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Nowhere Man: The Countryside of Fred Williams after Western Desert painting

ABSTRACT

Two monographs on Australian artist Fred Williams, published by Patrick McCaughey and James Mollison during the 1980s, have recently been joined by a third, Deborah Hart's *Fred Williams: Infinite Horizons* (2011). While the first two argue that the artist's work bridged a schism between Australian landscape painting and an internationalist contemporary art of the 1960s, the rise of Western Desert painting invites a new reading of his landscapes. Ron Radford's preface to Hart's new monograph wants to reconcile the artist's relationship to Western Desert painting with an anecdote about Clifford Possum's visit to the Art Gallery of South Australia in 1984. Possum was enthusiastic about a painting by Williams, and Radford sees in this enthusiasm a reconciliation of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal ways of seeing. Such different readings of Williams and his work, authored in different historical periods, reflect different moments in the unfolding of national anxieties that constitute the history of Australian art.

The most famous encounter between Fred Williams' work and the politics of landscape and Aboriginality took place without the artist being present to witness it. In 1982, only months after Williams' death, the forestry and mining giant Conzinc Riotinto of Australia (CRA, now simply Rio Tinto), sponsored an exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria of his famous Pilbara series – Williams' 1979 to 1981 paintings of the Pilbara region of Western Australia, an area that remains littered by mines run by CRA and other companies. Williams' Pilbara works have long been canonized as one of the most important series in the history of Australian landscape painting. In their major monographs on the artist, Patrick McCaughey and James Mollison describe the Pilbara series as the culmination of Williams' work as a landscape painter. McCaughey claims the series 'ranks with the greatest achievements of Australian landscape painting'.[1] Mollison, in his turn, calls these 'the breakthrough pictures of his career'.[2] In 1982, however, the exhibition was met with protests outside the National Gallery of Victoria, as CRA were under scrutiny for conducting illegal mining surveys within Aboriginal reserves and for spying on Aboriginal activists.[3] CRA's sponsorship of Williams was seen as a way of covering over this controversy.

Rio Tinto have long used Williams' Pilbara series as a means to publicise themselves. After sponsoring the series' first exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria and elsewhere, they toured them around the world. In 2001 Rio Tinto donated them to this gallery, using the occasion to once again tour them around the country. Gerard Vaughan, then director of the NGV, proclaimed at the time that Rio Tinto's donation

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[1] McCaughey, 1980, p. 320.

[2] Mollison, 1989, p. 237.

[3] Johnston, 2004, http://blogs.arts.unimelb.edu.au/refractory/2004/10/08/tracks-in-the-desert-the-tremulous-landscapes-of-johnny-warangkula-tjupurrula-and-fred-williams-ryan-johnston/#_ednref10>; accessed March 14, 2011.

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'represents the most significant corporate gift made in Australia'.[4] In 2011 and 2012 the National Gallery of Australia toured a new retrospective of Williams' work, including some works from the Pilbara series, accompanied by a new monograph on Williams by the curator, Deborah Hart. The exhibition was again sponsored by Rio Tinto and again visited the National Gallery of Victoria. This time, however, no protests greeted visitors to the gallery. Since the 1980s, Rio Tinto have become much better at conducting community relations, putting into place policies of consultation and employing high profile indigenous leaders like Marcia Langton to advise them. The ambivalence of space and distance in Williams' landscape painting opens itself onto the political problems of representation, of recreating the landscape genre amidst an ongoing colonialism in remote Australia. In an effort to understand the shifting attitudes towards Williams' works and their engagement with the ideas of landscape and Aboriginality, this essay considers the story of Williams' reception by his major monographers: McCaughey, Mollison and Hart.

