



Brett Whiteley | West of the Divide

Blue Mountains Cultural Centre

26 September – 30 November 2014

FOREWORD

Brett Whiteley's affinity with the landscape West of Sydney encompassing Oberon, Sofala, Fish River and beyond is little documented in the many texts that have been written on his oeuvre, yet the artworks produced of, and inspired by this region are some of the most magical.

As the gateway to the West, the Blue Mountains has a strong affinity to the landscape that inspired many of Australia's most recognised and celebrated artists. The Blue Mountains Cultural Centre's acclaimed inaugural exhibition of 2012, *Picturing the Great Divide: Visions from Australia's Blue Mountains* was a fine example of what can be achieved in a professionally run gallery space yet could only touch upon the broad artistic history of the Mountains and beyond. The exhibition *Brett Whiteley: West of the Divide* acknowledges the important role the region played in the artistic development of one of Australia's most recognised and celebrated artists and in doing so further interprets the rich artistic narrative of the region.

Blue Mountains Cultural Centre strives to meet its remit of bringing the best art of Australia and the world to our city. By developing and displaying an exhibition of the standing of *Brett Whiteley: West of the Divide* the Cultural Centre has shown once again its capacity as a leading public gallery of New South Wales.

Bringing together this range of works has only been made possible with the support of Wendy Whiteley and Alec George of the Brett Whiteley Studio and Wayne Tunnicliffe of the Art Gallery of New South Wales and I take this opportunity to thank them for their enthusiasm and commitment to the project. The Cultural Centre's exhibitions and programs team of Sabrina Roesner, Sarah Gurich, Riika Oakley, James Culkin and Tim Smith have been instrumental in the development of the exhibition and I thank them for their hard work and dedication.

Strong visitation and membership numbers are testament to the success of the Blue Mountains Cultural Centre in its fledgling years. The Centre has become an inspiring hub for artistic and creative activity and quickly established itself as a major contributor to the New South Wales museum and gallery industry. As our feature exhibition for 2014, *Brett Whiteley: West of the Divide* will delight our existing audiences and attract new audiences to our space and by doing so will reinforce the strength of both artistic practice and appreciation of the arts in our city.



Paul Brinkman
Director, Blue Mountains Cultural Centre

It is my pleasure to introduce this wonderful exhibition by one of Australia's most passionate artists. The exhibition *Brett Whiteley: West of the Divide* was developed by the Blue Mountains Cultural Centre in partnership with the Brett Whiteley Studio and Art Gallery of New South Wales and is the first of its kind focusing on the inspiration Whiteley drew from the landscape of Western New South Wales.

There are 38 artworks included in the exhibition, with works on loan from the Art Gallery of NSW, Brett Whiteley Studio and Orange Regional Gallery. This exhibition is testament to the quality of programs on show at our Blue Mountains Cultural Centre and to the celebration of the Arts by Blue Mountains City Council. I would like to congratulate the team at the Cultural Centre for securing this display and say that I believe it will be an amazing experience for those who see it.

The Blue Mountains is a wonderful, artistic community. The Cultural Centre is enhancing that reputation constantly.

I hope you love this exhibition as much as I do.



Cr. Mark Greenhill
Mayor, City of the Blue Mountains



Brett Whiteley *Summer by the River of Plums* 1985-1986, triptych: oil and collage on canvas 100.5 x 275.0 x 6.5 cm, Brett Whiteley Studio, Photo: AGNSW © Wendy Whiteley

IMMERSION AND DISPERSION IN THE LANDSCAPE VISION OF BRETT WHITELEY

Although Brett Whiteley became master of a spectrum of subjects, from portraits and interiors to abstractions and figure compositions in which he excelled as a draftsman of the nude with compelling vitality, it is perhaps his landscapes which best encapsulate an ability to transport us through the spaces of his imagination.

