



WILLIAM ROBINSON INSIGHTS

WILLIAM ROBINSON GALLERY QUT

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Creation landscape: Earth and sea 1995
oil on linen, three panels, 187cm x 721.6cm overall
Collection of S & J Ford

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INTRODUCTION

As uncanny as it may seem, in the 1960s a sound foundation in draftsmanship was a highly desirable skill for hairdressing apprentices and students in the visual arts alike. Brisbane's Central Technical College was a training ground for both, and it was in this teaching environment in 1957 that Betty Churcher and William Robinson first met. Both young teachers shared a class that trained aspiring hairdressers in the art of drawing, so that they could render the perfect 'do' on paper before taking scissors to hand. Neither was sure why they shared this peculiar class—Churcher had recently returned from London and Robinson was working part-time towards his art teacher's diploma and a diploma in drawing and painting—but both enjoyed hours of amusement as their fledgling and somewhat reluctant students struggled with the basics of portraiture. Robinson sums it up decades later with his trademark biting humour: 'the students were just into fashion and makeup, much like some contemporary artists of today'.¹ Despite an air of futility, the classes provided great mirth, and both acknowledge they were the foundation from which a lifelong friendship was formed.

Some 30 years later, as the Director of the Art Gallery of Western Australia, Churcher acquired Robinson's largest work to date, the epic *Creation landscape: Darkness and light* 1988, for the State Collection. In light of the previous year's controversy surrounding Robinson's Archibald win and prevailing public sentiments surrounding his work, this purchase was a bold move, and, in hindsight, inspired. As the first painting from the larger 'Creation series' (consisting of seven multi-panelled works created from 1988-2004), *Creation landscape: Darkness and light* is a gem in Robinson's oeuvre.

It is grand in both scale and subject matter, and integral to understanding the development of Robinson's signature multi-viewpoint perspective. It is also indicative of his transition from a painter of farmyards to the large-scale landscapes he is acclaimed for today. This acquisition was a shrewd move by Churcher, a combination of her curatorial acumen and in-depth understanding of Robinson's practice.² Watching the evolution of Robinson's work over decades has allowed Churcher to develop an unparalleled depth of understanding, as well as an authoritative eye—her insights balance moving personal commentary with sharp art analysis.

William Robinson's friendship with Betty Churcher led to the opportunity for an introduction to Brisbane artist, Davida Allen. Allen studied under Churcher at Stuartholme School in the late 1960s, and later under Roy Churcher (Betty Churcher's husband) at Central Technical College. Although neither Robinson nor Allen can remember the exact year they met (sometime in the 1970s), they acknowledge that Betty Churcher was the connection, and that they both moved in the same circles around the Kelvin Grove Teachers' College (at which Robinson was then a Senior Lecturer in Art) and their mutual art dealer at the time, Ray Hughes.

While art formed the basis of their friendship, it was family that provided focus. Since Allen's first visit to the Robinsons' Birkadale property in 1979 with children in tow, the families became close confidants watching as their respective families grew, children married and grandchildren arrived. Allen talks fondly of the completion of one of Robinson's major works (and the first of his Archibald entries), *William and Josephine* 1983, painted the year after the birth of Allen's daughter, also

Still life with Chinese vessels 2010

oil on linen 87 x 68cm

QUT Art Collection

Purchased 2011 through the William Robinson Art Collection Fund

a Josephine. Allen describes their relationship as 'regulars in the telephone contacts and visitors book...very strongly so'.³

While the formal and stylistic contrasts between Allen and Robinson's practices are striking, they both share an underlying concern with painting what they know: their family and immediate surrounds. In 1986 (beating Robinson by a year), Allen was the first Queensland woman to win the prestigious Archibald Prize for Portraiture with *My father-in-law hosing his celtus trees* 1986—a portrait of her father-in-law, Dr John Shera. *Michael with cow and crow* 1984, a portrait by Robinson of Allen's husband, Dr Michael Shera, was painted at their property and is among only a handful of portraits by Robinson of which the subject is from outside his immediate family. To come full circle, in 1990 Allen was once again a finalist in the Archibald, this time with a portrait of Churcher, titled *hey Betty – Portrait of Betty Churcher* 1990.

With a smirk, both Robinson and Allen talk fondly of the banter they share and is not unlike the humour that Churcher so fondly recalls from her days working alongside Robinson. Only amongst friends could Robinson get away with describing the experience of viewing Allen's works as 'a bit like swallowing nails'.⁴

With only two years separating them, multi-award winning author, David Malouf, and Robinson were both born in Brisbane in the 1930s. It wasn't, however, until 2003 that they finally met when Malouf was invited to open an exhibition of Robinson's graphic works at the Queensland University of Technology Art Museum.⁵ Prior to this, Malouf had held a keen interest in Robinson's work when it first caught his eye in the 1980s at the house of a mutual friend. In his exhibition opening speech

(which was subsequently adapted to text and reproduced in two publications on the artist) polymath Malouf perceptively draws parallels between Robinson's multi-view perspective and the unique topographical qualities of Brisbane. According to Malouf, Brisbane's hilly terrain presents not one perspective, as in the case of the single-point horizon offered by the flat landscape of cities such as Melbourne or Adelaide, but rather multiple prospects from a single vantage point. This quality, or shared spatial memory, is apparent in the work of many Brisbane writers, and is evident in the paintings of William Robinson.