The starting point for analysing McCaughey, Mollison and Hart's readings of Williams' work is via his relation to the national and the international – a dynamic of reading the artist that was first articulated by Bernard Smith. In *Australian Painting*, Smith writes:

> Williams is aware of a bond between his art and the environment, being most at home as an artist, most creative, in his own country. 'Wherever I've gone I've felt that I could be quite at home there if I'd been born there, like in France or Italy.' He sees culture, that is to say, as something to be created rather than as something to be taken and eaten.[5]

Smith reads Williams as an "internationalist"; that is, an artist who belongs to the world of culture-makers, but whose international place is determined by his national situation. Williams happens to belong to Australia, and it is through this chance historical situation that he produces Australian art.

For McCaughey and Mollison it is this internationalism, as defined by Smith, that enables Williams to absorb the new styles of the 1960s while remaining a national landscape painter. Thus it is that they are able to turn Williams from a parochial painter into one whose work is relevant to the concerns of contemporary artists around the world. It was left to Terry Smith, in additional chapters added onto a later edition of Bernard Smith's *Australian Painting*, to disagree with this version of Williams. He reports that as contemporary art exploded in Australia after the 1960s, introducing a raft of radically new practices to the field of art, Williams moved in the opposite direction, and returned to 'going out and setting up his easel in front of the motif'.[6] In this way, Terry Smith argues that Williams in fact responded to the emergence of internationalism with a renewed parochialism.

Hart's more recent account offers a third approach. While Hart follows Bernard Smith's version of Australian art history, in modelling Williams after his early years in London, she ultimately leaves this story behind as she becomes more immersed in his later life. Thus Hart abandons Bernard Smith's picture of Williams as grounded in

[4] Vaughan, 2002, p. 5.
[5] Smith, 1971, p. 414.
[6] Smith, 1991, p. 460.

Australia, instead establishing the thoroughly international nature of the artist's influences, as he studied European masterpieces in London and through Europe, before turning these influences into a biography of the artist's own achievements. In doing so, Hart's scholarship is empowered by her access to Williams' personal diaries, which remain the property of the artist's widow. Accentuating this sense of intimacy Hart punctuates the book with photographs of the artist at work. Paradoxically, Hart seems to bring us closer to Williams the person than either McCaughey or Mollison, who both knew the artist personally.

Fig 1. Fred Williams, *Australian Landscape I*, 1969. Oil on canvas, 121.0 x 152.5 cm, private collection. (Estate of Fred Williams.)

Debates about the role of biography in Williams' internationalism, however, address only obliquely the problem that Ian Burn and McCaughey among others have found so compelling in the artist's work from the 1960s: the problem of landscape. Over the years, Williams' treatment of landscape has generated a range of critical perspectives, which in turn reflect broader critical and political anxieties about the roles and divisions within Australian art. Two comments by Burn and McCaughey show something of the difficulty of apprehending Williams' treatment of landscape. In his essay on Williams, Burn cites as an often remarked fact that Williams' landscapes do not so much look like the Australian landscape, as the Australian landscape looks like a Williams painting.[7] As McCaughey notes, 'in the 1960s, a Lysterfield landscape could be virtually interchangeable with a You Yangs landscape'.[8] In other words,

[7] Burn, 1991, p. 88.
[8] McCaughey, 1980, p. 15.

Williams' landscape paintings are powerful not because of the landscapes that they supposedly depict, but rather because they represent landscapes as such. This aspect of Williams' work developed over time. During the late 1950s and early 1960s, Williams' paintings largely bore titles taken from the country that he painted, such as Sherbrooke Forest, Upwey, the You Yangs, Lysterfield, Lilydale and Werribee Gorge. However, during the later 1960s and early 1970s his works were increasingly given the name of general features of the land, such as the *Gum Trees in Landscape* series (1966, 1969), *Waterpond in Landscape* series (1966), the *Hillside* series (1968) and the *Australian Landscape* series (1969-70) itself. In these later works, however, it is ultimately immaterial whether Williams identifies the subjects of the paintings or not, because particular landscapes are barely recognisable in the work.