From the tiniest sketches of rocks and rivers, insects and birds, to his most grandiose vistas of land, sea, sky and cloud, he has demonstrated an intimate fascination with the minutiae of nature's mysteries and their relationship

to a universe of cosmic proportions. Few Australian artists have come near the boldness with which he explored an almost impossible combination of these extremities.

It was an aspect of his talent perhaps sown in infancy, as he encountered with insatiable curiosity and speed the boundaries of suburban Longueville on the northern shores of Sydney Harbour where he grew up. A hyperactive child, he was likeable, mischievous, seemingly immune from fear of danger, careering along streets on his billycart, running through parks, canoeing in the Lane Cove River, stealing birds' eggs, bread, and

burning letterboxes. It was almost as if he was sentient enough, at a very young age, to plot the coordinates of these boundaries so that he might come to challenge them; see how far he could reach beyond and confront whatever contradictions might emerge as he matured into a serious artist.

We might claim his earliest landscape image to be the drawing of a cricket match made when he was seven years old, setting in train a remarkable confidence manipulating shapes across a flat picture plane. True we could dismiss this small drawing as typical juvenilia

by any child, except that its dynamic was replicated in a painting of sophistication and wit made in London two decades later when Whiteley was proclaimed one of the most talented young artists on the international scene.

But it is in arguably Whiteley's greatest landscape conception of all where we can experience the broadest parameters of his ambition for the genre: *Alchemy* 1972-73. This is of course a fully visceral autobiography, from birth to an exploding portent of mortality, but if we view it purely in terms of landscape it lays out a framework for understanding symbols and small ecstasies in the

exhibition currently on show here in the Blue Mountains. Sadly, *Alchemy* could not be included for travel, but any visitor who would like to dwell in a deeper context is advised, on their next trip to Sydney, to visit the Brett Whiteley Studio in Surry Hills and have a good look at his vast masterpiece.

There they will find the multi-panelled composition divided into two halves: on the right an oceanic genesis from which creation of life on an isolated continent begins with real and surreal personal possibilities. And after pausing at the centre of the polyptych, signified by a huge graphic

fulcrum of the word *IT* – in which we may for current purpose be permitted to refer to it as a metaphor of the Divide – we move left through imagery gathered from landscape motifs of Western New South Wales, related to the subject of this exhibition: from Oberon in the Blue Mountains to the Central Tablelands through Bathurst, Orange, Lucknow, Milthorpe, Carcoar, Sofala, Hill End and south to Marulan.

In other words what we witness in this masterpiece is a prediction of Whiteley's shift away from the changing chromatic illusions of Sydney Harbour and his Matisse-

like dispersal of elements of man and nature across its surface to the warm, straw-coloured fields and soft contours of the hills west and south of New South Wales. The painterly language of this shift was partly triggered by Paul Gauguin's *The yellow Christ* of 1889, which he must have first seen whilst living in New York shortly before his return to Sydney.

Gauguin represented the perfect transition to modernist landscape from Whiteley's love of the Sieneese painters he had seen in Italy during his scholarship year there in 1960, in an unerring sensibility of dynamic contours, shapes and the flat surface.

He had also become fixated on a Florentine painting Saint Francis receiving the stigmata by Giotto he saw hanging in the Louvre during a two-week sojourn in Paris, where forms of the Saint and Christ float against a rocky mountain and flat sky in a palette of gold, cream and brown with passages of pink, red and olive green uncannily similar to that of certain images in this exhibition. A small predella at the bottom right of Giotto's image depicting Saint Francis with birds parallels a secular theme of nature Whiteley celebrated during the last decade of his career, to which he introduced winding rivers echoing the trace-lines of birds in flight and the wavy lines of willow trees executed with the élan of an Asian calligrapher. Whiteley's ability to create a hybrid style from across the centuries enfolded into a modern visual language he made his own during the 1970s and 80s is a distinction of his achievement.