At a recent Brisbane Writers Festival, an audience member told David Malouf that they found growing up in Brisbane boring, and nothing like the Brisbane in Mr Malouf's books such as *Johnno* 1975. Malouf replied, 'I suspect you were just not watching closely enough'.⁶ It is this sensibility he shares with Robinson—a capacity to present his audience with the familiar through the unfamiliar, to undermine the narratives that we are accustomed to and that dominate the way we view our surrounds. One of the great achievements of both Malouf and Robinson is their ability to capture the most ephemeral of subjects: atmosphere. In their respective mediums they have each mastered a unique language; one that inspires a journey from the seemingly ordinary to a discovery of the lyrical in the everyday. This connection between author and artist has fuelled lively discussion and perceptive commentary over the past decade, which has greatly added to our understanding of Robinson's work.

It is through these connections, inspirations, conversations and friendships that span more than fifty years that we are offered



Passing storm, late afternoon, Beechmont (Study) 1993
pencil on paper 14.5 x 22cm
Private collection, Brisbane



an exclusive insight into the work of William Robinson. His highly original artworks speak of his life's journey—from family life and exploits on the burgeoning farm, to the landscapes he surrounded himself with, and more recently the objects and settings of his home and garden—all are intrinsically connected to his personal life and vision. While Robinson's works are deeply personal they are also universal. From the magnitude of the multi-panelled landscape paintings to the sentimentality of an etching of a single mouse, they speak of humility and a marvelous awareness of being-in-the-world. It is this aspect of the work that we are greatly privileged to discover in *William Robinson: Insights*, the fifth exhibition at the William Robinson Gallery since its opening in 2009. We are offered a rare glimpse into both his private life and his extraordinarily rich and complex works, through the eyes of three friends and eminent figures in Australian cultural life—art historian Betty Churcher, author David Malouf, and artist Davida Allen.

VANESSA VAN OOYEN

Senior Curator
William Robinson Gallery

¹ W. Robinson, personal communication, 17 April 2012

² In 1989, aged 53, Robinson left his teaching position to concentrate on painting full-time. In the same year he held a sell out solo exhibition at Ray Hughes Gallery in Sydney. The following year he won the Wynne Prize for Landscape with the painting *The rainforest* 1990. It was during this time that Robinson began to attract critical acclaim for his work.

³ D. Allen, personal communication, 1 May 2012

⁴ C. McGregor, 'Master of creation', Sydney Morning Herald, 28 December 1996, p.35

⁵ Place and memory: The graphic work of William Robinson, Queensland University of Technology Art Museum, 12 September – 7 December 2003. The exhibition subsequently toured to seven regional galleries in Australia.

⁶ Readersvoice.com, 2006, <http://www.readersvoice.com/interviews/2006/08/david-malouf-on-johnno-and-writing/>, 14 May 2012

William and Josephine 1983

oil on linen 122 x 183.5cm

QUT Art Collection

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

CONTRIBUTORS

DAVIDA ALLEN

Davida Allen was born in Charleville in 1951. She studied under Betty Churcher at the Stuartholme School in Brisbane, then later with Roy Churcher at the Brisbane Central Technical College.

In 1973 Allen held her first solo exhibitions at Ray Hughes Gallery in Brisbane and Sydney. She has held exhibitions at Australian Galleries in Sydney and Melbourne, and Philip Bacon Galleries, Brisbane (the latter being her solo gallery). Allen has been invited to exhibit in major national exhibitions including Biennale of Sydney at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1984, and Australian Perspecta in 1981 and 1985, and also in *Federation: Australian Art and Society 1901–2001*, a National Gallery of Australia exhibition, which toured from 2000 to 2002.

In 1986, Allen won the prestigious Archibald Prize. She was the first Queensland woman, and one of only a handful of women throughout the award's history, to do so. The subject of the portrait was her father-in-law, Dr John Shera, watering his garden.

In addition to her work as a painter she has written and illustrated two books (*The Autobiography of Vicki Myers – Close to the bone* and *What is a portrait? – Images of Vicki Myers*) as well as writing and directing the 50-minute film, *Feeling sexy*, that was invited to screen at the prestigious Venice Film Festival in 1999.

Allen has held numerous solo exhibitions in Australia and has shown internationally. She is represented in all major Australian public collections as well as the Museum of Modern Art, New York, and National Gallery of New Zealand, Wellington.

BETTY CHURCHER

Betty Churcher AO was born in Brisbane. She is a graduate of the Royal College of Art, London, and holds an MA from the Courtauld Institute of Art, London.

Churcher was the first woman to head a tertiary institution (Dean of School of Art and Design, Phillip Institute of Technology, now RMIT), was the first female director of a state art gallery (Art Gallery of Western Australia from 1987 to 1990), and the first female director of the National Gallery of Australia from 1990 to 1997.

Churcher is the author of several acclaimed books, including *Understanding Art* 1973, *Molvig: The Lost Antipodean* 1984, *The Art of War* 2004, and most recently *Notebooks* 2011. Churcher has also been an art critic for the Australian and wrote and presented several television series on art including *Take Five* and *Hidden Treasures*.

Churcher was made an Officer of the Order of Australia (AO) in 1990, in recognition of service to the arts, particularly in the field of arts administration and education.

DAVID MALOUF

David Malouf AO is an internationally-known author whose work as a novelist, poet, short story writer, memoirist, essayist, and writer of plays, non-fiction works, and libretti, has been widely acclaimed. He was born in Brisbane, and after graduating from The University of Queensland, lectured there briefly before moving to England. Malouf returned in 1968 to Australia, lecturing at The University of Sydney. After becoming a full-time writer in 1978, he divided his time between Tuscany and Sydney. David Malouf was made an Officer of the Order of Australia (AO) in 1987.

