

Speech

Address By

**Her Excellency the Honourable Quentin Bryce AC CVO
Governor-General of the Commonwealth of Australia**

On the occasion of

William Robinson Exhibition and 75th Birthday

Brisbane
16 April 2011

Friends,

I want to say how utterly delighted I am to be with you in this much-loved historic Queensland House, so carefully and skillfully restored under the

Vice-Chancellor's inspired leadership during our sesqui-centenary.

We gather for a very special celebration, the opening of William Robinson:

The Transfigured Landscape.

An exhibition bringing together major works from public and private collections across Australia, some being shown for the first time outside the institutions that acquired them.

On show too are the self-portraits, rarely seen, including Archibald Prize winners, outrageously witty, provocative, whimsical, and controversial in their time.

You remember them - the one on the horse and the one with the fish.

Accompanying the exhibition is a magnificent publication of the same title – It is An Overview of the Artist's Journey.

We see oil paintings, pastes, water colours, gouash, conté, pencil and graphite drawings, lithographs, ceramics, bronzes and an etching or two.

In festschrift manner, there are essays from curators and writers whose insights and observations give considered analysis and original research. I am indebted to each of them for their evocative descriptions of the artist's thoughts and deeds, in particular to Dr Deborah Hart for her poetic pictures in words¹.

At the heart of it all, we commemorate a significant milestone in William Robinson's life, his 75th birthday.

Its chronology is set out in this volume – the early years which always tell us so much – are enormously endearing, familiar in so many aspects to Michael, to me, to our generation of Brisbane kids.

The boy in the riverside suburb who goes to school at Annerley, then to Brisbane State High, and on to teachers college.

So familiar – yes, but so different at the same time.

What William Robinson was struggling with weren't our ordinary hopes and aspirations, but a deeply serious artistic dilemma – to be or not to be a concert pianist or a painter.

The matter was resolved after his performance as a state finalist in the 1957 ABC's annual concerto and vocal competition. The QSO was conducted by Rudolph Pekarek at a very rapid tempo as Bill played Rachmaninoff's concerto Number 2 in C Minor.

He was so stressed by the experience, he gave up the idea of a performing career.

"I played the first movement 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. I was also trying to do an art course at the technical college, teach, and learn music at the same time."

I was sitting in the front row on the left hand side in the City Hall at this concert. Moreton Bay girls got the best seats because our music teacher Miss Handley queued up in the dark of early morning outside the Penny's Building in Queen Street, waiting for the ABC box office to open.

When I look at a photograph of Bill at that time – he was 21 – I know my pals and I would have been swooning at the tall, dark, handsome young man playing the divine Rachmaninoff.

I could never have imagined that some decades later he would have enormous influence on my days, on the way I look at landscape, in art and in life.

I could only have dreamt about what he would bring to it, as he does to so many – sublime beauty, intellectual and spiritual questioning and understanding, joyousness in nature, in our simultaneously ancient and still burgeoning environment, morning sun shining, *diaphanous rays, moonlight over the seas, stars in the night sky, lyrical mauve shadows, delicate patterns of birds flying over pale beachscapes*².

In my first days at Yarralumla, when I used to get lost in the paddocks and sometimes felt that I was "amid alien corn", a most wonderful thing happened.

I went to the National Gallery to choose some paintings for the House, and for my office, to bring a little of myself to my new place.

I looked and looked, and then I saw it. Blue upon blue upon blue shadow, light, darkness. *Springbrook with Lifting Fog*. Revelatory, highly theatrical, playful too.

The ancient trees, 60 million years old, Antarctic beeches, that Bill and Shirley looked up to every morning as they walked in Springbrook rainforest.

Bill recounts:

"I was thinking of 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."

Oh, the mystery, the majesty, the glory, of the volcanic ranges, the rising, tilting, spiralling trees in front, behind, and all around.

You can see them in *Creation Landscape*, the epic painting on our invitation.

Would there be the slightest chance I could have the Robinson? I squeaked.

I couldn't believe it when Ron Radford said Yes; and then the absolute magic that the space on my wall in the Chancery was perfect for it.

Its view is through my windows to mountains and lake, willows and poplars, maples: and Sulphur Crested Cockatoos peek in, squawking and flapping on my balcony.

I cannot describe the enormous pleasure, happiness, contentment and wonder that this painting gives to me. It takes me to the centre of myself; it gives me a sense of place, of belonging.