But his encounters with the landscape of the West in the last two decades of his career were by no means his earliest. Just as for the English painter Paul Nash the Wittenham tree clumps of Southern Oxfordshire had been magic nodal points of his childhood that fed indelibly into his imagery, so too features of the environs of Bathurst and beyond were an essential part of Whiteley's youth that he never forgot.

With his sister he was sent to boarding school at Scot's College in Bathurst in 1948, where he stayed for several years. The disruption of his family life caused him much anguish, but at least his teachers recognised his artistic talent and encouraged it. On Sundays he was permitted to go sketching in the countryside, and in a crucial way the vales and gentle hills became solace to his resentment at the disintegration of his parents' relationship. In 1954, aged fifteen, he wandered into an exhibition of Lloyd Rees paintings at the Macquarie Galleries in Sydney, and embraced the old master's sagacity and fire.

Rees himself had a personal connection with Bathurst through his wife's family, and when Whiteley eventually left school to work for the advertising agency Lintas in 1956, he saw his mentor's paintings hanging in the Art Gallery of New South Wales, such as *Evening hills*, *Bathurst* 1936, and *Landscape at Orange* 1952, not to mention the iconic *The road to Berry* 1947 – deeply

poetic in their contemplation of soft curves and arabesques rendered with impeccable tonality – which ever remained spiritual counterparts to the darker, more confronting imagery the younger man was destined to explore. At the end of Rees's life, the two artists exchanged letters expressing the mutual admiration they had for one another, bonded by their love of landscape.

Is it necessary to know such biographical details to enjoy this exhibition? Perhaps not. Great art stands on its own without extensive knowledge. But engaging the thread that runs from the sites of Whiteley's childhood, through identification with the inner paddock of a revered elder – and not forgetting the old gold-mining towns of Sofala and Hill End as mystical sketching grounds discovered by Donald Friend and Russell Drysdale in 1947 – to the later rediscovery of the landscape of his beginnings as a precocious talent, gives us an overpowering sense of a unique impetus, halted only by Whiteley's tragic death in 1992.

Alternatively, we might forget biography and simply think of, or rather feel, each drawing, each study of weeping willows, each tiny etching or small sketch snaring our gaze upon a serpentine river past stones, grass, shy mammals, birds and insects, like musical études drawing us inexorably toward the grand symphony of Whiteley's final magnum opus of the West, *Autumn (near Bathurst) – Japanese Autumn* 1987-88. En route we pass by the concerto of a beautiful triptych, 'Summer by the river of plums' 1985-86, its yellow palette conjuring a marvel of glare similar to that enjoyed by Australia's Heidelberg painters a century earlier, though interrupted by a dark brown river whiplashing the far right panel with a violent discordance that could only be the fabrication of a modern eye closer to our time.

But it is *Autumn (near Bathurst)* that delivers the great climax of the exhibition, bringing all contexts together with spectacular collusion just four years before Whiteley died. This major work, for which he did several smaller studies, is restrained to the point where its stillness hums quietly with the artist's genesis, returning to the place, indicated by the title, where it occurred to him he might become a painter.

Comprising two main sections with small, spare, floating shapes nudging edges like the abstractions of William Scott – a British artist Whiteley admired in his formative years – but now in an idiom that was his, a central panel is devoted to the calligraphic drawing on paper of a willow tree. This, combined with a rich brown lacquer colour dominating the rest of the painting, also recalls the Japanese screen tradition which informed the work of his contemporary Kenzo Okada admired by Whiteley in London during the early 1960s. It was begun in anticipation of his first visit to Japan in the Autumn of 1988 and probably completed upon his return, a triumphant conflation of time, place, space and simplicity; to paraphrase T.S. Eliot, coming back full circle to where he started and reconstructing it afresh.

