



INSIDE THE GALLERY PODCAST – SERIES 4 EPISODE 11 (November 2022)

FRED WILLIAMS: THE LONDON YEARS (NGV)

CATHY LEAHY - CURATOR

Tim Stackpool:

Now this London period that the exhibition is concerned with, why is it so relevant with regard to The Williams Collection?

Cathy Leahy:

It's a really critical period in Fred Williams' development. He's a young artist, when he goes to London he's only 24 years of age, but he had had already quite a significant period of training here in Melbourne. And it's quite an exploratory period while he is there in London. He took himself off to study the great collections of art in London. He was very serious about his vocation, about his practice, and really wanted to engage with the canon of Western art history.

While he's in London, Fred's really looking to establish his identity, I think, and he talks later about that he's looking for abiding values, something that's permanent, that he can really guide his art by rather than something that's fashionable. And so what we really see is him intensively observing the world around him while he's in London and also engaging with art history. And I think those two strands provide a very interesting kind of catalyst for development and for his later work.

What's interesting about the London period, and I think will surprise many viewers who come to see the show is that at this time in his career, Fred Williams, he was classically trained, was really aspiring to be a figure painter. It wasn't landscape that he was pursuing. Of course, he did make landscape, both drawings and gouaches and paintings, but he was really training himself and refining his skills in the representation of people. And so while he was in London, Fred actually had to work. He didn't have a scholarship, so he needed to support himself. So he had a daytime job in a picture framers. And in the evenings he would go to life drawing classes to keep his hand in, to keep drawing, to have access to models. And if you can imagine, he's there, he wants to further his art, but yet he's having to work during the day. So his evenings and his weekends are taken up with his own art practice.

So he's drawing at the School of Art at the Chelsea Polytechnic, and he's also painting in his rooms at nights and on the weekends he's visiting museums. We know that within the first two weeks of being in London, he writes a letter to John Brack saying, "I visited the Tate, the National Gallery and the V&A six times, and here are my impressions..." And he reels off a list of artists whose work has impressed him. And they are, it's people like Raphael, Bellini, French impressionists as well, Cezanne. He particularly loved a painting by Renoir called The Umbrellas, in London. So he was engaging with all of these collections.

Tim Stackpool:

I'm impressed that he was so committed and so fastidious at that age. Travelling to the UK and just being totally immersed and committed to this craft.

Cathy Leahy:

It's such a great point that you've touched on there, Tim. And it is something that is absolutely obvious with Fred right from the very beginning. And that is his total dedication to his work. And I know there are other people who were students with him at the National Gallery School in Melbourne, said they knew that Fred would be an artist because his commitment was so great. But in London, it's interesting. He told an interviewer later in life that when asked, "What did the London period do for you? What did you gain there?" And he said, "It slowed me down. It made me realize what I had to achieve, the standard I had to achieve." And he also said, Tim, he said, "A young artist is an artist at 50. The problem

with Australia is that so many artists want to be an artist before they're ready for it." So he was quite comfortable with this long-

Tim Stackpool:

A slow burn.

Cathy Leahy:

Slow burn, and really making sure that he was really well developed and sure of where he was going. And so that's one of the things that you see that come across in this exhibition is his dedication to his craft, to building his skills. So we have one room in the show that's dedicated to the life drawings that he made at the Chelsea school. And they're marvellous works. He's dedicated, he's committed, he observes intently, but the drawings are not laboured or highly finished in any way. Fred was a very quick worker. He was a very quick draftsman. And so the drawings have this extraordinary energy. They're working drawings, and you can see him working through. He over draws lines. He moves the position of a limb. He flips the Conte Crayon from its end where he's drawing line work to the side where he blocks in, very quickly, blocks in shade, shading and tone.

And even though it's very quickly handled, what really comes across in the exhibition, what strikes you, I think, is how incisive he was. What an extraordinary draftsman he was. So the drawings have this sense of vitality, of energy of their rapid-fire making, yet they absolutely capture the essential. So you've got the teeter in this stretched out languorous pose. And just with the sweep of the Conte Crayon, Fred captures it. Or with the contour line, he just...

