



Artwork in a box

William Robinson

Education resource for teachers

This secondary school resource for teachers accompanies *Artwork in a box: William Robinson*. It includes information about the artist, his artwork, and suggested activities and discussion points. Teachers are encouraged to utilise this resource before and after the in-classroom experience.

Learning areas that this project link to are as follows: Visual Art; English; History; Design and Technologies; Work Studies; Civics and Citizenship; and Study of Society and Environment.

General capabilities that the activities encompass are as follows: Literacy; Sustainability; Critical and creative thinking; Personal and social capability

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.

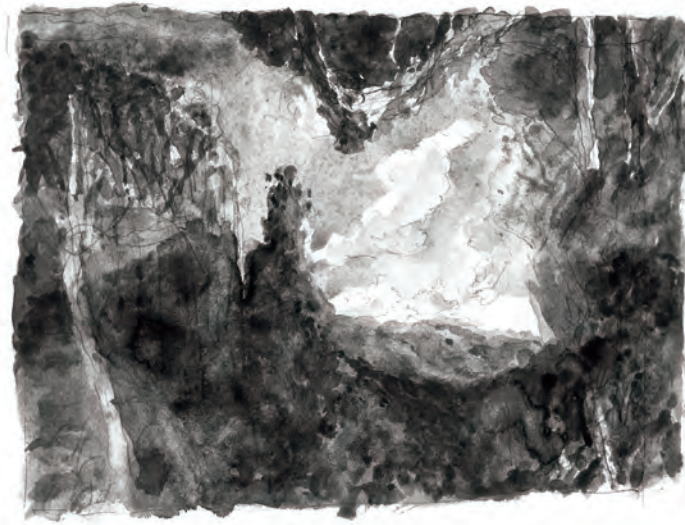
The sketches featured are from 1977 to 2008 and capture a range of different themes. Among them are studies for his early still-life paintings and drawings (1970s–80s), in which he was greatly influenced by French Post-Impressionist artist Pierre Bonnard. Robinson saw a major exhibition of Bonnard's 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

¹ William Robinson quoted in Bronwyn Watson, "Fertile ground for William Robinson's artistic spirit," *The Australian*, 1 December 2012, <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/arts/review/fertile-ground-for-william-robinsons-artistic-spirit/story-fn9n8gph-1226527308961>.

² William Robinson quoted in Stephen Rainbird, *Realms of vision: The art of William Robinson* (Brisbane: Queensland University of Technology, 2009), 11.

Images

William ROBINSON
Pug self-portrait 1991
etching 38 x 28cm
QUT Art Collection

William ROBINSON
Artist's sketchbook (detail) c.1970s
pencil on paper 24.6 x 26.5cm
Private collection, Brisbane

William ROBINSON
Artist's sketchbook 1997–99
watercolour on paper 14.5 x 22cm
Private collection, Brisbane



PHILIP BACON AM
supporting visual arts at QUT



|1940



|1950



|1960



|1970



|1980



|1990



|2000



|2010



|2015



1936

Born in Brisbane on 16 April, the second of four children to Ada (née Vogt) and Robert Robinson.

1943–49

Lives in Fairfield, a southern Brisbane riverside suburb, with his family. William spends his early schooling at Junction Park Primary School at nearby Annerley. He shows artistic skill early on, producing the best pastel drawings of his primary-school class.

1950–53

Attends Brisbane State High School, South Brisbane. In 1953, he sees the exhibition *French painting today* at the Queensland Art Gallery (QAG), which leaves a lasting impression on him. He shows considerable talent at playing the piano, which remains an integral part of his life. At the end of high school, he has to choose between becoming an art teacher or a professional pianist.

1954–56

Commences training as a primary school teacher at Queensland Teachers Training College, Kelvin Grove. In 1955, he is awarded a two-year scholarship and embarks on an art teacher-training course at Brisbane's Central Technical College (CTC). In 1956, he is awarded the College's Godfrey Rivers Memorial Medal for excellence in painting, sculpture, applied art and drawing.

1957–62

Appointed instructor in art at CTC, and works part-time towards an art teacher's diploma and a diploma in drawing and painting (which he completes in 1962). In 1958, marries Shirley Rees, a former commercial art student at CTC. The couple settles in Gaythorne, an inner north-west suburb of Brisbane, and the first of their six children is born in 1959.

