



# MODERN AUSTRALIAN LANDSCAPES, 1940s-1960s

WORKS FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA ART COLLECTION

Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery  
5 May – 18 August 2018

# Modern Australian Landscapes, 1940s-1960s: Works from the University of Western Australia Art Collection

Modern art began to be produced in Australia around the time of the First World War, influenced by late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century French art.<sup>1</sup> The varied group of works in *Modern Australian Landscapes* demonstrates the importance of French and European traditions, but also the advent of the influence of American art, in particular, Abstract Expressionism.

Broadly speaking, modern artists working in the landscape genre moved away from copying nature by traditional technical means: For example, artists generally dispensed with gradations of tone which had produced an illusion of plastic form. Rather, line, shape and colour were arranged to create a dynamic or formally pleasing composition. Modernist works of art can also reflect the emotional state of the artist, so that the unconscious mind, or intuition, may serve to direct the process of mark making on the canvas.

Approaching the subject in these ways tends to produce a movement towards abstract and expressive modes: An artist may wish to eliminate detail in an attempt to show the underlying or most compelling characteristic of a tree form; brilliant colour may be used to describe a condition of the landscape, such as heat, even if the colour does not match anything actually found in nature. In the case of modernist painting in Australia, artists adapted to suit local conditions, and within the landscape genre, to reflect the particular geography of Australia.

In the post-war period, when most works in this exhibition were produced, many artists were returning home from training or military service in Europe. John Passmore arrived back in Sydney in 1951, having been in England since 1933. The exhibition shows examples of works by Passmore from circa 1947 to 1959. His earlier works, depicting bathers, show the results of the artist's intense study of Cézanne. Works dating from the late 1950s, after his return to Australia, demonstrate the development of this influence into a mature and fluent personal style. Verging on complete abstraction, *untitled (c. 1958-59)* shows deftly applied brush marks, like notations, which convey the energy and vibrancy of the scene, likely around Sydney Harbour.

Sydney abstraction is also represented in the work of John Olsen, a student of Passmore's at Sydney's Julian Ashton School in the early 1950s. Passmore exhibited with Olsen in the group show *Direction I* held at Macquarie Galleries in December 1956, the year before Olsen set off for Europe. This exhibition announced a new generation of Sydney abstract painters. On Olsen, Passmore wrote:

[Olsen] said a totally new way of seeing things has taken over ... it's got a completely new lot of rules now ... You are not looking at nature at all. You are looking at a theory about painting. What one does is a painting. It is not nature at all.<sup>2</sup>

Olsen's work was, in part, influenced by Abstract Expressionism, as seen in *Mediterranean* (1967), a painting comprised of energetic and rhythmic mark making. The work remains referential, however, with the flowing line and vibrant blue colour indicating that this is the artist's vision of the sea.

By the late 1950s critical tensions had developed in the Australian art world between a group of largely Melbourne-based artists working in figurative or narrative styles, known as the Antipodeans, and proponents of Sydney abstraction. The Antipodeans, formed in 1959, comprised Charles Blackman, Arthur Boyd, David Boyd, John Brack, Robert Dickerson, John Perceval and Clifton Pugh. Art historian Bernard Smith, the group's key supporter, comments: 'The formation of the group was a reaction not so much against abstract art as one of the long-proven forms of contemporary expression as against the clamorous pretensions of the multitude of new converts to abstract expressionism and its varieties then rising upon all sides.'<sup>3</sup> Though none of the Antipodean artists is represented in *Modern Australian Landscapes*, Sidney Nolan's *Explorer and Township* (1962) is an example of the continuity of a figurative tradition in modern Australian landscape painting. In this work the landscape is integral, setting the mood for the doomed tale of Burke and Wills.

Though the most pronounced and well-publicised ideological battles regarding modern art occurred in Sydney and Melbourne, places outside of these 'centres' were also responding to significant cultural changes in the visual arts. This was due to a number of factors in the post-war period: The arrival in all capital cities of émigrés and refugees; the return of artists and servicemen who had been living and studying overseas; and the development of a more sophisticated gallery scene.<sup>4</sup> This transformation of Australian culture had, of course, begun on the eve of the Second World War when many Australian artists returned home and Europeans knowledgeable of modernist ideas settled in Australia. Arriving in Perth in 1938, German artist Elise Blumann developed a modernist approach to presenting the local landscape, largely through the lessons of Post-Impressionism. Produced during the war, *On the Swan, Nedlands* (1942) and *Melaleuca* (1943) show the artist's direct and bold style – using sinuous line to describe the distinctive shape of the melaleuca and casuarina trees that lined the Swan River near her home.

