

FRED WILLIAMS

Late Etchings 1970 – 1976

MEDIA RELEASE

Opening Night

Tuesday 24 September 2024 6pm – 8pm
28 Derby Street Collingwood VIC 3066

Exhibition Dates

Tuesday 24 September – Saturday 12 October 2024
Open 7 days 10am to 6pm



Fred Williams was a hinge on which the discipline of modern etching in Australia has swung. Many local artists made etchings before him. But, after he immersed himself in printmaking, creative attitudes were changed. What artists in this country now valued as they crafted an etching was different.

Williams was introduced to printmaking in 1950s London. The Australian painter was attending life drawing sessions at the Chelsea School of Art, and decided to sign on for a beginners' etching class. He really took to the medium. Besides equipping him with techniques, through those sessions he came to understand, and more fully appreciate, Old Master prints encountered on his visits to private galleries and the British Museum. So when he looked at prints by Rembrandt, Segers or Goya, it was henceforth with a developing eye which now grasped—and savoured.

Williams aspired to improve his skill to an advanced level upon returning to Australia. The opportunity to do so arose in 1958 when the printmaking section of RMIT's art school began allowing artists to use its facilities one evening each week. Williams seized this chance to edition the etched plates he had brought back from London, including some he had not previously been able to print.

Artists' night was busy as people prepared, proofed, then editioned works. Some of them experimented, knowledge about different papers and ink blends was shared, experienced hands assisted newcomers. Williams was soon a veritable fixture there as he set about translating his evolving landscape compositions into prints. From 1960 he also began going into RMIT on Fridays, when art students were few and no classes scheduled. He was now utterly absorbed in the metier of etching, indeed, the master printmaker Grahame King once told me how on some afternoons Williams had the room to himself as he patiently worked until closing.

Fred Williams had an aptitude for what is a demanding medium. Finding a fulfilment in the methodical process, he loved crafting an etching. This is probably why—unlike most painters—he did not pass his finished plates over to a technician to run off a full edition. Instead, he preferred to print each individual impression himself. The results are telling. If the paintings are rich, his etchings are positively spicy. Gazing into a Williams print, absorbing it, is such a sensual experience. His handwork is ever present.

A turning occurred with the publication of *Fred Williams: Etchings* during 1968, a catalogue of his prints to date. Written by the rising curator James Mollison, the profusely illustrated book both confirmed the artist's ranking as master printmaker, and shaped awareness of what might be achieved within etching. It was a catalyst for the outbreak in printmaking that occurred in this country over the 1970s, with Williams the innovator often looked to for inspiration.

The release of that handsome book coincided with a shift in Fred Williams's prints. Important commissions for his paintings meant time for graphic work became limited, even though he now had an etching press in his studio. Williams produced fewer prints; then again, they were larger, more generous visual statements which set the enduring benchmark in quality and inventiveness.



The current selection surveys these authoritative later etchings. In technical terms, Williams had made small etched copies of linear drawings when he took up printmaking in London. His inked lines then were neat and tight, and he kept paper clean and white. But we see in these later etchings the proficiency and amplitude of a skilled master, how the artist crafted each new work much as expert painters handle oil pigment. There is eloquence to the creative decisions seen here. With a range of procedures from drypoint through to fowl biting, he attended to the character of his inked lines. They now varied from slight to emphatic, fine to strong. It's not so much that trees and rocks are translated into points, dashes and little smoky blobs. There is a subtle music to this mark making. The very lines sing.

Likewise with aquatint Williams was devising quite tasty textures and granular effects, while in the 1970s he would use—rather sparingly—a roulette to add patterned tone. This is in contrast to his zones of dark tone, how he used high pressure upon the soft pulp of a thick paper to achieve passages of velvety blackness. At times Williams also subtly worked plate tone, giving a moody tinge to blank space. Even the grooved line left by an etching plate's edge might be used as a thin crusty framing device, introducing visual closure to a reductive minimalist-like design.

Thematically, these later etchings gather themselves into several loose groups. There are those signature planar landscapes which spring from encounters with rural country. It was the art historian Bernard Smith who wondered if what most stirs the viewer about a Williams landscape is the absence of people. There may be fugitive traces of human presence, usually via suggested fence lines, although there are no figures here. There is a point to this, because these are visual poems upon solitude. They convey the feelings of awe one experiences when confronted with the natural world, its stark immensity.

Another cluster of compositions uses organic motifs arranged evenly as vertical forms. They represent scorched ferns Williams had seen sprouting new fronds and regenerating amid the ashes after an intense bushfire, a subject he took to from the late 1960s.

And also found in this selection are his ongoing native forest scenes, which culminate in 1970s billabong imagery. Based on paintings of a Yarra billabong in suburban Kew, they mirrored a personal affection for thick bushland. But now this was infused with Williams's environmental concerns, for Melbourne's Eastern Freeway was under construction nearby and fuelled anxieties for these enduring pockets of precious bush. In these works Williams positively relishes the disorder of untamed nature, although sometimes secreted in the scene is a tiny discarded tyre or abandoned car to press an environmental point.

The later etchings gathered here are masterworks of rare wonder. This is graphic art at its strongest, a solitary transport, at moments, even food for the soul.

—Dr Christopher Heathcote, 2024

For more details or images contact: media@australiangalleries.com.au | australiangalleries.com.au | 03 9417 4303

Images -

Page 1: *Lysterfield I (state IV) JM259* 1972 etching, fowl-biting, polishing, engraving, aquatint, electric hand-engraving tool and roulette printed in brown 45.5 x 35 cm edition 16

Page 2 L-R: *Regenerating ferns II (state III) JM253* 1973 etching, drypoint and polishing 24 x 37 edition 18

Plenty Gorge (state IV) JM273 1974 electric hand-engraving tool, roulette, engraving, drypoint and polisher 22.4 x 28.6 cm edition 22