

The blot on the landscape: Fred Williams and Australian art history

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There is a blot on the Australian landscape. It has been there for a long time, but its existence only really became apparent with a defining shift in Australian art historiography which occurred with Bernard Smith's 1980 Boyer Lecture series, *The Spectre of Truganini*. Seeing the exclusion of an Aboriginal presence in Australian art through the ideas of Sigmund Freud, Smith proposed in his pivotal text that the history of Australian art was a history of repression. After Smith, contemporary art historian Ian McLean has developed the most detailed account of the history of Australian art according to this methodology. This essay examines the work of the modern Australian artist Fred Williams in relation to both Smith and McLean's understanding of the history of Australian art but to expand on their work I argue that, rather than Freud alone, it is Jacques Lacan's refiguring of Freud that offers us the most insight into Williams's work. Further, insofar as I argue that the history of Australian art is the very subject matter of Williams's work, his work stands in for a wider project, the writing of a history of Australian art according to Lacan's proposal of a foundational split between the eye and the gaze. But first, to that blot.

From colonial melancholy to a modern uncanny

In a brilliant observation, Ian McLean, in drawing attention to emigrant artist John Glover's attempt to control the disorderly dispersion of gums across the hillsides in the background of some of his paintings, suggests that therein could be found the origin to the art of Fred Williams. McLean's observation was made as part of his argument on the difference between Glover's British pictures and those that he completed late in his life after immigrating to Tasmania in 1831. In coming to Australia, McLean proposed, Glover's 'picturesque aesthetic wavered, producing an ambivalence and uncertainty typical of melancholy'.¹ The cause of this disturbance, he further specified, was Glover's inability to 'forget the uncanny presence of a paradise lost – that is, the exclusion of Aborigines'.² In a remarkable passage that I wish to quote in full, McLean proposes a history of Australian landscape painting that is to be understood as a repeated reworking of a loss that is made present in Glover's painting by its repeated absence. 'The haunting' of Glover's paintings, McLean writes,

¹Ian McLean, 'Under Saturn: Melancholy and the Colonial Imagination', in Nicholas Thomas and Diane Losche, eds, *Double Vision: Art Histories and Colonial Histories in the Pacific*, Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999, 157.

²McLean, 'Under Saturn', 156.

is at its most palpable in the melancholy solitude of the wooded ranges that frame his scenes like a looming amphitheatre watching over him with all the sublime terror of an absolute unbounded other. Here the space of the picture resists any imposed order, and Glover must paint blind in the hope of finding an order from inside his own consciousness – or in this most modernist of strategies, let the space compose itself. Occasionally, as in *Mt Wellington with the Orphan Asylum, Van Diemen's Land* (1837), the solitude of this chaos is cast like a great stain across the painting. The rainbow, a traditional emblem of redemption, ironically taunts the orphan asylum which, like the new colony, precariously inhabits a strange land with all the disjointed logic of a dream. In this new home stirs the unhomely. This uncanny presence of a paradise lost pictured by Glover in the background hills of Van Diemen's Land became a distinctive feature of Australian landscape art. Tom Roberts and Sidney Nolan were drawn to it, and Fred Williams made it the very subject of his art and content of his aesthetic.³



Figure 1 John Glover, *Mount Wellington with Orphan Asylum, Van Diemen's Land* (1837)
oil on canvas, 76.5 x 114.2 cm, National Gallery of Victoria

³McLean, 'Under Saturn', 156–7.

This quote comes from McLean's chapter contribution, 'Under Saturn: Melancholy and the Colonial Imagination', to the book *Double Vision: Art Histories and Colonial Histories in the Pacific*. However on different occasions and with slight variations, McLean repeated this passage. In his influential book, *White Aborigines: Identity Politics in Australian Art*, for example, the passage is revised, with the sentence on Roberts, Nolan and Williams replaced by a more generalised reference to how the underlying disorder in Glover's paintings makes his work the forerunner 'of Australian landscape art in the second half of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.'⁴ I wish to develop McLean's original line of thought, taking up the connection with Fred Williams that was not pursued in either his article or book, to argue that the structuring logic to Williams's work is indeed determined by the uncanny.

Williams's turning point: resurrection and failed redemption

To evidence how Williams's work was determined by the uncanny, I will examine the recent major study on the artist by Deborah Hart – a publication that accompanied her mounting of *Fred Williams: Infinite Horizons*, the retrospective exhibition of Williams's work held at the National Gallery of Australia in 2011. On reading Hart's catalogue, which builds on the previous two major monographs on Williams by Patrick McCaughey and James Mollison, it is surprising to realise that in the end, behind all the detailed scholarship and the careful historical reconstruction that marks her text, it is on just one decisive event that she hinges the destiny of Williams's art.⁵

After the many details across the narrative breadth of Williams's career have receded, one's lasting impression from Hart's text is of how the genius of Williams's art is ultimately the after-effect of an epiphany. Although Hart does not herself directly address the significance of this instant where all shifts for Williams, I wish to argue, after McLean, that this moment of revelation should be more properly conceived as the moment of the striking of the uncanny. Further, it is Williams's encounter with the uncanny, I believe, that provides the means for understanding his work's relation to the history of Australian art.

The turning point for Williams that Deborah Hart dramatizes is the moment of his re-seeing of the Australian landscape after a period of five years away studying and working in London. At the conclusion to her chapter on Williams's years in London Hart writes that 'away from his home-base', although 'his horizons had been broadened', Williams 'was still waiting for a catalyst that would take his art to another level. Although he didn't know it, in late 1956, as he sailed back to Australia he was moving to the threshold of this discovery.'⁶ This strange sense of

⁴Ian McLean, *White Aborigines: Identity Politics in Australian Art*, Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998, 44.

⁵Patrick McCaughey, *Fred Williams*, Sydney and London: Bay Books, 1980; James Mollison, *A Singular Vision: The art of Fred Williams*, Canberra: Australian National Gallery, 1989.

⁶Deborah Hart, *Fred Williams: Infinite Horizons*, Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, 2011, 42.

Williams being propelled by an unknown destiny is heightened by Hart immediately adding what she reads as a kind of unexplainable premonition on the part of Williams. In the next sentence and to end the chapter Hart writes: 'The year before he [Williams] departed he wrote to John Brack: "My paintings have been many, but also varied. I feel myself that before long I shall come home ... Perhaps this will strike you as very funny but I will paint many pictures in the future, this I have decided."' ⁷

The full theatrical effect that Hart is aiming for becomes clear when we turn from this second chapter – which is titled 'Setting the Stage', following on from the first chapter on Williams's student years, titled 'Laying the Groundwork' – to the third chapter, the title of which, 'Resurrecting the Gum Tree', announces the epiphany. With this title Hart is in the first instance referring back to Alan McCulloch's review of Williams's 1958 exhibition in Melbourne which featured the headline 'Resurrection of the Gum Tree' – and Williams's first exhibition which, as Hart notes, was 'to reveal the effects of his home country on his art after five years away'. ⁸ Also, more generally, the title references the seemingly miraculous overcoming of the impossible task that Williams set himself: a challenge expressed in a now famous exchange, perhaps more legendary than actual, between John Brack and Williams.

With Williams freshly back from London, Brack reportedly asked him, 'Well, Freddy, what are you going to do?' The matter-of-fact response came straight back, 'I am going to paint the gum tree.' Stunned and in disbelief, Brack responded, 'You can't do that. Everybody's done that', to which Williams replied, in his characteristic deadpan manner, (perhaps wishing to put an end to any further discussion on the topic but yet also, in an underhand way, maintain the enormity of his task): 'Well, it's just what I'm going to do.' ⁹ As an exchange that over the years has come to be used as a key for deciphering Williams's painting, it can on the one hand be understood to evoke how Williams could see anew what had been rendered invisible by its over-familiarity and over-use by other artists. This is one association implicitly connected to the idea of a resurrection: like Christ, who is the most ordinary of men, and for this reason his divinity is not seen, the gum tree is so pedestrian and familiar that it, too, is never truly seen. Thus something out of the ordinary is required – James Mollison terms it 'a singular vision' – to see what others cannot. Yet on the other hand, resurrection also withholds the promise of redemption.

A further association however can be made by following McLean's proposal that the history of Australian art is founded upon a failed or incomplete redemption. Observing the glowing Claudean light in paintings by Glover that depicted his new home in Tasmania, such as *My Harvest Home* and *A View of the Artist's Home*, McLean notes how this suggests the possibility of Glover discovering 'a personal redemption in the bush'. ¹⁰ However as McLean is quick to correct this thought, it would be misleading to think this is the case since Glover 'did not repeat these exaggeratedly

⁷Hart, *Infinite Horizons*, 42.

⁸Hart, *Infinite Horizons*, 45.

⁹James Mollison quotes this exchange as recalled by Hal Hattam; Mollison, *A Singular Vision*, 35.

¹⁰McLean, *White Aborigines*, 44.

transcendent visions in later works.¹¹ Rather than achieving any smooth transcendence, for Glover 'redemption falters'.¹² McLean extends this peculiarity to the history of Australian art that Glover originates. Comparing Glover to his near contemporary in America, Thomas Cole, McLean argues that whereas Cole redeems the American wilderness, painting 'sublime panoramas of a dream fulfilled, of paradise regained', in Australia, by contrast, 'the paradise was never regained. Here a paradise lost remained inscribed on the surface of its texts.'¹³

A history from blindness

There is no doubt, as both McCaughey and Mollison have exhaustively argued, that Fred Williams was Australia's greatest modernist painter. However, the modernist nature of Williams's art should be seen in terms of McLean's bold claim that Glover was already engaged in the 'most modernist of strategies'. Williams only becomes the most complete Australian modernist painter by returning to and repeating Glover. If the history of Australian landscape painting is a history of being ever more drawn into Glover's background hills, Williams, by removing in his work all possibility of distinguishing between background and foreground, both completes this history and at the same time makes this history – the history of Australian art's depicting of the landscape – the very focus of his painting. In doing this, Williams, more than any other Australian artist, was driven by the blindness that lies at the origin of Australian art.

