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Title of the extended essay: To what extent should Fred Williams be regarded
a Landscape artist (with focus on the Pilbara Series)?

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The extended essay I am submitting is my own work (apart from guidance allowed by the International Baccalaureate).

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sustained an academically rigorous investigation of Australian Modernist painting with particular focus on Landscape as a convention and Fred Williams as an artist. It was his synthesis of these terrains that allowed him to make such a clear judgment against theorists such as Arthur Danto and Michael Guadio.

I was impressed with his own analysis of Williams work as representing Abstract Expressionist, a personal revelation, without being aware of its prominence as a global art movement. This demonstration of understanding is evidence of a sustained primary inquiry into not just the artist, but, the artwork qualities. His selected analysis of the Pilbara series provides an eloquent and enlightening use a visual arts language.

was unwavering in his quest to accurately position Fred Williams for his intention and exhausted many research paths to find the artists voice and the truth behind his artwork.

This declaration must be signed by the supervisor; otherwise a grade may not be issued.

I have read the final version of the extended essay that will be submitted to the examiner.

To the best of my knowledge, the extended essay is the authentic work of the candidate.

I spent 4 hours with the candidate discussing the progress of the extended essay.

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Assessment form (for examiner use only)

Criteria	Achievement level	
	Examiner	maximum
A research question	2	2
B introduction	2	2
C investigation	4	4
D knowledge and understanding	4	4
E reasoned argument	4	4
F analysis and evaluation	4	4
G use of subject language	4	4
H conclusion	2	2
I formal presentation	3	4
J abstract	1	2
K holistic judgment	4	4
Total out of 36	34	

To what extent should Fred Williams be regarded a landscape artist (with focus on the Pilbara Series)?

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Abstract

Fred Williams is considered one of the most prominent landscape artists of 20th century Australian painting. 'The Pilbara Series' was considered the epitome of Williams' artistic success, completed one year before his death. By focusing on 'The Pilbara Series', this essay aims to reconcile critical reception with artistic intention, questioning: "To what extent should Fred William's be regarded a landscape artist?" By cataloguing the development of Williams' artistic practice, from his early works completed overseas, through to his stylistic shift in *You Yang Pond*, this essay argues that Williams did not consider himself a landscape artist and should therefore not be regarded as one.

Through extensive primary analysis of 'The Pilbara Series', paired with secondary critical opinion, the detailed attention to basic elements of form, composition, colour and line will be identified. Through this analysis, it will be illustrated that Williams was concerned with the materiality of paint, rather than the ideology of subject. Unlike Sidney Nolan or Arthur Boyd, Williams does not intend to convey a narrative through his images, but to displace his audience from their expectations, much like the American Abstract Expressionists.

To support my argument, the critical framework of art philosopher Arthur Danto and landscape theorist Michael Guadio will be utilised. Danto's insistence on defining the parameters of art and Guadio's belief in the true ideology of landscape contained in paint reflect Williams' comparatively conservative approach to art. Through strict emphasis on formalism, this essay will also pose questions about the status of being a "painter" as considered inferior to contemporary conceptual art. However, through Williams' success and global recognition, will insist that he should be acclaimed as a painter, irrespective of critical opinion.

Not a clear statement of
the conclusion reached.

Introduction

Australian painter Fred Williams has been met with critical acclaim, considered a prominent figure of 20th century landscape painting,¹ despite his focus on formalism. Having exhibited at prestigious galleries nationally including the National Gallery of Victoria and the National Gallery of Australia,² he eventually rose to international prominence as the first Australian to hold a solo exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art, New York.³ Given Williams extensive career spanning from 1957 to 1982,⁴ his final series, 'The Pilbara Series' (1979-81), will be the focus of this essay. The Pilbara Series is the accumulation of Williams's technical development, regarded as the point at which his style was actualised.⁵

Williams was recognised for broadening definitions of Australian art through an abstracted view of the landscape that challenged archaic conceptions of national identity informed by colonial art,⁶ giving him significance to Australian students like myself. My specific interest in the Pilbara Series was due to its high market value, sponsorship by mining company Rio Tinto⁷ and unique aesthetic vision relative to Williams' broader oeuvre. By analysing the conflict between Williams' intention and his critical reception, this investigation elucidates broader contentions in the art world between materiality and concept.

