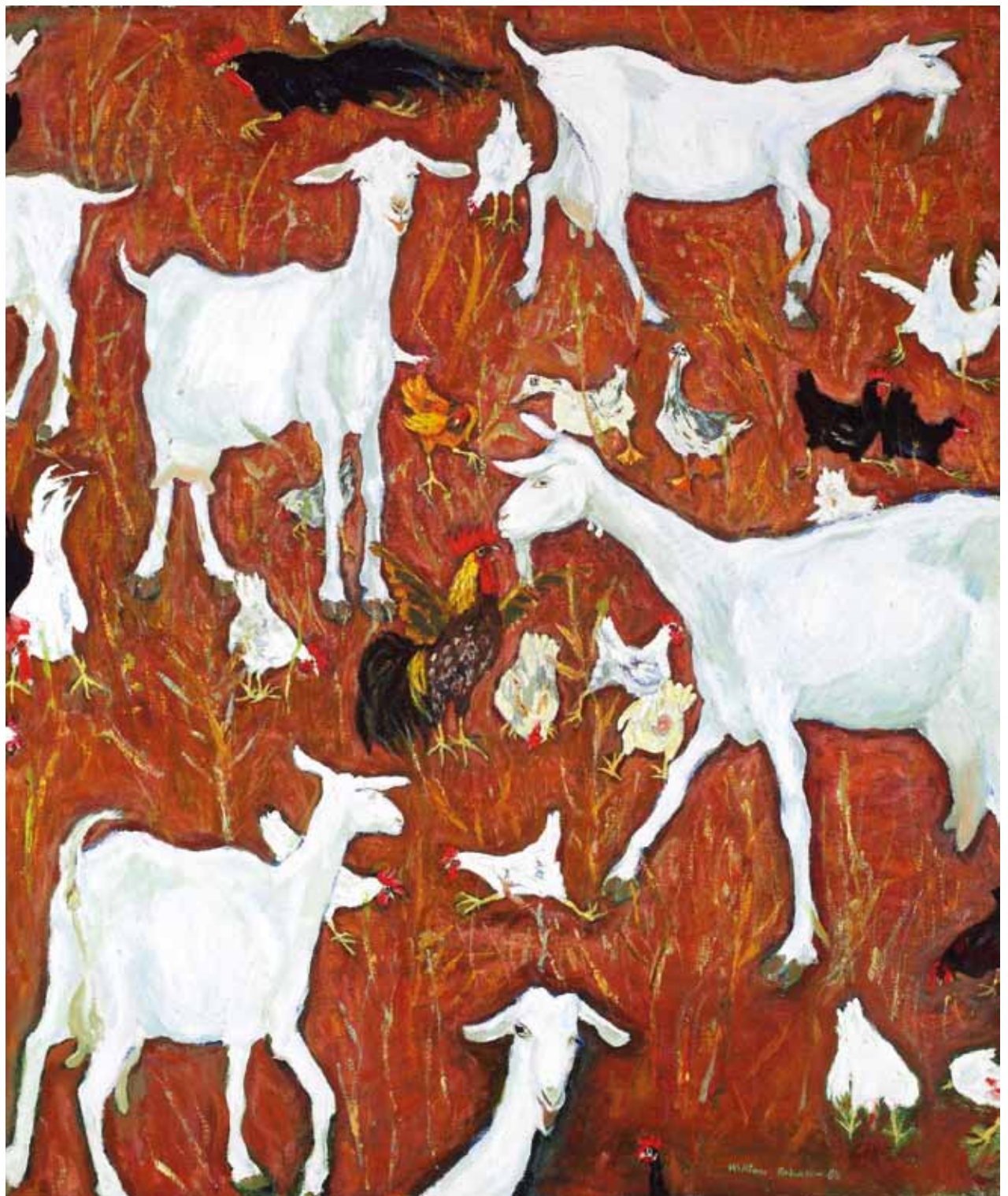
*This oil painting is like a still-life arrangement of forms. It could be almost an arrangement of bottles or apples on a plate; the same sort of systems and rules apply. One of the interesting things that I developed while drawing and painting interiors prior to these works was my use of the frame's edges—I would have things just coming in or just going out of the frame. These pictures gave me great scope for that—things coming in, or coming down and moving in one way or the other. In these new works, I began to restrict my colour palette and to apply the paint more thickly. At this time in my life, I was largely occupied with teaching and therefore the only time I had available to paint was at nights, on weekends and during holidays. Most of the interior works I was making before were in pastel and gouache. When I started these works, I also started in pastel and gouache and then later moved into oils.*

*Chookyard (detail) 1979*  
oil on board 104.5 x 91cm  
Private collection, Sydney



