

Splendid isolation

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Fred Williams: Water, McClelland Gallery and Sculpture Park, Langwarrin, Victoria, until February 27

"SPLENDID - but on the other hand ... just a rubbish dump." This was how Fred Williams described a small, secluded area of water cut off from the Yarra River in Kew, east of Melbourne.

Towards the end of his life, this "splendid rubbish dump" became the subject of several of Williams's finest and most surprising paintings, two of which have been included in a resplendent show at the McClelland Gallery and Sculpture Park, not far from Kew. Like almost everything else in Fred Williams: Water, the two Kew paintings provide a visual jolt to those whose first impulse, when they think of Williams, is to conjure a flat ground pockmarked by a morse code of particoloured daubs and blots -- signs for distant gums punctuating an otherwise featureless landscape.

Here, instead of the Zen-like minimalism of Williams's best-known works, is an intimate world packed with visual information. Forked Tree, Kew Billabong, 1975, is constructed like a quilt, with distinct shapes of multicoloured dots and dashes running in different directions. (The picture is too scrappy and uncultivated to be remotely Dutch, yet the arrangement of marks can't help but put viewers in mind of van Gogh's patchwork landscapes.)

Kew Billabong with Old Tyre I, 1975, meanwhile, is a riotous slap-up of pointillist paint, like a Seurat turned upside down and given a good shake. Except that, on closer inspection - as with all Williams paintings - it is marvellously constructed: it divides beautifully into thirds and sets up subtle rhymes all over the canvas.

What made Williams Australia's greatest painter? The obvious answer springs from the more minimal works, in which Williams distilled the ubiquitous Australian visual realities of eucalypt haze, heat shimmer and random incident into a modernist visual syntax of beautiful concision. I, like most people, love these paintings. But I can get enough of them.

This show, focusing on the artist's responses to billabongs, creeks, waterfalls, coastlines, forest ponds, swamps and rivers, presents a whole other side to Williams and a fresh clutch of cogent reasons to fall in love with him.

Water lends life. It also gives colour the chance to congregate and coalesce. These works have more saturated colour than one is accustomed to seeing in Williams. And they are more densely packed with information and activity - including the human kind. Just as Williams could be attracted to the splendour of a semi-suburban rubbish dump, he also painted bridges under construction, ruins of abandoned buildings, boats, jetties and piers.

No modern artist captured more precisely than Williams the tension between a longing for immersion in the undomesticated landscape and a peculiarly modern sense of detachment. He gave the resulting images an emotional pitch that is at once real and elusive.

But many of the best paintings in this show are less exquisitely aloof and altogether more down and dirty.

Yan Yean II (Dog Chasing Possum), 1972, for instance, shows just what it says: a dog snarling at a possum that is scrabbling, limbs splayed, up the trunk of a tree. The tree is curvy, bulbous and here to stay, like a fat diva on a dance floor, but its boisterous energy is reined in by the jackknifed form of a dead tree off to the left. This is fearless painting: exact and unsentimental, but unafraid of associating with unkempt emotions, including humour.

What makes the timing of this show especially wonderful is that a short drive away, at the Mornington Peninsula Regional Gallery, is an exhibition called Arthur Streeton and the Australian Coast, which focuses on the aqueous aspect of another great Australian landscape painter's oeuvre.

Looking over his shoulder at Streeton and the other Heidelberg School painters, Williams said: "I have always felt the challenge of what my predecessors had achieved and the need to equal their achievements."

This sentiment was slightly more respectful than the attitude of Sidney Nolan who, along with his fellow art students at the National Gallery School in Melbourne in the 1930s, "furtively spat on [Streeton's] post-1900 work when they passed it in the National Gallery".

To the Angry Penguins generation, Streeton was an early, talented maverick who had become, in middle and old age, a hopeless reactionary. He was someone against whom Nolan needed to kick.

Ten years younger than Nolan, Williams was a completely different kind of painter. Although he was, like Nolan, a modernist in love with paint, he identified with the classical side of modernism - Cezanne, in particular. He certainly found time to admire his Australian predecessors, such as Streeton and von Guerard. Where Nolan was all raw, subjective expression and devastating psychological immediacy, Williams was a calm and methodical empiricist.

I believe he also had a romantic streak. But it ran deep, like the thin trickles of water that ran through his landscapes, carving out great gorges of emotion, but quietly, modestly, with sympathetic reticence.

According to Robert Lindsay in the catalogue essay, Williams was "by temperament a farouche painter, but his art practice was ordered, methodical and studio-based".

Famously, he never learned to drive. Family and artist friends would take him on daytrips out of Melbourne, where he would paint en plein air - usually in gouache - before returning to the studio to do the hard work of constructing and finishing his oil paintings.

Williams was fascinated by the underlying structure of the landscape. He read geological tomes such as E. Sherbon Hills's Physiography of Victoria: An Introduction to Geomorphology (1967), as well as D.J. Mulvaney's The Prehistory of Australia (1969) and Charles Francis Laserson's The Face of Australia: Shaping of a Continent (1953). Later in his career, using Hills's book as a guide, he travelled further afield to seek out waterfalls. He painted masterpieces such as the four-part La La Falls I, II, III and IV, 1979, with the same kind of pictorial hypersensitivity that Cezanne brought to his late paintings of the Bibemus quarry near Mont Sainte-Victoire.

All these paintings, like the geology that so fascinated both artists, were fastidiously composed. In Williams's case, the compositions were partly inspired by the Chinese landscapes he had seen on a trip to China in 1976.



Dynamic symmetry:
Strath Creek Falls III, 1979, above;
Old Chimney, Howqua River, 1969, below



"Dynamic symmetry" was his underlying principle. Rather than constructing a simple, balanced form around a central point, Williams tried to achieve a dynamic relationship between the various elements in his work, often around an empty core.

He had learned some of the principles of dynamic symmetry from George Bell at Bell's private art school in Melbourne. But his sensitivity to them was enhanced by his exposure to Asian art. Many of Australia's greatest landscape artists have been similarly influenced by Asian principles of composition - John Olsen, Ian Fairweather, Rosalie Gascoigne and Joe Furlonger, to name just a few - no doubt because the idea of shifting elements relating to each other around an empty core seems tailor-made for the Australian landscape, with its absence of obvious focal points.

"One of the few thoughts I have ever had about Australia is that it is the oldest continent, in the sense that it is flat," Williams said, "and I have always been fascinated to think that the water leaves the Snowy Mountains, leaves Kosciuszko. If you tip a bucket of water up in Kosciuszko, seven months later it comes out in Adelaide - seven months, because the landscape is so flat it is horizontal."

Many of Williams's best paintings fuse an aerial or topographical perspective, which emphasises this flatness, with the kind of close-in observation that could result only from being present in the landscape. Indeed, to my mind, Williams's close attention to the specifics of place, to the cherishable randomness of physical form and visual incident, is what makes him great.

"I think I am basically an artist who sees things in terms of paint," he said. It's an endearing statement, providing as it does a brief and lonely respite from the contemporary obligation on painters to reference things, to see things in terms of photography, politics, art history, ideology - anything except paint. But Williams was, above all, a painter who liked paint for what it could do.



Yan Yean II (Dog Chasing Possum), 1972

What it does in paintings such as Old Chimney, Howqua River, 1969, is to bring otherwise flat and coolly distant compositions to life. Not only does Williams include in this marvellous work the freestanding red chimney of a ruin, like a gaudy classical column, but he also paints the river in a thick but fluid impasto that is as multicoloured as an artist's palette. It brilliantly evokes the froth and rush of a churning river.