



James C. Sourris Artist Interview Series 2015-2016
Item 30602/7: William Robinson Digital Story

Interviewee: William Robinson (WR)
Interviewer: Vanessa Van Ooyen (VVO)
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VVO: Thank you, Bill, for taking the time to come in today and speak with us. Can you just tell us a little bit about what art meant to you as a young boy?

WR: Well, it was the only way that I could express myself, actually. Art in school was very formal, but I used to actually draw on the dirt in the lunch hour and that sort of thing. I think it's the ability to draw, both from observation and from their imagination, and that's one of the things that I was born with.

VVO: You had your first solo exhibition at the Brisbane Design Centre in 1967, and previously you'd been showing with the likes of Roy Churcher and—

WR: Oh, well—yes, that sort of—little exhibitions. That first exhibition, I suppose, it was useful, because Modernism and the Modernism of Molvig and Roy and people like that—also brought with it a complete sort of direction change from what they did at the Central Technical College, which was extremely traditional and formal, almost Victorian in training. I think the '67 one was bigger than the '69 one, because I'd sort of gone off on a branch of Modernism where I'd started to have some sort of influence of Paul Klee and people like that, which had really nothing to do with me.

VVO: Then you started doing the Conté drawings with the cows.

WR: By 1970, we'd moved to Birkdale and had a farm. It was a very disorganised farm. I wasn't really a farmer at all. And I was still teaching full-time; that's how I made a living. Certainly one didn't make a living out of painting. Now, we did keep cows, as well. When you're sort of painting a cow—I worked out some sort of system whereby I would put them into ovals first, almost like Victorian photographs. That's how I started with the cows. Those first oval drawings of cows are very important. So from there, then, I incorporated chooks and goats, which we kept as well, and dogs, which we kept.

VVO: The 1980s were an interesting decade for you. In 1983 you were selected for Australian Perspectiva at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, and you painted your first Archibald entry, William with Josephine. And then in 1986, you were in the Sydney Biennale, and then the following year you went on to win the Archibald with Equestrian Self-Portrait. And Queensland Art Gallery commissioned you to paint Four Seasons. That must have been about 1986. So, in 1987 you won the Archibald, and there was a lot of buzz around that.

WR: There was. I wasn't ready for that. Except that it wasn't a painting of grandeur at all—it was a rather silly painting of Farmer Bill on the horse with no reins, no bridle, no belt, no saddle.

VVO: Yeah, I think that there's been a lot written about the self-portraits in terms of parody, but I see a real seriousness to the paintings.

WR: I realise that I've got a degree of flippancy about me, and that's just natural—I try not to be. But all of the Archibalds, in one way or another, are different aspects of not only my personality, but my life. I mean, once I painted myself to look like the dogs, and also put in a hunting scene. I was hunting with my pugs. No one hunts with pugs. And I had a broken shotgun, too, which is a sort of a deflationary device that I won't go into any further.

VVO: Now, the other person that you paint quite a lot is your wife, Shirley.

WR: We had this extraordinary life of living with animals, chasing cows, and looking after goats and chooks. We had six children, as well, so it was a bit like a sort of—I was going to say 'circus', but it's not quite like that—I don't know exactly how to explain all that sort of thing. But as I was doing the farms, Shirley started to appear in them. Somehow or other, I still had so many influences, so she wasn't her real self. She came into complete stardom on the farm, and in the bush pictures and things like that, riding the horse and chasing cows and things like that.

VVO: So in 1989—the eighties were quite a decade of growing acknowledgement of your work and success, and then in 1989 you retired from teaching full-time. What impact did that have on your life?

WR: A big impact. The first painting I really did was almost the biggest one that I've ever done, called the Sunshine Painting, which was about the farm at Beechmont, and which was in three panels, large panels. It gave me the ability to take on things on a much bigger scale, and therefore much bigger commitment.

VVO: And you're so disciplined and you paint every day.

WR: Every day. I paint until I drop, as it were. But I could no more stop painting than I could stop listening to music.

VVO: Well, thank you, Bill. Well, thank you for taking the time, and you're so generous with your time and your knowledge, and I hope that this will give some insight into your work and your practice and your life. So thank you.

WR: Thank you, too.

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