In order to understand how blindness conditions Williams's work it is first important to draw attention to a peculiar detail in the extended passage from McLean that I have quoted. In an earlier version of this passage, McLean spoke of how the 'vast silent solitude of Glover's wooded ranges that frame his central scenes' were occasionally, as in *Mt Wellington with the Orphan Asylum, Van Diemen's Land*, 'cast like a great shadow across an otherwise sublime landscape'.¹⁴ In the later version that I have quoted, and also in McLean's book, the 'great shadow' has been replaced by a 'great stain': 'the solitude of this chaos is cast like a great stain across the painting'. Although it is not referenced by McLean, this substitution of shadow for stain is likely to be the result of Slavoj Žižek's popularising of the term stain as it is used in Lacan's formulation of the concept of the gaze.¹⁵ This underlying dialogue with Lacan's theorising on the gaze is equally present in McLean's provocative idea

¹¹McLean, *White Aborigines*, 44.

¹²McLean, *White Aborigines*, 44.

¹³ Ian McLean, 'Your Own Land is Best: The Limits of Redemption in Australian Colonial Art', *Australian Journal of Art*, vol. 12, 1994–95, 132

¹⁴Ian McLean, 'Your Own Land is Best', 136.

¹⁵Although Žižek's use of the term stain is spread throughout his work, the most relevant to my concern is the chapter on 'The Hitchcockian Blot' in his *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture*, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: MIT Press, 1991, 88. Another possibility that does not necessarily cancel out this one, is that McLean is attempting to differentiate his argument from John Barrell's influential *The Dark Side of the Landscape: the rural poor in English painting, 1730-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980) replacing Barrell's use of shadow with the more suggestively violent (blood)stain.

of how the framing of Glover's wooded ranges caused his 'central scenes' to be like a 'looming amphitheatre watching over him', with the 'him' not just to be understood here as Glover but equally also the spectator.

In stating things in this manner, McLean is implicitly calling for the need to provide an account, as Lacan would endeavour to do in response to his reading of Merleau-Ponty's *The Visible and the Invisible*, for 'the pre-existence of a gaze' – for how it is that 'I see only from one point, but in my existence I am looked at from all sides.'¹⁶ In providing just such an account Lacan would put forth his famous proposal of a fundamental split between the eye and the gaze: 'the eye and the gaze – this is for us the split in which the drive is manifested at the level of the scopic field.'¹⁷ In turn, I would propose, it is precisely this split that Australian artists after Glover are, as McLean puts it, 'drawn to', and it is nothing other than this split itself that becomes the entire subject matter of Williams's art.

A stain over the view

An initial understanding of the implications of this proposal can be grasped by considering how Žižek presents the significance of the 'stain', drawing as he does from Lacan's featuring of Hans Holbein's use of anamorphosis in *The Ambassadors* and the distorted 'stain' of death's skull that is, to use McLean's expression, 'cast across the painting'. To approach the originality of Lacan's concept of the gaze Žižek is always at pains to stress how it reverses the relationship between subject and object, how the gaze is not linked to a spectator's look – to an eye – but rather strangely, indeed it could only be described as uncannily so, placed on the side of the object. This reversal overthrows, Žižek argues, a hermeneutical or even deconstructive approach to a work of art. 'The aim of the hermeneutical endeavour is to render visible', he writes,

the contours of a "frame," a "horizon" that, precisely by staying invisible, by eluding the subject's grasp, in advance determines its field of vision: what we see, as well as what we cannot see, is always given to us through a historically mediated frame of preconcepts ... there is no view that is not framed by a historically determined horizon of "preunderstanding".¹⁸

This all changes though with Lacan, who 'supplements this hermeneutical thesis with an unheard-of inversion: 'the "horizon of meaning" is always linked, as if by a kind of umbilical cord, to a point *within* the field disclosed by it; the frame of our view is always already framed (re-marked) by a part of its content.'¹⁹ The best way to

¹⁶Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1977, 72.

¹⁷Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, 73.

¹⁸Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy your Symptom!: Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out*, New York: Routledge, 1992, 14–15.

¹⁹Žižek, *Enjoy your Symptom*, 15.

exemplify this inversion, Žižek further suggests,

is via the dialectic of view and gaze: in what I see, in what is open to my view, there is always a point where “I see nothing,” a point which “makes no sense,” i.e., which functions as the picture’s stain – this is the point from which the very picture returns the gaze, looks back at me ... here I encounter myself, my own objective correlative – here I am, so to speak, inscribed in the picture; this ontic “umbilical cord” of the ontological horizon is what is unthinkable for the entire philosophical tradition, Heidegger included.²⁰

That Williams is granted such an exceptional place in the history of Australian art is because he does not paint a ‘view’ of the Australian landscape. This was his epiphany at the moment of his return to Australia: he suddenly saw in the landscape that which was not a view of the landscape. Paradoxically, on returning to Australia it could be said that Williams saw nothing, or this could be said another way: that he saw in the Australian landscape a point that could not be included in the history of Australian landscape painting, the point, that is, that made no sense within that history. It was consequently how to paint, to use Žižek’s words, the “I see nothing”, the point which “makes no sense”, that Williams struggled with on his return. If for Glover that which was excluded from view was sometimes cast as a great anamorphic stain across the canvas then, to follow McLean’s suggestion, it is for Williams as if the stain itself became the whole canvas. How then to give form to what was essentially formless? How to paint one’s own non-seeing, the blind spot in which ‘I am, so to speak, inscribed in the picture’? This was the dilemma that Williams felt that he could not shy away from, that he needed to squarely face, upon his return to Australia.

The Australian subject

To further appreciate the nature of the challenge that Williams set for himself, it is necessary to understand how McLean’s reading of Glover is itself the outcome of a fundamental shift in Australian art historiography that occurred with the publishing of Bernard Smith’s 1980 Boyer Lecture Series, *The Spectre of Truganini*. Smith began his series of lectures with a striking rephrasing of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels’ famous beginning to *The Communist Manifesto*: ‘Let me begin in this way. It seems to me that a spectre has haunted Australian culture, the spectre of Truganini.’²¹ Even though Smith wished to highlight his Marxist methodology with this introductory flourish, it was his use of Freud that had the most lasting impact in terms of subsequent Australian art history. In his second lecture, titled ‘The Mechanisms of Forgetfulness’, Smith observed that while for most white Australians the dispossession of Aborigines from their lands was ‘a nightmare to be thrust out of

²⁰Žižek, *Enjoy your Symptom*, 15.

²¹Bernard Smith, *1980 Boyer Lectures: The Spectre of Truganini*, Sydney: The Australian Broadcasting Commission, 1980, 9. *The Communist Manifesto* begins with: ‘A spectre is haunting Europe – the spectre of communism.’

mind', the elimination is never in fact complete. Turning to Freud, Smith proposed that:

like the traumatic experiences of childhood it continues to haunt our dreams. And as with childhood so with the childhood of a nation. As Freud has put it: "It is universally admitted that in the origin of the traditions and folklore of a people, care must be taken to eliminate from the memory such motive as would be painful to the national feeling."²²

With this quote serving as the basis for an understanding of the history of Australian art as a history of repression, it is not surprising that Smith should also have implicitly invoked the uncanny when he described the dispossession of Aborigines from their land as the 'locked cupboard of our history'.²³ That the unlocking and opening of this door in the familial home might create an uncanny effect should be related to Freud's explanation of the uncanny as occurring when something: 'that ought to have remained secret and hidden ... come[s] to light.'²⁴

However, to Smith's reference back to Freud I wish to add a Lacanian inflection. In the next sentence which follows the passage quoted by Smith, Freud wrote: 'Perhaps, on closer inspection, it may be possible to form a perfect analogy between the manner of development of national traditions and infantile reminiscences of the individual.'²⁵ If it is accepted that there is such a perfect analogy, and if for Freud consideration of a traumatic experience that continues to haunt leads back to the central notion of castration anxiety, there is a point, the explanation of which serves as Žižek's constant refrain, that is essential to consider. Indeed, it is a point all the more crucial to consider insofar as Lacan would ultimately draw the conclusion that Holbein's stain makes 'visible for us here something that is simply the subject as annihilated – annihilated in the form that is, strictly speaking, the imaged embodiment of the minus-phi [lack] of castration'.²⁶ To take one example from many, the point that Žižek would wish to stress here is that castration should not be thought only in terms of a

threat-horizon, a not-yet/always to come, but, simultaneously, something which always-already happens: the subject is not only under threat of separation, it *is* the effect of separation (from substance). Furthermore, insofar

²²Smith, *The Spectre of Truganini*, 17. The Freud quote is from *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, trans. A. A. Brill, New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1914, 154.

²³Smith, *The Spectre of Truganini*, 10.

²⁴Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. James Strachey, vol. 17, London: The Hogarth Press, 1955, 225.

²⁵Freud, *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, 154. If there is a perfect analogy then this would mean that the direction in which the analogy proceeded, that is from the individual to the nation or from the nation to the individual, could not be determined – each would be produced as the possibility of the other. This might suggest that it is far from coincidental that Freud would suggest the existence of a perfect analogy in the very year – 1901 – of Australia's Federation.