Williams dealt with varying subject matter throughout his career but was defined by his landscape paintings.⁸ Although he constantly re-iterated that the depiction of subject matter was secondary to his formal objectives,⁹ critics continued to analyse

¹ R. Barrett, *Significant People in Australia's History: Issue 8* (Macmillan Education Australia, 2009), 29.

² D. Hart, *Fred Williams: Infinite Horizons* (Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, 2011), 2.

³ W. Owen (ed.), *Fred Williams' The Pilbara Series* (National Gallery of Victoria, 2002), 21.

⁴ J. Mollison, "Williams, Frederick Ronald (Fred) (1927-1982)" *Australian Dictionary of Biography* 18, 2012; available from <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/williams-frederick-ronald-fred-15774>.

⁵ W. Owen (ed.), *Fred Williams' The Pilbara Series* (National Gallery of Victoria, 2002), 5.

⁶ P. McCaughney, *Fred Williams 1927-1982* (Millers Point: Murdoch Books, 2008), 20.

⁷ Council of Trustees of the National Gallery of Victoria, "Curatorial-Acquisitions," *NGV Annual Report: 2004-05*, 18.

⁸ J. Mollison, *A Singular Vision: The Art of Fred Williams* (Canberra: The Australian National Gallery, 1989), 26.

⁹ J. Gleeson, "James Gleeson interviews Fred Williams" *National Gallery of Australia: Oral History Collection*; available from <http://nga.gov.au/Research/Gleeson/pdf/Rees.pdf>.

him in comparison to landscape artists such as Arthur Boyd and Sidney Nolan.¹⁰ Recognising this trend towards categorising Williams based on his subject matter this essay questions, *to what extent should Fred Williams be regarded a landscape artist (with focus on the Pilbara Series)?* The critical framework of Arthur Danto and Michael Guadio will be used to identify subject as secondary to materiality in Williams' art. Further, through comparison of critical views and deconstruction of Williams' diary entries, it will be concluded that he is concerned with formalism irrespective of subject matter, making his canonisation as a "landscape artist" a misnomer. Instead, Williams would be better regarded a painter with a comparable ideology to the American abstract expressionists.

this conclusion
belongs in the
abstract.

¹⁰ P. McCaughney, *Fred Williams 1927-1982* (Millers Point: Murdoch Books, 2008), 20.

Relevant Context

The argument of this essay: that Williams was concerned with painterly technique over subject matter, is posited by Williams himself.¹¹ In an interview with James Gleeson when questioned on the conceptual intention behind his painting Williams responded, “I don’t think of myself as an artist as much as a painter...I just like to go from one thing to another...whether it be an egg, or a dog, or a waterfall, or a person”.¹² Williams’ response to Gleeson’s question carries a humorous tone in his juxtaposition of disparate visual entities like an egg and waterfall; it is also far more descriptive than Williams’ usually abrasive responses, suggesting his desire to clarify false interpretations of his art. Williams makes clear that he does not conform to the majority view of post-modern artists, but that he should be viewed through a traditionalist framework. This is affirmed by his later comments to Gleeson where he states he has a simplistic attitude towards explaining his pictures, with his ambition simply to “paint good pictures”.¹³ Williams’ Pilbara series and greater artistic practice will be viewed through this ethos. He was a man concerned with painting, rather than an artist who intended to liberate the landscape through his depictions of it.

