

EDUCATION RESOURCE



WILLIAM
ROBINSON
GALLERY
OLD GOVERNMENT HOUSE

QUT Art Museum

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COVER

*Creation landscape: The dome of space
and time* 2003-04

Oil on linen
Private collection, Brisbane

WILLIAM
ROBINSON
The Transfigured Landscape



Tone poem: Morning 2008
Oil on canvas
QUT Art Collection
Purchased 2008 through the William Robinson Art Collection Fund

Introduction

This education resource is designed to assist the appreciation and investigation of the exhibition *William Robinson: The Transfigured Landscape*. Key themes, ideas and works from the artists oeuvre are identified and ideas for discussions and activities have been provided. This resource can be used in conjunction with a visit to the exhibition and as a post visit resource for further study.

Whilst this exhibition is most relevant to the Visual Art area, areas such as English and Studies of Society and Environment would also find it beneficial.

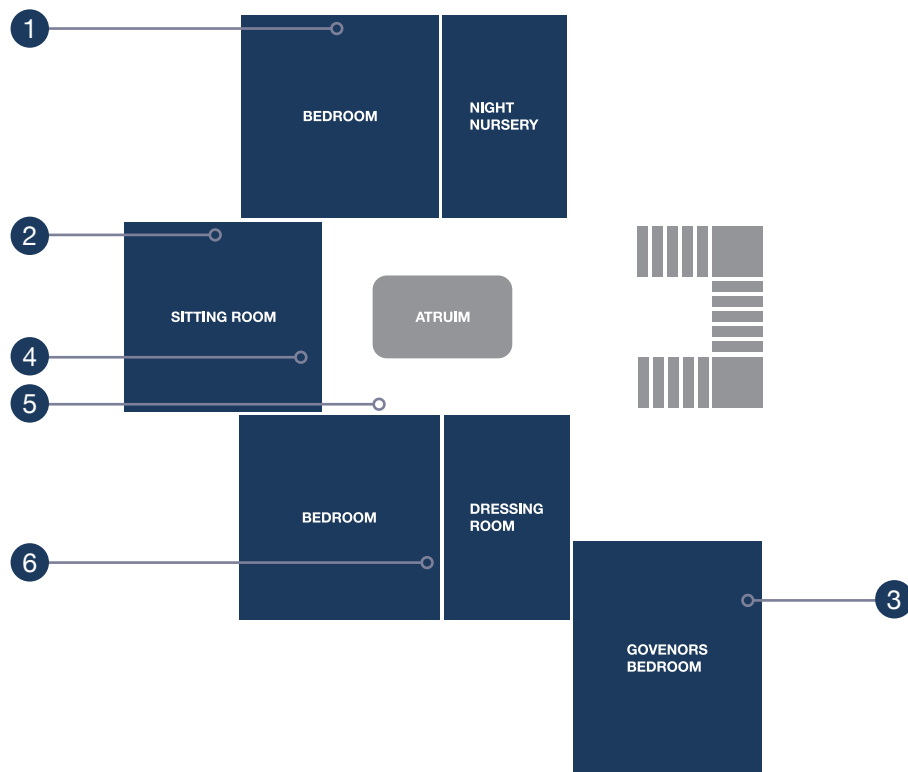
About the exhibition

William Robinson: The Transfigured Landscape marks the extraordinary breadth of vision by one of Australia's most important artists. The exhibition coincides with the artist's 75th birthday, and is both a celebration of this important milestone as well as a tribute to the artist's unique vision. It includes over eighty artworks exhibited across Queensland University of Technology's (QUT) two premier visual art institutions—the William Robinson Gallery and QUT Art Museum.

The Transfigured Landscape includes key landscape and seascape paintings, which are among the artist's most recognisable works, along with a selection of interiors, farmyards and his popular self-portraits. Alongside the paintings sit a selection of etchings, lithographs, drawings, watercolours, gouaches, ceramics, and artist's sketchbooks that reveal Robinson's mastery in a variety of mediums, as well as some of the processes behind his unparalleled creativity.