*This work was probably created at the same time as I was experimenting with the conté-drawn cows. I didn't really include much in the way of cows early on except for some very small works in which I also featured. This work, again, probably brings in the richness of the crop. Some of my early works just had one or a few animals in them, drawn in conté, such as one cow, or three cows, or a group of goats by itself. Gradually, I was able to work out ways of putting medium-sized goats and small chooks within the one picture, as in this one.*

*Goats and chooks* 1980  
oil on linen 104.5 x 91 cm  
QUT Art Collection  
Purchased and partial gift of Philip Bacon Galleries, 2009







*This work is unambitious; it's just a thought on paper. My eyes and the cow's eyes are the same, which is something I've done from time to time to make a comment about myself. Later on, when I bred pugs, I painted 'Self portrait for town and country' 1990 for the Archibald, in which I painted myself to look like the pugs. It is said that people grow to look like their dogs and in a way it's true. I experienced this when Shirley and I showed dogs and goats. It's not that people become physically like their animals, but I observed their little habits are quite often very, very similar. There's no way of showing these personality traits in a painting, but you can show it in terms of similarities of physical traits. It may seem as though I'm having a joke with myself, and I actually am, and, as this work is an early one, it is done in a rather crude way. I am having a joke with myself—my eyes are the same as the cows, pointing in all sorts of directions. It reminds me of an English comedian called Marty Feldman who actually had eyes like that. Maybe I was trying to turn into a theatrical character in a way.*

*There is something about the inevitability of farm life that I wished to depict in this work. It was my first entry into the Archibald Prize. There is something about farm life that is almost the opposite of self-importance and being grand—while the subject of Archibald entries are usually grand in some way. Once upon a time, the Archibald used to be a competition about people of importance and that, in fact, was part of the Prize's early rules. I suppose this work emerged from these sorts of ideas; it had to do with self-criticism. Strangely enough, by appearing as some sort of jester in this painting, I was able to convey many messages, including questions about the Archibald Prize itself.*

*I brought this idea back again with 'Equestrian self portrait' 1987, which references a history of showing people on horseback in war portraits, and in 'Self-portrait for town and country' 1990, where I painted myself to look like the pugs. In that painting, there is a little picture of a hill on the right-hand side with a shotgun that is bent and I've got two pugs sitting at my heel. Pugs are always out of control and they're almost impossible to train. They have a sweet little life, which I've always enjoyed. They're entertaining, almost clown-like—and they're certainly not hunting dogs; that is just absurd.*

*In old English paintings, people such as dukes and earls would be depicted with their guns and their hunting dogs to make them look important. Once you cock your gun, as seen in 'Self portrait for town and country', it does have something to do with masculinity no longer existing and it adds to becoming a clown to make a point. I did become a clown and I suppose it was because I knew everything was out of control. I didn't really realise what I was up to at the time, but I was showing myself in different guises that were purely to do with me. Even in my subject painting, if I started a picture of chooks or of cows or goats or the farm, I didn't expect to sell any of them since who would want a picture of 'Farmer Bill' on their lounge-room wall?*

*William and Josephine 1982–83*

*oil on linen 122 x 184cm*

*QUT Art Collection*

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







*I chose to use conté in these pictures because it doesn't have the build-up of a pencil. It remains flat when finished and has a certain sort of quality that reminds me of a photograph. These drawings are like old Victorian photos with oval frames where people are frozen in time while the camera waits to collect all the light to make the image. To a degree, they look as though they are being held like statues in time, motionless. I wanted to include cows in my paintings, but I wasn't sure how. This is how these drawings started; I was searching for ways to include them.*

*In these works I've painted myself to look like 'Farmer Bill' and I'm posing in a silly sort of way in each picture. The animals and I are all floating in an ellipse. The cows are moving with their legs going in all directions, but in a way they look as though they're just standing still. The chooks are in various positions and I think there are pugs in there as well. In a way, they are family arrangements. At the time I hadn't been overseas to see the great paintings of farms in the National Gallery, London, but I'd always enjoyed English pictures of simple country life. Not pictures of kings and queens in battle, but pictures of the people showing their cattle—holding onto a very long cow or a very prized bull, for example, with their families around them and their horse carts. There are plenty of examples of that sort of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century English-country-life painting. I was probably doing no more than that a century or more later.*

**Right and next**

*Small farm self-portrait I, II and III 1980*

oil on linen each 30 x 40cm

Private collection, Brisbane













*These works include pieces of corrugated iron, old former trees that had been chewed by the goats, and bits of timber, and so forth. All of these bits and pieces become incorporated with the animals and under this they partly take refuge. It's like a whole city that has built up. You'll notice a little group of chooks connecting, and there are other connections among the animals. It's no different from composing a still life; working out how everything relates in the picture. It's partly intuitive; for example, the chook on the end has not just stopped—there is anticipation that it's going to fly off and out of the picture. There is always movement because the animals don't have a night's sleep, but if you went out at night with a torch it wouldn't be the same place as during the day. The chooks might be up on the perch and the goats might be lying down, but the cows are still all wandering around eating. You'll notice all the grass has gone from the section where the cows are.*