Williams’ view of his art is supported by Arthur Danto and Michael Gaudio. Danto posits that even if critics give meaning to art on a conceptual basis, physical standards are necessary to distinguish art from non-art, if not art becomes a vacuous concept.¹⁴ Danto condemns art that is an open container into which the audience is able to place any meaning, making its limitations indefinable.¹⁵ Danto’s implicit affirmation of materiality is consistent with how Williams urges audiences to understand his painting. As Williams denies that an ideology is contained in his landscape; Gaudio sees the ideology of landscape in its painterly technique, rather than through myth or legend inherent to its subject matter.¹⁶ Therefore, William’s paintings should be read

¹¹ J. Gleeson, “James Gleeson interviews Fred Williams” *National Gallery of Australia: Oral History Collection*; available from <http://nga.gov.au/Research/Gleeson/pdf/Rees.pdf>.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ J. Elkins, (ed.), *Landscape Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 89.

¹⁵ A. Danto, *What Art Is* (Yale Books, 2013), xii.

¹⁶ J. Elkins (ed.), *Landscape Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 89.

through his artistic intention, manifested in the materiality of his paint, irrespective of critical interpretations inconsistent with this as he, Danto and Guadio advocate.

Technical Development

Throughout Williams' career he painted various subject matter including nudes, portraits and landscapes, all in the pursuit of developing his painterly technique.¹⁷ To catalogue this development, three works from his early oeuvre will be analysed to illustrate that Williams was an artist concerned with formalism over subject. In 1955, when Williams was in England, he painted *Tree Loppers*.¹⁸



Fig. 1: Tree Loppers

Tree Loppers depicts five slender, tall trunks with differing characteristics. For example, the trunk on the far left rises vertically, but at the point of a protruding branch stump intersects with a thinner trunk; the two curling to create an oblique oval gap and parallel forks in the left corner of the painting. There appears to be a sixth trunk, but which is a ladder from which a small figure cuts a tree branch. The painting is not primarily concerned with the trees being cut, but with the stylistic approach this subject facilitates.

¹⁷ J. Gleeson, "James Gleeson interviews Fred Williams" *National Gallery of Australia: Oral History Collection*, 12; available from <http://nga.gov.au/Research/Gleeson/pdf/Rees.pdf>.

¹⁸ A. Dodge, "Fred Williams: The Poetry of Paint," *Art Monthly Australia*, April 2012, 25.

There is an emphasis on vertical line in the rendering of forms, texture of brushstrokes and composition of the canvas. The ladder and trees are painted in deep brown earthy tones that are emphasised through contrast with the muted grey of the background. The low horizon line of the painting jars the viewer's sense of perspective to emphasise the height of the trees through abstraction of space. Individual forms are rendered with tonal and textural variance. Although the trees appear to be monolithic masses of black, there are subtle pink, blue, red and yellow utilised to create visual balance. The pink of the protruding stumps complements the washed out peach of the background, the vibrant pink of the man's face and the hues of the soil. The visual detail that Williams employs concern for basic material elements of composition and painterly technique as opposed to subject ideology. The human figure is insignificant relative to the overall image where the focus is the majestic presentation of the trees through careful rendering of paint. This is supported by secondary analysis of *Tree Loppers* that notes the use of "cloisonnism"¹⁹ ^{def?} reminiscent of Gauguin and evident in the subtle blocks of colour that compose his tree trunks. Dodge analyses Williams' emphasis on height and the beginnings of a minimalist elemental approach that he later applied to Australian subject matter.²⁰ Very few critics analyse the significance of the figure in the image despite this being an anomaly in Williams's later landscape paintings. *Tree Loppers* illustrates that even Williams' early paintings show a concern for the rendering of subject, rather than the ideology of the subject itself.

¹⁹ A. Dodge, "Fred Williams: The Poetry of Paint," *Art Monthly Australia*, April 2012, 25.

²⁰ Ibid.

Williams' focus on materiality over ideology is evident in his move to abstraction in *You Yang Pond*, painted in the middle of his career.



