

Ceaseless Patterns Of Being

Australian artist Ian Willding's art is deeply informed by memory, dreams, and narratives of childhood and experience. In revealing these intimate, interior landscapes Willding takes us on an uplifting journey of the spirit.

By Christine Nicholls

Ian Willding, who was born in rural New South Wales, trained as a chef in his early twenties, after which he worked in Sydney for many years. Following his move to Adelaide in 1989, he worked as a visual arts teacher in a suburban school for 'special' children. During those years Willding persisted with his own art making, often at considerable personal cost. Of Wiradjuri (Aboriginal) heritage, Willding is also active in Adelaide's gay community.

In 1996, Willding became involved with the Red House Group, an association of community artists based in Adelaide's southern suburbs. Today, he credits his participation in this strong community arts group, in which he remains actively involved, as the most important factor in his further development as an artist.

"The artists in the Red House Group led me in my quest to gain knowledge about many different genres of visual art: the members really informed me about visual art in the broadest sense. They helped me find direction, and as a result of my contact with this group I was driven to go on seeking further knowledge. Interacting with these artists has been a vitally important experience for me, in terms of giving direction to my own practice", says Willding.

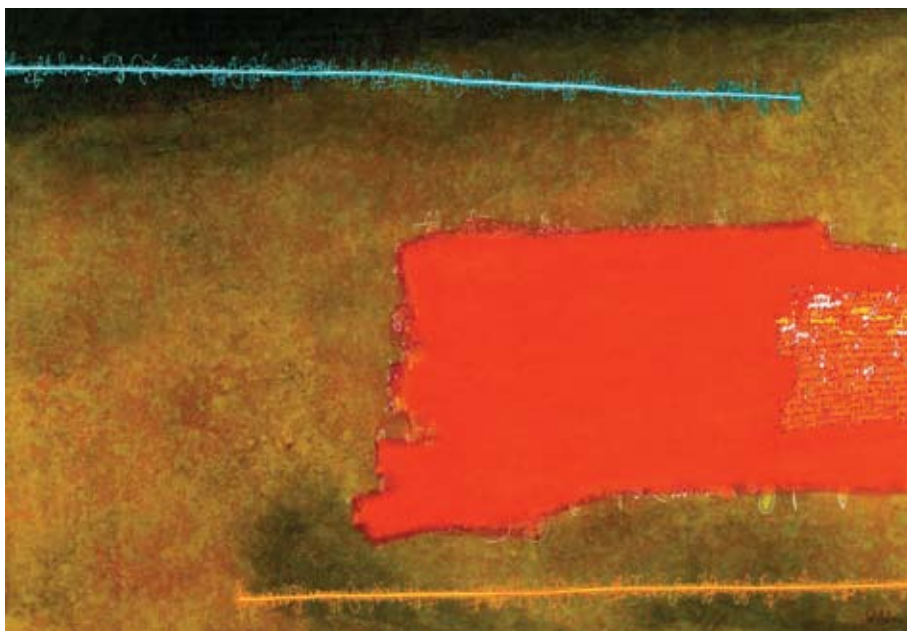
"The organization has a highly developed infrastructure and as a result the people in it are able to act as excellent mentors for newcomers. As time passes,

the people who begin as mentorees themselves become mentors for the next generation of artists coming through."

Willding cites Julie Pritchard, a glass artist and long-time resident curator at the highly regarded Gallery M in Marion, a southern suburb of Adelaide, as an especially important mentor, who was to become a friend. "Julie is a really knowledgeable person, a very hardworking person and an extremely giving person",

debates on topical subjects. Gallery M has also garnered an excellent reputation as a model for other local councils, in terms of its support for the arts. It succeeds partially because of the grassroots activism and commitment of local artists, but also, importantly, because a handful of visionary councilors backed the project from the beginning. The result has been the nurturing of many local artists, including artists of the caliber of Ian Willding.

As a result, in the space of a decade and a half, during which time he has participated in many group exhibitions and held six solo exhibitions in private galleries and in public spaces, Willding has truly 'arrived' as a professional artist—not as an Indigenous artist, not as a gay artist, but as an artist. It is not that Ian Willding eschews such labels—he is proudly Aboriginal and proudly gay and has exhibited artworks in numer-



Ian Willding, *Dreamscape*, 2010, acrylic on canvas, 95.5 x 139.5 cm. Photograph: Courtesy of Philip Martin.

says Willding. "I am indebted to her."