Malouf's earlier novels include *Johnno* 1975, *An Imaginary Life* 1978 and *Harland's Half Acre* 1984. *The Great World* 1990 won the Commonwealth Writers Prize and the Prix Femina Étranger (France). *Remembering Babylon* 1993 won the inaugural international IMPAC Dublin Literary Award and the Commonwealth Writers' Prize, and was shortlisted for the Booker Prize and the Miles Franklin Award. Malouf was awarded the Pascall Prize for Critical Writing in 1988, and the Neustadt International Prize for Literature and the Lannan Literary Award for Fiction (both 2000). *Revolving Days: Selected Poems* by David Malouf was published in 2008.

The author's collected short stories, *The Complete Stories*, was shortlisted for the inaugural Australian Prime Minister's Literary Award in 2008, and also in that year Malouf won the inaugural Australian-Asia Literary Award; was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature; and won the Australian Publishers Association's Lloyd O'Neil Award for outstanding service to the Australian book industry. Malouf's novel *Ransom* was shortlisted in the fiction category for the 2010 Prime Minister's Literary Awards, and won the 2010 Criticos Prize in Athens.



When I first saw Bill's *Starry night* images (at Ray Hughes Gallery in Red Hill, Brisbane), I was struck by the simplicity of the images and had a strong feeling of exactly what they were: stars in the sky. I had not yet met Bill but I became an admirer of his work then and there.

This image is simply some white spots on a page of dark blue with some lighter marks at the bottom of the paper to suggest buildings or water. It doesn't really matter what—it is the land or sea...it is the bottom of the universe—because the stars are at the top in the dark blue sky. For Bill it is a very conventional perspective, and looking at this image it is as if one is looking up into the sky counting the stars...is it the Milky Way?

DAVIDA ALLEN

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

This small etching shows us what a consummate draftsman William Robinson is now and always was. In the silhouette of the man walking his dog we see so much; the rolling walk of the man, the alertness of the dog as he impatiently pulls on the lead—this way, this way. The man concentrates on the dog, the dog on the way ahead. It's a wonderful little ode to man's relationship with his dog—something seen briefly that has left an image indelibly stamped on the memory.

BETTY CHURCHER

Untitled (Man walking a dog) 1979
etching and aquatint 40 x 40cm
QUT Art Collection
Gift of the artist, 1979





It is the composition even more than the subject matter that attracts me to this painting. The goats moving in and out of the canvas; one just poking a head into the story from the bottom; another leaving; another moving in. Of course these are only white shapes with ears, legs and a tail, but we believe in them as 'goats'. The ramshackle-ness of goats—who are known to eat everything, nibbling away—is happening right here in front of us. It is a mastery of craft if the audience can hear the bleating of these animals. In 1980 Bill Robinson actually did have goats around his house and he knew exactly how they behaved. When an artist is familiar with the subject, the magic of a painting has a much better chance of success.