Rex Butler has developed this idea further. Looking in particular at Williams' *Australian Landscape* (1969-70, private collection), he argues that it 'could be a painting of *anywhere*. Or that it is perhaps a painting of everywhere – and nowhere – at the same time. Maybe, indeed, that it is a painting of nothing, of the pure space between places ... the space, we might say, before place.'[9] Butler's seductive reading of Australia is that it is this nothing, this space, from whose vacuum the paradoxes of Australian art history take shape. Butler further unravels Burn's problematic: a particular landscape will look more like a Williams painting since it is impossible to see an Australian landscape without having first seen a picture of an Australian landscape. At times it seems that Williams himself would support this view of his work, when he says for instance that 'I don't love the bush the way Clif (Pugh) does. I don't want to live in it. I only want to see it from a distance. I couldn't say I love the bush ... I simply want to paint pictures from it.'[10] Or, more famously, 'the landscape is something that I can hang my coat on ... After Cubism the subject was pretty unimportant anyway.'[11] It is possible to see this attitude in his work, as for instance in the Sherbrooke Forest series, where trees make a kind of vertical scaffolding for the idea of a forest, in a mental map of a forest that is constructed by its seeing. Ultimately, what Burn and Butler make clear is that the identity of Williams as an Australian artist lies not in his ability to see Australia in a new way, but rather in his ability to turn the seeing of Australia into the concept of seeing Australia. That is, Williams' paintings show us not landscapes as representations of particular places, but rather landscape as such – the form through which Australia as a place is always already constructed.

The monographs by Mollison and, more recently, Hart, however, eschew this interpretation of Williams' landscapes as critical reflections on place, instead looking to establish the artist's essential relationship to the country he depicts. Mollison cites Williams on his many trips to Lilydale that '[s]omehow I feel so at home working around Lilydale.'[12] Hart also pays a lot of attention to the journeys the artist made to the outskirts of Melbourne to paint. Her reproductions of photographs of Williams painting in the countryside depict him as happiest there, absorbed by the landscape before him.

Like Mollison and Hart, McCaughey also draws on Williams' personal relationship to

[9] Butler, 2009, http://espace.library.uq.edu.au/view/UQ:177452; accessed March 14, 2011.
[10] McCaughey, 1980, p. 21.
[11] Haynes, 1998, p. 174.
[12] Mollison, 1989, p. 183.

the country he depicts, but in the opposite sense: he casts Williams as a studio painter, whose trips are made only in order to return to the abstraction that is the subject of his art. For McCaughey, Williams was not immersed in the environment referenced in his paintings but was, rather, radically separated from it. Assuming this to be true, there are at least two ways of reading this distance in Williams' work. The first is suggested by Burn, when he uses the term 'countryside' rather than landscape to describe the subject of Williams' art, pointing out that the region around Melbourne where he worked is largely cleared.[13] Burn here suggests an art history grounded in a history of environmental change and labour, before going on to note the similarity of Williams' work to that of John Brack, in order to describe the way that they shared a certain ambivalence toward the subjects of their work.[14] Brack's subject is suburbia rather than the countryside, yet he also portrays an all-over sameness, giving an appearance of monotony in the Australian scene.[15] As James Gleeson points out, Williams makes a virtue out of this sameness by organising it into a simulation of nature, creating an 'invisible web of tensions holding every detail in its place'.[16] Yet Brack calls Williams' paintings 'gloomy in the same way the country is gloomy.'[17] When Brack paints the natural country, as in *The Car* (1955, National Gallery of Victoria), he does so only through a car window, seen as if in a dim blur.