Fig. 2: *You Yang Pond*

You Yang Pond depicts a landscape densely populated with trees and shrubs, based on Williams' visit to the ridges of North Geelong.²¹ The painting lacks a distinct focal point. The viewer is drawn to the centre, due to the clustering of dark tones. However, the viewer is also urged to inconsistently scan segments of the painting with no prescribed visual vectors – drawn simultaneously to patches of earthy red and copper orange. Although the canvas has been carefully constructed, the lacking horizon line²² and chaotic depiction of subject creates a compressed sense of space that overwhelms the viewer, but through minimalist forms. The trees are depicted as rounded blotches balancing on thin lines; a simplicity that dominates his later works. The compositional uncertainty through repetitious depiction of trees alludes to a continuing landscape, beyond the dimensions of the painting. In comparison to *Tree Loppers*, the simplistic illustration of landscape, without a human subject, draws attention to Williams' carefully orchestrated materiality. The immense ^{def ?} size of the painting²³ also encourages audience interaction reminiscent of the Abstract Expressionists.²⁴ Upon detailed viewing there is significant variance in texture throughout the painting: harsh brushstrokes layered with delicately depicted trunks and subtle nuances of gradient

²¹ "Fred Williams: Infinite Horizons", *National Gallery of Australia*, 7, available from: http://www.artgallery.sa.gov.au/agasa/home/Learning/docs/Online_Resources/WILLIAMS_EDU_KIT.pdf

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ A. Chave, *Mark Rothko: Subjects in Abstraction* (Yale University Press, 1989), 7.

juxtaposed with stark colour contrasts. At immediate view the image lacks a subject, but with perspective and inspection, unique subject forms actualise. The viewer sees small creatures and irregularities develop and recede into the landscape, illustrating the evolving depth and complexity of landscape through materiality. The clustered and layered use of paint in *You Yang Pond* shows a development from the restrained, representational subject of *Tree Loppers* to the beginning of the abstracted, aerial landscapes that define 'The Pilbara Series'. The development of technique from *Tree Loppers* to *You Yang Pond* illustrates Williams' development in painterly technique throughout his career, making his focus the depiction of landscape, rather than landscape itself.

The Pilbara Series

The Pilbara Series was completed by Williams from 1979-1981 and was acquired by the Rio Tinto Group, the mining company that had invited him to explore the region initially.²⁵ Williams first visited the Pilbara in May of 1979 and by mid-June had produced almost 100 gouaches, making these months some of his most productive as an artist.²⁶ He continued to visit the region, eventually producing the large scale, strikingly colourful images that have come to be remembered as the “greatest series of landscape paintings in 20th century Australian art”.²⁷ During his time painting, Williams kept personal diaries to record his process. Despite the eventual success of ‘The Pilbara Series’, Williams was initially concerned as to the likelihood of its sufficient completion. On 21st March 1981 he wrote with regards to the Pilbara region, “I will desist with toying of going back there. It’s simply been going on too long and I think I would be better off finishing off all the outstanding things...”²⁸ showing Williams’ concern for expediency. Williams’ desire to complete the paintings over returning to the landscape illustrates that the realistic depiction of the Pilbara was not his concern. The landscape itself was secondary to him; rather it was an inspirational agent for his rendering of paint. This is illustrated through his reference to the formal qualities of his work, on 5th May 1981 remarking that he had “increased the colour density on almost all of them”²⁹ and 15 days later that “the Pilbara is a conscious effort to do pictures based purely on colour and using the peculiar forms of the area”.³⁰ Williams’ clinical mode of recounting his practice shows his dissociation with the concept of his subject and fixation with the finished aesthetic product of his painting.

²⁵ X. Pons, (ed.), *Departures: How Australia Reinvents Itself* (Melbourne University Press, 2002), 20.

²⁶ B. Kühlenbeck, *Re-writing Spatiality: The Production of Space in the Pilbara Region in Western Australia* (Transaction Publishers, 2009), 108.

