

From the ground up



Growing fascination: *Regenerating Ferns I* (1968) by Fred Williams

BEFORE Fred Williams's premature death in 1982, he had time to sort out the contents of his studio, finish pictures that could be completed, and destroy whatever he felt was unworthy to survive. The estate he left behind was nonetheless considerable, and parts of it have been gradually sold over the intervening years. The present show at Rex Irwin's in Woollahra, Sydney, is said to represent the last important series to be made available to collectors, four decades after they were originally painted.

In February 1968, bushfires ravaged the bush country in the Dandenongs where Williams lived and had his studio. His widow, Lyn, recalls that she had to leave with the children while Fred stayed to fight the fires with their neighbours. In the event, their house was unharmed, but it was a frighteningly narrow escape. Over the next two years, Williams painted the regenerating bush, particularly fascinated with the regrowth of the charred tree ferns, new fronds unfurling from their tops.

Artistically, this was a time of transition in Williams's style. He had reached a high point in his stylistic evolution a few years earlier, discovering how to capture something quintessential about the experience of the Australian bush with a language of painterly dabs and squiggles. In the late 1960s, however, Australia was caught up in a fashion that had already established itself in America: gestural gave way to hard-edged abstraction. 1968 was the year of *The Field*, the exhibition in Melbourne that heralded the new trend's sudden and short-lived triumph.

Williams's work of the late 60s and early 70s reveals the gravitational attraction of the new style, although he never gives in to it completely. His backgrounds simply become bigger and flatter and emptier, the squiggles animating them sparser. In the present works, the canvases are painted in flat earth hues, like the coloured grounds of traditional oil painting. The canvas is only thinly primed, so that the tooth of the weave shows prominently through the underpainting.

These grounds serve to evoke the colour of the land, but not its substance; the only things painted in impasto are the trunks and stumps and tree ferns, which thus seem to float, unrooted in the ground, in indetermi-

VISUAL ART

Fred Williams: *Regeneration After the Bushfires 1968-69*

Rex Irwin Art Dealer, Sydney.
Until September 5.

Rick Amor: *Small Paintings 2009*

Liverpool Street Gallery, Sydney.
Until September 3.

nate space. The combination of the flattening of the background surface and a closer viewpoint creates a striking sense of discontinuity; a new way of giving shape to the scattered shapelessness of the bush. The most attractive thing about these pictures — and what obviously delighted the artist — is the brilliance of the colours that spring anew from the deep black of the burnt trunks.

Rick Amor's pictures have one thing in common with those of Williams: he too employs coloured grounds — again over thinly primed canvas — but he uses them in a way that is much closer to the traditional method of the 17th-century masters, the source indeed of much of his strength as one of our best contemporary painters. The ground establishes a generally appropriate underlying colouring for the subject, holds the composition together, and allows particular hues and tones to be produced much more economically and coherently than if each had to be built up from a white background.

These principles of coherence and economy are evidently important to Amor. The pictures are lightly painted, the grounds still visible in many places, and the layers of overpainting often, it seems, deliberately kept to a minimum. We recognise that deliberate show of ease which the Renaissance called *sprezzatura*, or carelessness, in his style. Here and there are passages which are perhaps too careless; but Amor clearly prefers light suggestiveness and would rather sacrifice solidity than risk losing spontaneity and animation.

Amor imagines his subjects like dream narratives — a figure on a beach beside a deserted tower; others standing in shadow while brilliant light pours from behind a temple-like edifice — and seeks to preserve the mobile and disembodied quality of memory.

Christopher Allen

mentary. The day we speak, he's snuffly with a cold, but still his enthusiasm for music and musicians comes through.

The Proms, he says, is the most exciting time of the musical year in London. "And the repertoire is so incredibly diverse: you can hear anything from Guillaume de Machaut to Harrison Birtwistle and everything in between," he says. "That's the most remarkable thing about it. It's always a puzzle, I think, that you have all these people, especially young people, who come to the Proms and you never see them in the winter at the Festival Hall or the Barbican. It's the sort of thing to do in the summer."

Davis's introduction to classical music was partly through the Proms. "My maiden aunt took me up there to begin with and then I used to go on my own," he says of his early trips on the Tube into London. There, he heard performances that have remained with him: Barbirolli conducting Elgar's *The Dream of Gerontius*, for example, a piece he greatly admires.

Later, he was an organ scholar at King's College, Cambridge, thinking that he would "end up in a cathedral somewhere if I were lucky". By this stage, he was also conducting some orchestral music and the idea of conducting as a career began to take hold.

Eventually he was appointed assistant conductor of the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra in Glasgow, and had a lucky break when he was asked to step in and conduct the BBC SO. "I had a pretty exciting start to my career," Davis says. "I had to pinch myself to make sure I wasn't dreaming it all."

He's since held positions with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra (13 years), the BBC SO (11 years), Glyndebourne Festival Opera (11 years), and briefly with the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra.

At Lyric Opera of Chicago, he conducts three or four operas a year in a season that typically includes eight. The Civic Opera House, with its art deco auditorium, is second only in size, of the US theatres, to the Metropolitan Opera House in New York. In terms of stature of performances, too, Davis rates LOC as second only to the almost monolithic Met.

In his time there he has conducted *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, Berg's 12-tone masterpiece *Lulu* and Michael Tippett's *The Midsummer Marriage*. He says the economic downturn has led the Lyric to program cautiously. "We have tended to be slightly more conservative than any of us would like," he concedes. "But we are the only opera company in America with absolutely no deficit... We like to think it's because what we do is good."

Busy in Chicago, Davis has not spoken to Opera Australia about the vacancy for a music director, following the death of Richard Hickox. "I'm not saying I wouldn't like to come and conduct here... but frankly I don't have time. I'm interested to see how they solve that problem."

In Melbourne, Davis will present two programs: the first including Beethoven's fourth piano concerto, with young American soloist Jonathan Biss, and music by Elgar and Vaughan Williams; the second a Wagner and Strauss program with American soprano Christine Brewer. Davis and Brewer will also give a Strauss concert with the WASO in Perth.

Brewer he describes as a remarkable singer whose repertoire includes Brunnhilde and Poulenc's *Gloria*. "It's unusual to have somebody who can spin a very beautiful and delicate line, like you need in Poulenc, and also do the Immolation Scene. I'm really looking forward to these concerts."

Andrew Davis appears with the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra, tonight, Saturday, August 24, 27, 28 and 29; and with the West Australian Symphony Orchestra, September 4 and 5.