DAVIDA ALLEN

Goats and chooks 1980

oil on linen 91 x 76cm

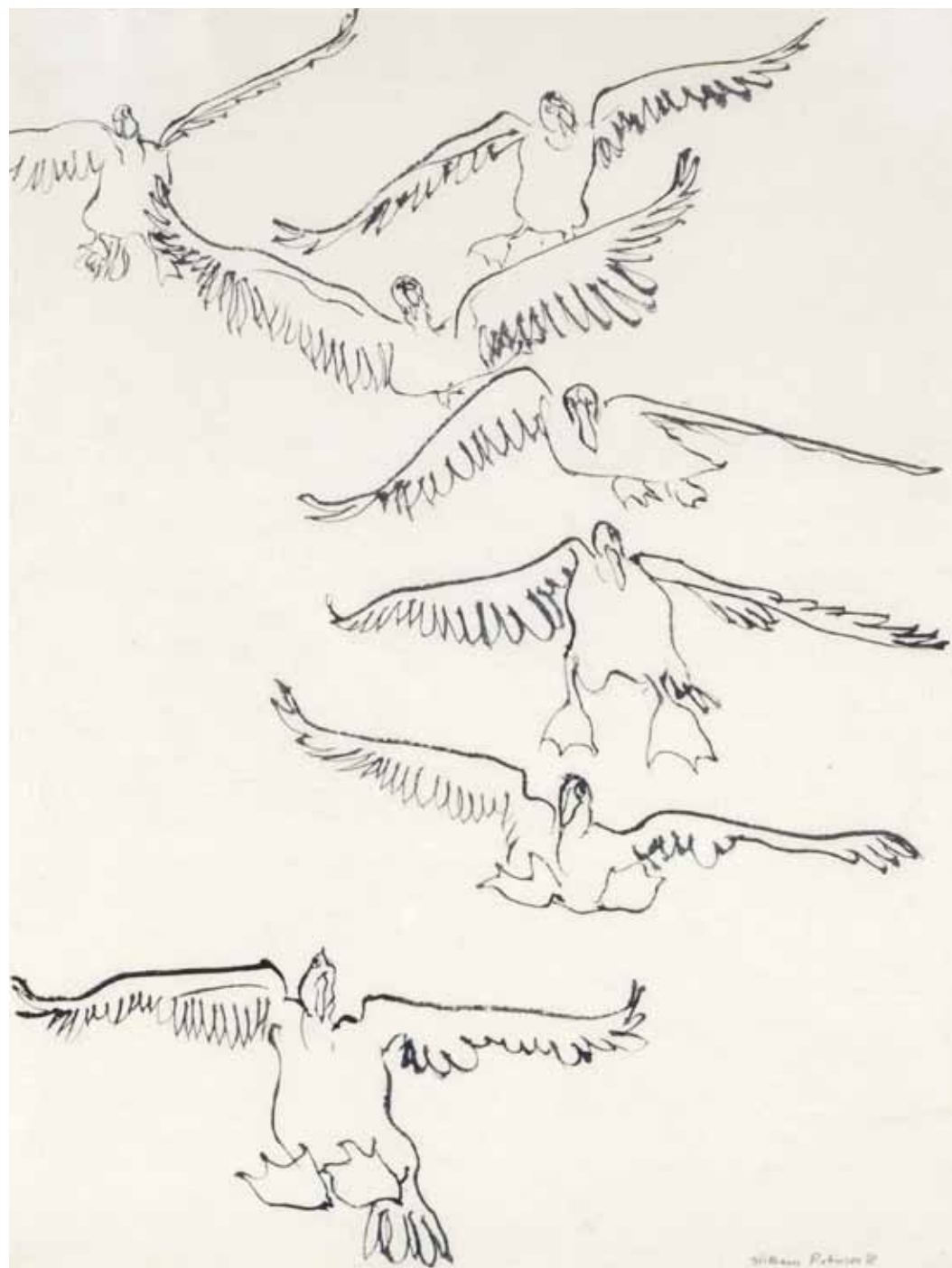
QUT Art Collection

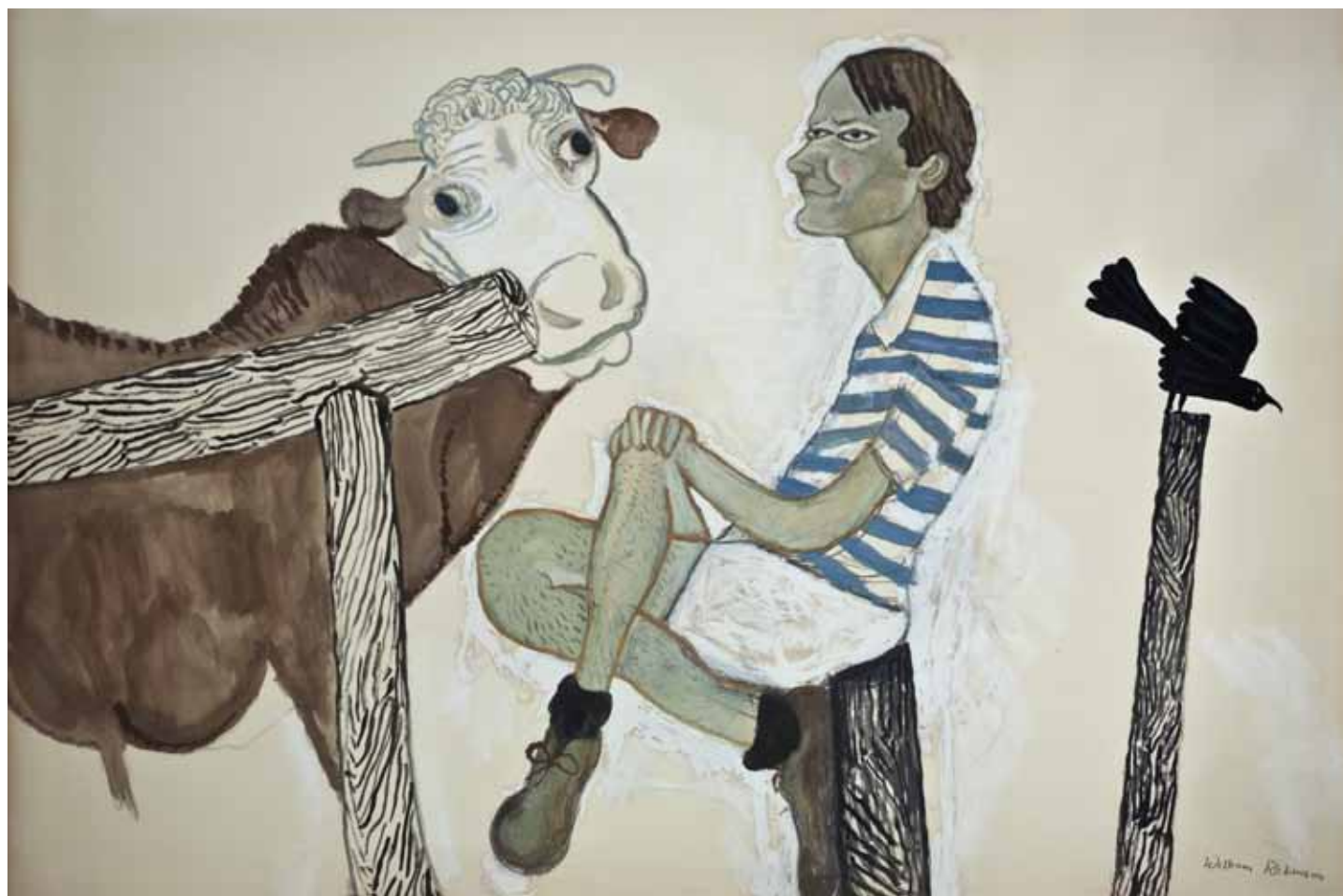
Purchased and partial gift of Philip Bacon Galleries, 2009

This drawing of a duck coming in to land on water has been chosen by me to highlight the vital role played by drawing in the artist's practice. The artist seems to be projecting himself into the bird; he's not an outsider observing the bird. For a moment he is able to lose himself, and empathize with the bird. He draws with ink, with a sure and steady touch, following every moment of the landing as the bird wheels, and banks, and finally rights himself for landing. The feet come down and finally they brace to ski across the surface of the water. It's a magical moment that the artist is able to share with us, through his astonishing ability to draw, and to hold an image accurately in his memory.