²⁶Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, 89.

as a traumatic encounter generates anxiety, we should bear in mind that, for Lacan, in anxiety, what the subject is exposed to is precisely the loss of the loss itself – Lacan here turns around Freud: anxiety is not the anxiety of separation from the object, but the anxiety of the object (-cause of desire) getting too close to the subject. This is why trauma belongs to the domain of the uncanny in the fundamental ambiguity of this term: what makes uncanny uncanny is its proximity, the fact that it is the coming-into-visibility of something too close to us.²⁷

My endeavour is to propose that Williams's ultimate subject matter was separation in the sense that Žižek explains here, and thus that in his repeating of the past, in his return to the origins of Australian art, Williams was painting the (Australian) subject that *is* the effect of separation. In doing this, Williams was equally, to utilise Žižek's terms, painting what makes the uncanny uncanny. Thus if the uncanny for Glover was a distant exclusion, with Williams his practice actually proceeded from the more truly uncanny realisation that it was that very exclusion that formed the most intimate part of the Australian subject, that is, that any substance to the Australian subject only exists in that which it is separated from. Thus again in comparison to Glover, Williams's encounter with the bush was one of proximity, of the coming-into-visibility of something too close, in a word – the one that Lacan invented to evoke what makes the uncanny uncanny – an encounter with the 'extimate'.²⁸

To draw is to cut

In Hart's chapter on Williams's resurrection of the gum tree she rather unexpectedly first refers back to several works – a drawing, an etching and an oil on composition board – that Williams completed in London on the subject of tree lopping. Comparing the speed and vigour of the drawing and etching to that of the painting, she suggests that the painting

embodies stasis; a feeling of time held in honour of form. There is power in the pictorial distillation that finds an equivalent in trees felled and lopped until all that remains are the bare essentials. There is a sense that these trees, reaching up with severed branches, might be a crucifixion of sorts. There is strength and beauty in their Spartan survival, despite the odds, and in the spatial possibilities they open up, limb to limb.²⁹

²⁷Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times*, London & New York: Verso, 2010, 309.

²⁸Lacan coined the word *extimité* (in English translated as extimacy or the extimate) to combine the most intimate interiority with the most distant, excluded exterior, thus following Freud's principle of the uncanny as the coincidence of opposites.

²⁹Hart, *Infinite Horizons*, 46. Hart's general sensing that this is a crucifixion scene can actually be given much more precision as Christopher Heathcote has recalled how John Brack once told him that with the *Tree loppers* Williams was consciously reworking Rosso Fiorentino's *Deposition from the Cross* altarpiece. Christopher Heathcote, 'L'Education Sentimentale', in Jeffrey Makin, *Australia Felix: Landscapes*, Melbourne: MacMillan, 2002, 20.



Figure 2 Fred Williams, *Tree loppers* (1955)
oil on composition board, 102 x 70.5 cm. © Estate of Fred Williams

Hart singles out *Tree loppers* (1955, oil on composition board) as providing a link to Williams's subsequent work back in Australia, observing how its 'strong composition and vertical emphasis ... pointed the way to future developments'.³⁰ As Hart develops this connection, a sub-theme of uncanny dismembering runs through her text, not necessarily made explicit as such, but it emerges, cuts through to the surface like a symptomatic disturbance, or like an unconscious that can only be glimpsed in disruptions and distortions. From crucifixion to resurrection Hart suggests the idea that Williams's work is concerned with a wounding of the landscape, or more exactly, and this I wish to see as the uncanny dimension to his work, that it is not so much about the wounding of the landscape, but that the landscape arises from the wounding, that the landscape *is* the inscription, the cut itself.



Figure 3 Fred Williams, *Sketch for Tree loppers I* (1955)
ink on paper, 23.5 x 17 cm. © Estate of Fred Williams

In the context of this idea it is significant that Hart should construct a link to Williams's Australian work not just through the painting of the tree loppers, but via

³⁰Hart, *Infinite Horizons*, 46.

the relationship between the drawing, etching and painting of the tree loppers. If we look at Williams's first sketch (*Sketch for Tree loppers I*, 1955, ink on paper) a sketch that Hart did not reproduce, the association of the tree lopper series with a crucifixion scene is quite striking. Here one can see how Williams undertakes a displacement of the crucifixion scene, moving from seeing the tree lopper himself as like Christ on the cross, to the tree as the substitute body being crucified. There is an odd effect created by Williams with the outstretched arm of the tree lopper doubling as a limb of the tree, creating confusion between what is doing the severing and what is severed. With the doubling that takes place, it is as if the tree lopper's limb becomes some other strange and alien life-form no longer attached to the tree lopper, as if, and this would equally be the case for the artist's hand that draws the limb, there is the seeing of one's 'own' limb as another, as other to oneself. Although the outstretched arm that fuses with the cutting instrument – and it is not clear if this is a saw, a hacksaw or just a blade – seems to bridge the gap between the two trees, in its exaggerated extension the arm itself seems to be split, which is to say that the arm doing the cutting seems itself to be cut.³¹ This thought can itself be extended as we see that it is not just the arm but also the figure itself that appears to be strangely split. Thus for example one notes how the figure's left foot faces away from us, as if the figure had his back to us, yet the other side of the figure suggests he faces towards us. Is it then the front or back of the figure we see? Is the head twisting to look to the side or is it already facing out? Further still, the left foot as it turns away seems to be resting on nothing, yet at the same time we have the impression that the vertically framed background becomes a horizontal support on which the figure stands – a precursor of the confusion between the horizontal and vertical that would become a feature of Williams's work. To recognise in all this doubling and dividing what is foreshadowed in Williams's work, as Hart does, I wish to draw attention to the significance of how the scene itself – the cutting of a limb – is a doubling of the act of drawing. To draw is to cut: this is an equation that fascinated Williams, and it was within the thrall of this fascination that Williams's re-seeing of the Australian landscape took place.

The shape that forms itself

To see more of what is implicit in Hart's proposal, we should consider a key moment in her text as she identifies a specific return to the *Tree loppers* series in Williams's later Australian work. Of Williams's 1965–66 *Oval landscape* Hart writes that the 'underlying subject of the painting – tree felling – is indicated by the shape of an axe close to the horizon line, recalling his stark early *Tree loppers*.'³² This is quite a simple but nevertheless intriguing observation. It is initially interesting to note that what Hart now sees as an axe – the form on a grey background situated just below the right hand side of the horizon line – was seen by others to be simply a chopped tree, and as such to be the clear subject matter of the painting. Patrick McCaughey, for

³¹This is not an isolated case; both the exaggerated extension of the arm and the arm as severed feature in quite a few of the drawings and etchings Williams did in London.

³²Hart, *Infinite Horizons*, 77.

example, was quite explicit on this, claiming that 'the key to *Oval landscape* is the chopped tree focused so sharply just under the horizon line.'³³ Ursula Hoff also saw it that way, describing the work as 'painted in a sombre mood, as if it were a dirge for the fallen tree which lies at the top.'³⁴



Figure 4 Fred Williams, *Oval Landscape* (1965-66)
oil on canvas, 157.5 x 90 cm. © Estate of Fred Williams

Building on McCaughey and Hoff, Hart is no doubt hoping to intensify the felt pain of this lament through the amplification given to the chopped tree now seen as an axe. Even more however, there is also the suggestion that the seeing of the axe is now to be read as an intentional symbol or allegorical sign on Williams's part. Not wishing to necessarily decide on the extent to which Hart's reading is an imposed one or not, I think the axe can be seen as an allegorical sign, even if taken as an

³³Patrick McCaughey, *Fred Williams*, Sydney and London: Bay Books, 1980, 178.

³⁴Ursula Hoff, *John Brack—Fred Williams*, Albert Hall, Canberra, 1-13 August, 1967, unpaginated brochure.

unintentional one, if it is understood as reflecting back on Williams's own making of the painting. Consider for example how Hart draws our attention not just to the axe but also to the axe's placement just below the horizon line, in fact in line with it, so that it is doubling or repeating it. A further exchange is thus suggested, implicit also in McCaughey's wording, when he draws our attention to the chopped tree by noting how it is, to re-quote his phrase now with added emphasis, '*focused so sharply just under the horizon line*'. The doubling of the tree/axe (or tree 'slash' axe) with the horizon line is to suggest that the horizon line itself is also a kind of cutting: that the framing or presentation of a scene is dependent on a process of cutting similar to tree felling – and that tree felling here is itself echoing the initial cutting that the framing of a view necessarily implies.

In the *Chopped trees* series of works with which the *Oval landscape* is associated, there are many dead or burnt gum trees lying flat, visually rhyming with the horizon line. This occurs equally in the *Upwey landscape* series that just precedes these works, where the horizontal black marks of the dead trees are sometimes indistinguishable from what McCaughey also refers to elsewhere as the 'razor's edge' of the horizon line in that series.³⁵ In the *Upwey landscape* paintings, with the vertical trees depicted as caught between the sky and the ground, the perception of the trees as cut by the 'razor's edge' of the horizon line is particularly pronounced. However this cut is only itself repeating another eccentricity of Williams's work that stands as one of its defining characteristics: spread across the canvases there is the proliferation of the isolated foliage – the 'head' of the gum tree – that hovers in an indeterminate space above the ground, that is to say cut from any connection to a tree. With Williams it is thus as though the gum tree as the defining trait of the landscape – the Australian – is only there in its dispersion, in its separation from itself. Turning back then to *Oval landscape*, with the dislodged and cut gum trees floating above the horizon line, as much as Williams could be searching for a spiritual release, a redemption, suggested by the movement towards a lighter tone and hence more refined essence in the upper portion of the canvas, it is equally that the remains of the gum trees are suspended in a non-place, nowhere, as though a final resting place cannot be found.

Enhancing this sense of displacement and dispersal, Hart's recognition of the axe also gives a certain surreal edge to its appearance, evident in the way that the cleared space around the axe makes it stand out so that it is both strangely exposed and oddly out of place. This is an effect intensified by the impossibility of attributing any sense of scale to the axe, as any normal expectations are inverted insofar as its placement next to the horizon line would suggest its distance from the viewer, whereas as its actual, depicted size certainly implies the opposite. There is thus no way that it can be coherently placed 'in' the picture.

Intriguingly, Hart pairs her discussion of *Oval landscape* with a painting done in the same year, *Circle landscape*, and relates both to Williams's intention, noted in his diary at the time, of clarifying 'his images by cutting out shapes and reapplying them.'³⁶ It is unclear how exactly Williams would have gone about this, but Hart suggests that in any event his aim was alternatively met when he applied 'geometric

³⁵McCaughey, *Fred Williams*, 168.