Vanessa Van Ooyen and Megan Williams
Exhibition curators

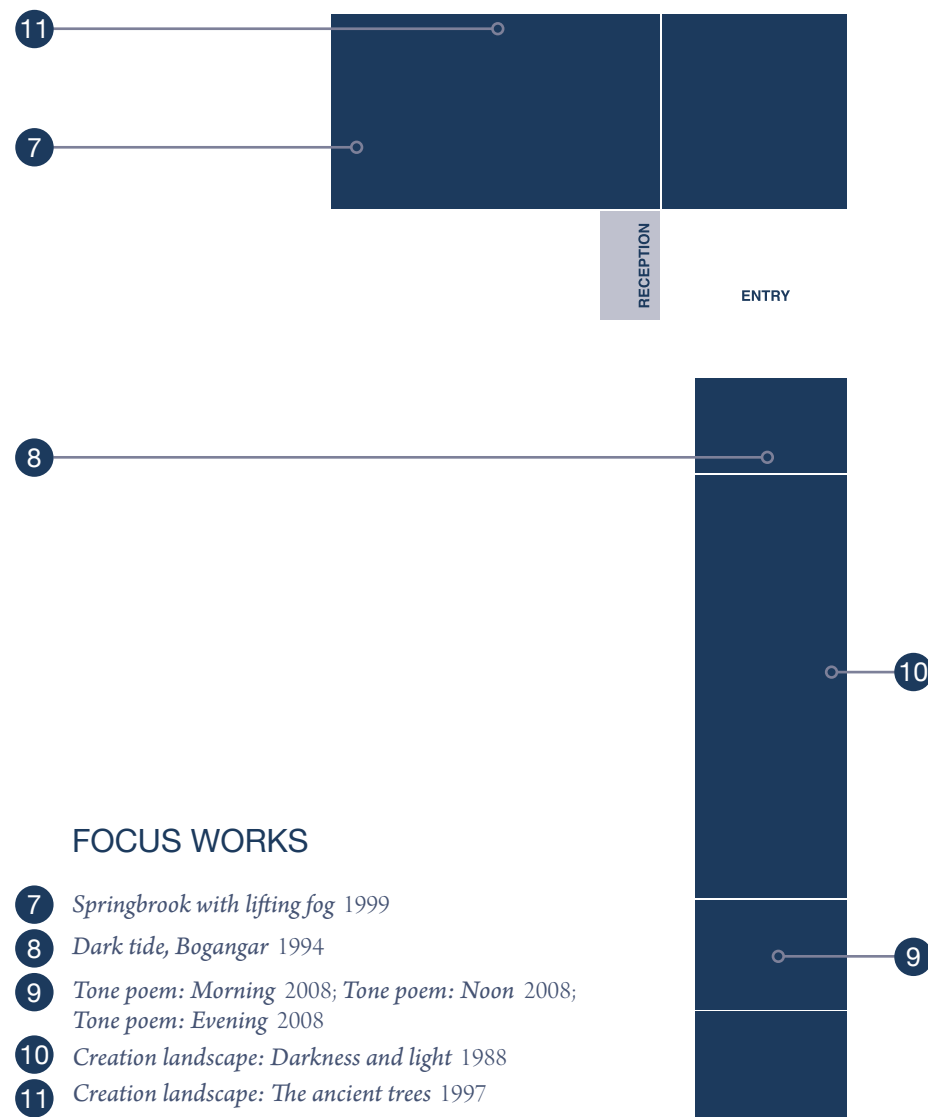
William Robinson Gallery Old Government House



FOCUS WORKS

- 1 *Sophie in her bedroom* 1974
- 2 *Panorama* (Grassy landscape with figures, cows and birds) 1985
- 3 *Two springing Guernseys* 1979
- 4 *Chookyard* 1982
- 5 *Self-portrait with basket* 2003
- 6 *Equestrian self-portrait* 1987