It is through Brack's work that it is possible to look again at the way in which Williams painted the Australian landscape. Rather than depicting specific features or icons of a landscape, Williams' views are emptied of these to produce images that have 'no focal point.'[18] It is as if we are seeing the country in the moment before it resolves itself to our gaze. Indeed, Williams was always driven to his favourite spots on his outings beyond the suburban edges of Melbourne, his gaze upon the countryside that of a passenger looking through the car window.[19] In this, his practice bears some resemblance to that of the Heidelberg painters, who also made pilgrimages to the edge of the urban sprawl only to return to their city studios. The distance from the landscape experienced by the Heidelberg painters was effectively foreshortened for Williams, as his own journey was a much shorter one, taken in the vehicles of the twentieth century. His brevity of mark is at one with the increased speed of transport. From a pastoral gaze Williams shifts the Australian landscape painting into a suburban gaze, the distance of the painter from the countryside becoming at once closer and further away, foreshortened and abstracted. This distance becomes the perception of Australian landscape and implicitly assumes the spectral quality of an Australia that has collapsed into a flat screen of itself.[20] Read in this way, Williams' physical distance from the subjects of his landscapes, as pointed out by McCaughey, can be found in the very surface of his paintings, and can be read as representative of a broader generational trend of Australian artists like Brack in an era of cars and screens.

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[13] Burn, 1991, p. 88.
[14] Burn, 1991, p. 88.
[15] For this reading of Brack, see McAuliffe, 1996, p. 70, and Sayers, 2001, p. 187.
[16] Gleeson, 1969, p. 172.
[17] Catalano, 1980, p. 67.
[18] Catalano, 1980, p. 20.
[19] Williams never learned to drive, relying on family and friends, often artists, to take him on weekly painting expeditions. See McCaughey, 2003, p. 29.
[20] On this collapse of distance in Williams, see Butler, 2009, http://espace.library.uq.edu.au/view/UQ:177452; accessed March 14, 2011.

A second way of reading the distance that McCaughey recognised in Williams' relationship to, and treatment of, his landscapes, and that Williams himself admitted to, is to turn to the political conflicts of his day. In particular, it is possible to turn to

Fig. 2. Fred Williams, *Aboriginal Cave, Rocklea*, 1979. Gouache, 57 x 75 cm, Melbourne, National Gallery of Victoria, acc. no. 2001.611. Presented through the NGV Foundation by Rio Tinto, Honorary Life Benefactor, 2001. (Estate of Fred Williams.)

the emergence of Aboriginal art and rights in Australia. Through such a lens we can see that Mollison, McCaughey and Hart's interpretations of Williams' work play out a narrative that plots changing attitudes and anxieties about the relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal art and landscape. In this way, the distance in Williams' work morphs from a geographical distance, to become a cultural and ideological one. During the 1960s and 1970s Aboriginal rights, including land rights, were coming to the attention of the Australian public. More particularly, this period also saw the emergence of a broader interest in Aboriginal art, including the revolutionary birth of Western Desert art at Papunya Tula in 1972. Williams himself was interested in Aboriginal art, and it is possible to see in parts of his oeuvre an attempt to bring his work into proximity to it. There is an Aboriginal influence on a series of gouaches made in 1976 and upon a series of oils in 1981, their strong lines reflecting the aerial perspectives of Aboriginal painting.[21] Roslynn Haynes reports that the doubled influence of flying and Aboriginal art caused him to lie his canvases on the floor, as if to see the landscape from above.[22] For McCaughey and Mollison, Williams struggled to represent Aboriginal subjects. Ryan Johnston wants to read the

[21] Mollison, 1989, pp. 210, 228.
[22] Haynes, 1998, p. 175.

inclusion of the gouache *Aboriginal Cave, Rocklea* (1979, National Gallery of Victoria, Fig. 2) in the Pilbara series as a kind of disruption of the ideological thrust of corporate landscape painting in the Pilbara, troubling the view of a beautiful, colourful country.[23] But McCaughey and Mollison ignore the political problem of the Pilbara series, and instead turn to a different series of Williams' works in order to tackle the problem of Aboriginal representation. This is a series of gouaches and oils based on Aboriginal graves he saw in the late 1960s in remote New South Wales.

