

Idris Murphy

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After 25 years of teaching, Idris Murphy is making time to focus on his own practice – and turning out more provocative work.

“ONE NEEDS to move away from the Renaissance way, the objective enlightenment view of the world,” says Idris Murphy. “That everyday way of looking at stuff is quite realistic and worthwhile (but) that’s not the way philosophically I relate to the world ... you have to try and form a new set of languages. The naïve work, indigenous work, the collection of Sepik River work and all those other things give me other ways of thinking about that.”

As a curator and writer, there are few more privileged things that you get to do than step into the working and living spaces of artists. This experience is so telling and insightful in terms of the work they do – it can show how an intensely personal vision is informed by the things with which they surround themselves.

To walk into the home of Idris Murphy is one such experience. The collection of objects, artworks and books assembled by himself and his family inform the everyday practice of painting. Walls are covered in African masks, Australian indigenous paintings, and prints by John Bellenay, Antonio Tapies and Matisse. Ceramics and sculptures adorn every flat surface. There is work for the eye to do, scanning across the plethora of objects, putting it all together and trying to deduce the role that this material plays in Murphy’s working life. In the studio, works pile against the walls – Murphy’s own and number of smaller works by other artists (Adrian Robertson, Jenny

01 Idris Murphy in studio

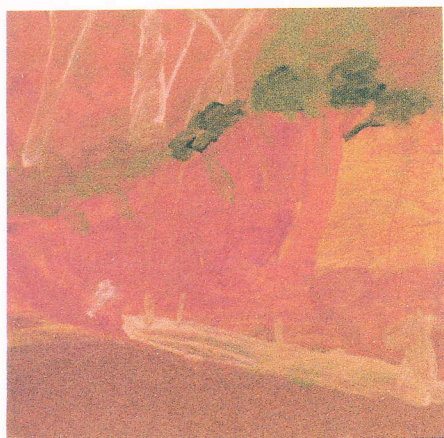
02 **Late In The Day Mutawintji**, 2007, Acrylic and collage on board, 30 x 30cm

03 **Desert Road**, 2007, Acrylic and collage on board, 30 x 30cm

04 **Sturt National Park 6**, 2007, Acrylic and collage on board, 30 x 30cm



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Caddle, a beautiful naive painting of Palm Beach by an anonymous artist found in an op-shop, more African and Papua New Guinean sculptures) – informing, challenging and inspiring his work. A wall of books, not just on art but also philosophy, poetry and religion, take up one corner. It's all grist for the mill.

The way artists collect and the way they look at art – either as image or word – is entirely different to the way a curator or theorist would look at art. It's a more intimate and felt reaction; it's about looking at the way things are made in a more philosophical and physical way. Some artists can be hopeless talking about their own work (that's why they make the work in the first place) but provide amazing insights and a completely

unique way of explaining the work of an artist or poet that they like, admire and respect.

TAKING TIME

"(I've) run part of my life in order to have time to walk and now I have time to walk," he says.

In Murphy's studio, one can track a number of systems and paths he has pursued that led to his most recent show of new paintings at King Street Gallery in August–September, 2007.

This show came not long after Murphy made the decision to take time out from his position as painting lecturer at COFA, with this break coming after a good 25 years of teaching at art schools from the NAS to the University of Wollongong. When I saw this show, I was struck immediately

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by what I saw as a breakthrough in his work, which has been on a slow burn for a number of years. The opportunity to paint full-time both in the studio and on-site was palpable.

"Time and continuity of time, week after week, time to think ... you can spend three weeks making a lot of dud things, saying they're all crap, but I learnt a hell of a lot and now I'll take that learning into the next stage," says Murphy. "I felt that [the paintings] had earned their time in the studio back and forth, turned around to the wall, looked at again. They were really getting there. I felt quite excited about it."

It's a funny thing, time. In terms of the art world, the rush to get to a point of financial and critical mass leads to burnout or, at the very least, a tension between the need to produce and the need to maintain that production over a long working life. It leads to a steady grinding out of young artists who flit from style to style, medium to medium, while the old idea that painting – and especially something like sitting down and painting the landscape – is perceived as something for the old guard. Indeed, the

landscape is old, well-furrowed ground, especially in this country.