Artists Guy Grey-Smith and Howard Taylor returned from war service and art studies in England, in November 1947, and January 1948, respectively. Like Blumann, they wished to create modern paintings through observation of their immediate environs. An experimental approach, particularly with the effects of colour, can be seen in Grey-Smith's works depicting Rottneest Island. In one rendition, *Rottneest* (1954-1957), the scene is shown in vermilion red suggesting extreme heat, and in the other, *Rottneest Landscape* (1954) cool green and blue hues predominate. Arriving in Western Australia in 1962, following training at the Chelsea School of Art, London, George Haynes was part of a new generation of artists working in the landscape genre. His painting employs strong chromatic contrasts, as in the vivid red and blue combination in *Tropical* (1968).

The Perth art scene was greatly enhanced by the establishment of the Skinner Galleries in 1958 by Rose and Joe Skinner. A purpose-built gallery of modern design, it not only exhibited local artists such as Guy Grey-Smith, Robert Juniper and George Haynes, but

showed work by other leading Australian artists. The Skinners amassed a significant private collection, mostly of the work of artists exhibiting with them, and bequeathed their collection to the University of Western Australia.

Professor Allan Edwards, an early supporter of the University's art collection, and responsible for the purchase of key works by Sidney Nolan in 1953, notes:

Long before she opened her Gallery in 1958 Rose Skinner ... had begun to acquire the work of contemporary artists. Early in the nineteen-fifties I remember seeing on her walls paintings by Sali Herman and Russell Drysdale, a drawing by Matisse, a Rouault Woodcut, and paintings by Kate O'Connor and Bessie Gibson, drawings by Louis Kahan and Robert Juniper, and some of the first paintings of Guy Grey-Smith. ... After the close of an exhibition Rose would often keep two or three paintings giving them house-room sometimes for months at a time and occasionally keeping them for good.<sup>5</sup>

Many works from this bequest are displayed in *Modern Australian Landscapes*, including paintings by Sam Fullbrook, Sidney Nolan, John Olsen, John Passmore and Fred Williams.

Of particular significance in the Skinner Bequest is a group of paintings by Fred Williams, ranging from circa 1947 to 1968-69.<sup>6</sup> *Burning Off*, c. 1947 is an early work set on the outskirts of Melbourne. The painting is unusual in that it shows atmospheric effects in the landscape, with clouds and plumes of smoke, as well as the inclusion of a human figure, rare in landscapes by Williams. As Patrick McCaughey describes, Williams was not concerned with the romantic aspects of the bush, or with using this setting for narrative action, as were artists such as Arthur Boyd or Sidney Nolan.<sup>7</sup> Rather, Williams 'accepted the flat and featureless quality of the landscape, making a significant part of his art from it, never clothing it in fictional guise'.<sup>8</sup>

Other works show the influence of Cézanne as Williams renewed his interest in the landscape theme upon his return to Australia, following studies at the Chelsea School of Art from 1951 to 1956 – for example, *untitled (trees in a landscape, Mittagong)* (1957). The artist's mature style is seen in *Foothill landscape* (1968). This painting shows some of the key innovations developed by Williams in adapting a modernist language to the depiction of the bush. It is both a deeply analytical and imaginative approach to landscape painting but one which, nonetheless, has a beginning and end in nature. As McCaughey notes:

Williams's aim and goal, the strategy of his art, was to realize fully the pictorial form occasioned by the motif in the landscape. His chief efforts as a painter were spent clarifying and elaborating the pictorial structure suggested to him in that direct contact and experience of nature. Although many of his oil sketches and gouaches are miracles of observation, their purpose was to furnish further pictorial possibilities.

What he made, not what he saw, was the centre and focus of his activity – although what he made always proceeded from what he had seen.<sup>9</sup>

The challenge for modern landscape painters was to create a resemblance to nature but to simultaneously transform a particular scene to suit specific formal and aesthetic goals. We see the resolution of these dual concerns in the mature work of Fred Williams.

Sally Quin  
Curator  
The University of Western Australia Art Collection

- 
1. On the advent of the modern movement in Australia and its characteristics see Bernard Smith and Terry E. Smith, *Australian Painting, 1788-1990*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991, pp. 167-170.
  2. Barry Pearce, *John Passmore 1904-84: Retrospective*, Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1984, p. 17.
  3. Smith and Smith, p. 328.
  4. It should be noted, however, that travel was not an absolute prerequisite to understanding modernist thought and techniques. For example, Sidney Nolan, well-versed in modernist literature and painting from the 1930s, did not travel to Europe until well-established in his career in 1950.
  5. Allan Edwards, *The Joe and Rose Skinner Bequest*, exhibition catalogue, Undercroft Art Gallery, the University of Western Australia, March 1982.
  6. An additional work by Fred Williams, *Seascape*, 1974, also came from The Joe and Rose Skinner Bequest, but is beyond the scope of the current exhibition.
  7. Patrick McCaughey, *Fred Williams 1927 – 1982*, Sydney: Murdoch Books, 1996, pp. 19-23.
  8. *ibid.*, p.22.
  9. *ibid.*, pp. 15-16.