³⁶Hart, *Infinite Horizons*, 76.

devices' to his works so that the framing oval and circle were in effect themselves the cut-out shapes.³⁷ It could be equally proposed, however, that the cleared space around the axe is effectively a cut-out in the sense that it does not quite fit in with its surroundings.

There is yet another way to understand Williams's intention behind the cut-out: by relating it to the importance of etching and engraving to his work. The *Oval landscape* painting was, as was the case with other decisive works for Williams, a development from an etching. Prior to the painting Williams had worked through five states of the *Oval landscape* as an etching. Crucially, this was an etching in which Williams's used the sugarlift aquatint process, a process that involves the brushing of a sugar solution directly onto the plate. There are a number of stages to the process of etching with sugarlift aquatint: firstly the brushing on of the 'shapes' with the sugar solution, then the covering of the whole plate with an acid resistant varnish, then the placement of the plate in hot water so that where the sugar solution lies underneath the surface it dissolves and cracks through – that is to say, splits open – the surface. There is then the subjecting of these newly exposed areas to the acid which bites into them, and finally the inking and pressing of the print itself. From one stage to the next it is as though a shape is alternately there and not there, or as though what is there gets concealed to later return, to rise again to the surface. The relationship between the process itself and the subject matter – whether that be the 'dirge' for the gum tree as Ursula Hoff said, or what could be extended to a more generalised mourning for the passing of an Australian landscape tradition, insofar as the gum tree could stand in for that tradition – is a fascinating one.

In Williams's 1965 interview with Hazel de Berg, in the very year in which he was working on the *Oval portrait*, he commented on the importance of not just etching but also more particularly sugar aquatint to his work. Williams reflected: 'I think I've had a preference in my etching for sugar aquatint, which means I can put an organic shape on the plate or on the print, and this helps me with the landscape, particularly with my ideas of the trees, so I work directly from the etchings.'³⁸ One of the key attractions for Williams to this idea of an 'organic shape' was the sense that the shape would arise all by itself, independent of his control. It was as if, to refer back to McLean on Glover, the work was composing itself, with Williams proceeding as if blind.

Although Williams himself set a chemical reaction in process, that process was to have an uncanny life and direction of its own once it was in motion. In this respect, it is quite important to understand that it was not just an organic shape or process that was involved but equally an inorganic one, in the sense of being at the same time opposed to the natural or the human. With the outlining of the shape taken outside of Williams's direct control, it was the making strange of the shape, that is, the tree, which is also to say the Australian landscape, to the movement of Williams's own hand that was decisive. It was the separating and distancing of Williams from his own act of inscription, along with the paradox of the repetitive,

³⁷Hart, *Infinite Horizons*, 76.

³⁸Fred Williams interviewed by Hazel de Berg, Hazel de Berg collection, National Library of Australia, interview conducted 8 December, 1965.

machine-like nature of the printing process which at the same time unleashed an animating spirit, that was so compelling for him. The shape that emerged, which again it is necessary to understand as equivalent to the idea of the Australian landscape for Williams, was strangely formless, as much alien as organic, with its lack of definition making it like some kind of continuously morphing horror film 'Thing', or science fiction-like viral contagion.

Consequently you could also think of this amorphous figure as a shape that never settles, or that it is a shape that arises from an unsettling principle within it, so that its formless nature is the result of its lack of a place. This is a thought that also emerges when Williams further explains his process of working 'directly from the etchings' to mean that 'I can refer to the etchings so that the paintings never really are of any particular spot'.³⁹ This is an idea that Williams would develop in later interviews, speaking of how you could see the Australian landscape as the same all over if you looked at it or painted it with its 'skin off'.⁴⁰ Although this phrase – how Williams is painting the landscape with the skin off – has often been repeated by many commentators, it has not been realised how intimately this seeing of the landscape with the skin off was related to his working process. For example, how looking at his etchings in process and seeing the sugar aquatint break through to the surface is like the breaking of a skin, or how the acid as it eats away an exposed surface registers this sense of removing or cutting through a surface covering.

In the progression from Williams's etching of the *Oval landscape* to the painting of the *Oval landscape*, the sense of the destabilisation of the surface that was part of the etching and printing process is transferred to the painting as well. Without actually thinking of the etching process from which the painting itself was derived, McCaughey wonderfully captures this in suggesting that 'parts of the painting flow into each other with a slow tidal surge'. With this, he says, the painting gives reign to the 'seethings and surgings' of 'pent-up forces'.⁴¹ Thus, despite the extraordinary flatness to the work, it is as though any form that momentarily appears on the surface is there only just before being sucked back into an archaic formlessness, with perhaps a fragment of the form to appear again elsewhere as a distant reminder, or maybe it is just forever to be dragged under into oblivion. With this coming in and going out of a tidal surge, McCaughey effectively conveys both the importance of a sense of repetition in the work and also how an image is created through a constant unsettling. The suggestion of 'pent-up forces' equally adds the idea of repression, and the uncertainty of whether the repetition that is the cause of the painting would then be working to contain what is repressed or alternatively operating as a means to release and open up the work to what lies underneath.

This degree of ambiguity in McCaughey's reading is accentuated by the fact that exactly what lies behind the pressure of all these 'seethings and surgings' is not said. It is evident though that it is of some larger historical significance as McCaughey maintains that the 'work is a critical one, both for Williams and for

³⁹Fred Williams interview, Hazel de Berg collection.

⁴⁰Fred Williams interviewed by Alan Oldfield on 12 August 1981 for *Australian Eye*, series 5, Film Australia, National Library of Australia.

⁴¹McCaughy, *Fred Williams*, 178.

Australian landscape painting.⁴² McCaughey believes that ‘few paintings of Williams’s maturity can match its bleakness.’ This makes the painting rather special, he suggests, ‘something of a singularity within Williams’s mature period’, though not that it would exist outside of this and should be excluded from Williams’s main body of work. On the contrary, for McCaughey, its singularity makes its central, offering access to what is usually hidden or covered over in other work. With this painting, McCaughey writes, Williams ‘had taken his art to new level of expressiveness and, for him, explicitness. He had shown his world was less neutral, less aesthetic, and that equally it did not submit to easy characterization or succumb to bogus heroic metaphors. The grimness of this work signalled a new profundity in Williams’s art and in Australian landscape painting.’⁴³

The anti-heroic landscape: a new profundity?

This new profundity, though, is perhaps not as new as McCaughey suggests, or at least its newness must be understood in relation to Williams’s repetition of the past. Indeed, even in McCaughey’s own account of the development of Williams’s career the newness of *Oval landscape* needs to be qualified. For McCaughey, Williams’s break-through moment in re-seeing the Australian landscape, the series of work ‘that represents the turning-point from Williams’s early work to his maturity’, were Williams’s paintings, gouaches and etchings of 1961–62 that he classifies as the ‘Forest Series’. The works at this critical juncture are already referred to as ‘aesthetically grim’.⁴⁴ Further, McCaughey establishes a crucial connection between Williams and earlier Australian landscape painting that he really only mentions in passing, neglecting to develop the consequences of his observation. Referencing Marcus Clarke in Bernard Smith’s 1975 collection, *Documents on Art and Taste in Australia: The Colonial Period 1770–1914*, McCaughey writes on Williams’s break-through works: ‘Sunless and airless, with the frame cutting off the ground as well as the sky, they are painted throughout in the most muted chiaroscuro, and achieve an oppressive quality, haunted by the “the weird melancholy of the bush”’.⁴⁵

With the ‘Forest Series’, Williams made the dramatic move of rendering the bush, as McCaughey suggests, in ‘close-up’: ‘Williams now turned from the extensive landscape to concentrate on the single image: the bush seen close-up: not a view of it but felt, seen, experienced immediately and in totality.’⁴⁶ Zooming in close, feeling, to recall Žižek’s words, the ‘proximity’ of the bush, or ‘the coming-into-visibility of something too close to us’ in the bush, what we see in this landscape cannot be clearly described or delineated, for it is no longer, and this marks for

⁴²McCaughey, *Fred Williams*, 178.

⁴³McCaughey, *Fred Williams*, 178.

⁴⁴McCaughey, *Fred Williams*, 143

⁴⁵McCaughey, *Fred Williams*, 143. Although McCaughey footnotes the Marcus Clarke quote – ‘the weird melancholy of the bush’ – as coming from Clarke’s ‘*Waterpool Near Coleraine*’ in Bernard Smith’s *Documents on Art and Taste in Australia*, Clarke does not use this phrase in this essay. This adds to my point that it is really Smith’s new interpretation of Clarke that McCaughey is responding to.

⁴⁶McCaughey, *Fred Williams*, 139.

McCaughey the key significance of this series and consequently for Williams's work as a whole, a 'view' of the bush. McCaughey notes how by moving in on thin sapling trunks the viewer is brought up hard against the surface of these works: 'The unity of the paintings, taken at a glance, makes for their remarkable quality. Here the manifold possibilities, shapes, forms and changing light of the bush, are held as a constant single image altering and varying as the saplings move the eye back and forth across the impenetrable surface.'⁴⁷

Although McCaughey would wish to interpret this impenetrable surface in terms of Williams's successful co-opting of the high modernist ideal of flatness – in turn allowing Williams to soon progress with confidence from these preparatory 'close-ups' to the ultimate work, "'the big canvas", equal in scale to the abstract-expressionist paintings then being produced in Australia' – the impenetrable, which is to say the blindness of this surface, can be read in another way.⁴⁸ If by zooming in, or with the completion of a kind of tracking shot, the ghostly, haunting quality of the bush returns, then Williams's whole endeavour could indeed be captured by suggesting that it is a closing in on Glover's 'background hills' that takes place, and thus that it is by means of the shift in register to the 'close-up' that Williams makes palpable, to quote McLean again, the 'melancholy solitude of the wooded ranges that frame' Glover's scenes.