Fig. 3. Fred Williams, *(Aboriginal Graves 1)*, 1967-69. Gouache, 57.2 x 76.2 cm, Canberra, National Gallery of Australia, inv. No. 1983.2989.42. Purchased from Gallery admission charges 1983. (Estate of Fred Williams.)

The difference in the accounts that McCaughey and Mollison give of these paintings plays out the antinomy of Australian landscape and the Aboriginality of this landscape, with all of the national anxieties the juxtaposition of these two notions imply. Of the gouaches Williams painted while in remote New South Wales, McCaughey reports that they are mere studies, and that back in the studio he failed to turn them into a large oil painting. McCaughey says that this signifies his lack of sentiment, that Williams could not sufficiently romanticise the graves to make them interesting enough subjects. McCaughey portrays this failure as symptomatic of the artist's 'resistance to mythmaking', which in turn reflects Williams' more general ambivalence toward his subjects.[24] Following McCaughey, Williams was either condemned by his own distance from the Aboriginality of the landscape to render

[23] Johnston, 2001, http://blogs.arts.unimelb.edu.au/refractory/2004/10/08/tracks-in-the-desert-the-tremulous-landscapes-of-johnny-warangkula-tjupurrula-and-fred-williams-ryan-johnston/#_ednref10>; accessed March 14, 2011.
[24] McCaughey, 1980, p. 196.

them untruly, or unable to render them truly because his detached gaze could not of itself resolve them. Here the anxieties of the Australian nation speak through McCaughey's interpretation of Williams as an artist unable to resolve his work's relationship to the Aboriginality of the country.

In his later monograph on Williams, Mollison draws a different conclusion about the series, and about Williams' attitude to Aboriginal subject matter. He looks to a large oil painting, *Aboriginal Grave* (1969), which McCaughey does not account for. Mollison tells us that *Aboriginal Grave* is the only successful attempt out of as many as twelve versions in oil that Williams made from the gouaches.[25] The composition is a pared back version of these gouaches, its style in keeping with Williams' tendency toward minimal mark making during the late 1960s.[26] From three graves in the gouache Williams has moved to only one in the oil, in a busy but lonely image of multi-coloured twigs overlaid atop each other. This paring back suggests the struggle that Williams had with this unfamiliar subject, and its complex and chaotic arrangement is barely resolved in the composition. Like McCaughey, Mollison suggests that this struggle was due to the subject, commenting that '[h]e was touched by the simplicity of the Aboriginal burial.'[27] However, in Mollison's version, the completion of this successful oil painting represents a resolution of the subject. He quotes the artist's diary, where Williams writes that the work 'is in sulphur and lilac (this I have always wanted to do).'[28] The achievement is a formal and personal one, carrying on an interest in balancing colour that took place over the course of 1969.[29] Yet for Mollison it also seems that this aesthetic resolution is a political one, as the work represents a resolution of his work with an Aboriginal subject.

The differences between McCaughey and Mollison here betray a similarity, as they choose to account for and reproduce the evidence of Williams' struggle with Aboriginal subject matter. This choice illuminates a trope that both of these writers work with, a trope of failure that runs through their accounts of Williams' career. The obsessive returns to the same subjects and the same landscapes that define the periods and styles of Williams' work are symptomatic of a fear of failure that drives the artist. Mollison notes the number of paintings that Williams destroyed in the process of making masterpieces,[30] and cites the painter Fraser Fair as saying that this 'was a traumatic effort for him against the burden of failure – the meeting with the landscape was his purpose for being alive – there was the tension of do or die for a good result that would justify his existence.'[31] At one point Mollison includes Aboriginal art in this characterisation, citing Fair that 'from time to time Williams mentioned the need to "absorb Aboriginal art", but that he 'put that in the too hard basket'.'[32] Aboriginal art is a part of the ongoing failure that constitutes Williams' success. Struggling to represent that from which he was culturally distant, Williams tried to get to the essentials of the landscape, of what it meant, of what constituted it, because he felt there was something to be found within it, something in the relationship between his