QUT Art Museum



FOCUS WORKS

- 7 *Springbrook with lifting fog* 1999
- 8 *Dark tide, Bogangar* 1994
- 9 *Tone poem: Morning* 2008; *Tone poem: Noon* 2008; *Tone poem: Evening* 2008
- 10 *Creation landscape: Darkness and light* 1988
- 11 *Creation landscape: The ancient trees* 1997



The influence of Bonnard

William Robinson's early works were strongly influenced by French artist Pierre Bonnard, who famously used bright colours to paint everyday interior scenes. After completing high school, Robinson went on to train as a primary school teacher, and was later awarded a scholarship to specialise in teaching art. Like most budding artists of the day, students learned by sketching the work of established artists, learning to mix paints and drawing figures by copying the artists they respected. For Robinson, Bonnard was one such artist.

Training as an artist back in the 1950s meant learning how to draw the human figure through practice. Students learned to draw ears, eyes and noses individually, and it wasn't until later that they could graduate into a whole head or body. Practice made perfect and students often had to draw figures repeatedly until they were right.

Artists also had to learn to manipulate perspective. Having been taught by semi-modernist painters Melville Haysom and Arthur Evan Read, Robinson's use of perspective is not always realistic. Their modernist style influenced his future landscape and farmyard works. His early interiors were built from flat shapes of colour, bringing the background closer to the surface of the painting and creating very shallow pictorial space. They often feature flowers, hats and other still life elements, as well as patterned rugs, posing figures and unusual shadows.

Like his landscapes and farmyards, Robinson's interiors express a deeper personal understanding of the subject matter and often depicted his own home or the homes of close friends and family members.

Interior with black dog 1970
Oil on canvas
Private collection, Sydney



1

FOCUS WORK

Sophie in her bedroom 1974

Oil on canvas

Purchased 1975 with the assistance of an Australian Government Grant through the Visual Arts Board of the Australia Council
Collection: Queensland Art Gallery

When looking at the early interiors, such as *Sophie in her bedroom*, we can see that they share an overt connection with the post-impressionistic style of Pierre Bonnard, one of Robinson's main influences during this period. What is also evident in this work, however, is the artist's intimate connection with his subject matter as well as his use of light and unconventional perspectives for which he was later to become renowned. Here, the familial scene of the artist's daughter engrossed in play is dotted with woolly details of a child's bedroom – a cluttered dresser, a curled up cat, a doting puppy dog – all neatly ordered by the steady lines of the window frame.

This work is located in the William Robinson Gallery



Farmyards

Preferring a quieter domestic life after the construction of the South-East Freeway, the Robinsons moved from inner south-east Brisbane to a farm in semi-rural Birkdale in 1970. They kept goats, chooks and cows, and gave many of them names—the cows Josephine and Rosie appear in many of the artist's paintings. Being close to the animals, Robinson has been able to reveal their personalities as if they're real characters and depict their behaviour as they play on the farm. Robinson also paints portraits of his cows complete with oval frames, which parodies 19th century portrait photography.

Sometimes the artist includes himself and his wife Shirley in his farmyard compositions. They never appear like farmers in charge of their animals, rather they're intermingled with the animals, playing on the farm as if they're equal.

Robinson recalls some days on the farm as being quite chaotic. He believes that when things get out of hand all you can do is laugh at yourself, which is why he paints these works with a quirky sense of humour. His farmyard works tend to have a flat background and no horizon line. This means that Robinson can compose the image in a way that spreads the action across the whole canvas, which lets us focus on the animals and therefore adds to the feeling of chaos on the farm. Often only parts of the animals are visible, which makes it seem like the paintings are just smaller snapshots of all the activity on the farm. By the time the Robinsons sold their farm, they had 40 chooks, six cows and about 70 goats!