To develop this other reading of Williams's work that McCaughey's reference to Marcus Clarke's 'weird melancholy' here suggests, it should equally be considered how the reference to Clarke also implicitly carries a reference to Bernard Smith's presentation of Clarke's ideas in his *Documents on Art and Taste in Australia* (1975). The introduction to Clarke's two pieces of writing that Smith included in his collection announced a challenging reformulation of Smith's own understanding of the history of Australian art, one eventually given more coherent and developed form in his 1980 Boyer Lecture series, *The Spectre of Truganini*. In Smith's 1962 *Australian Painting, 1788–1960*, his elevation of the Heidelberg School, how he begins the chapter – significantly titled 'Genesis' – on its formation with the claim that between '1885 and 1890 a distinctive Australian school sprang into existence', was paired with the dismissal of what came before, and in particular Marcus Clarke's reading of the landscape, as far too subsumed by European convention.⁴⁹ However, this situation was subsequently reversed by Smith in his 1975 introduction to Clarke. Whereas in the 1962 *Australian Painting, 1788–1960* Smith would belittle Clarke's melancholy as the product of a nostalgia for a distant Europe, in the later *Documents* Clarke's stature was dramatically changed so that it was then 'Clarke more than anyone who first began to experience what it was to be an Australian; to internalize for himself and the new men of his adopted country a dark vision of Australian nature which contained in its kernel the pain and guilt of the colonial experience.'⁵⁰ In *The Spectre of Truganini* Smith elaborates on the fact that there was a previous

⁴⁷McCaughey, *Fred Williams*, 143.

⁴⁸McCaughey, *Fred Williams*, 145.

⁴⁹Bernard Smith, *Australian Painting, 1788–1960*, London: Oxford University Press, 1962, 71.

⁵⁰Bernard Smith, 'Hardship and Weird Melancholy', in Bernard Smith, ed., *Documents on Art and Taste in Australia, 1770–1914*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1975, 129.

misreading of Clarke, commenting on how 'historians' (amongst which, even though he does not say, he must include himself) misunderstood the white settlers' tendency 'to perceive the bush as mournful and melancholic'. To correct the interpretation of melancholy as simple nostalgia, he poses a question:

When Marcus Clarke writes that "the Australian forests are funereal, secret, stern. They seem to stifle in their black gorges a story of sullen despair" we might ask ourselves whether it is the black gorges or guilty colonial hearts that sought to stifle the story of despair, projecting their fear and guilt upon nature itself.⁵¹

On reading this one can realise that the connection made by McCaughey but without anything actually being said, is that it is indeed remarkable to think how Marcus Clarke's description of 'the Australian forests' could itself be describing Williams's break-through 'Forest Series'. This could in itself explain much. First, the dramatic elimination of figures from Williams's work after his return to Australia.⁵² The silence and solitude that Clarke attributed to the bush would work against the inclusion of figures, since the presence of figures or even a figure would imply the possibility of communication. With the zooming in on the saplings such that, as McCaughey notes, the frame cuts the sky and ground, the saplings become marks that are barriers to sight, delimiting a zone in which sight no longer seems possible or able to offer a way ahead. In this respect, they could thus equally be functioning to 'stifle' the 'story of sullen despair', making the bush suffocating, or as I have already quoted McCaughey, 'airless'. Second, in returning to re-see the Australian landscape after his time abroad Williams was no doubt re-seeing the landscape through the eyes of the Australian art history in which he was formed. If we consider Bernard Smith's 1962 *Australian Painting, 1788–1960*, as representative of the accepted understanding of the history of Australian art at the time of Williams's return, then it is evident that despite the qualifications that Smith introduces, the origin of Australian art, its 'Genesis', remained the Heidelberg School. Thus for Williams to so boldly claim that he was going to 'paint the gum tree', it could be considered that it was above all the Heidelberg School's well entrenched claim to the rights of the gum tree that Williams was re-figuring, effecting a re-seeing of the history of Australian art that preceded Smith's own re-seeing of the beginnings of Australian art.

If, prior to the Heidelberg School, there was much in evidence Marcus Clarke's 'weird melancholy' of the bush, this melancholy all but seemed to be erased in the sunny disposition, good health and companionship displayed in the works of the impressionists. However such surface effects belie the true condition. As McLean, in following Bernard Smith has argued, if for Marcus Clarke the maligned and twisted forms of the gum trees were the markers of an Aboriginal past, constituting

⁵¹Smith, *Spectre of Truganini*, 21.

⁵²In his interview with James Gleeson Williams comments on how he could never explain why this should occur, it striking him as always extremely odd as before this he was only really interested in painting figures. 'Interview with Fred Williams', James Gleeson Oral History Interviews, National Gallery of Australia, recorded on 3 October, 1978.

what Clarke referred to as 'fit emblems of the departed grandeur of the wilderness' and monuments 'of the glories of that barbaric empire', then this was not forgotten by the impressionists so much as repressed. Repeating Smith in *The Spectre of Truganini*, McLean proposes that according to Freud, 'when the memories of formative experiences appear to disappear, they have not been erased but repressed in the unconscious, from where they are articulated in art, wit and dreaming through mechanisms of displacement, reversal and indirect expression.'⁵³ Thus, McLean reasons, even if in place of 'Clarke's ghostly gums, the impressionists depict either slender young saplings, or old trees triumphantly felled like trophies on the ground – as in Streeton's *The selector's hut: Whelan on the log* (1890) and Condor's *Under a southern sky* (1890)' – then it is still the case that the saplings are 'native trees, symbols of the new nation that bear the imprint of a repressed Aboriginality.'⁵⁴ Following this initial symbolism,

it did not take long for the saplings to grow into monumental emblems of a new nation. Indeed, between 1890 and 1910 these gums grew with their characteristic rapidity into what [Ian] Burn called the 'regal gum-tree' of Hans Heysen – an 'anthropomorphic' vision of 'giant gum trees frozen in self-conscious melodramatic poses'.⁵⁵

Williams can be said to reverse all of this, with his works travelling back through the past to complete, to use McLean's terms, a retracing of history. Thus if the impressionists had repressed the melancholy landscape then with Williams it returns. In the *Oval landscape* as in the *Chopped tree* series it is indeed the Australian impressionist's 'symbol' of the felled tree in combination with the slender young sapling that is the focus. Here though, the slender saplings are severely charred and stand in forlorn isolation, and any self-satisfied, triumphant figure has been removed. Consequently the work's subject matter, as McCaughey rightly suggested, is the failure of the heroic metaphor.

Uncovering the imprint

It was however from the very beginning, that is, from the moment of Williams's return to Australia, that the defining marker of the Heidelberg School – the felled tree in combination with young saplings – was his focus. In 1957 Williams took the opportunity to live on a property in Mittagong owned by a friend of John Brack, and would work on clearing the country in the morning and sketching in the afternoon. As the owner of the property wrote to Brack at the time, 'Freddy ... works with me in the morning, throws the crowbar around like a toothpick, oscillates the cross-cut saw like a piston and after lunch dashes off with his drawing board and watercolours.'⁵⁶ Reading this, one can't help wondering if the dexterity with the

⁵³McLean, *White Aborigines*, 60.

⁵⁴McLean, *White Aborigines*, 61.

⁵⁵McLean, *White Aborigines*, 61–2.

⁵⁶As quoted in Mollison, *A Singular Vision*, 36.

cross-cut didn't become creatively confused with the facility for sketching, particularly given the fact that Williams's very first watercolours and gouaches are indeed devoted to the sense of isolation and vulnerability facing a stand of young saplings within a more expansive, cleared setting.