²⁷ W. Owen (ed.), *Fred Williams’ The Pilbara Series* (National Gallery of Victoria, 2002), 5.

²⁸ P. Goulds, *Fred Williams The Later Landscapes, 1975-1981* (La Louver, 2005), 35.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

Williams' focus on mastering painterly technique in *The Pilbara Series* can be seen by analysing *Gorge Landscape* of 1981.



Fig. 3: Gorge Landscape

Gorge Landscape depicts a deserted section of the Pilbara through a conflict in perspective where a bird's eye view is conflated with a side on perspective to depict the gorge in the landscape through a detailed cross sectional image. The colour palette is broadened by the bright blues, yellows and pinks of the gorge that contrast with the monotone of the red brown Australian outback. The unconventional use and dotting of colour recalls colour field painting, showing the development of the abstract expressionist technique noted in *You Yang Pond*. Like *You Yang Pond*, although the subject is the outback, it is non representational. The tree branches are the only forms to directly imply a landscape subject, with the irregular form of the gorge suggesting abstraction. The sharp right angle and slanted horizontal line of the gorge formation is constructed relative to the fluidity of natural forms. The lines of the gorge creates a left to right horizontal movement in the image through the claw like indentations that pull the viewer towards centre of the dark, dotted mass. Clear attention is paid to basic compositional strategies such as the rule of thirds, the blue pass taking up the middle third of the painting. Williams' has also attempted to balance the image, through a rough symmetrical arrangement, illustrated through the placement of tree forms and dotting of the gorge. As in *You Yang Pond* the detail of paint is captured through the immense scale of the painting showing Williams' focus on formalism rather than subject.

Critical Reading: Owen & McCaughey

It is clear from Williams' works and interviews that he was concerned with rigorous painting, irrespective of landscape subject matter. Williams' intention has largely been captured in critical responses to his art. Wendy Owen, art critic from the National Gallery of Victoria argues that Fred Williams presents a "distinctive vision of the landscape, which has shaped the way Australians see their own country".³¹ She also compares him to Xavier Herbert arguing that unlike Herbert "Williams was not interested in depicting the landscape as a metaphor for mans triumph over nature".³² Although Owen insists on comparing Williams to other landscape artists, she recognises the focus he places on formalism over narrative. Similarly, Patrick McCaughey, director of the National Gallery of Australia also notes that Williams does not engage in "interpretation of landscape, the Utopian, the weirdly melancholy, no heroic or tragic as identifiable throughout Sidney Nolan, Arthur Boyd".³³ In substantiating Williams' unique approach, McCaughey argues that "the romanticism of earlier depictions is suppressed in devour of a more direct, objective account of the landscape before him".³⁴ I would argue that consistent with Owen and McCaughey, Williams does not represent a myth of the landscape through his paintings however, he also does not represent the landscape in a direct and objective manner.

³¹ Owen, Wendy (ed.), *Fred Williams' The Pilbara Series* (National Gallery of Victoria, 2002), 5.

³² Owen, Wendy (ed.), *Fred Williams' The Pilbara Series* (National Gallery of Victoria, 2002), 7.

³³ McCaughey, Patrick, *Fred Williams 1927-1982* (Millers Point: Murdoch Books, 2008), 20.

³⁴ McCaughey, Patrick, *Fred Williams 1927-1982* (Millers Point: Murdoch Books, 2008), 324.

The break from Australian landscape ideology is seen by comparing *Ned Kelly* by Sidney Nolan with Williams' *Pilbara Landscape*. Nolan depicts infamous bushranger