Barry Pearce

Emeritus Curator of Australian Art
Art Gallery of New South Wales



Brett Whiteley *The day asia got born* 1970, pen, brush and black ink, oil, collage, branch, nest, egg, bird, cicada, wood on hardboard, 131.5 x 77.5 x 23.4 cm. Brett Whiteley Studio, Photo: AGNSW © Wendy Whiteley



Graham McCarter *Brett Whiteley* (detail) 1991, photograph. Courtesy Graham McCarter

BIOGRAPHY: BRETT WHITELEY

Brett Whiteley is one of Australia's most revered artists. His lyrical expressionism and lack of inhibition placed him at the forefront of Australia's avant-garde art movement. He won many prizes and awards and his work hangs in numerous galleries, including the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra, the Tate Gallery in London and the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

Whiteley was born 1939 in Sydney, New South Wales, and grew up in Longueville, a harbourside suburb in north Sydney. By the age of seven he had won his first art competition. He was sent to boarding school at Scots College, Bathurst and in 1956 was awarded first prize in the Young Painters' section of the Bathurst Show. He left school mid-year and took night classes in drawing at the Julian Ashton Art School in Sydney while holding down a job at an advertising agency.

In 1960, aged 21, Whiteley left Australia on a Travelling Art Scholarship (judged by Sir Russell Drysdale at the Art Gallery of New South Wales), and by 1961 had settled in London where his work was shown at the Whitechapel and Marlborough galleries. In London he met many other painters, including fellow Australians, Arthur Boyd and John Passmore.

His reputation grew world-wide with his success in winning

the international prize at the second Biennale de Paris (International Biennale for Young Artists) in 1962, the same year he had his first one-man exhibition at the Matthiesen Gallery. Around this time he married Wendy Julius at a Chelsea Registry Office in London, a marriage that would last for over 25 years.

Whiteley's painting developed rapidly during his time overseas. His abstract and fluid style turned increasingly to figuration, and his paintings became laced with images of sex and violence.

His work began to incorporate collage elements such as fibreglass shapes and photographs. He exhibited widely during these years, including in Australia, France, Belgium and Italy.

In 1967 he exhibited at the Pittsburgh International Carnegie Institute in the United States and was awarded the Harkness Foundation Fellowship. He lived in New York for 18 months and returned permanently to Australia in 1969 after a brief stay in Fiji.

By the beginning of the seventies Whiteley was involved with The Yellow House artist's community in Potts Point, Sydney and was seen as one of the leading lights of the avant-garde art movement.



Brett Whiteley *Sofala* 1958, oil on canvas on board, 84 x 104.5 x 6 cm. Brett Whiteley Studio. Photo: AGNSW © Wendy Whiteley

In 1972 he began work on *Alchemy* and by the following January it was complete. It was exhibited at the Bonython Gallery in Sydney. This incredible work was interpreted as an allegory of life's journey, from birth to death, and the ultimate transmutation.

He exhibited at The World Expo in Washington in 1974 and, ominously, stated in an interview to Philip Adams that he had 'moved from alcohol to more serious mind altering chemicals'.

Whiteley's acclaim continued to grow throughout the seventies and eighties. In 1975 he was awarded the Sir William Angliss Memorial Art Prize. In 1976 he won his first Archibald Prize with *Self-portrait in the studio* and the Sir John Sulman Prize for Interior with *Time Past* (genre painting).

In 1977 he won the Wynne Prize for *The Jacaranda Tree (On Sydney Harbour)*, and in 1978 became the only Australian artist ever to claim the Archibald with *Art, life and the other thing*, the Sulman Prize with *Yellow Nude* and Wynne Art prize with *Summer at Carcoar* – a unique treble.

He was awarded the Wynne Prize again in 1984, and the following year purchased an old T-shirt factory in Surry Hills Sydney and converted it into a studio. Further renovations

followed and in 1988 Whiteley held his only exhibition there titled *Birds*. In 1991 he was awarded the Order of Australia (General Division).

