1. THE PROJECT

Artwork in a box brings real artworks and activities directly to you for a unique in-classroom art experience.

This custom-made crate features reproductions of pages from the visual diaries of acclaimed Queensland-based artist William Robinson. These rarely seen works on paper reveal Robinson’s artistic process and everyday observations, captured quickly through gestural marks and notes made using graphite and watercolours.

An accomplished painter, draftsman, colourist, and printmaker, William Robinson has produced an incredible body of work over a period that spans more than four decades.

My art is a visual autobiography of my life, my concerns have been about the places where I have lived and these have shaped my whole imagination. ¹

The artist’s works are autobiographical, referencing his personal experiences and the environments in which he has lived. His subject matter includes still-life arrangements, the natural environment, and farmyard scenes.

During the in-classroom experience, students will observe and discuss William Robinson’s visual diaries to gain an understanding of his practice and some of the ideas that underpin it. The role of the visual diary to document, describe, and develop an artist’s practice and thoughts will also be examined. Students will role play through activities such as unpacking the crate and handling the art objects, which will enhance their understanding of what is involved in the different roles and careers within the visual arts sector, including art conservator, art installer, art educator, and artist. They will then have the opportunity to respond to Robinson’s sketches by experimenting with the processes, techniques, and ideas demonstrated within them. Students will develop observational and sketching skills by capturing their everyday environment on paper, and drawing on their individual perspectives to tell stories.

2. THE ARTWORK

Artwork in a box features visual diaries that contain reproductions of William Robinson’s visual diary pages. They include sketches of still-life arrangements, and farmyard animals alongside detailed and descriptive notes. These rarely seen sketches reveal Robinson’s artistic process, including his experiments with colour and how he develops ideas to prepare for works produced in the studio.

The sketches featured are from 1977 to 2008 and capture a range of different themes. Among them are studies for his early still-life paintings and drawings (1970s–80s), in which he was greatly influenced by French Post-Impressionist artist Pierre Bonnard. Robinson saw a major exhibition of Bonnard’s works in 1971 at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, which left a lasting impression on him. In particular, Bonnard’s style impacted the way that Robinson manipulated perspective through creating a shallow pictorial space and asymmetrical compositions that feature cropping and distorting.
I revisit places, repeatedly searching for greater depths of understanding, glimpses of stillness and sacredness. These carry as memories into the studio where I try to create a parallel vision of a place, not just representation of the subject seen, but physically unreachable and only understood from within.²

Also featured are some of Robinson's gestural pencil sketches that capture the movement and expressions of farmyard animals, including goats, cows, chickens, and pigs. These sketches are largely from the 1970s to 1980s, when Robinson and his wife Shirley ran a farm in Birkdale. These sketches are particularly whimsical and playful, and perfectly capture the chaotic activity of life on a farm.

Robinson is critically acclaimed for his striking compositions of South-East Queensland rainforests and seascapes of northern New South Wales. His work has changed the way we perceive the landscape through his use of a distinctive, multi-viewpoint perspective. Robinson's work is represented in all major Australian public art museums as well as in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Vatican Museums, Vatican City; and the British Museum, London. The William Robinson Gallery opened at QUT Gardens Point campus in Old Government House in 2009.

4. ACTIVITIES

The following provides a timeline of William Robinson's practice and activity sheets that explore different themes in his oeuvre through a study of five different artworks. These activities can be completed before or after the Artwork in a box program to further students' engagement and understanding of Robinson's practice. The themes covered are as follows: Influence of Bonnard, Farmyards, Self portraits, Landscape, and Creation Landscape series.

3. THE ARTIST

Born in Brisbane in 1936, William Robinson is a celebrated contemporary artist. After graduating in 1962 from Brisbane's Central Technical College, an early forerunner of QUT's Gardens Point campus, he began a long and distinguished career teaching art at several of the University's predecessor institutions. Robinson left teaching in 1989 to work full time as an artist, and since then, his work has achieved national prominence. With the award of some of Australia's most prestigious art prizes—the Archibald Prize for portraiture that he won in 1987 and 1995, and the Wynne prize for landscape painting in 1990 and 1996—Robinson's career as an artist flourished. QUT awarded him an honorary doctorate in 1998 in recognition of his extensive links with the University as a student and senior arts educator. In 2007, the artist was appointed an Officer of the Order of Australia (AO) for his outstanding achievement and service to the arts.

Notes


Images

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Image Description</th>
<th>Artist</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>Institution</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pug self-portrait 1991 etching 38 x 28cm</td>
<td>William Robinson</td>
<td>1991</td>
<td>etching</td>
<td>QUT Art Collection</td>
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<tr>
<td>Artist's sketchbook (detail) c.1970 pencil on paper 24.6 x 26.5cm</td>
<td>William Robinson</td>
<td>1970</td>
<td>pencil</td>
<td>Private collection, Brisbane</td>
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<tr>
<td>Artist's sketchbook 1997-99 watercolour on paper 14.5 x 22cm</td>
<td>William Robinson</td>
<td>1997-99</td>
<td>watercolour</td>
<td>Private collection, Brisbane</td>
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William is born in 1959.