BETTY CHURCHER

Ducks 1981
ink on paper 66 x 51cm
Artbank collection





Bill created this image of my husband, Michael, and even though some years have passed since he was sitting on a fence post, talking to a cow on our property, it still looks so like him. I wanted this image to be kept securely in a place where everyone could enjoy it, particularly my grandchildren. I didn't want my daughters fighting over who would inherit it because each one loves it, so Michael decided to give it to QUT to be part of the William Robinson Collection.

DAVIDA ALLEN

Michael with cow and crow 1984
gouache and pencil on paper 79.1 x 119.6cm
QUT Art Collection
Donated through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts
Program by Michael Shera, 2011

This image is indeed clever in the fact that not only are there stars to tell the audience it is night time, and not only is everything dark around the stars, but Shirley has a torch. What is Bill doing out there in the dark? Probably attending to one of the cows.

This is the most endearing image because the story is so rich. We know that these two figures live with cows and are therefore on duty at night as well as day. This night has a spectacular starry sky, but still, in amongst the trees, Shirley needs a torch to spot Bill. Again the perspective has the trees reaching to the sky, but the sky is in the middle of the page, not conventionally at the top of the page. Has the artist put the sky in the middle of the page because it is the most important part of the story? Or is it simply a more logical place to put it?

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 sun light seeping through a cloud that makes it turn yellow, without thinking of William Robinson and wondering if he is hiding somewhere behind a rock or tree with his paintbrush in hand!

DAVIDA ALLEN

Starry night 1985

pastel, pencil and gouache on paper 56 x 75.5cm

Griffith University Art Collection

Acquired in recognition of the artist's time as a student at Central Technical College, now Queensland College of Art, Griffith University





It would be easy to take this painting, at first glance, as primitive, an image, down-home and simple, of life on the farm, and to see the artist as naive. All the elements of the work are immediately recognisable as just what they are: sheets of corrugated iron, wooden slats; several goats, each looking out at us from individual lives and with individual expressions; a cow, a rooster, birds; the artist himself, mysteriously hooded and ghostly, a mite uncomfortable in his role as keeper of this menagerie; as Adam in this rundown version of a not quite domesticated Eden. Is this a vision of order or of chaos? And what is the source of our pleasure, our immediate visual pleasure in all this?

There is nothing naive or primitive about the way space is organised in the painting. The artfulness of the play between line and volume; the geometric patterns created by the squares and triangles of the corrugated iron sheets with their aquamarine and russet stripes; the bold blacks and whites and dabs of red against the painterly variations of the earth background. All this is complex and sophisticated, as we discover as soon as we give the painting the attention its complexity deserves.

The one thing, of course, that no observer can miss is the gentle humour and wit of the artist here; his affectionate eye for the oddness and individuality of even the most commonest creature, and for the created objects of this ramshackle world; his willingness, too—in the spirit of inclusiveness and gentle mockery—to number himself, clearly as bemused as the rest, among the household's domesticated beasts.

DAVID MALOUF

William with Lancelot and others 1985
oil on linen 136 x 198cm
Private collection, Sydney

Much of the exuberance and daring of this picture comes from the medium Robinson is working in; watercolour. With its lightness and fluidity, watercolour has always encouraged artists to let go, to be spontaneous, to experiment. *Landscape with noon reflection* 1985 is one of the earliest works in which Robinson plays with what will be a distinguishing feature of his later and more considered paintings: the artful manipulation of point of view that allows us to see a sweep of land, water, sky, from more than one angle simultaneously; a sweet derangement of our sense of visual reality that in its vivid colours, and its challenging reversal of what is expected and ordinary, but also in its choice of an aerial out-of-the-body perspective, suggests transcendence, an opening of the moment in fluid time to a more than ordinary apprehension of what the world is and where we stand in it. A similar aerial view appears in many of Robinson's finest pictures in the following decade: *Puddle Landscape* 1986; *Landscape with the moon and bathers* 1988; *The Mountain series I-IV* 1993; where the eye finds no single point from which all the details of the painting cohere, and, on the artist's powerful persuasion, demands none; finding in the denial of what we think of as 'natural' deployment of objects in space a disorientation that is also a new, more liberated way of seeing.

DAVID MALOUF

Landscape with noon reflection 1985

watercolour 74 x 55cm

QUT Art Collection

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





Not all the puddles are blue—only one in fact—then it becomes a muddy water landscape. This is the most splendid story. The red shirt and straw hat figure is at the puddle furthest away, while the male with the big hat looks into the big blue pool at his reflection, just like the cows!