1963–69

Commences a six-year tenure as an art lecturer at Kedron Park Teachers College. Family moves to Coorparoo on Brisbane's south side. In 1967, Robinson holds his first solo exhibition at the Design Arts Centre, Brisbane.

1970–71

The Robinson family move to a three-hectare farm at Birkdale on Brisbane's eastern outskirts. William is appointed Senior Lecturer in Art at Kelvin Grove Teachers College (until 1975). In 1971, he travels to Sydney to see the *Pierre Bonnard* exhibition, which exerts a strong influence on his art, particularly his compositions of domestic interiors.

1975

Begins to focus on landscapes of the Redland Bay district and Moreton Bay. He moves to Toowoomba for six months to teach at the Darling Downs Institute of Advanced Education.

1976–77

Starts to teach at North Brisbane College of Advanced Education (until 1981). In 1977, he holds a solo exhibition at Ray Hughes Gallery, Brisbane. The theme of farmyard life becomes the main subject of his art from the late 1970s. He is also influenced by his love of music, with many of his works containing musical references, such as *Orchestra with cows* 1980.

1982–84

Appointed Senior Lecturer in Art at Brisbane College of Advanced Education (until 1989). In 1984, he moves with his family to an 80-hectare farm at Beechmont in Queensland's Gold Coast hinterland, and begins to paint the precipitous landscape of this subtropical rainforest area.

1987–89

Awarded the Archibald Prize for portraiture in 1987 for *Equestrian self portrait*. Completes first *Creation landscape* painting in 1988. Leaves teaching in 1989 and starts working as a full-time artist.

1990

Awarded the Wynne Prize for landscape in 1990 for *The rainforest*. Begins making lithographs. Travels overseas for the first time, visiting Greece, England, France, and Italy.

1991–92

Shirley and William's lives are devastated by the loss of two of their children. The artist becomes increasingly introspective, and his work more contemplative. Commences the 'Mountain' series, which he considers among his finest work.

1994–96

Moves to Kingscliff on the northern New South Wales coast, where the changing moods of the sea and sky became a primary inspirational focus for his work. Acquires a rainforest studio at Springbrook in the adjacent hinterland. In 1995, he wins the Archibald Prize for the second time, with *Self portrait with stunned mullet*. Travels to Paris where he makes lithographs at Atelier Bordas (and he makes subsequent prints there in 1998, 2000, 2004, and 2006). In 1996, he wins the Wynne Prize again for *Creation landscape: Earth and sea*.

1998

Awarded an honorary doctorate by his alma mater, Queensland University of Technology (QUT).

2001

Returns to live in bayside Brisbane. Holds first solo exhibitions at Philip Bacon Galleries, Brisbane, and Australian Galleries, Melbourne and Sydney. First full-survey exhibition of his work is shown at QAG.

2005

Purchases coastal retreat near Byron Bay and sells property at Springbrook.

2007–08

Appointed Officer of the Order of Australia (AO). In 2008, moves from bayside Brisbane to the city's inner west.

2009

The William Robinson Gallery is opened at QUT.

2011

Artist celebrates his 75th birthday. The William Robinson Gallery and QUT Art Museum host a major exhibition of key works from the artist's oeuvre and publishes the accompanying monograph, *William Robinson: The transfigured landscape*. The artist continues to live and work in Brisbane.

William Robinson: A portrait of the artist opens at the William Robinson Gallery, QUT.

Donates seven of the only eight self portraits produced to QUT, including the Archibald Prize-winning paintings, *Equestrian self portrait* 1987 and *Self portrait with stunned mullet* 1995.

2012

William Robinson: Insights, curated by Davida Allen, Betty Churcher, and David Malouf, opens at the William Robinson Gallery, QUT.

2013

William Robinson: The farmyards opens at the William Robinson Gallery, QUT.

Completes *The garden*, the first multi-panel work produced since the *Creation landscape* series over 10 years prior.

2014

William Robinson: Infinite sphere opens at the William Robinson Gallery, QUT.

2015

William Robinson: Inspirations, curated by Dame Quentin Bryce, opens at the William Robinson Gallery, QUT.