1962 – William's family moves to a north-west suburb of Brisbane, settling in Gaythorne, an inner north-west suburb of Brisbane, and the first of their six children are born. The Robinson family move to a 80-hectare farm at Beechmont, a subtropical rainforest area.

1963–69 – William attends a six-year term at Central Technical College, Kelvin Grove (QAG), which leaves a lasting impression on his art, particularly his compositions of land and the precipitous landscape of this rainforest.

1970–71 – Begins to focus on landscapes of the Redland Coast, south of Brisbane. He is appointed Senior Lecturer in Art at North Brisbane Teacher Training College, Kelvin Grove, Brisbane, and begins to paint pastoral landscapes of the multi textual northern area.

1971 – Travels to Sydney and the New South Wales coast, where the changing moody of the sea and sky became a primary inspirational focus for his work. Acquires a studio cottage near Batemans Bay. Travels to Toowoomba for the first time, visiting Greece, England and France.

1971–75 – Focuses on landscapes of the Redland Coast, south of Brisbane. Begins to paint landscapes of the nearby Darling Downs area including the river, the rolling hills, and farms. The work is turned more introspective, and his work moves from a stylistic subject of his art from the late 1970s.

1975–80 – Travels to Sydney and the New South Wales coast, where the changing moody of the sea and sky became a primary inspirational focus for his work. Acquires a studio cottage near Batemans Bay. Travels to Toowoomba for the first time, visiting Greece, England and France.

1980–87 – Focuses on landscapes of the Redland Coast, south of Brisbane. Begins to paint landscapes of the nearby Darling Downs area including the river, the rolling hills, and farms. The work is turned more introspective, and his work moves from a stylistic subject of his art from the late 1970s.

1987–90 – Travels to Sydney and the New South Wales coast, where the changing moody of the sea and sky became a primary inspirational focus for his work. Acquires a studio cottage near Batemans Bay. Travels to Toowoomba for the first time, visiting Greece, England and France.

1990 – Travels to Sydney and the New South Wales coast, where the changing moody of the sea and sky became a primary inspirational focus for his work. Acquires a studio cottage near Batemans Bay. Travels to Toowoomba for the first time, visiting Greece, England and France.

1995 – Travels to Sydney and the New South Wales coast, where the changing moody of the sea and sky became a primary inspirational focus for his work. Acquires a studio cottage near Batemans Bay. Travels to Toowoomba for the first time, visiting Greece, England and France.

2000 – Travels to Sydney and the New South Wales coast, where the changing moody of the sea and sky became a primary inspirational focus for his work. Acquires a studio cottage near Batemans Bay. Travels to Toowoomba for the first time, visiting Greece, England and France.

2005 – Travels to Sydney and the New South Wales coast, where the changing moody of the sea and sky became a primary inspirational focus for his work. Acquires a studio cottage near Batemans Bay. Travels to Toowoomba for the first time, visiting Greece, England and France.

2010 – Travels to Sydney and the New South Wales coast, where the changing moody of the sea and sky became a primary inspirational focus for his work. Acquires a studio cottage near Batemans Bay. Travels to Toowoomba for the first time, visiting Greece, England and France.

2015 – Travels to Sydney and the New South Wales coast, where the changing moody of the sea and sky became a primary inspirational focus for his work. Acquires a studio cottage near Batemans Bay. Travels to Toowoomba for the first time, visiting Greece, England and France.
INFLUENCE OF BONNARD

William Robinson's early works were strongly influenced by the French Post-Impressionist artist Pierre Bonnard, who famously used luminous colours to paint interior spaces that reflected aspects of daily life. After completing high school, Robinson went on to train as a primary-school teacher, and was later awarded a scholarship to specialise in teaching art. Like most budding artists of the day, Robinson learned by sketching the work of established artists. For Robinson, Bonnard was one such artist.

Training as an artist back in the 1950s meant learning how to draw the human figure through repetitive practice. Students learned to draw ears, eyes, and noses individually, and it wasn't until later that they could progress on to a whole head or body. Practice made perfect, and students often had to draw figures repeatedly until they were accurate. Artists also had to learn to manipulate perspective. Robinson shares Bonnard's pictorial sensibility, with both artists presenting slightly askew compositions. Bonnard's spatial and compositional organisation inspired Robinson, whose later farmyard works often involved large empty spaces on the canvas. The modernist style also influenced his future landscape and farmyard works.

His early interiors were built from flat shapes of colour, bringing the background close to the surface of the painting and thus creating very shallow pictorial space. They often feature flowers, hats, and other still-life elements, as well as patterned rugs, posing figures, and unusual shadows. Like his landscapes and farmyards, Robinson's interior scenes express a deeply personal understanding of the subject matter and often reflect the comforts and domestic intimacy of his life in suburban Brisbane.