In the last years of his life Whiteley travelled far and wide, taking in England, Bali, Tokyo, and spending two months in Paris in an apartment on Rue de Tourmon. On 15 June 1992 he was found dead from a heroin overdose in a motel room in Thirroul on the NSW coast. The coroner's verdict was 'death due to self-administered substances'. He was 53 years old.

Text source: ACME



Brett Whiteley *The lyrebird* 1972-1973, oil and mixed media, 198 x 183.5 x 23 cm. Brett Whiteley Studio. Photo: AGNSW © Wendy Whiteley

LIST OF WORKS

Lucknow N.S.W.
pencil, charcoal, conte, oil pastel, gouache, oil, collage, self-adhesive tape on white laid paper on cardboard
91 x 117.3 x 2.5 cm
Brett Whiteley Estate

Oberon Carcoar Kookaburra River
oil, charcoal collage, plaster, pastel on canvas on cardboard
101 x 70.5 x 4.5 cm
Brett Whiteley Estate

Fish River rocks
brush and black ink on canvas board
77.1 x 61.1 x 3 cm
Brett Whiteley Estate

Landscape Oberon
brush and black ink, wash on rice paper
87 x 105.2 x 3.8 cm
Brett Whiteley Estate

Landscape Oberon II
green coloured pencil, blue watercolour on white wove paper
70.8 x 53.1 x 3.6 cm
Brett Whiteley Estate

Sofala 1958
oil on canvas on board
84 x 104.5 x 6 cm
Purchased by the NSW State Government 1994, transferred to the AGNSW 1998

The day asia got born 1970
pen, brush and black ink, oil, collage, branch, nest, egg, bird, cicada, wood on hardboard
131.5 x 77.5 x 23.4 cm
Brett Whiteley Estate

The lyrebird 1972-1973
oil and mixed media
198 x 183.5 x 23 cm
Brett Whiteley Estate

Willow (Study for print) 1975
brush and black ink on cream wove paper
76.9 x 61 x 2.9 cm
Brett Whiteley Estate

Marulan bird with rocks circa 1980
oil, gouache, collage, rocks on plywood
153 x 88.6 x 9 cm
Brett Whiteley Estate

Totem I (black - the get laid totem) 1978-1988
fibreglass and wood
284.5 x 170.2 x 61 cm
Purchased by the NSW State Government 1994, transferred to the AGNSW 1998

Totem II (Tan female) (1978-1988)
fibreglass, wood, chrome, oil
259.2 x 203.2 x 53.4 cm
Brett Whiteley Estate

Totem (white female) (1978-1988)
fibreglass, wood, painted steel, marble
271.8 x 215.9 x 55.9 cm
Brett Whiteley Estate

Willow tree 1978
brush and black ink on white laid paper on scroll
181.5 x 48.2 x 5.7 cm
Brett Whiteley Estate

The willow tree (1978)
charcoal on white wove paper
116.7 x 91.5 x 2.3 cm
Brett Whiteley Estate

The willow 1979
oil on cardboard
150.4 x 100.8 x 5.6 cm
Brett Whiteley Estate

(Willow) 1979
brush and black ink on white wove paper
193 x 158.5 x 4.2 cm
Brett Whiteley Estate

Oberon River 1979
brush and black ink, pen and brush and black ink, gouache, plaster on cardboard
77 x 61 x 2.8 cm
Brett Whiteley Estate

Poplars beside the Fish River, Oberon 1979
brush and black ink on off-white wove paper
83.1 x 65.3 x 3.3 cm
Brett Whiteley Estate

The Fish River and boulders, Oberon (1979)
etching, drypoint, aquatint, black ink on white wove paper
83.5 x 57.9 x 3.5 cm
Brett Whiteley Estate

Page of sculptures
pen, brush and black ink, blue ball-point pen on ivory wove paper from spiral bound sketch book,
42 x 59.3 cm
Brett Whiteley Estate

Spring at Oberon 1979
three-colour screenprint, gouache on white wove paper
146 x 84.3 x 3.1 cm
Brett Whiteley Estate