There's a wonderful series of caricature heads, people that he observed in the music halls in the evenings where their expressions of face have clearly amused him. And I think there's a lot of humour comes across in Fred's drawings. So these little caricature heads, people have got their mouths open in shock or a surprise at what they're seeing before them, or someone's wearing a ridiculous hat and someone else has got a big double chin and beaky nose, they're humorous drawings. And Fred was very well tutored in the history of caricature. He loved Dornier. He was, knew the works of Hogarth and Goya. And so that was the style of drawing that he was very good at.

Tim Stackpool:

We see in this collection that you are showing zoo animals and people in music halls. Do you know why he had such a focus in that area?

Cathy Leahy:

Yeah, the zoo animal drawings, he became friendly with an Australian artist who arrived in London from Sydney. His name was Francis Lymburner. And was Lymburner very well known as an accomplished animalia, a drawer draftsman of animals. And a Lymburner had been going to the Taronga Park Zoo from the late 1930s. He later said, "It's the best training an artist can have. It's not like the posed models in the studio that you have to be quick. It's where I learned to draw." And so Fred actually went along to the zoo in Regents Park, together with Francis Lymburner, they worked together. And apparently Frances Lymburner used to cadge sheets of paper from Fred. They were both desperately poor and would draw side by side and Lymburner's drawings as well, of animals, like Fred's. So this very fluid linear outline.

In addition to Francis Lymburner's animal drawings Fred, of course, knew the drawings of Rembrandt and Goya. Rembrandt does marvellous drawings of elephants and lions. Goya, there's a great print of an elephant that Goya made. So he knows these works from art history and also various other 20th century

artists who made animals. So, that's one sequence of works that he did. And I think he went along because as I mentioned before, he was really intent on drawing all the time. He was drawing incessantly while he was in London. So he was looking at the world around him, and this was one venue where he could go and extend his skills.

And similarly, the music hall, he started going there quite soon after his arrival in London. Do you know the auditoriums, there was still lighting up in the gods, up in the upper section of those great big music hall auditoriums? And so he would sit at the front of the gods and with his sketch pads and pencil and just draw, draw, draw, draw the acrobats, the jugglers, the puppeteers, even performing geese that he saw at one performance, Max Miller, the great comedian. And so again, if you think about, he's been drawing moving subjects at the zoo, of course they don't stop on the stage at the music hall. So yet another place where he could continue to draw.

And one of the friends that he used to go to the music hall with John Taylor said that he would use, there were memory prompts, they were just notes. And then he would later use those drawings to work up other compositions. And that is one of the aspects of Fred that I'm really trying to draw out in his exhibition. And that is that he uses that he put his drawing to, how he would combine sketches or modify them and turn them into etchings, which are related to drawing. You would draw through the acid resistant ground with a sharp needle. So it's like drawing with a pen. And he would transpose his subject or the composition onto the plate and then work it through a whole series of techniques and processes. And then he would also even take that image and then move it across into a painting either in gouache or oil.

And while he's doing this kind of serial nature, the progression of the image, he's changing the image, he's refining it, he's kind of changing the format or cutting out details or adding in new details. And so it becomes a very important way of him distilling his pictorial ideas and refining his ideas from the direct observation, what he observes on the spot. And I think one point about Fred's work is that it always comes from observations directly observed, but then he filters it through the craft of picture making with reference to all of the great works of art that he's looking at. You can see in the etchings where he's clearly looking at Goya or he's clearly looking at Rembrandt. But I think the point with Fred is that it's never undigested. They're not direct copies. He's built a vocabulary that's come from vast looking. He's very intelligent and well-informed artist.

And so it creates his own language drawing from all of these sources. I think that way of working is something that really he consolidates in his London period, and it becomes the kind of basis for his later development, the way he will progress an image even when he's no longer, not necessarily with withdrawing, but once he starts working on his paintings, he'll progress the image through sequences of images and series and develop, refine, change. So it becomes a *modus operandi*, in effect. So that's another reason why it's such an important period for him as an artist.