## MODERN AUSTRALIAN LANDSCAPES, 1940s-1960s

WORKS FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA ART COLLECTION

Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery

5 May – 18 August 2018

## LIST OF WORKS

**Elise Blumann**, *On the Swan, Nedlands*, 1942, oil on composition board, 56.6 x 66.4 cm, The University of Western Australia Art Collection, Acquired with the assistance of the Visual Arts Board of the Australia Council and the Dr Albert Gild Fund, 1976

**Elise Blumann**, *Melaleuca*, 1943, oil on board, 35.7 x 44.3 cm, CCWA 88, Cruthers Collection of Women's Art, The University of Western Australia

**Elise Blumann**, *Rottnest lighthouse and salt lake*, 1947, oil on board, 46.5 x 54.9 cm, The University of Western Australia Art Collection, Gift of Dr and Mrs R K Constable, 1985

**Lina Bryans**, *Dancing Gum*, 1960, oil on canvas on board, 59.5 x 49.5 cm, CCWA 803, Cruthers Collection of Women's Art, The University of Western Australia

**William Frater**, *untitled (landscape with old house)*, n.d., oil on composition board, 48.6 x 59 cm, The University of Western Australia Art Collection, Dr Albert Gild Fund, 1974

**Sam Fullbrook**, *Plane with blue wing*, n.d., oil on composition board, 29.3 x 39.3 cm, The University of Western Australia Art Collection, The Joe and Rose Skinner Bequest, 1978

**Sam Fullbrook**, *Emu and aeroplane*, 1965, oil on canvas, 96.3 x 76.4 cm, The University of Western Australia Art Collection, The Joe and Rose Skinner Bequest, 1978

**Audrey Greenhalgh**, *untitled*, 1953, oil on composition board, 44.8 x 55.3 cm, The University of Western Australia Art Collection, Gift of the late Frederick Miller, 2014

**Guy Grey-Smith**, *Blackboy grove*, 1950, oil on canvas, 54 x 75.5 cm, The University of Western Australia Art Collection, Gift of Dr and Mrs R K Constable, 1985

**Guy Grey-Smith**, *Rottnest landscape*, 1954, oil on canvas, 50 x 40 cm, The University of Western Australia Art Collection, Jean Kahan Bequest, 2014

**Guy Grey-Smith**, *Rottnest*, 1954-57, oil on canvas, 61.2 x 76.5 cm, The University of Western Australia Art Collection, Tom Collins Bequest Fund, 1987

**George Haynes**, *Girl on the beach*, c 1966, oil on composition board, 35 x 40 cm, The University of Western Australia Art Collection, University Senate Grant, 1972

**George Haynes**, *Tropical*, 1968, acrylic on composition board, 122 x 122 cm, The University of Western Australia Art Collection, The Joe and Rose Skinner Bequest, 1980

**Godfrey Miller**, *Tree series (forest series)*, 1948-53, oil on linen on board, The University of Western Australia Art Collection, McGillivray Bequest Fund, 1982

**Sidney Nolan**, *Landscape Carnarvon Range, Queensland*, 1948, Ripolin on board, 91 x 121 cm, The University of Western Australia Art Collection, Tom Collins Memorial Fund, 1953

**Sidney Nolan**, *Windy plain, Cape York Peninsula*, 1949, Ripolin on board, 91 x 121.5 cm, The University of Western Australia Art Collection, Tom Collins Memorial Fund, 1953

**Sidney Nolan**, *Explorer and township*, 1962, oil on composition board, 121.5 x 121.5 cm, The University of Western Australia Art Collection, The Joe and Rose Skinner Bequest, 1981

**John Olsen**, *Mediterranean*, 1967, gouache, 49.6 x 62.7 cm, The University of Western Australia Art Collection, The Joe and Rose Skinner Bequest, 1981

**John Passmore**, *The bathers*, n.d., oil on canvas, 39.6 x 49.1 cm, The University of Western Australia Art Collection, Estate of Dr Harold Schenberg, 2000

**John Passmore**, *Young fisherman*, n.d., oil and ink on canvas, 34.8 x 42.8 cm, The University of Western Australia Art Collection, Estate of Dr Harold Schenberg, 2000

**John Passmore**, *untitled*, n.d, oil on cardboard, 34.2 x 23.5 cm, The University of Western Australia Art Collection, The Joe and Rose Skinner Bequest, 1979

**John Passmore**, *The bent tree*, 1954, oil on board, 50.5 x 60.3 cm, The University of Western Australia Art Collection, The Joe and Rose Skinner Bequest, 1981