(Oberon) 1980
pen and brush and black ink, gouache on off-white wove paper
74.7 x 77.5 x 4.4 cm
Brett Whiteley Estate

Small willow 1991
painting, collage, mixed media, triptych:
pencil, charcoal, oil, paper, sand on canvas on plywood (left panel); oil on canvas (centre panel); oil, pencil, charcoal, graphite, collage, twigs, self-adhesive electrical tape on canvas on plywood (right panel)
168.0 x 152.5 cm (left panel)
167.0 x 30.5 cm (centre panel)
166.9 x 151.8 cm (right panel)
Private collection

(Small) willow 1991
etching, plate tone, black ink on white BFK Rives wove paper
14.8 x 10 cm
Brett Whiteley Estate

Willow at Oberon 1980-1988
charcoal, collage on ivory wove paper
131 x 66.8 x 3.7 cm
Brett Whiteley Estate

Fish River near Carcoar (1980)
brush and black ink, collage on white wove paper
148.9 x 95 x 3.9 cm
Brett Whiteley Estate

The Fish River near Oberon 1980
brush and black ink on white Canson Mi-Teintes wove paper
148.2 x 95.2 x 3.4 cm
Brett Whiteley Estate

Oberon after the rains 1983
pen and black ink, gouache, oil, plaster, collage on cardboard
217 x 85.5 x 4.1 cm
Brett Whiteley Estate

Summer by the River of Plums 1985-1986
triptych: oil and collage on canvas
100.5 x 275 x 6.5 cm
Brett Whiteley Estate

Oberon abstract I 1986-1988
charcoal, gouache, pencil, fabric, collage, synthetic polymer paint on three sheets buff Canson Mi-Teintes wove paper
157.5 x 102.9 x 3.7 cm
Brett Whiteley Estate

Autumn (near Bathurst) – Japanese Autumn 1987-1988
oil, tempera, egg, ink and photography on plywood
220.5 x 418.5 cm
Brett Whiteley Estate

Rivers / Walker St. 1987
pen and black ink, collage, postcards on paper
39.2 x 31.5 x 3.5 cm
Brett Whiteley Estate

To Yirrawalla 1972
oil and mixed media on board
185.3 x 166.3 x 6.3 cm
Collection of Art Gallery of New South Wales

The blue river 1978
oil, collage and egg on two panels of canvas
135 x 68.6 cm
Brett Whiteley Estate

Yellow willow at carcoar 1984
coloured inks, gouache and charcoal on cardboard
75.5 x 93.5 cm
Collection of Orange Regional Gallery

The balloon ride (unfinished) 1991
painting, collage, mixed media, triptych:
pencil, charcoal, oil, paper, sand on canvas on plywood (left panel); oil on canvas (centre panel); oil, pencil, charcoal, graphite, collage, twigs, self-adhesive electrical tape on canvas on plywood (right panel)
168.0 x 152.5 cm (left panel)
167.0 x 30.5 cm (centre panel)
166.9 x 151.8 cm (right panel)
Private collection

Brett Whiteley

Brett Whiteley | West of the Divide 26 September – 30 November 2014

A Blue Mountains Cultural Centre Exhibition in association with the
Brett Whiteley Studio and the Art Gallery of New South Wales

Cover Image: Brett Whiteley *Marulan bird with rocks* circa 1980, oil, gouache, collage, rocks on plywood, 153 x 88.6 x 9 cm. Brett Whiteley Studio. Photo: AGNSW © Wendy Whiteley

Special thanks to Wendy Whiteley; Alec George, Coordinator Brett Whiteley Studio; Wayne Tunnicliffe, Head Curator Australian Art, Art Gallery of New South Wales; Barry Pearce, Emeritus Curator of Australian Art, Art Gallery of New South Wales and Orange Regional Gallery, without whose contribution this exhibition would have been impossible.

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