Tim Stackpool:

It might have been his way of capturing a photograph, if you like, for future inspiration. But what an amazing way to build your skills as well, to actually have to capture the moment of a subject where you don't have control over them, where you have to actually capture that moment. Again, remarkable for someone of that age, we know he had the skills and we know he had the education, but just to use that as a method of refining what you do is brilliant.

Cathy Leahy:

It really is. You see the calibre of the artist that he is, these drawings, although they're rushed off, as I said before, they're quick, they're quick, quick, quick. And there's wonderful reminiscences of his fellow

artists about that. When Fred was drawing at the National Gallery School, he'd be discarding sheet after sheet onto the floor and clouds of charcoal dust that he was quick. And John Brack also mentioned this about him, that he was a very quick painter and he wouldn't unscrew the tube of paint. He'd chop it in half to get to the paint.

But even though he's doing working so quickly, it is just the skill, the extraordinary incisive ability that he had to capture very, very quickly the essence of what he sees before him. And I think that's what makes these drawings so breathtaking really is in looking at them you can really appreciate both the speed with which he's done them, and also just how amazing they are in capturing either an expression or a mood or a position of an animal or a person sitting before him.

Tim Stackpool:

They are, they're rushed pieces, but I don't necessarily want to indicate by saying they're rushed pieces, that they don't have a style about them.

Cathy Leahy:

Fred often said that drawing a line was a basic instinct for him. And I think that also speaks to his interest in caricature because of course, it's the potent, the charged line that is such an important element in caricature. And that his ability to refine a subject before him down into its component, linear outline or content. And these are great skills that he then takes across into his paintings when he comes home. And of course, the relationship, that extraordinary moment of when he decides to paint the Australian landscape is connected to the London period because it's when he comes home by boat and stops at Fremantle. And from the deck of the boat, he could actually see the Australian landscape and see how unstructured and unfocused it was and thought, that's what I'm going to paint. That is what I will do. And for Fred, he often said that the subject itself was not what was important, it was just something you hung your hat on, that you built your subject into the paint. So you constructed your picture.

And his great biographer, James Mollison, talked about the extraordinary knowledge that Fred had of the great works of art in, and he had his favourites, but that he not only knew the canon of Western art history, but he also knew, he knew particular paintings intimately. The layering of paint, the scumble techniques. He knew them intimately, he had studied them very closely. And so when he comes to working before the motif in the Australian landscape, he brings all of that knowledge of how to construct a picture, how to make what you see in front of you, turn that into a work of art. Not just a copy of what you see, that you are constructing, that you are creating something.

Tim Stackpool:

It has its own beauty.

Cathy Leahy:

Yes, you create that out of the mark making. And I actually think that all of this drawing that Fred did in London and before London, he was drawing incessantly in Melbourne before he went to London as well. His abstracted views of the Australian landscape are known for their telegraphic vocabulary. The mark makings, the blobs of paint that stand for the fallen trees and the stumps and the gray green foliage of the gum tree. That some of that comes through from his ability of capturing essentials that he'd developed so well through his drawing practice.

Tim Stackpool:

Now Kathy, let's talk about your connection with these works. How excited are you to have received these into your gallery?

Cathy Leahy:

I'm so thrilled. I'm so thrilled. Do you know the National Gallery of Victoria already has a very fine and in fact, the most important collection of Fred Williams's work in the country. We've been very fortunate. Over several decades, Lynn Williams, the artist's widow and family, honoured a wish that Fred himself had articulated before his death that he wanted to establish a collection, a museum collection where his prints could be studied. Print making becomes a major form for Fred during his London years. And he, like Rembrandt, like Goya, these artists whom he revered, he worked very seriously at his print making. And it feeds into his practice in a very interesting way. And he wanted one collection to represent that. And so he chose Melbourne, the National Gallery of Victoria. And so we have benefited over the decades through a series of donations that really have established us, the National Gallery of Victoria collection as the study centre, the repository collection for Fred Williams's print making.

And we have something like 1,500 or 1,600 impressions of his prints. He has a total number of about 300 prints, but he does them in different states and prints them on different colours of paper. So we represent all of that. And that group of works has now been very richly supplemented or complemented by this recent donation from Lyn Williams and the family of a great case of the artist's early drawings, drawings from both the London period. And there's about 500 of those, 500 in total, and some are in other collections and also Melbourne drawings. Early Melbourne drawings when he was a student.