[25] Mollison, 1989, p. 122.
[26] McCaughey, 1980, p. 196.
[27] Mollison, 1989, p. 122.
[28] Mollison, 1989, p. 123.
[29] Mollison, 1989, p. 135.
[30] Mollison, 1989, p. 44. Rudy Komon, Williams' dealer, also claimed that 'from hundreds of paintings he might choose to show only a few,' cited in Flynn, 1980, p. 27
[31] Mollison, 1989, p. 174.
[32] Mollison, 1989, p. 210.

eye and the landscape, that could not be seen in an ordinary way. Distance puts this struggle with the seen into play, as it confronts the failure to truly apprehend that which lies before it.

In her 2011 monograph, Hart's account of the Aboriginal graves uses the same word as Mollison, simplicity, to describe both their appeal and the difficulty in capturing them. She reports that 'he did not presume to know more than he did' and waited for a couple of years before trying to convert his gouaches into oils.[33] For Hart, this gap between mediums, between versions of the graves, stands for the gap between the non-indigenous artist and the Australian landscape. Yet Hart's difference from Williams' previous monographers lies in thinking that it was a mistake to attempt to overcome this distance, as Williams' success lies not in the oil painting but in the 'lightness of touch' of the gouaches themselves.[34] Hart's reading wants to stop short of appreciating the monumentality of an oil painting in what is today the politically charged situation of a non-indigenous artist painting an Aboriginal subject. She also deflects the politics of the Pilbara series by quoting from his diaries:

> It's true the argument for the Aboriginals keeping control of their tribal lands is imperative. Common sense would solve a lot of these problems ... What is badly needed is a list of major reserves and they should not be touched ... [35]

The comment comes just after the artist travelled to the Pilbara, separating his personal politics and that of the series he painted from that of the company that would later promote them. Hart also stops short of glorifying these paintings, calling them his contribution to the history of Australian paintings of the desert. Since there are few Williams paintings of the desert, the comment says little about their place in either his oeuvre or in the history of Australian landscape painting.

Ron Radford, also writing in 2011 in his foreword to Hart's monograph, points to a different sort of resolution of the differences between Williams' work and Aboriginal art. He recalls the way that one of the founders of the Western Desert art movement, Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri, admired a spotted ochre painting hanging in the Art Gallery of South Australia. This was Williams' *You Yangs Pond* (1963, Art Gallery of NSW, Fig. 4). Radford speculates that the colours and shapes of Williams' work recall Possum's own, in 'a superficial likeness' to Western Desert paintings. He writes that the 'aerial map-like quality of many of these Aboriginal works, the ochre colours, the black and white, and the textured dots have some parallels with Williams' landscapes'.[36] This story, written some thirty years after the day that Radford walked with Possum through the Art Gallery of South Australia, wants to show how Williams' work overcame, at least at this moment, the schism between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal art-worlds in Australia. Radford attempts to allay anxieties around Australian landscape painting after the Western Desert movement brought a consciousness of the Aboriginality of the country into the Australian art-world.

Taking Radford's point, it is certainly possible to see similarities between Williams' work and the later work of Possum. The aerial dimensions of Williams' paintings are

[33] Hart, 2011, p. 96.
[34] Hart, 2011, p. 96.
[35] Hart, 2011, p. 177.
[36] Radford, 2011, p. 9.

comparable to Possum's own, as this artist distils the Dreaming and its relationship to vast tracts of the desert. The flatness of Possum's work, too, creates a critical

Fig. 4. Fred Williams, *You Yang Pond*, 1963. Oil on composition board, 116.3 x 132.8 cm, Adelaide, Art Gallery of South Australia. Gift of Godfrey Phillips International Pty Ltd, 1968. (Estate of Fred Williams.)