The red bird flying past gives the painting's perspective another dimension of space. I could simply look at this image for ages and ages. The clouds in the far left corner drifting in behind the red shirt person (I know this is Shirley, but that is neither here nor there), and there are more clouds in the water's reflection. The artist is playing a game of space here. I suspect he has painted this day on the land with his cows simply as he sees it—not trying to be particularly clever with composition or perspective—and this is exactly what being an artist is all about: having an individual language and making up stories in colour (in this case, on a flat surface of linen), but the end result is tumultuous in its extraordinariness and so we all celebrate in William Robinson's way of looking at his universe.

DAVIDA ALLEN

Puddle landscape 1986
oil on linen 124 x 173.5cm
Private collection, Brisbane

The starry night wraps comfortably around the swimmers and above and beyond is infinite and unfathomable space that reminds us that we are all floating in a vast universe. 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

William and Shirley swimming 1987
oil on linen 76.5 x 101.5cm
Private collection, Brisbane





Robinson often uses mirrors or reflections to 'puncture' the canvas, as it were, inviting us to glimpse below the surface to the mystery that lies beyond. In this picture, Shirley and Bill gaze into the glassy surface of a forest pond. All around the pond the shapes are dark and muted in colour—the true clarity is revealed on the surface of the pond. There we feel everything is revealed for a moment, yet we know that a ripple on the surface of the water can obscure what a moment ago was crystal clear. The pervading mood is of stillness and peace. We envy the onlookers their moment of revelation.

BETTY CHURCHER

Creation night, Beechmont (Study) 1988
oil on linen 76 x 102cm
Private collection, Brisbane

To paint fire is a bit of a challenge. Here the artist has done more than just the *look* of fire. The brush strokes are moving, and moving in the middle of two landscape shapes. Our eyes go immediately into this gap of air with the red and pink hues. How on earth does the artist make it actually *feel* hot? By using the colours of red and pink, and then mauve? Or by sitting the fire alone in the middle of the composition, with smoke seeping over a couple of already burnt trees on the left bank? I think this perspective helps the fire be fire—we know the intrinsic feature of fire is that it is fast and we can see where the fire has moved. *I love this painting* and I am left wondering if the fire will actually catch alight the whole vision!

DAVIDA ALLEN

Summer landscape with bushfire 1989
oil on linen 147 x 195cm
The Macquarie Group Collection





One requirement of a portrait is a good likeness. Another, often forgotten, is that it should create—in iconographical terms, as Robinson does so superbly here and elsewhere—an image that is immediately memorable. Robinson often appears in his own works. Drawings, paintings, sculpture, on ceramic plates and vases; sometimes in the company of cows, goats and chickens; sometimes with his wife, Shirley. Here he stands alone and full frontal, the centre of attention, but of what sort of attention? This is a self portrait, a representation of how the artist sees himself, or wants or is willing to be seen. But we have only to think of similar portraits of Rubens, Rembrandt, Sir Joshua Reynolds, to see how quirky this one is. Why is the painter wearing a monk's hood knocked up out of a chaff-bag? Where is he exactly? Is he levitating? Why is he holding two goose feathers?

In the Renaissance portrait, every detail of dress, accouterment, pose etc., is part of a language, an emblematic code that tells us things we need to know about the sitter: his status, his trade—whether he is an artist, a merchant, a man of power; something of how he stands in relation to the world; his character or soul. What, if we attempt such a reading here, is the artist William Robinson? A goose of another sort? A Holy Fool? It takes us a moment to move beyond questions of why and where, and beyond playful humour, to look close and discover the painter here: in the way stillness becomes tension; in the boldness of the colours, yellow against grey/green/black; in the rendering of the goose and the island of feathery cloud under the figure's feet; the perfect organisation of all this within the picture's space; the language of painting itself in the hands of an artist at the peak of his form.

DAVID MALOUF

Self portrait with goose feathers 1989

oil on linen 198 x 138cm

QUT Art Collection

Donated through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts

Program by William Robinson, 2011

The vastness of creation and the smallness of man are highlighted to an almost frightening degree in this picture. Bill's kerosene lamp lights up a small space around him, but the moon lights up the world. You can't help feeling nervous for Bill, alone in that dark forest, but at the same time you envy him the experience of that starry night. Bill is able to tell his story without once slipping into banal illustration—the high night sky has a symphonic grandeur—you can return again and again, and each time experience something new in this picture.

BETTY CHURCHER

William by lamplight 1990
oil on linen 137.5 x 197.5cm
Private collection, Brisbane





This ceramic, like many of William Robinson's paintings, is a celebration of a perfect marriage. Here a modern Adam and Eve clasp hands and defy the serpent. The joy that they have each taken in their life together is a tangible reality—they each know that strength is in unity.

BETTY CHURCHER

Genesis pot 1990
painted and glazed stoneware bowl 53 (d) x 3.5cm
wheel thrown by Errol Barnes
Private collection, Brisbane

What sheer delight to look at this image—it is so mousy. Bill must surely have studied and tried to catch mice. Its long tail, its whiskers, and the little marks on the surrounding white background making the page twitch. Oh, I can smell it!