*I find these paintings terribly interesting now, but in a way they shouldn't have ever been because they're so unlikely. I suppose I was experimenting at this point with the reality of thick paint. It is something that a photograph can never really capture—substance. Substance is important in a painting.*

*These pictures have never been publicly shown and I was very uncertain of them initially, but I'm not uncertain of them now because I can see that they are developmental. They're part of developing that persona of the person and the animal that I've talked about, just in a slightly different direction. Rather than painting myself with the animals, here I'm painting show animals with their owners and judges. The actual art of showing animals is a whole way of life. Within the dog-showing business, for example, there are lots of breed clubs, each of which have their own internal politics, and it's very competitive. It is a strange sort of world that you only get a slight view of if you go to the Royal National Show. In those days, it was much more of an event than it is now, everyone getting dressed up in his or her Sunday best. It was to do with pride of ownership and again the ordinariness of country people. Usually there aren't a lot of figures in my work and it makes me think I could've gone off in a number of directions at any point. I could have stayed with this for some time, developing it, but I was painting part-time then and still moving through various thoughts. I can accept the unfinished nature of everything and the untidiness of life from this side better than I could from the other side.*

*Country life I 1981*  
gouache on paper 56 x 76cm  
Private collection, Brisbane





William H. Edwards 19



*There is a certain sort of ungainliness to this picture. You can see it in other works, such as 'Panorama' 1985, where the cows are wandering in a line, following one another. They all have different gaits, and dairy cattle are very bony and ungainly, particularly when they're running—with their udders and tails swinging. Yet, they are quite large animals and you have all of this going on right next to you in the paddock. The black one in this picture would be a Friesian. We did have the odd Friesian. I suppose they are studies of the movement of cows.*



*These drawings coincided with our move to Beechmont in 1984. I didn't have a studio at the time, so I worked from the kitchen alcove where the stove used to sit. I sat down there and did all these pencil drawings. When we first moved to Beechmont, the farm had been abandoned for many years. The home paddock was scattered with old furniture, a leaning dunny that subsequently fell over, and wrecks of old motor vehicles. The animals interacted with all of this until we were able to remove it. It did provide an ongoing link to my other farmyards. Shirley and I appear in most of that series.*

*Untitled 19 (Farmyard) 1984*  
pencil on paper 56 x 76cm  
Private collection, Brisbane







*By this time in my career, my landscapes had started to develop. When looking at all of these pictures in context, it doesn't look as though there's a huge change; rather, they are gradual. The animals start to work their way out of the landscapes, but they are still there, as in this pastel where there are cows. I think that there is an awkwardness within a lot of these pictures that I think is good. While in these pictures I hadn't started to consciously develop anything in terms of a multi-vision landscape, you can see the early movements towards that direction. However, I wouldn't say it's a very sophisticated development of it at all.*

*Beechmont landscape, early evening 1985*

pastel on paper 54 x 74cm

QUT Art Collection

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

*This is one of a small series of paintings that were included in the 1986 Biennale of Sydney. Thunderstorms are far more intense in the country where there are no city buildings to disperse the sounds. We lived in the hinterland so also had a closer proximity to storms—essentially, we were surrounded and immersed in them. Working in the open, we found the presence of storms both exciting and frightening. As we stood transfixed with anticipation of the storm, the animals would sense the change in weather, with the storm rolling across the hills. This painting is one of the last ones where cows are included in the landscape. By 1988, after the completion of 'Creation landscape: Darkness and light', only occasionally does the figure appear in my work.*

*Thunderstorm 1986*  
oil on linen 96 x 101 cm  
Private collection, Brisbane







*In this unlikely encounter with a rearing horse, we are in a pas de deux. In some works, such as this, the sensible relationship with animals changed to imaginary levels. But at the same time, the painting also shows a type of simpatico that I sometimes feel with my animals.*

*Self-portrait with Shar 1989*  
oil on linen 66 x 56cm  
Private collection, Brisbane









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**William Robinson: The farmyards**

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**Cover**

*Farmyard, Beechmont with William looking* 1985

oil on linen 86 x 113cm

Private collection, Sydney

**Inside cover**

*Untitled 19 (Farmyard)* 1984

pencil on paper 56 x 76cm

Private collection, Brisbane

**Previous**

*Farmyard drawing (detail)* c1982

graphite on paper, three panels each 203 x 112cm

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