Red House, by hazarding a collective project and partly by sheer perseverance, resilience, and willpower, eventually persuaded the local Marion Municipal Council to dedicate a permanent gallery space for exhibiting their members' works, as well as works by other artists in the same region. In the past, Willding has, on numerous occasions, shown his work in group exhibitions at Gallery M, a fine exhibition space connected with a community center where a lot of other activities take place, including well-attended live

debates on topical subjects. Gallery M has also garnered an excellent reputation as a model for other local councils, in terms of its support for the arts. It succeeds partially because of the grassroots activism and commitment of local artists, but also, importantly, because a handful of visionary councilors backed the project from the beginning. The result has been the nurturing of many local artists, including artists of the caliber of Ian Willding.

ous all-Aboriginal exhibitions, particularly at Adelaide's Tandanya National Aboriginal Cultural Institute, as well as in exclusively gay and lesbian art exhibitions. Ian Willding's artworks, however, exceed the limitations imposed by the (at times) narrow identity politics and labeling conferred on members of groups who have suffered or continue to experience oppression on the basis of their race or sexuality. The Indian intellectual and Nobel-Prize-winning economist Amartya Sen talks of the "illusion of a single identity" and the fact that we humans have "layered"

identities rather than a single defining one. This is certainly how Willding regards himself—as an artist, who happens to also belong to two minority groups.

The perseverance that characterizes this gentle, quietly spoken man has contributed to his survival as an artist over many lean years. This approach is now paying dividends: private collectors and others are now actively seeking Willding's brightly hued, lyrical works in which he expresses strongly felt experiences, emotions, memories, thoughts, and dreams. In addition, corporations, businesses, and individuals exhibit Ian Willding's artworks on either a short-term or long-term rental basis through ART LOGIC, an Adelaide-based company that works with the private sector with the aim of showing works by a range of artists, on a rotational basis.

On the face of it, Willding's artworks, in which he deploys tonal, and sometimes color contrasts, are non-representational. For the most part, Willding's paintings are devoid of figuration. Instead, they usually comprise in-filled blocs of bright colors (often red, orange, yellows, blues, greens, and more) frequently overwritten with distinctive, quasi-calligraphic squiggles. Under closer examination these apparent doodlings or markings emerge as coherent written script. Willding's well-chosen words are artistically and semantically significant, and strategically important in terms of coming to an understanding of his work.

Because the visual language that he uses in his compositions shares certain characteristics that are commonly associated with abstract art, it is tempting to classify Willding's artworks under the rubric of abstraction, or partial abstraction, or perhaps even abstract expressionism. But while Willding's artworks may, at first glance, seem abstract, this impression is not entirely accurate. Although his works evoke mood or affect, rather than depicting objects *per se*, each individual canvas relates to a specific memory, sensory experience, or significant repetitive occurrence in Willding's life, past or present.

The artworks included in Willding's solo exhibition *In Ceaseless Patterns of Being*, now showing at Adelaide's Art Images Gallery in inner



Ian Willding, *Through Cathedral Skies*, 2010, acrylic on canvas, 101.5 x 137 cm. Photograph: Courtesy of Philip Martin.

city Norwood, are his strongest yet. Considering Willding's *oeuvre* as a whole, his work can be divided into three distinct,

though thematically interrelated, groups: those works that relate to his life in the past (for example, his 2009 work, *Summer Mosaic*); those pertaining to his life in the here and now; and those that convey aspects of his dream-life.

The first group of works draws, in equal measure, on childhood memories and on the collective experiences of Willding's extended Wiradjuri family. The memories that inform these works date back to the late 1950s, when, as a child, Willding was living with his family in Forbes, a country town in central New South Wales, about 400 kilometers to the northwest of Sydney. In this 'early memory' strand of artworks Willding reprises significant, and diverse, past events and feelings.

Examples from this group of works include *Through Cathedral Skies* (2010), a lovely, lyrical work in which Willding evokes a childhood memory of sitting in church staring out from a pew at the beautiful patterning on the stained-glass windows, and outside into clouds and sky, absorbed in his own private world. As the child daydreamed, mesmerized by the gorgeously mottled tessellations on that seemingly infinite world outdoors, a sermon or even an entire church service would fall on deaf ears.



Ian Willding, *Little Stories in the Dirt*, 2009, acrylic on canvas, 137 x 101.5 cm. Photograph: Courtesy of Philip Martin.



Ian Willding, *Hometown Dirt Clouds*, 2009, acrylic on canvas, 95.5 x 139.5 cm. Photograph: Courtesy of Philip Martin.

Little Stories in the Dirt (2009-2010) evokes the games that Willding, as a young child, would play with matchbox cars and trucks, carving out spatial forms in the dirt to represent miniature highways, streets, garages, and the like. The narratives he invented to accompany this Toy Town, and the comings and goings of the traffic that he controlled, and the structures in which the small vehicles were housed, were detailed and engrossing.