William, Josephine and others 1982-83
Oil on canvas
QUT Art Collection
Purchased 1984

Panorama (Grassy landscape with figures, cows and birds) 1985

Oil on canvas

City of Brisbane Collection, Museum of Brisbane

Gift of the Brisbane City Hall Art Gallery and Museum Advisory Committee, 1990

Robinson recalls the family farm at Beechmont as a disaster. In this painting from 1985, during the Robinsons' first year at the 80-hectare property, cows, goats, and chooks run amok, colourful native birds flit between the towering treetops, and a flustered William and Shirley stand among the commotion with arms flailing in complete bewilderment. The feeling of disorder is emphasised by a distinct sense of movement without a consistent orientation: Robinson leans to the left with the curving trees, the cows trot to the right, Shirley stoops over at a right angle, and even the grass dances in different directions.

This work is located in the William Robinson Gallery



3

FOCUS WORK



Two springing Guernseys 1979

Oil on canvas

Collection: Art Gallery of Ballarat

Gift of the artist under the Cultural Gifts Program, 2007

Many of Robinson's farmyard paintings portray the animals as members of the family rather than livestock, and *Two springing Guernseys* is no exception. The term 'springing' is used to refer to cows that are about to give birth. Here, the two round-bellied Guernseys are depicted front on against a nondescript background. This emphasises the flatness of the picture plane, and is suggestive of studio portraiture. This, coupled with the oval format, by which the cows are framed, is indicative of 19th century portrait photography, and serves to humanise Robinson's subject matter.

This work is located in the William Robinson Gallery

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FOCUS WORK



Chookyard 1982

Oil on canvas

Ipswich Art Gallery Collection

Acquired with public donations, 1982

This work offers a colourful, comedic portrayal of the chookyard at the Birkdale farm. Typical of Robinson's farmyard paintings, the work depicts the scene from an aerial perspective and shows no horizon line or surrounding environment. Poultry are scattered across the whole canvas, with no single focal point taking priority over another, emphasising the chaos that is the chookyard.

This work is located in the William Robinson Gallery

Self-portraits

Like his farmyards, many of Robinson's portraits are painted with a sense of humour. A number of them are parodies of famous artworks from history. For example, *Equestrian self-portrait* 1987, was inspired by the story of Charles IV on horseback, a painting by Francisco de Goya that satirised the eighteenth-century Spanish king. Charles IV was a fat and foolish king who wanted a portrait painted of him riding a horse, even though he wasn't known for horse riding. The equestrian portrait is a long-established mode of portraiture that dates back to classical times. Equestrian portraits were normally painted of respected leaders or military figures, usually in a strong and powerful pose, but Goya painted Charles IV sitting still on a fat old horse, and didn't make him look very impressive. The King didn't realise that Goya's painting was mocking him, but he liked it anyway.

William Robinson entered his *Equestrian self-portrait* into the prestigious Archibald Prize in 1987 and won. Since the Archibald Prize shows paintings of important figures in Australian culture, Robinson is trying to make fun of the seriousness of it all by painting himself as an uncomfortable farmer astride a horse. And just as Charles IV liked his mocking portrait, so Robinson won the Archibald Prize. He won again with his 1994 entry *Self-portrait with stunned mullet* 1994, which references William Hogarth's *The shrimp girl* painted in 1740-45.

Although many of the self-portraits use humour and parody, they are sometimes very personal and they give Robinson the opportunity to express how he sees himself or he wants the rest of the world to see him. By using humour in his self-portraits he is able to make bold statements about the human condition under the guise of silliness. For instance, in *Self-portrait with goose feathers* 1989, Robinson looks a lot like a goose himself, but his face is solemn and the painting has a dream-like quality, so although the artist presents himself as a fool, underneath there is something deeper.