**John Passmore**, *untitled (seascape)*, c 1958-59, oil on board, 43 x 46.2 cm, The University of Western Australia Art Collection, The Joe and Rose Skinner Bequest, 1980

**John Passmore**, *untitled*, c 1958-59, oil on board, 76.6 x 80.3 cm, The University of Western Australia Art Collection, The Joe and Rose Skinner Bequest, 1981

**John Passmore**, *Abstract in yellow*, 1959, oil on board, 66.2 x 73.8 cm, The University of Western Australia Art Collection, Tom Collins Bequest Fund, 1961

**Howard Taylor**, *Rocks with blackboys*, 1949, pen, watercolour and pastel, 39 x 48.4 cm, The University of Western Australia Art Collection, The Ruby Rose Maller Fine Arts Acquisition Fund, 1998

**Howard Taylor**, *untitled (down the hill)*, 1951, egg tempera on board, 37.8 x 30.3 cm, The University of Western Australia Art Collection, Gift of Dr and Mrs R K Constable, 1985

**Howard Taylor**, *Tree Group*, 1963, oil on board, 60.2 x 121 cm, The University of Western Australia Art Collection, Gift of Mr Bryant and Mrs Tedye McDiven, 1988

**Howard Taylor**, *Bush structure*, 1963, sheoak and jarrah, burnt and painted, 111 x 50 cm, The University of Western Australia Art Collection, Presented by Pola and Broniek Stein in gratitude for the life they have enjoyed in Australia since their arrival in 1939, 1995

**Howard Taylor**, *untitled (the quarry)*, 1965, oil on composition board, 64 x 102.2 cm, The University of Western Australia Art Collection, Gift of Dr and Mrs R K Constable, 1985

**Fred Williams**, *untitled (six trees)*, n.d., oil on hardboard, 71.8 x 43 cm, The University of Western Australia Art Collection, The Joe and Rose Skinner Bequest, 1981

**Fred Williams**, *Burning off*, c 1947, gouache, 38.5 x 42.5 cm, The University of Western Australia Art Collection, The Joe and Rose Skinner Bequest, 1982

**Fred Williams**, *untitled (trees in a landscape, Mittagong)*, 1957, oil on board, 94 x 88.5 cm, The University of Western Australia Art Collection, Tom Collins Bequest Fund, 1961

**Fred Williams**, *Two rocks*, 1957, gouache, 48.3 x 52.2 cm, The University of Western Australia Art Collection, Tom Collins Bequest Fund, 1960

**Fred Williams**, *Saplings, Mittagong*, 1957-58, gouache, 38 x 55.5 cm, The University of Western Australia Art Collection, The Joe and Rose Skinner Bequest, 1978

**Fred Williams**, *Sandstone cliff, Mittagong*, 1961-62, gouache, 62 x 62 cm, The University of Western Australia Art Collection, The Joe and Rose Skinner Bequest, 1978

**Fred Williams**, *Blue landscape (Lysterfield)*, 1967, gouache, 52.7 x 71.6 cm, The University of Western Australia Art Collection, University Senate Grant, 1974

**Fred Williams**, *Pink and silver*, 1967, gouache, 51 x 72.5 cm, The University of Western Australia Art Collection, The Joe and Rose Skinner Bequest, 1978

**Fred Williams**, *Foothill landscape*, 1968, oil on canvas, 122.5 x 132.5 cm, The University of Western Australia Art Collection, The Joe and Rose Skinner Bequest, 1981

**Fred Williams**, *untitled (landscape)*, 1968, gouache, 41.4 x 65 cm, The University of Western Australia Art Collection, The Joe and Rose Skinner Bequest, 1981

**Fred Williams**, *Burnt landscape*, 1968, gouache, 54 x 73.7 cm, The University of Western Australia Art Collection, The Joe and Rose Skinner Bequest, 1981

**Fred Williams**, *untitled (landscape)*, 1968-69, gouache, 66 x 85 cm, The University of Western Australia Art Collection, The Joe and Rose Skinner Bequest, 1981

Cover image: Fred Williams, *Foothill landscape*, 1968, oil on canvas, 122.5 x 132.5 cm. The University of Western Australia Art Collection, The Joe and Rose Skinner Bequest, 1981, © Fred Williams Estate

Published by the Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery, The University of Western Australia, 2018.  
Images are copyright the artist or artist's estate and cannot be reproduced without permission.  
ISBN - 978-1-925793-00-0



**LAWRENCE WILSON ART GALLERY**  
OPEN TUES - SAT 11AM - 5PM  
FREE ADMITTANCE  
f t i @LWAGallery

THE UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA  
35 Stirling Highway, Crawley, WA, Australia 6009  
P +61 (0)8 6488 3707 W lwag.uwa.edu.au  
CRICOS Provider Code: 00126G