WILLIAM ROBINSON GALLERY



William Robinson

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.



Following the construction of Brisbane's Southeast Freeway in 1970, the Robinsons opted for a quieter domestic life and moved from inner Brisbane to a farm in semi-rural Birkdale. Here they kept goats, chooks, and cows, giving many of them names. Josephine and Rosie were two cows that appear in many of the artist's paintings. He did not begin painting farmyard works until 1980, allowing himself time to become familiar with both the animals and the farming lifestyle before distilling these years of observation and experience into the artworks. The time Robinson spent in the company of his animals enabled him to reveal their humorous and whimsical personalities as if they were real characters, and to depict their behaviours as they played on the farm.

Some of Robinson's painted portraits of his cows are complete with oval frames, which parodies examples of nineteenth-century portrait photography. In many of these cow portraits, the animals are viewed from several viewpoints, suggesting connections to photographic documentation. Sometimes, the artist includes himself and his wife Shirley in his farmyard compositions, with Shirley shifting from the domestic scenes portrayed in the early interiors to active involvement on the

farm. The couple don't appear like farmers in charge of their animals; rather, they're on equal footing with the animals, all playing on the farm together.

Robinson recalls some days on the farm as being quite chaotic. He believes that when things get out of hand, all you can do is laugh at yourself, which is why he paints these works with a quirky sense of humour. His farmyard works tend to have flat backgrounds and no horizon line. This means that he can compose the image in a way that spreads the action across the whole canvas, letting us focus on the animals. The feeling of chaos is emphasised by the floating and scattered compositional elements—a shift from his previous 'realistic' Bonnard-style interiors. Often, only parts of the animals are visible, which makes it seem like the paintings are just smaller snapshots of all the activity on the farm. By the time the Robinsons sold their farm, they had 6 cows, 40 chooks, and 70 goats.

ACTIVITY

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?



SELF PORTRAITS

As with his farmyard paintings, many of Robinson's self portraits are painted with a sense of humour. A number of them are parodies of famous artworks from history. For example, *Equestrian self portrait* 1987 was inspired by the story of Charles IV on horseback, a painting by Francisco de Goya that satirised the eighteenth-century Spanish king. Charles IV was a fat and foolish king who wanted a portrait of himself riding a horse, even though he wasn't known for his horse riding. The equestrian portrait is a long-established mode of portraiture that dates back to classical times. They normally depict respected leaders or military figures, usually in a strong and powerful pose, but Goya painted Charles IV sitting still on a fat, old horse, and didn't make him look very impressive. However, the king didn't realise that Goya's painting was mocking him, and he liked it.

In 1987, William Robinson won the prestigious Archibald Prize with his *Equestrian self portrait*. Since the Archibald Prize shows paintings of important figures in Australian culture, one can see that Robinson is making fun of the seriousness of it all by painting himself as an uncomfortable farmer astride a horse. He won again with his 1995 *Self portrait with stunned mullet*, which references

William Hogarth's *The shrimp girl*, painted in 1740–45.

Although many of Robinson's self portraits use humour and parody, they can sometimes be very personal, giving the artist the opportunity to express how he sees himself or how he wants the rest of the world to see him. In doing so, he is able to reveal a more multi-layered aspect of himself through his oscillation between seriousness and wry humour. He is also able to make bold statements about the human condition under the guise of silliness. In *Self portrait with goose feathers* 1989, for instance, Robinson looks a lot like a goose himself, but his face is solemn and the painting has a dream-like quality. Thus, although the artist presents himself as a fool, something deeper underpins the painting. By camouflaging himself with different guises and costumes, Robinson can expose emotions and intimate feelings in a less confronting manner.

ACTIVITY

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?

Equestrian self portrait 1987
Winner Archibald Prize for portraiture 1987
Oil on linen 141 x 192cm
QUT Art Collection

Donated through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program by William Robinson, 2011



WILLIAM
ROBINSON
GALLERY



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 landscape 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' arid representation of the 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?

Creation landscape: Darkness and light (study) 1988
Pastel on paper 69 x 77cm
QUT Art Collection
Purchased through the William Robinson Art Collection Fund
and partial donation by Phillip Bacon, 2010



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