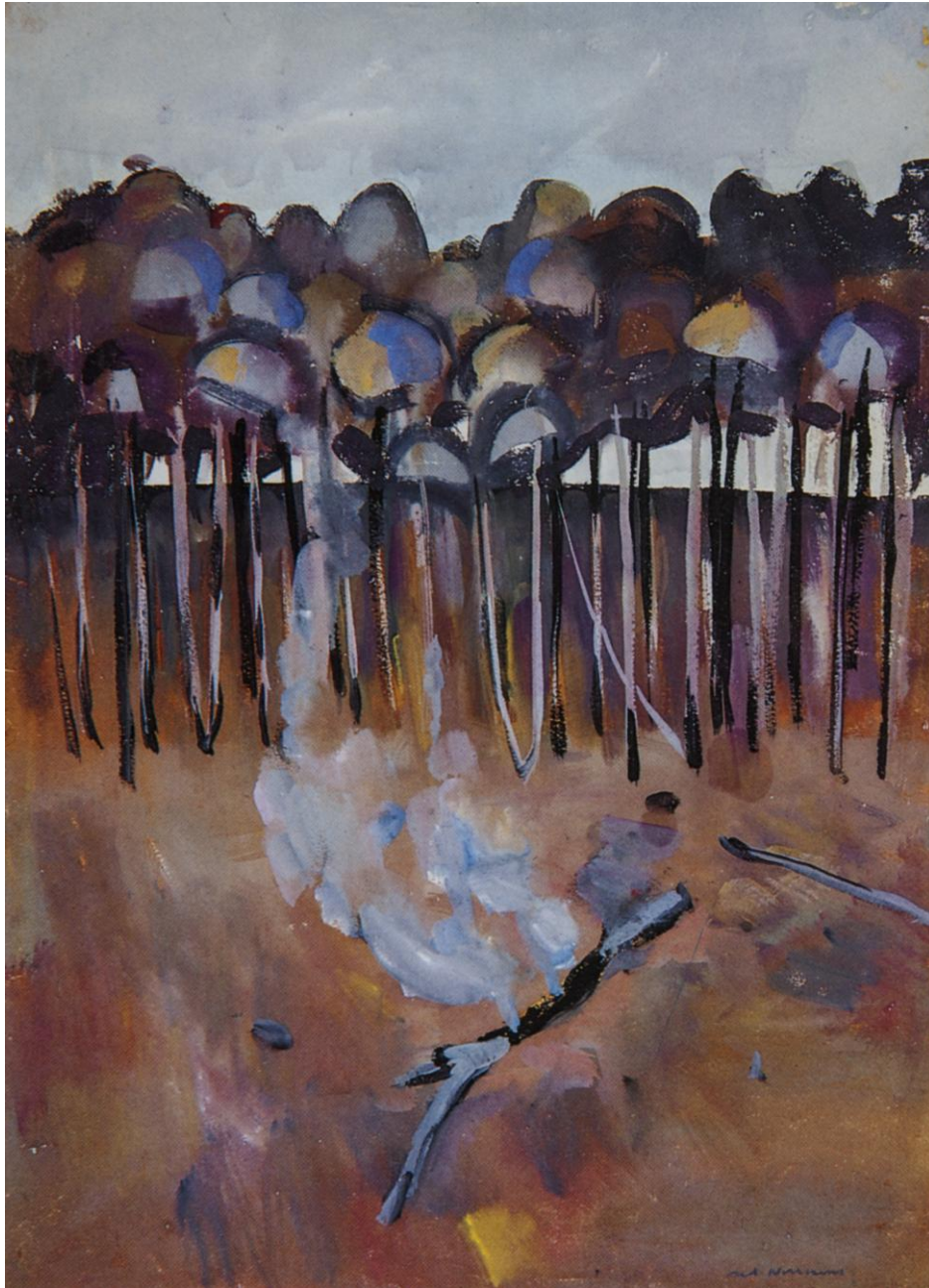


Figure 5 Fred Williams, *Burning log* (1957)
gouache on paper, 62.5 x 44.8cm, National Gallery of Australia. © Estate of Fred Williams

In a work such as *Burning log* (1957, gouache on paper) it is in following the drift of smoke from the burning log in the foreground to its dispersion amongst the saplings in the background that one senses how the fate of these young trees is already sealed. Indeed an odd spectral effect is created with the trees, achieved through the combining of fragile, already completely blackened saplings, with ones

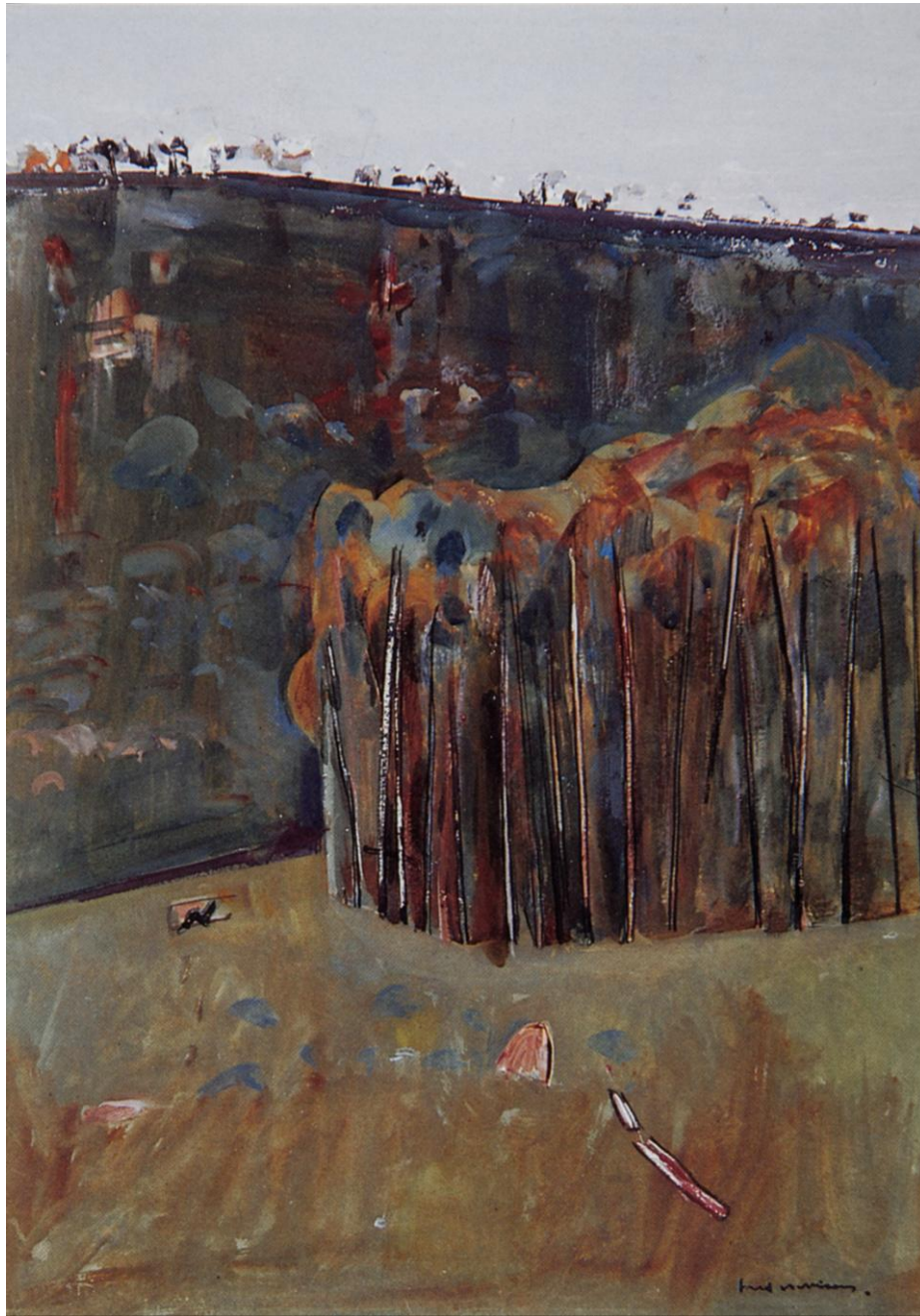


Figure 6 Fred Williams, *Saplings Mittagong* (1958) gouache, watercolour on paper, 52.9 x 37.2 cm, National Gallery of Australia. © Estate of Fred Williams

that are rendered with pale, barely-there washes. Also in a work such as *Saplings, Mittagong*, (1958, gouache, watercolour on paper) Williams is exploring the relationship between the odd, dislocated fragments and shapes that we see in the cleared country shown both in the foreground and background, and the saplings in the middle ground that almost seem as though they are huddling together in desperation to find some protection and comfort. While this touches on an impending melancholy, it is Williams's next step that is the decisive one, one that he crucially undertakes via etching.



Figure 7 Fred Williams, *Saplings Mittagong II* (1968)
oil on canvas, 122.3 x 122.3 cm. © Estate of Fred Williams

As Williams told James Gleeson, on returning to Australia he ‘zeroed in on the landscape’, and this we can see in how after the early Mittagong works he moved across the burnt and broken trees to zoom in on the saplings themselves.⁵⁷ In this though the clearing of the country is not simply forgotten, it makes the close-up rendering that Williams does of the saplings all the more intense, as if, that is to say, the zooming in was the attempt to see the original mark of repression. It is this extraordinary force you feel when confronted with a later painting such as *Saplings Mittagong II* (1968, oil on canvas). Painted from a series of etchings which moved successively closer into the Mittagong bush, this work is effectively a blow-up of Williams’s first Mittagong gouaches.⁵⁸ Here the saplings are depicted as scars cut

⁵⁷Interview with Fred Williams’, James Gleeson Oral History Interviews.

⁵⁸In describing the sequencing of Williams’s 1959–61 *Saplings, Mittagong* etching series, Mollison notes how Williams, in cutting the original etching plate to the series, removed the foreground from the original image. James Mollison, *Fred Williams: Etchings*, Sydney: Rudy Komon Gallery, 1968, 117.

into the 'skin' of the canvas, or rather, to be more precise, in an uncanny coincidence of opposites, the saplings seem to be at once in the darkened ground and at the same time, as part of their ghostly illumination, separated from it.

On returning to Australia the most striking aspect of Williams's practice is how he obsessively turned to etching with such focussed intensity. In interviews over the years Williams would comment on how after returning to Australia an overturning of his relation to etching took place, and he believed that what might normally be pushed aside as a minor practice should more rightly be accorded the major status it deserves. Why this should be so is that if it was through the process of etching that Williams 'zeroed in' on the gum tree, and more particularly on the sapling, then the significance of the wording of McLean's assertion, namely that 'saplings are still native trees, symbols of the new nation that bear the *imprint* of a repressed Aboriginality', suddenly becomes evident. With all the potentially uncanny exchanges that etching entails – right for left, dark for light, positive for negative, concave for convex – disrupting one's familiar, everyday orientation in the world, it would seem to be a medium perfectly suited to the task of articulating 'through mechanisms of displacement, reversal and indirect expression' all those traces in one's formative experience that one might initially believe to have disappeared. To this though, there is one key additional element that must be considered: with etching's covering over of the image in its moment of formation, it is the opening of the practice to blindness, to the sense of how the image could arise from out of one's non-seeing, that could also account for why Williams found etching to be such a compelling medium for him.

To evidence this special place that etching came to occupy in Williams's work consider one last example from Hart's text that returns us again to the moment of Williams's re-seeing of Australia. Hart prepares us for seeing the axe in *Oval landscape* not just with the *Tree loppers* painting but also with what she sees as Williams's 'most daring' work in his first exhibition of Australian material after his return home: his early Mittagong painting *Landscape with a steep road* (1957–58). In this work, again referencing the idea of dismembering, she draws our attention to 'a surreal appendage like a stump in the shape of a foot [that] appears near the base of the road.'⁵⁹ She argues that over the years Williams would sometimes suggest 'an ambiguous presence in the landscape' such as this, giving us a 'glimpse of [a] mystery' that he kept to himself, never liking 'to spell it out.'⁶⁰ However to understand the intrusion of such a 'surrealist appendage' more as signalling the ambiguous presence of the uncanny in Williams's work, here the unsettling addition

⁵⁹Hart, *Infinite Horizons*, 49. Sasha Grishin very intriguingly proposes that we read this work as an inverted crucifixion, connecting it back to the crucifixions of Francis Bacon (who Williams met and much admired the work of while in London). This adds to Hart's seeing of *Tree loppers* as a crucifixion, confirming the importance she places on this series as a forerunner to Williams's Australian work. To Grishin's observation it should be added that Williams often claimed that on returning to Australia he always painted with the painting upside down, so this painting could indeed be read as an inversion of the earlier the *Tree loppers*, and by extension Rosso Fiorentino's *Deposition from the Cross*. Sasha Grishin, *Australian Art: A History*, Melbourne: Miegunyah Press, 2014, 433.