Fig 4: Ned Kelly

Ned Kelly from behind, riding off into the Australian outback on his horse, only distinguishable by his characteristic black metal armour and helmet.³⁵ The focus of the image is Kelly, as indicated by his centre placement and harsh black paint used to render his figure in contrast with the landscape. There is little tonal or textural detail in the application of paint. Although the sky and ground have a painterly quality, there are no notable visual anomalies, unlike those Williams frequently employs. The paint has been intentionally blended in a gradual gradient to create a representational image. The painting has limited depth, showing Nolan's restricted attention to perspectival elements despite his heavily constructed symmetrical composition. The rudimentary forms mimic a child-like aesthetic, the background simplistically divided into three slabs of colour: muddy yellow, soft blue and a darker blue. Clouds are outlined to sit distinct from the sky, again showing limited attention to painterly nuance. The landscape is not the primary subject; it is an agent for constructing the narrative of Ned Kelly, elucidated by the slit in Kelly's helmet acting as the focal point. Nolan's presentation of landscape reflects his confessed influence by Rousseau, whose plasticine tree trunks, lonely clouds and flattened perspective are recalled in *Ned Kelly*.³⁶ Kelly's controversial reputation as violent criminal is heightened through

³⁵ R. Radford (ed.), *Collection Highlights: National Gallery of Australia* (National Gallery of Australia, 2008), 26.

³⁶ A. Sayers, *Sidney Nolan: The Ned Kelly Story* (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1994), 22.

the desolate representation of the landscape, presenting a harsh and unforgiving environment to parallel those fugitives who live within it.³⁷ The simplicity of the painting shows Nolan's desire to capture the audience not through the technical abilities his painting represents, but through the cultural concepts its simplistic illustration alludes to.

In comparison, *Pilbara Landscape*, although exhibiting some similarities is entirely distinct in its engagement with landscape subject matter, reflecting Williams' unique approach to painting. Both *Ned Kelly* and *Pilbara Landscape* come from a series of



Fig 5: Pilbara Landscape

paintings. All the paintings in 'The Ned Kelly Series' display a strong thematic link and an individual painting cannot be understood appropriately without the context of the entire series.³⁸ By contrast, the paintings of 'The Pilbara Series' are entirely distinct. Although they are inspired by the same landscape, Williams has not made a conscious effort to link the images. Elements from form, to colour, style, composition and painterly technique differ vastly from image to image, evident by comparing *Pilbara Landscape* with earlier analysed *Gorge Landscape*. In comparing the technical quality of Nolan and Williams, *Pilbara Landscape* although utilising a more

³⁷ M. Bail, *Sidney Nolan's Ned Kelly: The Ned Kelly Paintings in the National Gallery of Australia* (National Gallery of Australia, 2002), 16.

³⁸ A. Sayers, *Sidney Nolan: The Ned Kelly Story* (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1994), 22.

restrained colour palette, shows tonal variance and detail within this palette. There are specs of blue, yellow and green that although contrasting with the harsh ochre brown of the landscape base, create visual harmony. Williams has chosen his colours to blend upon first glance so that his landscape appears as a construction of seamless tones and textures, comparable to post impressionist pointillist technique. In contrast to Nolan's attempt to blend colour through uncomfortably blended brush strokes, Williams' colour blends through the organic experience of the audience viewing the canvas. Although Williams has attempted to define forms in the landscape, unlike the strict definition of horizon line and subject in *Ned Kelly*, *Pilbara Landscape* leaves representation to question – the three grooves may be mountains, ridges or cliffs. In comparing *Ned Kelly* and *Pilbara Landscape* the emphasis on painterly quality that differentiates Williams from canonised “landscape painters” is evident.

In regards to McCaughey's claim that Williams depicts an objective landscape³⁹ – comparing *Mount Nameless (Morning)* and *Mount Nameless (Afternoon)* reflects the falsity of this claim.



Fig 6: Mount Nameless Morning

³⁹ P. McCaughey, *Fred Williams 1927-1982* (Millers Point: Murdoch Books, 2008), 324.