Betty Churcher writes in her “Notebooks” of another great painting, “every time you see it you realise that your memory has played you false; each time you notice another brilliant brush stroke, that is really no more than a squiggle of paint, but it means so much.”

Oh yes, again and again that happens.

I know you will understand what I mean when you look into its grandeur and strength in the museum this evening. It will mesmerise you too. Endlessly fascinating, those clouds, their edges, their roots, the twists of the trees. You can breathe the atmosphere, that rainforest clarity of air, fine and pure.

In meetings I sit in a chair where I can look into the Fog Rising. It has taught me so much, how much a work of great beauty demands and how love grows

as you search for its secrets, as it transports you to another place.

David Malouf captures the way Robinson appeals to our senses directly and powerfully, the play of paint on the canvas, the complex rhythms, the illusionistic conjuring with the effects of light and air in a technical display

so easy, so insistent, that it looks like another form of nature.

I’ll confess that I’m anxious to see it again tonight, and that I did indeed almost shout down the phone at Phillip Bacon ‘what do you mean, borrowing it for three months?’

His sanguine reply ‘I was told to expect that sort of response.’ My painting, as I outrageously refer to it, belongs to our national collection. The first major William Robinson work purchased by the NGA the year it was painted, 1999.

This followed strenuous urging, a crusade you could say, by Giles Autey, John MacDonald, other critics and many artists, particularly in Queensland, who saw in Creation Landscape a masterpiece that should have been preferred to others acquired at the time.

When the Springbrook painting was hung in my office I invited Bill and Shirley to come and see how it looks there.

What a thrill, a memorable experience, to stand with them in front of it. We talked about the exquisite clear clear blue in the left hand corner, the earth and its curvature, the sky and its wonder.

I watched Bill, and marvelled at the extraordinary capacity of his observing eye – the special power of his vision – this gentle, humorous man, given to acts of kindness, who loves slapstick, and is a most charming and entertaining companion.

Perhaps our conversation that day was the trigger for a gesture of extraordinary generosity, the loan of a painting from Bill’s own collection, *Evening Landscape with Pandanus*, for the Official Entrance. It’s the first thing you see when you come into the House on the left hand side: underneath it, always, a table of Australian flowers.

The proportions are perfect, the dark and the light, painted in late afternoon, the sun is setting on the left, as it comes down, it bathes everything in gorgeous iridescence. It’s a momentary thing.

On the right in the bubbles and sparkles of churning water are jellyfish, and other creatures, insects.

Across, there’s something stunning: a distinct trace of purple where the sea hits the sand.

Bill’s words “*it was an absolutely incandescent violet line: I found it the most inspiring thing you can imagine: the sensation was enough to carry me into another realm of painting.*”

Through the day, ravishing passages of luminous colour constantly change, the soft pearly peach glimmers in late morning when I stand back.

There’s always something new among the grevilleas, hibiscus, banksia, night blossoms: a blue faced miner bird.

I can feel that scrub on my arms as a child when we escaped on sleepy afternoons at the beach to investigate and to scratch about.

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Evening Landscape is our introduction to visitors from across Australia and from overseas, greeting, welcoming. I observe the way it tickles the imagination, delights the heart, engages intensely.

I can't tell you how many adults have seen it, but I do know that 30,000 schoolchildren have – we've been counting them. The 30,000th, a Grade 6 boy from Toowoomba Grammar who lives near Adelaide River in the Northern Territory.

I told him about Bill Robinson, about our great Australian landscape artist who is musician, teacher, painter, constantly learning, changing, developing, creating magic.

As we celebrate this glorious exhibition on your 75th birthday Bill, we reflect on the golden life you and Shirley share. There have been times of light, shadow and darkness, but always a holding on to truth, goodness and beauty.

They are, as Emerson said, but different faces of the same all.

With gratitude, admiration and affection I open the Transfigured Landscape.

1. Dr David Malouf AO

Making consciousness and the created world one

Mr Desmond MacAulay and Ms Bettina MacAulay

A soul's solace: Art, faith and music

Ms Hannah Frank

Light Years: William Robinson and the creation story

Dr Michael Brand

William Robinson and the public eye

2. Dr Deborah Hart

William Robinson's artistic development: An ultimate and expansive journey. The journey continues.

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