ACTIVITY

Look at how Robinson has placed the visual elements within the composition and how he has used a vibrant colour palette. Discuss the advantages of painting an interior space as opposed to a landscape.

Briefly research examples of Pierre Bonnard’s paintings, and attempt your own interior painting, keeping in mind both artists’ use of colour, texture, and placement of objects and people.

Both Bonnard and Robinson were influenced by still-life paintings. Set up a still life on a table, and include the surrounding room within the painting.
Robinson is skilled in capturing the movement and commotion of the farmyard in his paintings. Experiment with his techniques and create your own piece, capturing past experiences of a busy and chaotic art classroom.

Robinson has been influenced by many artists throughout his career. Discuss the merits of appropriation. For further discussion, address the negative aspects of appropriation and the notion of originality in the art world.

Many of Robinson’s farm animals seem to have their own personalities. Do you feel this is an accurate representation of nature? Why or why not?

**ACTIVITY**

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In pairs, discuss the advantages versus the disadvantages of presenting confronting and intimate emotions through camouflage.

Compare and contrast Robinson's Self portrait with basket and Professor John Robinson and brother William in terms of their humour and seriousness. Now create your own piece that addresses both these characteristics.

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

In 1984, Robinson and his family moved to a farm at Beechmont in the Gold Coast hinterland. He remained there for the next 10 years, producing dramatic landscape paintings. Framed by steep cliffs and subtropical rainforest, the Robinsons’ property and its surrounds were a great source of inspiration to the artist.

During Robinson’s long walks in the rainforest, he would observe the way light moves throughout the day, which he incorporated into his paintings. Sometimes, the morning sky would be painted in one corner, with the darker evening or night sky painted in another, reflecting the enormity and immersive quality of nature. This also captures the feeling of time passing. In 1994, when he moved to Kingscliff, a coastal town in New South Wales, he continued to explore the possibilities of conveying time by painting the ocean tide in its various states. Robinson’s love of art and music helped him transition from the sparseness of the farmyard compositions to his multiple-perspective rainforest works. Drawing inspiration from the music of Bach, which sometimes goes off on tangents or takes unexpected directions, Robinson allowed himself to not define a focal point. Rather, he would use random compositional elements in these works.

Like many Australian landscapes painters, such as Sidney Nolan, John Olsen, and Fred Williams, Robinson is interested in multiple-point perspective, meaning that there is no single vanishing point in his paintings. In this way, he can represent more of the environment, expressing his knowledge and appreciation of the rainforest, while also emphasising the vastness of the Australian landscape. By not representing the landscape realistically, Robinson is able to depict the passage of time and the magnitude of the rainforest more so than if he created a ‘traditional’ landscape painting. He wants us to see and understand the landscape the way he does. He does this not by presenting viewers with an insight into cultural identity, but rather allowing his paintings to act as portals into his personal identity.

ACTIVITY

Robinson claims his work abandons the ‘traditional’ and representational landscape. What are the similarities and differences between Russell Drysdale’s Man reading a paper and Robinson’s The blue pools, Springbrook to Beechmont?

Drawing on Robinson’s depiction of the passing of time within his paintings, create your own piece that reflects one whole day within the same painting. Pay attention to how each different part of the day can flow seamlessly into the next.

Think about your own artistic practice. Do you bring past experiences and influences to your work? If so, why might this be beneficial for your practice?
CREATION LANDSCAPE SERIES

Many of William Robinson’s works carry biblical references, particularly the Creation landscape series, which is made up of seven multi-panelled works made between 1988 and 2003. In these works, Robinson expresses a sense of wonder at creation itself. Exploring the relationship between humans, earth, sky, and sea, he raises the question of humans’ relation to their universe.

Creation landscape: Darkness and light 1988 begins the story of creation as told in the book of Genesis; however, the artist tends to focus on his own spiritual experience rather than literal readings of the Bible. He holds a pantheistic view of the landscape, and, as such, is very interested in Indigenous peoples’ deep connection to the landscape and their sense of place in nature. In the middle panel of Creation landscape: Darkness and light, Robinson has used a large coiling shape that looks a bit like a river or a serpent. The serpent is a significant character in the story of Adam and Eve, but it is also a reference to the Rainbow Serpent, who represents both destruction and creation in Indigenous culture. Each panel addresses the forces of creation and destruction, with the work depicting fire, the sun, the moon, and the passing of time from day to night, again expressing the enormity and power of nature.

The works present a transition from the artist’s previous whimsical and humorous landscapes to a more serious insight into the natural environment, with a focus on the intrinsic human experiences of sorrow, happiness, and grief. Robinson’s intention is to capture God’s creation and his eternal presence by presenting what Robinson sees as the transcendent quality of the rainforest.

ACTIVITY
Research Robinson’s Creation landscape series and attempt to note all the biblical references alluded to in these paintings.

Research another artist whose spiritual beliefs inform their practice and discuss, in pairs, how your own beliefs could affect your practice.

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