Fig 7: Mount Nameless Afternoon

Although both paintings depict the same landscape, they are markedly different. Despite time of day having no effect on physical forms, the mountains are depicted differently. In the morning painting the mountain has a steadier incline approaching from the halfway point of the canvas and then declining at a steeper rate from the peak. By contrast, the afternoon image is nearly square in formation, rising at a close right angle and plateauing immediately. The ridges in the afternoon painting split and follow a close parallel angle to the base of the mountain however the split between the ridges in the morning is almost at a perpendicular angle, the second ridge running directly off to the left of the painting. Greater detail has been employed in the afternoon painting through the rendering of trees at the base of the mountain as intricate, realistic forms, as opposed to the incoherent blots of paint in the morning painting.

Both paintings are gouaches, although the comparative thickness in the appearance of the morning painting makes the afternoon painting seem as if rendered in watercolour. The morning painting uses vivid tones, from the monochromatic electric blue sky, burnt sienna foreground and khaki mountainside. Comparatively, the colours of the afternoon painting have a washed out and translucent aesthetic. The colour palette is softer, characterised by soft pinks, purples and plastic yellow conjuring nostalgic associations. Further, the intensity of gouache in the afternoon painting provides for

greater tonal nuance, particularly evident in the lower quadrant of the painting where blues, pinks and yellows meld to create muddled earthy tones. The nature of the dots in both paintings is also contrasting. In the afternoon painting the dots are of a consistent colour and rendered in intricate patterns that parallel the movement of colour and complement the image of the landscape. The dots are an element of the landscape, whilst in the morning painting they are superimposed on the landscape, reflected in the unspecified form and colour, ranging from orange yellow, to white, to turquoise. The morning painting also utilises articulated lines to give the landscape directional dynamism through a horizontal motion that draws the viewer's eye from left to right. The afternoon painting however, articulates line through subtle rendering, creating a fluid but relaxed sense of movement. The differences between the paintings and therefore Williams' desire to present a subject landscape is articulated by Williams himself who, when asked why his use of colour did not correspond with seasonal changes, responded that he wanted to paint "the essence of the Australian landscape".⁴⁰ Returning to McCaughey's claim that both paintings depict the landscape in its honest form, it is clear through the difference between *Mount Nameless (Morning)* and *(Afternoon)* that Williams exercises personal liberties in his rendering of paint to focus on visual technique, rather than capturing his subject matter.

⁴⁰ J. Mollison, *A Singular Vision: The Art of Fred Williams* (Canberra: The Australian National Gallery, 1989), 40.

Critical Reading: Dober & Mollison

In contrast to McCaughey's claims, Dober and Mollison present views that align with this essay. James Mollison, Director of the National Gallery of Australia, establishes that Williams' objectives in landscape paintings were not as "a means of showing other people how much he loved the landscape and how he wanted them to love the landscape also"⁴¹ but rather as a "basis for the formal construction of pictures".⁴² Mollison removes conceptual judgment from Williams' work, instead identifying his landscape as purely demonstrating his practical skill. Mollison discusses Williams' practical use of paint, describing him as "a man who was completely in charge of his means, perhaps the finest painter we ever had. The beauty of his paint, the use of the canvas, the infinite invention of those little marks".⁴³ Mollison continues to deliberate about the formalistic use of paint in characterising Williams' style to reinforce the fact that Williams' should be regarded as a painter instead of an artist. Similarly, Mark Dober Professor from Monash University regards Williams' works as questioning not how we should represent landscape but "what we require from good painting".⁴⁴ Dober also analyses Williams' use of paint stating that "for Fred Williams the issue was not flatness per se, but paint. Painting was primarily about what you could do with paint, and flatness privileged the work's objectness, and hence its status as painting".⁴⁵ Therefore Dober and Mollison support the reading that Fred Williams should be viewed as a painter rather than a landscape artist. It should be noted that some critics have challenged Williams' depiction of the landscape, noting his failure to depict the mining machinery and technology that enabled his visit. Seddon notes that although the landscape was of shades of red, with sealed roads and air conditioning, Williams paints it purely "red",⁴⁶ a perception that has influenced tourists and idealised the destruction of Indigenous land by mining companies.