Self-portrait with stunned mullet 1994
Oil on canvas
Private collection, Brisbane



*Self-portrait with basket* 2003

Oil on canvas

Private collection, Brisbane

Robinson's first self-portrait in eight years is a visual riddle of sorts. We are presented with a bespectacled, barefooted William Robinson standing tall, wearing a plain black sweater and a pair of remarkable wicker-basket trousers. He holds a cane in his left hand, a scattering of feathers and pearls are at his feet, and a tapestry-like backdrop of royal purple and gold, with a farmyard animal motif, completes the scene. But these clues are more perplexing than they are informing, and the only thing we can know for sure is that the man before us appears supremely authoritative, yet utterly ridiculous.

The artist has revealed that the work is a parody of Hans Holbein's portrait of King Henry VIII. The idea for the basket trousers came to Robinson in a dream. Later, when he was painting the hulk-like pose with bubbled calves, he was reminded of the 16th century portrait. With this information, similarities between the works become obvious: the stance, the tapestry background, and the codpiece. The pearls and feathers are similar to those in Henry VIII's hat and both men carry a shaft in their left hand: Henry VIII, a dagger; and Robinson, his grandfather's walking stick.

This work is located in the William Robinson Gallery

Equestrian self-portrait 1987

Oil on canvas

Private collection, Brisbane

Today, Robinson is predominantly recognised for his landscape paintings; however, it was his 1987 Archibald prize-winning self-portrait that led the artist to national prominence. The equestrian style portrait is a long-established mode of portraiture that dates back to classical times, and is commonly associated with authority, power and status. In this painting, Robinson challenges this tradition, depicting himself as the humble artist-farmer in gumboots, riding a saddle-less horse through the encircling country landscape. Through self-deprecation, Robinson simultaneously undermines the seriousness of the Archibald Prize and satirises the pretensions of the portraiture tradition.

This work is located in the William Robinson Gallery





The sea with morning sun from Springbrook 1996
Oil on canvas
Private collection, Sydney

Landscapes

In 1984, Robinson moved with his family to a farm at Beechmont in the Gold Coast hinterland. He remained there for the next ten years producing dramatic landscape paintings. Framed by steep cliffs and subtropical rainforest, the Robinsons' property and its surrounds was a great source of inspiration to the artist.

Robinson would take long walks in the rainforest, observing the way light moves throughout the day and often he paints a whole day in a single painting. Sometimes the morning sky would be painted in one corner, with the darker evening or night sky painted in another. He is very interested in capturing time in his paintings. In 1994 when Robinson moved to Kingscliff, a coastal town in northern New South Wales, he continued to explore the possibilities of conveying time by painting the ocean tide in its various states.

Sometimes in the wet subtropical rainforest in Beechmont, Robinson would come across a puddle or stream that reflected the sky in an interesting way and paint that too. The canopy of the rainforest is so high that when you look up to the sky it looks like trees are sprouting in every direction. The first thing many people notice about Robinson's paintings is that the trees are growing in twisting directions and that it is hard to tell where the horizon is. A distorted horizon with curling trees and complex reflections makes it very hard to gain a normal perspective of the environment—you can't tell where you are when looking at these landscapes.

Like a lot of Australian landscape painters such as Sidney Nolan, Russell Drysdale and Fred Williams, William Robinson is interested in multiple-point perspective, which means that there is no single vanishing point in his paintings. In this way he can represent more about the environment, expressing his knowledge and appreciation of the rainforest, while also emphasising the vastness of the Australian landscape. By not representing the landscape realistically, Robinson is able to show more about the passage of time and the magnitude of the rainforest, more so than if he painted a "normal" landscape painting. He wants us to see and know the landscape like he does.



Springbrook with lifting fog 1999

Oil on linen

Collection: National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

Purchased with funds from the Nerissa Johnson Bequest, 1999

While his stylised landscapes of the 1980s were very much concerned with composition and construction, Robinson's works from the late 1990s onwards are more naturalistic, and show the artist's developing awareness of atmosphere. In *Springbrook with lifting fog*, Robinson attempts to subtly convey the mood of the landscape rather than provide a specific description. He aims to make us feel as if we are standing in the midst of the lifting fog, looking over to the patches of sea and sky, and soaking up the sunlight as it filters through the emerging trees.