DAVIDA ALLEN

Mouse 1991
etching 25 x 25cm
QUT Art Collection
Gift of the artist under the Cultural Gifts Program, 2002





We are fortunate, in the case of one of William Robinson's grandest landscapes, *Passing storm, late afternoon Beechmont* (from the 'Mountain' series) 1993, in having the pencil sketch (see p.5): the moment of vision from which the later painting springs, in whose rapid lines we catch, in a first fine careless rapture, the artist's hand, eye, mind, but also the full range of his senses as they engage with the actual and then translate and organise it to make the finished view. All the rich and highly worked elements of the painting—the light, the thrust of tree-trunks up and downward, the solidity of the land-masses that in the painting are so plastic, so tactile—are already there in the sketch. We see clearly for once, and appreciate, the mysterious and on our part barely graspable distance between the bare bones of the painter's first glimpse of the thing and what, in the final work, paint can do to flesh it out, and make it, to our senses as we take it in, a special experience, an apprehension of light, colour (the luscious greens, violet, orange, yellow, indigo), weight, texture, play between closeness and distance, that makes the picture as a visionary moment so immediate and 'real'. The image, as Robinson presents it, is already numinous before we recall the biblical and later romantic associations (Wordsworth) of the rainbow as covenant; its place in the relationship between God and Man, and the natural link, in its essential colours and the guarantee in its curve, of a completed circle between sky and Earth.

DAVID MALOUF

Passing storm, late afternoon, Beechmont
(‘Mountain’ series) 1993
oil on linen 137 x 183cm
Private collection, Brisbane

When I first met William Robinson in 1957, he was a young man who clearly knew where he wanted to be, but was in no particular hurry to get there. He had chosen two European artists to be his mentors: Pierre Bonnard and Paul Klee. At the time it wasn't clear to me why, but now with the benefit of hindsight it is perfectly clear. Bonnard was an artist who settled back into his life and time, painting his domestic environment with the eye of a poet and the passion of a lover. Paul Klee was an artist who viewed his world with humour and told his story with a witty whip-lash line. William Robinson views his world with the tender and passionate eye of a lover and the sensitivity of a poet, and every now and then his whip-lash humour bubbles to the surface—it may be silly but it's also serious. Brisbane in the 1950s was a million miles from both these artists, but for Bill Robinson they were to be his escape hatch into his own life and time. No one could have guessed that this serious young man—with his witty and sardonic sense of humour—was incubating an epic soul who could take on and conquer a subject as dynamic and profound as *Creation landscape: Earth and sea* 1995.

The forty years that separates the young William Robinson from the artist who painted this picture of the Gold Coast hinterland have matured and tempered him. *Creation landscape: Earth and sea* is not the painting of a young man; it is Wagnerian in its scale, and is, to my mind, one of the great masterworks in this exhibition, almost frightening in its intensity.

This is the coastline that we all know and love, but where are those sunny stretches of sea and sand? In their place we see its might as the giant tectonic plates of the earth's surface collide and buckle at the beginning of time, pushing up vertiginous mountain ranges and valleys as the two almost equal forces meet. The ocean seems to be a living and dangerous monster, heaving and threatening, but finally settling back against the immovable force of the Continental shelf.

This glimpse of the Herculean forces that shaped our land gives us a memorable image of the power behind creation. Here we see its immensity. It's a violence and intensity that is as miraculous as the smallest aspect of creation: a tentative beam of sunlight or a delicate palm frond. It's important to realize that behind the playful eye that paints Josephine the cow, or himself (the inept farmer), there is the profundity that gives us this epic landscape. The fulcrum of the heaving depths is the rock of Mount Warning, seen against the sky. It's firm and static, as if it's the only thing capable of holding the angry elements at bay. Yet look down in the bottom left corner of the picture—there is the moon that controls the tides and can move that huge body of water in and out as it waxes and wanes—it's a moon that now presides over a world that is serene and settled.

BETTY CHURCHER

NOTE This artwork will be exhibited from June to December 2012.

Creation landscape: Earth and sea 1995
oil on linen, three panels, 187cm x 721.6cm overall
Collection of S & J Ford





William Robinson has a miraculous visual memory, working from small 'thumbnail' 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. Working slowly, bit by bit, he never loses his grip on the expanse of the afternoon sky, silhouetting as it does the sharp jutting boulders. Each branch, each twig and leaf of the outcrop has been painted as a personal memory. He is there, not as a casual observer, but as part of the landscape itself. Look, for example, at the palm frond seen against the sky (top right) that has been beautifully remembered and slowly executed.

BETTY CHURCHER

Rainforest mist in afternoon light 2002
oil on linen 167 x 244cm
Private collection, Brisbane

This magisterial work spans three canvases, and has been explained by the artist as a vast rolling spiral that sweeps in and out of space and time: a truly epic work. One is reminded of the mighty spiral of Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling—the panel where God separates the darkness from light. Like Michelangelo, Robinson's spiral moves horizontally across the three panels. To the left, a morning light illuminates the sky; in the middle panel we are blinded by the full force of noon; the spiral then continues into the cool tones of twilight, as day turns to night. We marvel at the artist's power of concentration as he builds this majestic landscape. He works slowly, bit by bit, brush stroke by brush stroke, and the end result is as magnificently dramatic as it's possible to be. Only an artist as obsessed and dedicated as William Robinson could achieve such a complex masterpiece in the 21st century.

BETTY CHURCHER

NOTE This artwork will be exhibited from December 2012 to June 2013.

Creation landscape: The dome of space and time 2003-04
oil on linen, three panels, 152 x 640cm overall
Private collection, Brisbane





Misty light, Springbrook 2006, with its subdued colours and sfumato silhouettes of trees, bushes, mountain peaks—a late example of Robinson's virtuoso use of pastel—stands at the furthest possible remove from such works of three decades earlier as *Puddle landscape* 1986, or *Landscape with moon and bathers* 1988, and we see in it how Robinson's interests (while remaining close to their origins) and his powers as an artist, have changed and developed across a long career. What engages him here is atmosphere, the way light and weather can be made to reflect an inner state in the beholder. The individual forms of vegetation and rock dissolve, one into the other, and what matters is not their distinction from each other in texture or feathery lightness and weight, but the part they play as elements of a single mood that is both an aspect of momentary light and a more settled and single state in the mind that is observing all this, and the hand that is settling it down.