relationship to the naturalism of European landscape painting. For while the Heidelberg school painters often took the position of pioneers, looking across at their subjects or over the land, both Possum and Williams make works as if they are pressed against glass, so that there is little if any recession, either an infinite distance or none at all. Like Williams, Possum and the first generation of contemporary Western Desert painters work with a relationship between flatness and land, as their dots also create an all-over sameness. These visual styles emerge as the car window and television screen mediate the view upon the land for Australians, whether in remote settlements like Papunya or cities such as Melbourne. This is the point of Australian artist Imants Tillers in his essay 'Fear of Texture', in which he argues that the adoption of what he calls the 'dot-screen' by Western Desert painters is convergent with the arts of mechanical reproduction.[37] Thus Williams and the Western Desert movement represent something of a generational change in Australian art, a change inflected by visual technologies. At one point, Williams makes a

[37] Tillers, 1983.

comparison between the similarity of the suburbs and the Australian landscape. He notes that 'there's no difference between the suburban landscape or the outer-suburban landscape and the top coast of West Australia . . . that expression "landscape with the skin off" is [not] just referring to the desert. It's all basically the same.'[38] Such similarities betray a way of seeing produced out of a distance from the landscape, a distance that urban living brings about in Australia.

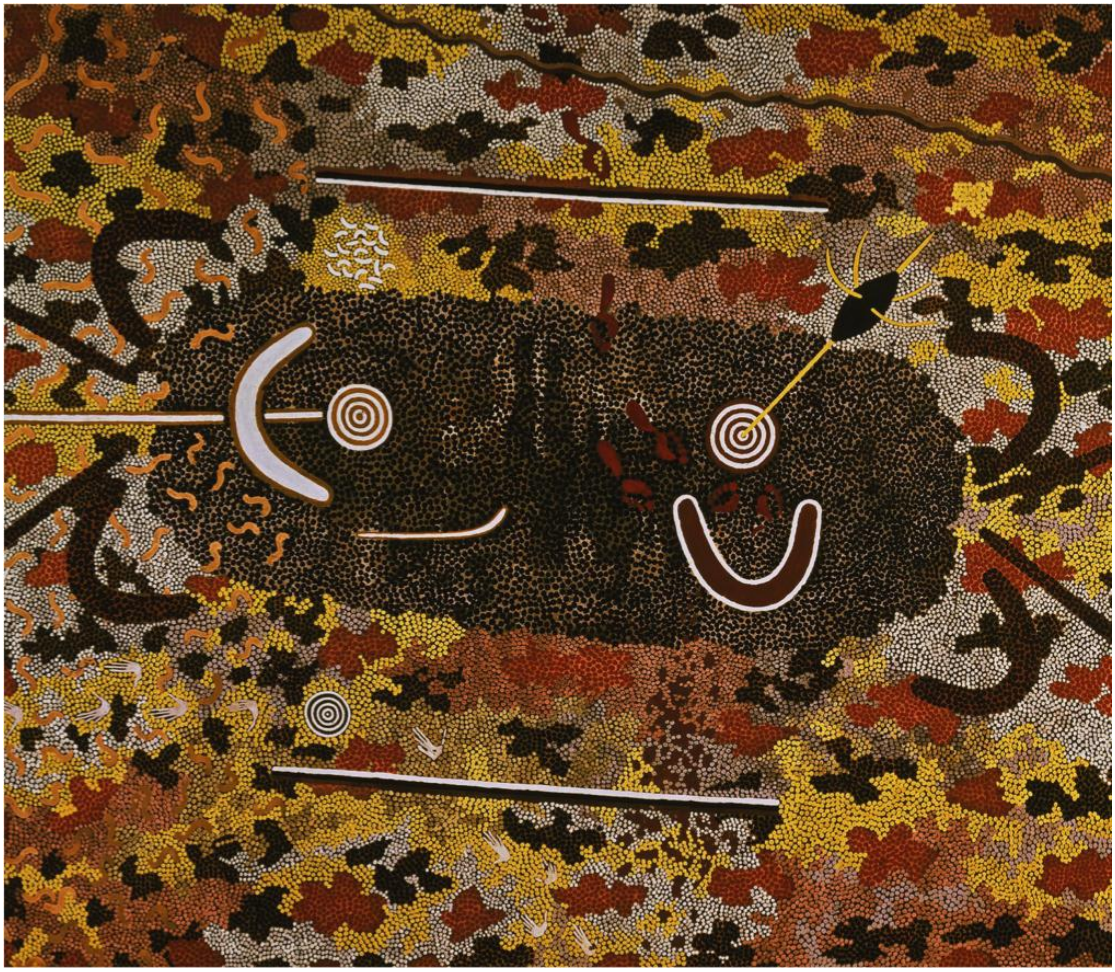

Fig. 5. Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri, *Man's Love Story*, 1978. Synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 217 x 261 cm, Adelaide, Art Gallery of South Australia. Visual Arts Board, Australian Contemporary Art Acquisitions Program 1980. (Estate of Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri.)

Thus it is possible to see the similarities between Williams' *You Yang Pond* (1963, Art Gallery of NSW, Fig. 4) and Possum's *Man's Love Story* (1978, Art Gallery of South Australia, Fig. 5), two works hanging in the Art Gallery of South Australia at the time of Possum's visit. *Man's Love Story* arranges a cross-spindle, footprints, long bars and u-shapes amidst dotting, each of which has a particular meaning in the telling of a story of forbidden love. Williams' *You Yang Pond* is also iconographic, consisting of brushstrokes that form trees and their trunks, lain out over a flat plane, so that in 2011 Hart is able to write retrospectively that '[l]ike indigenous artists who would paint on board and on canvas in the next two decades, Williams intuitively understood, from a personal perspective, that a summary approach to natural forms