This work is located at QUT Art Museum



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FOCUS WORK

Dark tide, Bogangar 1994

Oil on canvas

Purchased 1995 with a special allocation from the Queensland Government. Celebrating the Queensland Art Gallery's Centenary 1895-1995

Collection: Queensland Art Gallery

This work is located at **QUT Art Museum**

Created shortly after the artist's move from Beechmont to Kingscliff, *Dark tide, Bogangar* marks a thematic shift in Robinson's practice from landscapes to seascapes. The painting depicts a panoramic view of the Pacific Ocean in its many different states. The scene runs chronologically from left to right, with the dark tide rising against the bright morning sky and gradually retreating as the sky becomes golden and evening falls. As always, Robinson offers us an unconventional horizon line, in this case to interweave temporal and spatial elements, and to convey the mutually dependent relationship between sea and sky.



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FOCUS WORK

Tone poem: Morning 2008

Oil on canvas

QUT Art Collection

Purchased 2008 through the William Robinson Art Collection Fund

Tone poem: Noon 2007

Oil on canvas

Private collection, Sydney

Tone poem: Evening 2008

Oil on canvas

Private collection, Sydney

Each of the 'Tone poem' works is complete in its own right, yet when the three are presented as a series, they tell the story of the subtly changing 'tone' of the landscape throughout the day. On the left, the morning fog lingers so that anything beyond the foreground is obscured by the enveloping haze. At noon, we see a more colourful landscape, but although the haze has lifted, the scene remains dense as layers of branches, leaves and flowers crowd the canvas. The subdued ambience becomes quieter still as dusk falls and the scene is masked in purple.

These works are located at **QUT Art Museum**

The Creation Series

Many of William Robinson's works have spiritual undertones, particularly the 'Creation' series, which is made up of seven multi-panelled works created between 1988 and 2003. In these works, Robinson expresses a sense of wonderment at creation itself, and explores the relationship between humans, earth, sky and sea. *Creation landscape: Darkness and light* 1988 begins the story of creation as told in the book of Genesis, however, the artist tends to focus on his own spiritual experience rather than literal readings of the Bible. He holds a pantheistic¹ view of the landscape, and as such, is very interested in Indigenous people's deep connection to the landscape and sense of place in nature. In the middle panel of *Darkness and light*, William Robinson has used a large coiling shape that looks a bit like a river or a serpent. The serpent is a significant character in the story of Adam and Eve, but it is also a reference to the Rainbow Serpent who represents both destruction and creation in Indigenous culture.

The title of the exhibition, "The transfigured landscape" is important when understanding the context of the 'Creation' works. To 'transfigure' literally means to transform something into something else, and on one hand, it refers to the multiple-point perspective that Robinson uses to transform the appearance of the landscape into something new. However, the term also has spiritual connotations and can refer to the moment when a person or object assumes divine radiance. Transfiguration was a popular subject for many painters throughout history. The most famous example is *The transfiguration* by the Renaissance master Raphael Sanzio da Urbino, which depicts the gospel story about Jesus transforming from a person into a hallowed figure. For William Robinson, transfiguration in painting is about striving for a kind of light within the work to create something numinous. He has said that he thinks painting "should be able to lift you into another realm."²

¹ The belief that nature and the earth are in some sense divine and should be revered

² Robinson quoted in: MacAulay, D. and MacAulay, B. 2011. A soul's solace: Art, faith and music. In *William Robinson: The transfigured landscape*. Brisbane and Sydney: Queensland University of Technology and Piper Press.



