

## THE AUSTRALIAN

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# Painter Geoff Wilson, an artist in his natural landscape

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Geoff Wilson's Five triangles of the Barossa Valley, 2013. Source: Supplied

**One of the most remarkable stories of late 20th-century visual culture in South Australia is the long official neglect, among others of his generation, of Geoff Wilson. To some extent the artist brought this on himself. As far back as 1978 he said with surprising modesty how he had once been told by artist Ivor Hele to get out of the teaching racket and “just do it”.**

“I never felt strongly enough about it,” Wilson said. “I liked to do it, but I also found lots of excuses not to do anything. Painting was pleasant work, but if I wasn’t doing it, it didn’t matter.

Never pushing himself forward, he has given generously to many as a painter, teacher, friend and

mentor across seven decades in Adelaide and, without *schadenfreude*, asked nothing in return beyond genuine curiosity to see others flourish. Concern for the posterity of his own vision never took priority over revelations of the moment and the encouragement of others to share those revelations through painting.

A born teacher, Wilson is regarded fondly by many ex-students whose reminiscences give us a strong sense of his communication skills and clarity of thought guiding them towards an aesthetic rigour that suited each one's individuality. But as an artist it was his older contemporaries who, working alongside him, witnessed most intimately the progress of his methodology.

Wilson straddled counterpointing aspects across his career, travelling far and wide throughout Australia and Europe, yet keeping his reputation anchored exclusively to the world of his home town. In his work, he drew his images tightly at first, then evolved a more confident, free-flowing watercolour method until the late 1950s, before going back to tight, constructive painting compositions from the late 60s — at which time he dabbled briefly in a kind of abstraction when his inner core would not let go of an instinct to remain a figurative draftsman.

But the most fascinating push-pull that has continued within his pictorial style lies between his relentless pleinairism, for which he has moved tirelessly around the landscape of South Australia, and a slow, deliberate calibration of composition that would seem to have been far better served in the quiet space of a studio.

David Dallwitz, who taught with Wilson at the art school and was his painting companion for almost three decades from the early 70s, articulated this arm wrestle best. He wrote a piece for Wilson's mini retrospective at the Chapel Hill Winery, McLaren Vale, in 2000, disagreeing with his younger friend's self-deprecating assertion that he was, as Cezanne said of Monet, "just an eye":

"So deep is his love for the landscape and all the fascinating treasures which it contains that he is impelled to express that love in paintings. In doing so he feels that he must respect the motif, and so he imagines that he is painting in a completely realistic manner. But so powerful is his designing instinct that, despite himself, the forms and colours are gradually modulated into a perfectly integrated arrangement which is far superior to what he imagines he is 'copying'."

As a student during the mid-40s Wilson crossed paths with Jeffrey Smart, who invited him to call in on one of his landscape painting classes. Smart urged Wilson to experiment with oils, warning him that if he remained only a watercolourist in the English manner he would forever consign himself to being a lightweight. The resulting effort was a struggle that put Wilson off painting for many years. Writing to him in 1992, Smart stressed the merit of working on paintings in the studio, and recalled his suggestion that Wilson neutralise the overt confidence of his watercolours by introducing pen and ink, through which a skeletal design could be maintained.

To Smart's mind, these two aspects formed a constructive counterpoint. "I'm very proud of the fact that I had something to do with your early years," Smart wrote. "Yes, you were almost too proficient as a watercolourist & the only way out I could see for you was to introduce pen & inks, which you did, with such good results. It was then easier to graduate to oils."

Wilson continued to combine the look-and-put process of the plein-air sketch with a detached pictorial structuralism in his painting for the rest of his career. Following his retirement from teaching at the art school in 1982, he and Dallwitz ramped up the frequency of their painting excursions, through which Wilson in particular created a quite breathtaking iconography of South Australian landscape — from its northern mountain ranges and deserts, coastal regions

from gulf waters down through the Barossa Valley, to verdant bushland and farms of the Adelaide Hills, and south through Tuscan-like plains to the Fleurieu Peninsula.

Photographs abound of him sitting on a stool working at a watercolour or painting fixed exactly towards what is in front of him. A lateral shift in position one way or another might be necessary to align shapes here or a vertical axis there, and occasionally he might work on a version inside the van that was his mobile studio, marking the outline of a composition with thinned blue paint. He might lay in colour, trying to keep up with the changing tones of sky and grass, knowing that modulation and finish would almost inevitably take place back in the studio when the painting became its own creature. One major technical change occurred during this practice. In the late 80s Wilson abandoned the seductively quick-drying property of synthetic polymer paint and reverted to the lustrous translucency of oils.