⁶⁰Hart, *Infinite Horizons*, 49.



Figure 8 Fred Williams, *Landscape with a steep road* (1957-58)
oil on composition board, 110.3 x 90.9 cm, National Gallery of Australia. © Estate of Fred Williams

that upsets the balance of the landscape must be related to how it is doubling the cut that is the road. The tree stump/appendage repeats not only the shape of the swerve of the road to the right and the left, as an uprooted tree or cut off body part it also embodies the violence of the road as it splits the scene. With its radical use of flatness *Landscape with a steep road* was also for McCaughey the undisputed *chef d'oeuvre* of Williams's first exhibition of Australian works after his return. 'The road', he says, 'cuts through the plane, giving only the barest illusion of receding in space.'⁶¹ This is indeed a key work for Williams because if, as I argued before, Williams began his Mittagong series by exploring the relation between the cleared, open country and the stands of saplings, here it is the violent cut of the steep road (which is given such

⁶¹McCaughey, *Fred Williams*, 107.

dramatic emphasis in its evoking of the speed with which one travels along it) that moves from one (the cleared country) to the other (the saplings).

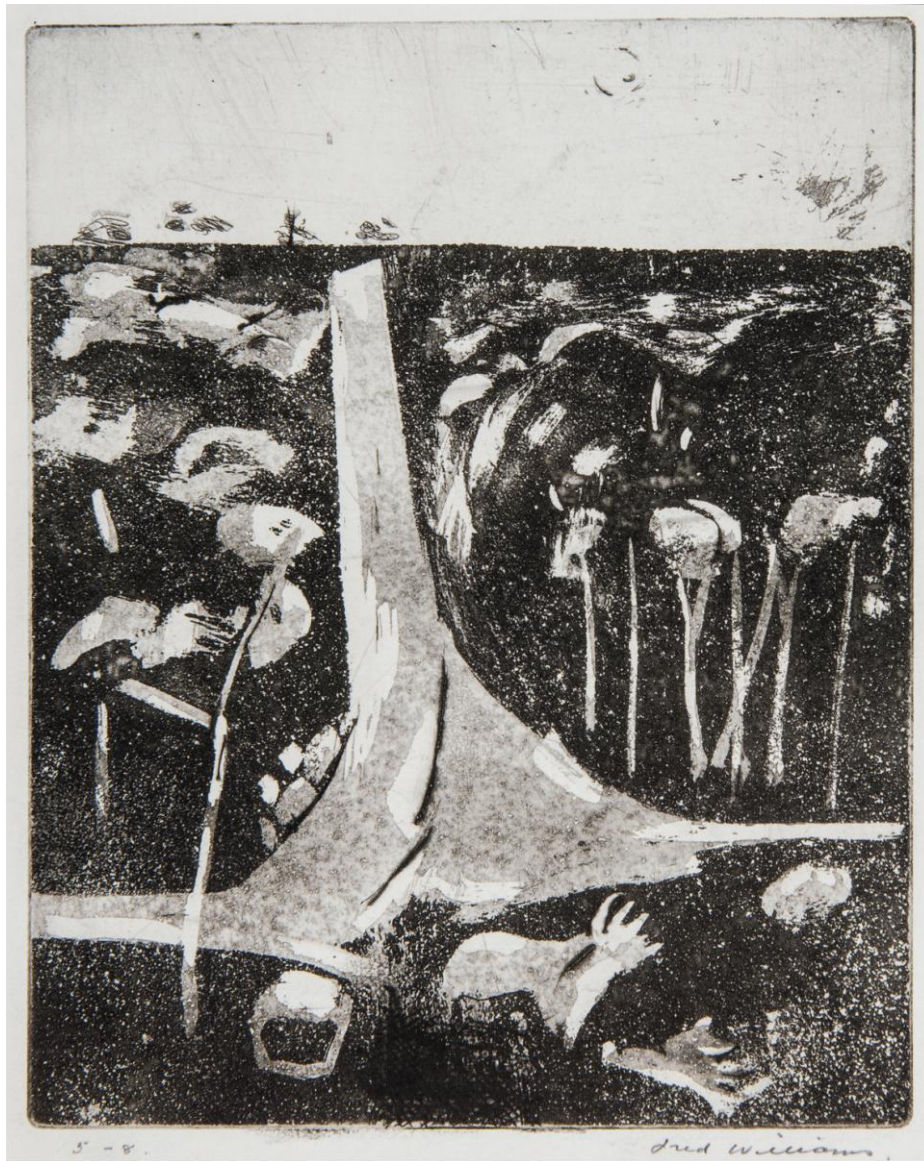


Figure 9 Fred Williams, *Landscape with a steep road* (1959) 3rd state of 5, aquatint, etching, drypoint and engraving on Kent paper, 196 x 157mm, National Gallery of Australia. © Estate of Fred Williams

The significance of this violent cutting that places together cleared country and saplings becomes clear when Williams began working on an etching based on the painting. In the painting there is a contrast between the almost vertical flatness of the road as it runs up the picture plane and the foliage of the treetops which are rendered as receding in successive planes according to a conventional perspectival approach. With the etching however, made a couple of years later, this distinction can no longer be drawn. As Mollison has observed, 'the last vestiges of the atmospheric perspective used for the tops of the trees disappear, and the space now

reads vertically. This is the moment when picture making takes over from scene painting.⁶²

Etching into the split

That Williams moves at this moment from scene painting to picture making is a major and decisive claim by Mollison, though once again it should not simply be directed towards establishing Williams's high-modernist self-reflexive credentials, as Mollison wishes to do with the appeal to the formalist discipline of 'picture making'. Against this, the move should rather be conceived as the moment of splitting between the eye (the seeing of a 'scene' or 'view') and the gaze (the stain or blot in which 'I am already, so to speak, inscribed in the picture').

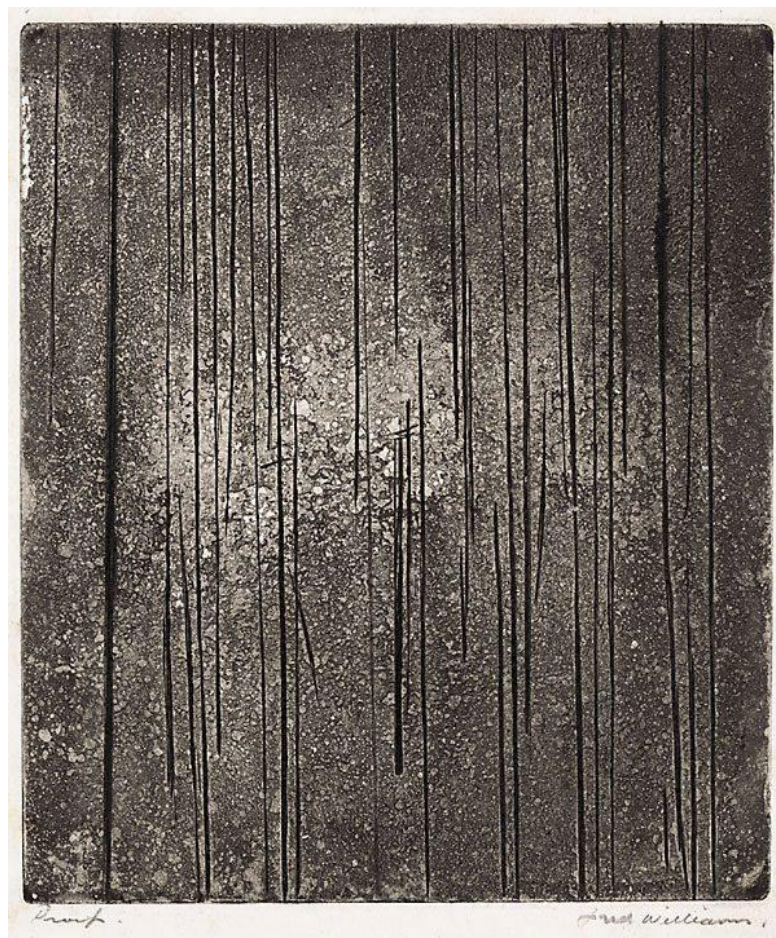


Figure 10 Fred Williams, *Sherbrooke Forest number 1* (1961) 1st state of 23, engraving, aquatint, rough bite on copper, black ink on Kent paper, Art Gallery of New South Wales. © Estate of Fred Williams

In considering the moment when the split between the eye and the gaze – or the split itself – becomes the subject matter of Williams's work, more emphasis should be placed on why it is etching that completes the transition. That the etching

⁶²Mollison, *A Singular Vision*, 48.

follows the painting in this instance is more of an exception in Williams's work and for this reason itself quite significant.⁶³ After *Landscape with a steep road* it is more the case, as we know Williams himself notes, that he works 'directly from the etchings'. The principal point with this etching though, why it marks a moment of change, is that the road as a cutting is aligned with the trees as they themselves are formed by a cut. As Williams's zoomed in to do close-ups of just the saplings themselves, as he was to do in the crucial etchings and engravings that he completed over the next few years as part of the 'Forest Series', each sapling was formed by a cut and was itself cut. It was the gouging out of a line in an engraving plate, or the acid as it etched ever deeper into the metallic surface, that formed the tree. But while a cut formed the image, it is equally the case, and this is the uncanny doubling of the line that occurs with Williams in the very moment of its inscription, that the tree itself is cut, in the sense that there is nothing that grounds a tree for Williams, it is separated from the earth such that its only existence is in and as a cut.

