

Emotion laid bare in landscape

William Robinson's vision is grounded in his backyard, writes Louise Martin-Chew

A FULL-BLOODED emotional response of any kind — from joy to grief — is more often the preserve of music, theatre and narrative art of the past than contemporary painting. Perhaps the mass market sentimentality of Hollywood has degraded the acknowledgment of human emotion or it may be simply that we find any journey outside the spectrum of the intellect to be threatening to our human vulnerabilities.

These issues are raised by the profoundly emotional journey the Queensland Art Gallery has conducted through 30 years of the work of Queensland-based artist William Robinson. In a world where cool most often equals conceptual, Robinson is the most unfashionable of artists: a painter of landscape with content.

A wider Australian audience might know him best as a two-time Archibald Prize winner — in 1987 and 1995 — with self-portraits that parodied self-importance and unravelled not only the genre but the context. However, Robinson, 65, is not primarily a portrait painter. It is a small part of his output, spanning only the years from 1987 to 1994, during which the Archibald was his target.

Public interest also stalked him in 1998 when Giles Auty, then an art critic for *The Australian*, pronounced his *Creation Landscape: The Ancient Trees* (1997) a masterpiece, triggering debate as much about the definition of masterpiece as about Robinson. His work has clearly struck a chord, with support from

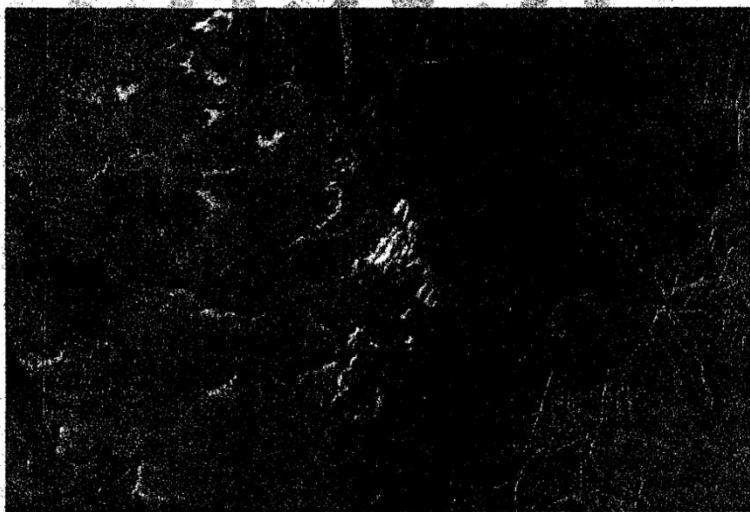
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collectors and national and international institutions, and strenuous debate among critics.

The Queensland Art Gallery retrospective comes at a good time for Robinson and, perhaps for the first time, will allow the work to be judged on its merits. The exhibition is one of the largest retrospectives presented by any Australian gallery and the catalogue is the third book produced on Robinson in six years. It is also, significantly, the most substantial scholarly contribution to date on Robinson's work.

Robinson clearly feels that the media debate and headlines have little to do with him and his work ethic. Sanity and the seeds of his successful artistic journey lie in his withdrawal from an urban centre. Despite teaching art in Brisbane from 1957 until 1989, Robinson, wife Shirley and their six children left the city and suburbs behind in 1974 when they moved to the bushland suburb of Birkdale, outside Brisbane.

Robinson describes himself as a painter... the cow's udders, followed soon after by



Masterpiece? A panel from Robinson's *Creation Landscape: The Ancient Trees* (1997)

towards new modes of expression, painting the landscape as though you were walking through it, with different vistas, trees soaring above, also reflected in pools of water. The aim is to draw the viewer in and the vertiginous effect induced by a journey through this work is complete.

However, the death of Sophie⁸ Robinson in 1992, only 18 months after that of another Robinson daughter, propelled the artist through a significant shift. The works that follow are almost entirely bereft of the animal and human presence and comic elements of the earlier works, and focus on larger questions.

The shifting perspective within which Robinson created his original vision grows even more vertiginous, while allegorical elements — a fire, a rainbow, a mistiness softening the certainties — show him looking through his personal vision to something universal.

The multiple perspectives in these works are seductive, evoking a sense that through them you enter another world, familiar yet magical.

One of the most moving works is *Green Mountains* (1992), which Robinson completed shortly after Sophie's death. There is palpable sadness in this work, a spine of mountains, distantly rendered to infinity.

William Robinson: A Retrospective
Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane to November 11; then National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, December 14 to March 10, 2002.

of his own backyard, crediting the inspiration of his down-home environment as the stimulus for his original vision. And this is the story told by the retrospective.

The exhibition begins with Robinson's Archibald portraits. To view the series of six portraits entered in the prize is to grasp, in some measure, the clever, self-deprecating psychology of the man. The last of these, *Self-Portrait with Stunned Mullet* (1994), draws on Monty Python's *Flying Circus* (madly waving fish like a changing of the guard) and depicts Robinson with a simpering smile as in Hogarth's *The Shrimp Girl*.

Beyond the Archibald alcove are the earliest works, Bonnard-influenced domestic vignettes, although already distinguished by Robinson's characters, himself in blue and white striped pyjamas, wife Shirley in bed and setting the table plus the Robinson reality of babies and children.

The exhibition moves chronologically through Robinson's landscapes. The farmyard pictures, which began Robinson's chronicling of his life and experiences on the land, are hung separately from the climactic work of the landscapes of Beechmont and Springbrook. Paintings that take the sea as their primary inspiration, with rolling seascapes that reflect the curvature of the earth in a giddy horizon line and evoke the surging aural quality of the sea, emerged in 1994 and 1995 after Robinson moved to coastal NSW. These are also displayed separately, appropriately enough, in the Queensland Art Gallery's water mall.

His multiple viewpoints began with the farmyard series, like a schism from the earlier work. Pastel shades disappear in favour of browns, blacks, greys, and colour the reality of a chaotic country life. The earliest indications as to how Robinson was going to see the landscape may well be in his portrayal of

the deconstruction of the corrugated-iron barns.

The move to Beechmont pushed this further. Suddenly William and Shirley, the cows, goats and horses are in an unfamiliar landscape, and their struggles to come to terms with it, as well as their awe at the natural beauty, are laid bare. A self-deprecating humour, the send-up with an eye on the crowd visible in each of the Archibald entries, is also visible here.

However, the style grows more sophisticated. Robinson, who lived and walked daily in the rainforest, moved deftly