Willding's approach to many of his artworks, including *Little Stories in the Dirt*, includes the important element of synaesthesia. Sitting alone on the ground playing with small cars and trucks, the child was surrounded by the roots of the white cedar trees that lined the Willding family's yard. In the course of painting this work earlier this year, without any warning, the scent of the white cedar blossoms wafted into Willding's consciousness, transporting him back to those earlier childhood days playing with his toys while sitting under those trees.

Scientists have only recently established that synaesthetes do in fact use their brains differently from others. Unlike the majority of people, who process different pieces of sensory information in different parts of the brain, in the case of synaesthetes, an experience or thought in one modality (for instance, sight) automatically triggers an experience that involves one or more of the other four senses, be that smell, taste, sound, or touch. It is only in recent years that scientists, through experiments on the human brain, have begun taking this phenomenon of 'sensory mingling' seriously. For Willding, the sense of sight, relating to the vibrant colors that he uses in his artworks, often acts as a catalyst, bringing into play one or more of the other senses.



Ian Willding, *Native Tongue III*, 2009, acrylic on canvas, acrylic on canvas, 100 x 150 cm. Photograph: Courtesy of Philip Martin.

In *Hometown Dirt Clouds* (2009) Willding recalls, with a sense of childlike wonder, the approach of a dust storm and how it covered his uncle's wheat crop "like a golden blanket". Although the uncle lost half of his annual crop in the hailstorm that followed the visitation of this giant, apocalyptic golden dust cloud, Willding expresses awe rather than fear in this painting. Similarly, in his *Storm Electric*, the artist captures the thrill of a powerful storm, the intensity of its light, and the glow of its electric energy, as seen through a child's eyes. By his extraordinary use of asymmetrically patterned patches of vivid color, Willding stitches together beautiful patchwork distillations of his past experiences.

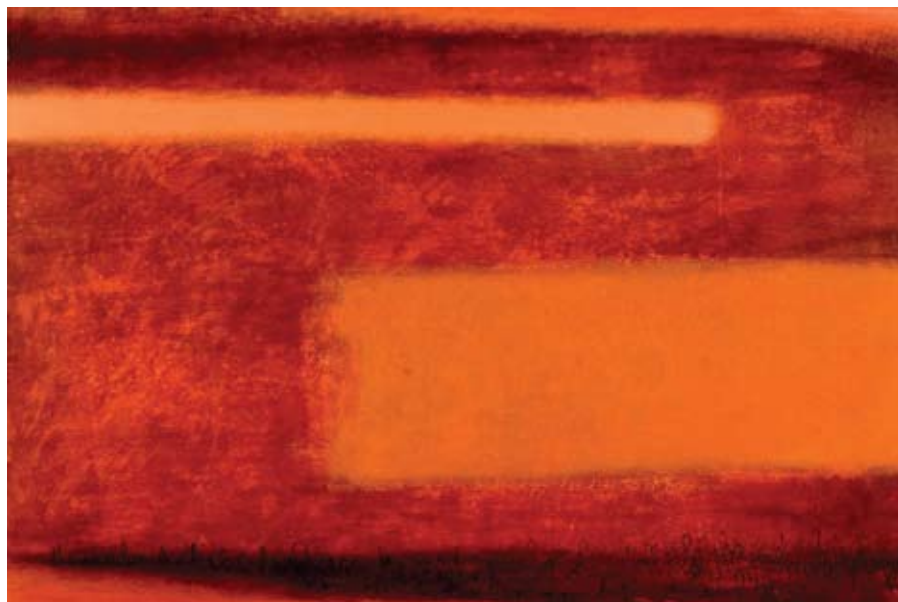
In addition, Willding uses written text as a means of passing editorial

comment on the visual elements of his artworks. The artist's scribbles, often little more than memory-fragments, are critically important in terms of developing an understanding of his work.

Native Tongue III memorializes and celebrates the one and only occasion in his life that Willding heard a member of his extended family, his Great Auntie Olive, speaking the family's ancestral language, Wiradjuri. The fuzziness of the written script that he deploys in *Native Tongue III*, overwritten by English words, is a reference to the boy's childish perception of the funny, monotone words that he recollects hearing spoken on that momentous day. The muffled sound of the language, as perceived through the ears of a young child, is represented by means of Willding's written text. Synaesthesia again informs Willding's work, on this occasion triggered by a certain remembered sound that engendered the visual imagery he deploys in this work.

In the second, closely related thematic area in which Willding works, the artist incorporates references to present-day experiences, events, and adult sensations. Although strong stylistic continuities exist between the works in which he evokes the past and those that relate to the present and to contemporary experience, there is in fact a sharp demarcation between how Willding conceptualizes his past and his present-day 'selves'. For Willding, the past is indeed another country.