⁴¹ *Fred Williams: The Pilbara Series Exhibition Catalogue* (Ian Potter Museum of Art, 2000), 4.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ M. Dober, "Fred Williams' 'spaceless' landscapes: a response to recent controversy," *Art Monthly Australia* 251 (July, 2012), 16.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁴⁶ B. Kuhlenbeck, *Re-writing Spatiality: The Production of Space in the Pilbara Region in Western Australia* (Transaction Publishers, 2009), 108.

Although pertinent criticisms, given Williams' apolitical oeuvre, his concern remains with materiality, irrespective of context.

Adopting Dober and Mollison's viewpoint, Williams' *Iron Ore Landscape* can be analysed. As identified by Dober, Williams employs flatness uniquely so that the



Fig 8: Iron Ore Landscape

painting loses its subject; with no sense of perspective to suggest its vastness.⁴⁷ The composition is also peculiar, rendering the horizon line unidentifiable due to its diagonal nature. The simplistic use of colour and form is more reminiscent of American abstract expressionist and colour field painting than Australian landscapes. Potentially influenced by Mark Rothko, Williams utilises large blocks of bold colour and a restrictive triadic colour palette of red, blue and yellow.⁴⁸ The comparison between Rothko and Williams extends beyond the aesthetic to the conceptual. In the same way Rothko endeavoured to “destroy the finite associations with which our society increasingly enshrouds each aspect of our environment”,⁴⁹ Williams dissociates Australia from an iconic landscape by attempting to evoke a material

⁴⁷ M. Dober, “Fred Williams’ ‘spaceless’ landscapes: a response to recent controversy,” *Art Monthly Australia* 251 (July, 2012), 17.

⁴⁸ A. Chave, *Mark Rothko: Subjects in Abstraction* (Yale University Press, 1989), 28.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

response from his audience. Although this painting differs significantly from others in 'The Pilbara Series' it still has the characteristic dots that Mollison defines as Williams' visual motif.⁵⁰ Like Rothko's planes of paint,⁵¹ Pollock's drip technique and Clyfford Still's characteristic jagged flashes,⁵² Williams' dots characterise his works as a painter concerned with formalism rather than subject.

⁵⁰ *Fred Williams: The Pilbara Series Exhibition Catalogue* (Ian Potter Museum of Art, 2000), 4.

⁵¹ P. Wood (ed.), *Varieties of Modernism* (Yale University Press, 2004), 151.

⁵² *Ibid*, 123.

Conclusion

Fred Williams should not be regarded a landscape painter, as he has been by the Australian public and broader artistic community. By analysing Williams' intention to be a painter, as well as 'The Pilbara Series' it is clear that he was an artist concerned with formalism over subject matter. The landscape mythology of Sidney Nolan and Arthur Boyd is not present in Williams' works. In fact, many of his works scarcely represent the landscape; instead they are abstracted forms of flatness and colour united only through his dot motif. Williams is therefore better conceived of as an abstract expressionist or painter, than landscape artist. Defining Williams through landscape ideology is problematic as it limits the appreciation of his formal techniques and dilutes him to the Australian canon. Williams' intention as an artist should be considered in analysing his works and sculpting how the artistic community remembers him. Perhaps the desire to ascribe concept to Williams reflects implicit hierarchies in the art world whereby being simply a painter concerned with formalism is not sufficient to warrant critical attention. However, the captivating nature of Williams' landscape, attention to basic elements of colour, form, composition and brushwork in an innovative way makes clear that formalism ought to be equally important to 'good art' as concept. Williams' description as a landscape artist is therefore unrepresentative of his works or desires and should be remedied through encouraging understanding of his painterly techniques.

Word count
3

A brief, but fitting conclusion to an impressive extended essay. The candidate writes with intelligence & offers insightful analysis & argument throughout. The candidate appears to have viewed at least some of these works first hand & has made excellent use of academic material.

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Needs list of image sources
giving dimensions & locations