So we have this great study collection now for Fred Williams, and he's such an important artist in Australian art history that it's wonderful that we have that collection. And it will enable his work to be studied in depth and understood better, understood going into the future. So it's exactly the kind of thing that great collections do. And we are very grateful to the Williams family for really entrusting us with the legacy, with this great legacy for Fred Williams.

Tim Stackpool:

Standard question, in your job, Kathy, how do you choose what you're going to include in this exhibition?

Cathy Leahy:

That was a tough job, and I can tell that was really hard. That was weeks and weeks in the print room here at the National Gallery of Victoria, going through all of the drawings that have come in as part of the donation. And really thinking about how I might organise the exhibition and just really assessing the works, which ones are stronger, which ones show a different array of techniques, which ones show different processes that the artist is doing. So it's about including the very best of the work, but also showing the variety and range of the material. So I actually do it physically. I lay the works out, go through them and then lay them out and group them and refine and refine. It's a long process, but it's great. And it's been very gratifying actually, all that work that's done in here before they're framed or mounted to see how strong they look on the walls now that we've actually installed the show. So yeah, it's been a marvellous experience.

Tim Stackpool:

Do you think your collection is done now in terms of Williams, or is there stuff that you're still itching to add to what you have?

Cathy Leahy:

Always can have more.

Tim Stackpool:

Ha! I know the answers to these questions, but I want to hear it from you.

Cathy Leahy:

Is there ever a curator who says, no, that's enough? I don't know. Look, there's other aspects of his development. We're always on the lookout for sometimes with his prints, sometimes there are states. And states are the working proofs. When he makes a change on a plate, he'll take an impression and then move on to the next. We're missing just some of those. And very occasionally they come up on the market and if ever that happens, we pounce because we really want it to be a complete collection for his prints. But always on the lookout for something that complements and it might extend. But yes, we're in a very good position now with what we have.

Tim Stackpool:

So you're very satisfied with what we'll get to see when we come to visit.

Cathy Leahy:

Yes. I hope people will be excited about it as I am. It's been interesting just this past week where I've had really very interesting responses from the broader public, I think. A real, Fred Williams aficionados or art historians know that there was this London period that precedes the development of his mature vision. But it's not really been explored in great depth. So that's, we've got 200 works on the wall here. So it's a big show and it just is very fulsome in its exploration of those major groups of work, the drawings that he made.

Tim Stackpool:

Yeah, I think you get to that point where the artist so well. And then all of a sudden something else is uncovered and you go, well, hang on a minute, I had no idea that this artist had this period or these works or whatever. Especially him finding himself, finding his own art, but for those who love the artist himself to actually discover this. It's like re-imagining a person in a completely different dimension.

Cathy Leahy:

Yeah, I think so. He did always do portraits later, but I think people will really be surprised and I hope delighted by the show, just how strong it looks. And by, as you say, this kind of hitherto hidden aspect that comes in, comes to light through the exhibition, through this expose.

Tim Stackpool:

Yeah, absolutely. Now before I let you go, is there anything else that the gallery is putting together, something else you're excited about coming up soon?

Cathy Leahy:

Well there's, yeah, lots.

Tim Stackpool:

Pick two, Cathy, pick two.

Cathy Leahy:

The Alexander McQueen Exhibition that opens in December is a marvellous show. Really the first major expose of McQueen's work here in Australia. A show that's been done in partnership with the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. That's going to be very exciting.

And of course, in March we have Melbourne Now, which is 10 years on from the first iteration of that show that really will take over the National Gallery of Victoria Australia building at Fed Square with the works of a couple of hundred of contemporary Australian artists and designers, looking at what's happening in Melbourne right now. So two very exciting projects coming up.

Tim Stackpool:

Yeah, well, you're always very busy at the National Gallery of Victoria. Kathy, plenty of great stuff coming up and I wish you all the very best for the Williams Exhibition too. And thank you so much for your time on the podcast.

Cathy Leahy:

Thanks so much, Tim. It's been great to talk.