While Willding's artistic 'voice' today is equally characterized by a sense of wonderment and even joy about what life offers on a daily basis, what emerges from the works based on the artist's present-day



Ian Willding, *Transition*, 2009, acrylic on canvas, 100 x 150 cm. Photograph: Courtesy of Philip Martin.

selfhood is his deepening self-awareness and reflexivity. Also apparent is Willding's increased capacity to liberate himself from established patterns imposed by routine. This is accompanied by an intensification of the strong spiritual basis that underpins his work. In part, the latter manifests itself in the verve and richness of Willding's vivid color usage. *Transition* (2009), for example, is a wonderfully confident, vibrantly colored work that marks the artist's conscious effort and decision to free himself from the shackles of prior 'ways of thinking' about life and his work as an artist.

Another example of this genre is Willding's *Chinatown* (2010), a diptych in which Willding responds, with typical *joie de vivre*, to his daily working environment. His artist's studio is based immediately adjacent to Adelaide's Chinatown, next to the legendary Adelaide markets. There, day and night, the streets are alive with the hustle and bustle of people engaging in purposeful activity. In *Chinatown*, Willding has applied many layers of glaze, building up the surface with layer upon layer of paint to create the black, yellow, red, and white quasi-Oriental symbols that dominate the work.

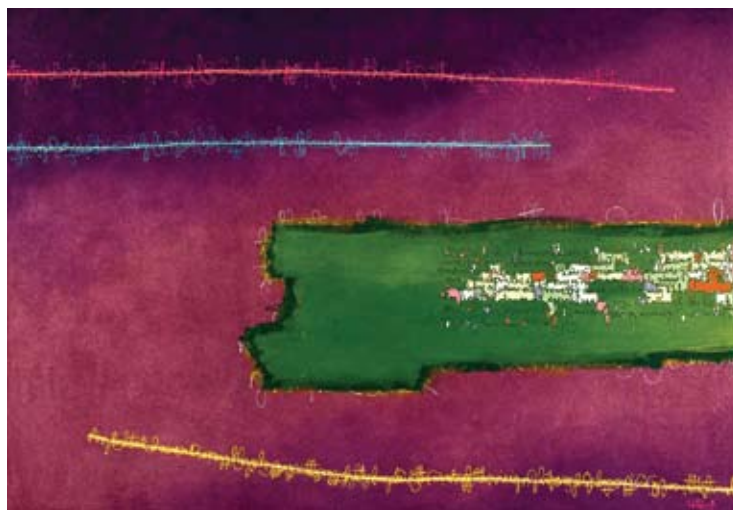
The third category of work that Willding has created for *In Ceaseless Patterns of Being* relates to dreams and to dreaming. An excellent example is *Dreamscape* (2010), which is informed by a recurring childhood dream of being able to float as high as he wished, above the structural edifices of entire towns. "I would be looking down on geometric shapes that were houses, garages, sheds and town buildings and roads", writes Willding. "There were fields of different crops like canola, sorghum, rape, and wheat. From my bird's eye view all were in brilliant color. This dream kept returning for a long time, and there were a number of variations of it, always in vivid color. For me, *Dreamscape* captures that feeling of floating while setting up another pattern that continues in the new paintings following it." *Dreamscape* is one of the many works in this exhibition that deliver pure visual



Ian Willding, Chinatown, 2010, diptych, acrylic on canvas, 191 x 139.5 cm. Photograph: Courtesy of Philip Martin.

pleasure, not least because of Willding's use of gorgeous color.

Thus, despite the overwhelming, and not entirely accurate, impression that



Ian Willding, Oasis, 2010, acrylic on canvas, 95.5 x 139.5 cm. Photograph: Courtesy of Philip Martin.

Willding's works fall into the category of abstraction, they are in fact autobiographical, indeed, narratively exciting. The exhibition's title, which sets the conditions of possibility in which Willding strives to work, derives from a work by the celebrated Indian poet and sometime artist Rabindrinath Tagore (1861–1941), winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913. (Strangely, given Willding's gift with color, Tagore was partially colorblind. Now there's an enticing paradox.)

In Ceaseless Patterns of Being is an exhilarating and uplifting exhibition in which we see an artist reaching the height of his not insignificant powers—leaving us wanting more. Artist, daydreamer, honorable campaigner against injustice and hypocrisy—Ian Willding deserves the widest possible audience for his work. Δ



Ian Willding, Storm Electric, 2010, acrylic on canvas, 80 x 120 cm. Photograph: Courtesy of Philip Martin.

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