[38] Mollison, 1989, p. 230.

could convey the relationship between the intimate parts and the whole, the microcosm within the macrocosm'.[39] The twenty-first-century writings of Hart and Radford on Williams' work are marked by a desire to resolve the distance between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal artists. More than this, both Hart and Radford would like us to believe that this distance was never really there. Hart's appreciation of the gouaches of Aboriginal graves reads Williams as a painter who works best on site, who is most comfortable in the country rather than in the studio. Radford, on the other hand, recounts the Clifford Possum incident to demonstrate how Williams' work is not so far from Western Desert painting. His work is thus characterised by an intimacy with the country rather than a distance from it.

The idea of distance that has accompanied interpretations of Williams' art comes to assume a new meaning in twenty-first-century Australia. Hart finds that Williams is not really distant at all, refusing the trope of failure that has long accompanied interpretations of his work. In concluding that the gouaches of the Aboriginal graves are resolved works rather than studies, Hart does not write Aboriginality into the anxiety of Williams' development. However, without the anxiety of distance, the paradoxes that such critics as Butler, Burn and McCaughey find in Williams' work are no longer so perplexing. In the twenty-first century, the paradox of seeing a Williams painting in a landscape, rather than a landscape in a Williams painting has been overcome. Now, the visual identity of Australian landscape has become all too self-evident in Western Desert painting, turning an abstract landscape painter like Williams into a simple painter of landscape. For the image of Australian landscape, after the rise of Western Desert painting, is now an abstract and aerial one, modes of seeing the country that Williams had mastered as long ago as the 1960s. However, as ongoing conflicts over Aboriginal land rights in the Pilbara attest, such a resolution between indigenous and non-indigenous people is not necessarily taking place in remote Australia.[40] This essay's analysis of the different interpretations of Williams' work by McCaughey, Mollison and Hart has shown the changing ways in which the paradoxes of Williams' work, and of the distance that produces these paradoxes, have worked to alternatively reveal or obfuscate the differences between his representations and the country beyond, and the political anxieties buried within these representations.

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[39] Hart, 2011, p. 64.
[40] Georgatos, 2012, p. 1.

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