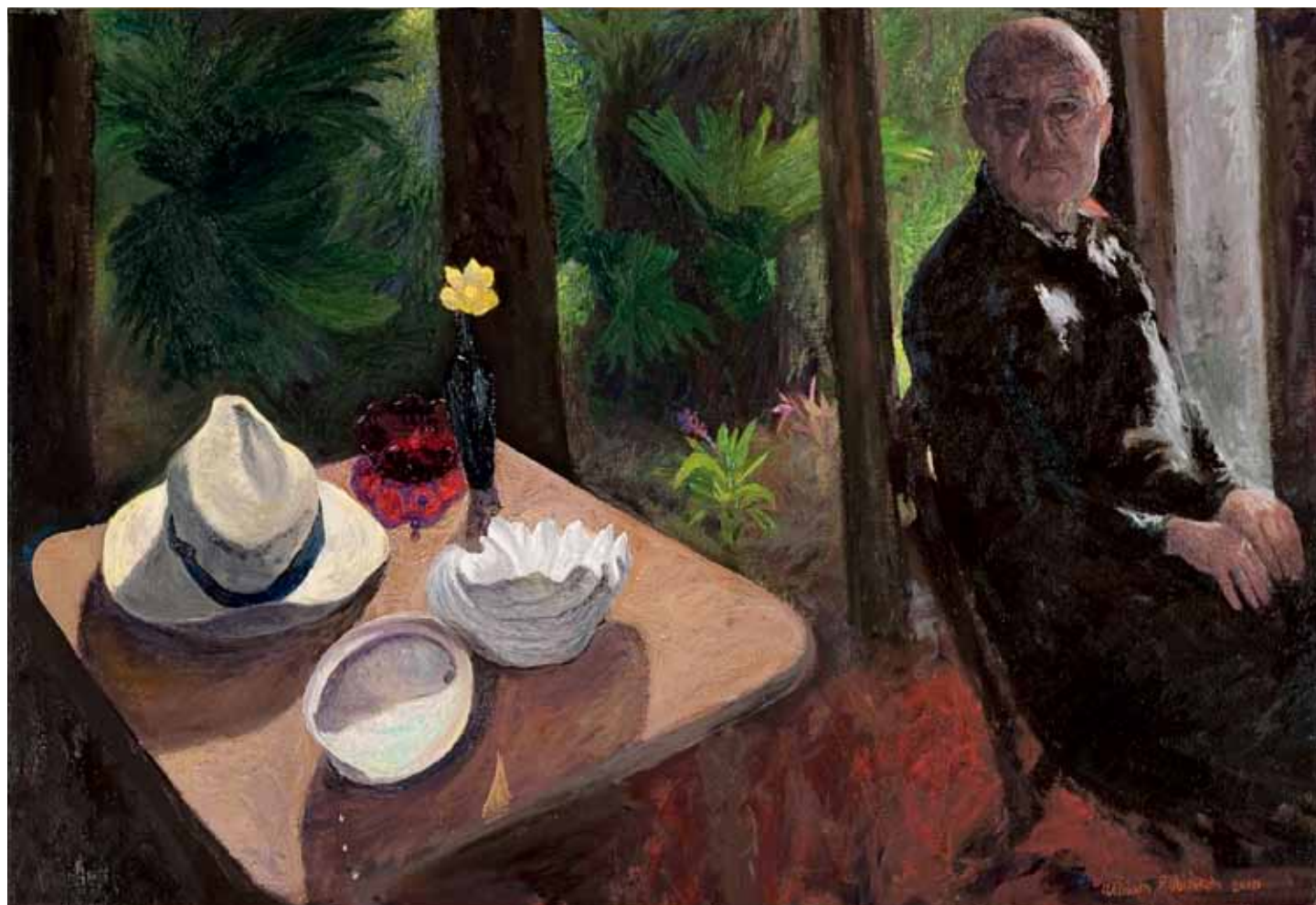
Robinson has always worked, and commandingly, in a range of media and forms: in pencil, crayon, pastel, oils; as a painter, etcher, lithographer. We see him here working on a large scale and creating the subtlest effects in pastels, in a work of sublime stillness and contemplative wonder, and, as in so many of his late pieces, of transcendent calm.

DAVID MALOUF

This exhibition shows us that Robinson is at home with any medium: oils, watercolours, pastels, lithography, lead pencils or ceramics; and any subject: a chook, a vertiginous mountain ridge, or, in this case, himself sitting on his verandah. This self portrait is wonderfully accurate. The Panama hat is essential for Bill in the harsh Queensland sun—there are hats everywhere in the house, to remind him never to leave the house without one—but the yellow flower jauntily claims centre stage. Everything is tangibly real. You can imaginatively lay your hand on each item in the picture, feel its texture and its weight. He allows the light to articulate the self portrait, the curve of his bald head, and the three splashes of light giving volume to the torso. It is reassuring to see that drama and profundity are not confined to sublime river valleys and mountain cliffs; it's also here on the verandah of his inner-city Brisbane home.

BETTY CHURCHER

Self portrait with Panama and shells 2010
oil on linen 53.5 x 77cm
Private collection, Brisbane



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