Creation landscape: Darkness and light (study) 1988

Pastel

QUT Art Collection

Purchased 2010 through the William Robinson Art Collection Fund and partial donation by Philip Bacon



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FOCUS WORK

Creation landscape: Darkness and light 1988

Five panels, from left to right:

Fire mountain landscape

First sun landscape

Creation landscape, darkness and light

Rocky moon landscape

Lost world landscape

Oil on linen

The State Art Collection, Art Gallery of Western Australia

Purchased 1989

This work is located at **QUT Art Museum**

Creation landscape: Darkness and light, the first in Robinson's 'Creation' series, addresses the narrative of creation as told in the book of Genesis. As the title suggests, it focuses on darkness and light – the beginning of all creation. The work describes the dualism of nature and how it is bound together by the oneness of the cosmos. Once again, Robinson and his wife, Shirley, make an appearance as Adam and Eve, in the second-to-right panel.

In the centre panel we see a large arc adorned with stars. This shape is a recurring motif in Robinson's work, appearing in many forms including meandering creeks and rivers, rainbows, the dips of gullies, and the rise of mountains. On inspection, this shape can be found throughout all five panels of *Creation landscape: Darkness and light*, unifying the panels that are otherwise quite contrasted.

The shape is also representative of the serpent, which has great biblical significance and also references the Rainbow Serpent in Indigenous culture. Robinson has expressed on various occasions the affinity he feels with Indigenous people's deep connection to the landscape and sense of place in nature.



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FOCUS WORK

Creation landscape: The ancient trees 1997

Oil on linen

Private collection, Sydney

This work is located at **QUT Art Museum**

This work depicts the Antarctic Beeches that Robinson and his wife, Shirley, passed on their daily walks at Springbrook. The artist explains that the trees reminded him of a particular cathedral seen years before:

When I was looking at them, I was thinking of Chartres, which at the 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.¹

Like the Chartres Cathedral, the environment depicted here is on one hand ancient, and on the other it is alive and flourishing before our eyes. Robinson attempts to replicate the spiritual experiences he had in both the cathedral and in the rainforest. This is achieved in part by the sheer size of the work, which has the effect of immersing the viewer in the mystical image of the ancient yet thriving landscape.

¹ Robinson quoted in: Hart, D. 2011 (2001). 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.



DISCUSS

Although primarily a painter, William Robinson has created many works other media including drawing, printmaking and sculpture. Discuss the merits of exploring different media?

Why do you think William Robinson bases many of his self-portraits on famous artworks from history?

How might multiple-point perspective and the representation of time in Robinson's work help us understand the landscape better?

William Robinson wants us to see the Australian landscape in a personal way. Why might this be important?

Many artists throughout history have dealt with themes of spirituality and the divine. Why do you think people express their spiritual beliefs and experiences through art?

RESEARCH

Throughout art history, artists have shown interest in representing 'time'. Research the different ways artists have attempted to demonstrate the passage of time.

TIP: You could begin by researching memento mori or vanitas painting. It may also be useful to think about mediums that are time based, such as video.

Many artists paint self-portraits for different reasons. Research three self-portraits and compare and contrast them. They may vary in medium, era, style or mood. Remember, portraits aren't always figurative! Try to include one very traditional self-portrait and one that is a bit abstract or conceptual.

Robinson has a very pantheistic view of the landscape and is interested in Australian Indigenous art. Research another non-Indigenous artists who are influenced by Indigenous art.

REFLECT

Think about your own art making. Do you work with themes such as spirituality, mysticism, magic or perhaps even the supernatural? If so, how and why do you do this?

A few of William Robinson's sketchbooks and studies were on display in the Art Museum. Do you use sketchbooks to do studies before you create your final work? Why might this be beneficial for your own practice?

The environment in which William Robinson lives plays a vital role in his art making. It is reflected in his landscapes, interiors and farmyard works. Is the environment you live in reflected in your artwork? If so, why do you think this is important?

Misty light, Springbrook 2006
Pastel
Collection: R. McAuliffe and R. Killin-McAuliffe