Re-finding paradise lost

There is an extended comment by Williams recorded by Craig McGregor as together they climbed the You Yangs, a granite outcrop not far out of Melbourne that Williams immediately became captivated by when he first caught sight of it on the boat back from London. One has the sense that Williams, out in the bush, in the only place other than his studio that he said he could work because it was only there that he could escape from a debilitating self-consciousness, is running with an almost free association of thoughts or, as McGregor says, muttering as he goes:

Hardly anyone seems to come here. Don't know why. There's another hillock over there which is absolutely primitive, almost aboriginal. Very strange. Oh, and Flat Rock. We'll go there for a picnic. I've painted some of the waterholes there. There's a muddy sort of pool which could be the start of Creation. Water, then mud, then trees: there's so little earth they seem to be about to take off. Nolan got them right. He got the Kelly country right too: I went there not long ago. He must have really studied it. There's something irrational about the trees, here and there. They seem to be on top of the ground instead of in it.⁶⁴

Williams painted the 'very strange' hillock to which he here refers in his painting *Knoll in the You Yangs* (1965). However, again, as is characteristic of Williams's working method, an etching of the subject preceded this painting, an etching that all commentators agree was Williams's most intense and prolonged. Mollison, who possesses the most detailed and intimate knowledge of Williams's etchings, has

⁶³John Brack has noted this change: 'In this case it is the painting [*Landscape with a steep road*] which suggests a further development in the etching. Subsequently this reciprocity worked, as a rule, in the opposite direction.' John Brack, 'Introduction', in James Mollison, *Fred Williams: Etchings*, Sydney: Rudy Komon Gallery, 1968, 7.

⁶⁴Craig McGregor, *In The Making*, Melbourne: Thomas Nelson, 1969, 107.



Figure 11 Fred Williams, *Knoll in the You Yangs* (1965) oil on canvas, 150.1 x 206.3 cm. © Estate of Fred Williams



Figure 12 Fred Williams, *Knoll in the You Yangs* (1963) 15th state of 18, aquatint, engraving, drypoint, black ink on Kent paper, 35.8 x 51.8 cm, Art Gallery of New South Wales. © Estate of Fred Williams

documented how the 'etching gave Williams enormous trouble', recording how he proceeded to work furiously through some thirty-five different states of the original.⁶⁵ The aquatint was applied in one session and over this 'were engraved the

⁶⁵ Mollison, *A Singular Vision*, 82.

deep lines that define the knoll and the tree trunks'.⁶⁶ However these lines were then 'modified dozens of times' in a process that Mollison conceives as equivalent to drawing for Williams: 'After making each series of marks on the plate, Williams printed from it to see the result – a process of drawing with interruptions for inking and printing.'⁶⁷ Even with the printing itself though, there was often no clear resolution, with Mollison also noting how 'many proofs were destroyed before the ink had dried, as he drew on them and smudged them with his finger to find his way ahead.'⁶⁸ All this uncertainty and seemingly interminable repetition to the point of destruction, was for Mollison to be understood ultimately as Williams's dedication to a formalist 'picture making', with alteration upon alteration progressing so that 'the shapes and tones of rocks, foliage and ground were adjusted to ensure that they held their place within the flattened space of the landscape'.⁶⁹ However in the blindness of the continual smudging – the staining – of the defining lines, there is within Mollison's account the suggestion of another reading, one that would see Williams's struggle in terms of a fundamental unsettling quality within the landscape, one in which a mark would never find its proper, correct place.

Williams must have also spoken about his sense of the aboriginal nature of the hillock with Mollison, for Mollison, in first introducing Williams's painting *Knoll in the You Yangs*, explains Williams's attraction to 'this outcrop of granite rocks with its stand of stunted trees' by noting that for Williams, 'who did not know at the time just how rich the area was with Aboriginal remains, the place recalled the presence of Aborigines, of the country before European settlement.'⁷⁰ With this observation we of course return to my starting point: the excluded uncanny presence in the background hills of Glover's paintings. However now, as Williams zooms in on the background hills, it is this excluded uncanny presence that becomes the entire painting. As Hart has noted, though without any mention of an aboriginal presence, speaking rather of Williams's association of the area with wild weather, it is 'as though all elements of this landscape are propelled by the wind, enlivened by a dynamic pulse running through them'.⁷¹

The *Knoll in the You Yangs* painting came as the concluding work to Williams's first series of You Yangs paintings. Prior to this painting Williams was positioned on the rise of the granite outcrop looking across the distant and featureless plain that extended towards the coast. Looking down from this high vantage-point, as McCaughey has noted, 'the flat ground of the canvas became a ready substitute for the coastal plain'.⁷² Yet, as McCaughey subsequently observes, when Williams turns to paint what lies behind him, when he turns to paint, in a sense, his own point of view, or to paint what enabled him to see across the expansive plain, the change that takes place is dramatic: 'When he turned

⁶⁶ Mollison, *A Singular Vision*, 82.

⁶⁷ Mollison, *A Singular Vision*, 82.

⁶⁸ Mollison, *A Singular Vision*, 82.

⁶⁹ Mollison, *A Singular Vision*, 82.

⁷⁰ Mollison, *A Singular Vision*, 82.

⁷¹ Hart, *Infinite Horizons*, 68.

⁷² McCaughey, *Fred Williams*, 161.

momentarily from painting the view from the You Yangs to painting the You Yangs themselves, his style altered drastically.⁷³ Now, where before there may have been distant refinement, Williams's shift in perspective suddenly 'brought the elements – trees and rocks, earth and sky – into a conflicting, seething landscape'.⁷⁴ This change was the result, as McCaughey further quite significantly suggests, of Williams no longer turning his back on the picturesque: 'Here Williams was dealing with motifs which were pronounced and picturesque compared with the repetitive anonymity of the plain.'⁷⁵ Thus it is as if Williams is turning to paint the cause of the dispersion in his work, or to rephrase this in terms of the understanding of the history of Australian art as the zeroing in on Glover's background hills, as if he is turning to face and make the failure of the picturesque the complete subject matter of his work, as if he is turning to paint the blind spot that makes the view possible.

Although this is a conclusion which can certainly be drawn from McCaughey's astute perception of this move made by Williams, McCaughey's own understanding of the reasoning behind this move are nevertheless oddly displaced. For McCaughey, the drastic change in style with the *Knoll in the You Yangs* painting compared to the You Yangs series of paintings from which it arises is also, and perhaps even more so, observable in the You Yangs etchings compared to the later *Knoll in the You Yangs* etching. McCaughey notes how 'the neutral tone of the early You Yangs etchings changed in the etching of *Knoll in the You Yangs* to a charged, nocturnal setting, a Walpurgis night of flying rocks and whitened gum-tree trunks.'⁷⁶ Again this is a characteristically perceptive remark by McCaughey, but the shift to a European reference misdirects his insight. Walpurgis Night has a long tradition in Europe associated with carnivalesque inversion and, most particularly for our interest, the uncanny. To take one example from many, Bram Stoker's evoking of this tradition in his short story, 'Dracula's Guest', is particularly apt. Stoker's story revolves around a character who, setting out on a journey into the country and not having heard of Walpurgis Night before, dismisses the warning to be back before nightfall and its onset. After being diverted from a pleasant picturesque path to pass through 'miles and miles of bleak country', abandoned by his coachman Johann, who repeated the warning to him, and then in his disorientated isolation unknowingly stumbling across a grave site, the character eventually discovers the meaning of Walpurgis Night:

There was something so weird and uncanny about the whole thing that it gave me a turn and made me feel quite faint. I began to wish, for the first time, that I had taken Johann's advice. Here a thought struck me, which came under almost mysterious circumstances and with a terrible shock. This was Walpurgis Night!

⁷³ McCaughey, *Fred Williams*, 161.

⁷⁴ McCaughey, *Fred Williams*, 161.

⁷⁵ McCaughey, *Fred Williams*, 161.

⁷⁶ McCaughey, *Fred Williams*, 162.

Walpurgis Night, when, according to the belief of millions of people, the devil was abroad – when the graves were opened and the dead came forth and walked. When all evil things of earth and air and water held revel.⁷⁷

With Williams, the night that he enters, and above all the night that he enters via the medium of etching, is not Walpurgis Night, it is the night of the history of Australian art. McCaughey quite rightly claims that Williams's etching of the Knoll in the You Yangs 'remains among the most expressive of all his landscape etchings'.⁷⁸ He also is correct in pointing out how the paintings from this etching, in particular the *Knoll in the You Yangs* but also the *Trees and Rocks* series (1963-64), 'remind one how much Williams remains a painter of feeling even in his most classical moments. Usually that feeling is channelled into augmenting his art but, occasionally, expressive energy boils over, as in these splendidly direct paintings.'⁷⁹ However the possibility that this assessment could marginalise the significance of a painting such as *Knoll in the You Yangs*, enabling one to quickly move on and forget the expressive energy that lies underneath, forget, that is, Williams as the painter of feeling as McCaughey rather enigmatically states it, needs to be avoided. The question that McCaughey raises here, and which I intend to answer subsequently in a more complete assessment of William's relation to the history of Australian art, is why the most exquisite qualities of Williams's art are not separated from his direct encounter with the night of Australian art, but rather arise from it – why it should be that it is from out of this darkness that Williams enables us to glimpse the most impossible beauty.

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⁷⁷ Bram Stoker, 'Dracula's Guest', in *Dracula's Guest and Other Weird Stories*, London: Penguin, 2006, 12.

⁷⁸ McCaughey, *Fred Williams*, 161.

⁷⁹ McCaughey, *Fred Williams*, 161.