But, with sketches and photographs as his references, the sheer zealousness of painting outdoors demands some explanation. For when we see the end product it is tempting to ask why Wilson did not restrict himself more to the studio, beginning to end, for his final versions. Why struggle to seize the momentary impression, when a painting laboured over even on a modest scale for several hours in the field could never possibly represent true tones, shapes and shadows, now long shifted or disappeared, that initially caught his eye? This was often the criticism made against French realist painter Jules Bastien-Lepage who influenced certain Heidelberg School artists. What exactly was Bastien-Lepage depicting while insisting that quite large, detailed compositions should be painted entirely out-of-doors?

Wilson was acutely aware of the problem: “The paintings generally contain a kind of topographical truth, however all were triggered simply by looking at something at a particular time of day,” he said. “The same subject seen 10m to the left a few hours earlier or later may strike no visual interest. The difficulty when painting on the spot is to hold the initial intention and not give away to random passing changes. In the end, of course, the look of the paintings is the result of all the things you have read about, looked at, liked and hated.”

Clearly for Wilson there was the physical and social pleasure of being out and about, remote from the slog and solitary confinement of the studio. He has always enjoyed the company of students and friends, immersed in camaraderie at the heart of which he was invariably the beloved jester. It is not hard to picture him and fellow artists, camped at Aldinga, the Piccadilly Valley or Strout Farm, absorbed in a collective spirit akin to the French painters at Barbizon, a kind of ersatz family brought together through a shared sense of place. Not to mention the elated feeling of regeneration, working close to nature surrounded by air, sunlight, rain, the sound of birds, and wind on the skin. Painting outdoors went beyond the mere seizing of a flashing, never-to-be-repeated optical moment. How deeply can we penetrate an artist’s earliest memories to illuminate why he became the artist he is? Wilson has little sentiment for his ancestral history but admits that his father’s peripatetic nature and the fracturing of his parents’ marriage during his childhood may have had something to do with his propensity to wander restlessly between spaces and relationships, yet manage to preserve their personal significance with extraordinary loyalty.

For there is no doubt, for all their architectonic caution, and the self-effacement with which Wilson plays them down, his paintings have a faint aura of yearning for the harmonious presence of people outside the picture plane. They present, in other words, a telling in absentia portrait of himself.

Like all good painters Wilson has improved with age. He pared back to perfection his palette for the dry, dusty fields of *Late Summer Landscape Dutton* (1980) and *Towards the Murray Flats*,

Dutton (1987). In his greatest masterpiece of composition, *The Milking Shed* (1991), he resolved a notoriously difficult — in terms of hue control — slab of green field in the foreground through a judiciously placed red roof and impeccably proportioned strip of grey sky. He projected a subtle, mystical light above the horizon of *Blue Bitumen to Paschendale* (2000) and *Monument to the South East Freeway* (2000), with shapes that beckon like the *Wittenham Clumps* of Paul Nash. And among his most recent paintings, *The Chair Near Port Lincoln* (2012), *Five Triangles of the Barossa Valley* (2013) and *Back Lit Barns* (2013), he brought a new, revelatory authority of brightness untrammelled by the plein-air problem of local colour.

Wilson has exhibited frequently, from group shows in commercial galleries to the Royal South Australian Society of Arts and the Contemporary Art Society and museum survey exhibitions of South Australian artists. His solo exhibitions have not been quite so frequent, but there has been no shortage of exposure born of a productive life. Reviewers on the whole have been generous.

Which raises the question: how long it will be before Wilson receives acknowledgment from outside the borders of his home state? Will he ever be assessed as an Australian rather than merely South Australian artist? His local stature beyond the mainstream of Sydney and Melbourne may be commensurate with someone such as Robert Juniper in Western Australia perhaps, or William Robinson in Queensland, except for a sense of triangulation connected with the past of South Australia that is quite unique.

Wilson looked carefully at two other great local artists of the 20th century who, like him, never left Adelaide: Hans Heysen and Horace Trenergy.

Heysen projected a timeless image of the South Australian pastorate, echoing European masters of the past he so admired like a Barbizon reverie transported to the Antipodes. Trenergy gave that vision a modern inflection through composition and texture, and an authentic mood of existentialist isolation. Wilson has added to their legacy a dance between nature and the transient forms of human industry.

And so the question of national recognition is probably irrelevant. For the only thing that matters in the end is that Wilson is an artist who has surprised us with ideas of landscape we might never have noticed, extending an invitation to share his pleasure in the technical challenge of immortalising those ideas in pigment. “The artist,” as Walter Sickert once wrote, “is he who can take a piece of flint and wring out of it drops of attar of roses.” Wilson can take a collapsed barn, or a rusted rain tank, or a dockland shed, set it against a classic natural sky and reconstruct our notion of the beautiful.

This is an edited extract from *Geoff Wilson: Interrogated Landscape*, by Barry Pearce. An exhibition of the same name opens at the Samstag Museum of Art, Adelaide, on Friday.

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