"[Working outdoors] is absolutely crucial to my thinking and my work – to go out there like Cézanne and all those old boys and make these pictures," says Murphy.

"What I don't do is paint a view ... now I just paint a series of things that encompass that view. Some work and some don't but I end up working on five or six and keep reworking them, turning them over ... that little picture is as worthwhile as a big picture."

An artist like Murphy is becoming more challenging and provocative due to the fact that they want, their need to stick at a subject – in this case, the landscape – changes as a person changes



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and as the artist changes. It is the landscape as experience, as something both internal and external, as culture and nature.

VISION OF THE LAND

"One of the things I want to conserve is solitude ... without being confronted with stuff, human-made stuff, even great human-made stuff, but most of it's not just a deluge of stuff ... that just weighs you down ... out in the desert you lose that, you can't take it with you there and that's both wonderful and frightening," says Murphy.

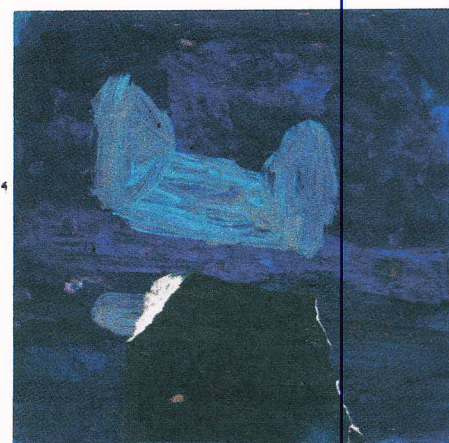
Over the past decade or so, Murphy's work has been intrinsically linked with his work in the desert regions of western NSW and further afield through his dedicated support and participation in workshops as founder of Imagining the Land International Research Institute (ILIRI). The desert, or even the idea of the "desert", is so paramount to the Australian visual imagining that Murphy is part of the lineage of Australian non-indigenous painters that see the desert as a site of mysticism and potential.

The emergence of an indigenous viewpoint and vision of the land is also something that, as a painter in this country, any serious artist has to get around or through. This is at the core of these new works – a way to incorporate the great western tradition that Murphy is part of and can't escape – with a new, direct depiction of the land based on spirituality and meaning.

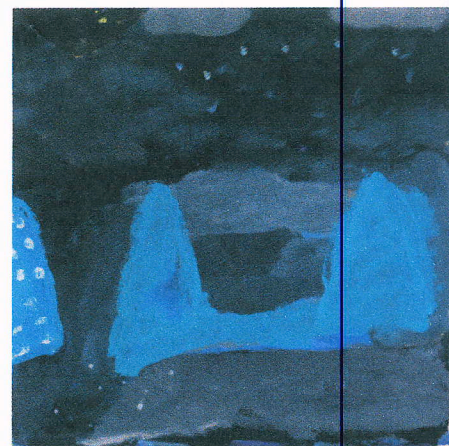
"I'm not interested in negating my way around [indigenous painting]," says Murphy. "I think it is going to be a problem, you know - can the western tradition sustain a view of the world? I mean, Peter Fuller used to talk about this when he came to Australia very briefly ... he saw in Williams and Nolan and a few other people he didn't know too much about the potential [for]



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the last great hurrah of the northern romantic tradition ... and I think there's a lot of truth in what he said ... and I think it's going to be a problem – it's not a problem for me! I'm just lapping it up! I'm not trying to be indigenous at all, in the sense of that's not me anyway, but I'm loving the idea of the European, you know, this great wonderful tradition which I belong to, fusing [with Indigenous art] happening right under my nose in my lifetime! And I can see that as a whole new sort of language base for contemporary painting."

A WORLD REIMAGINED

"Beauty doesn't have an agenda in itself – we just respond," says Murphy. "That's what makes us human and the possibility of being more human. Great pictures do this."

The works of Idris Murphy give us a chance to know that the possibility of Australian landscape painting isn't exhausted – it's only just beginning. It weaves in and out of so many histories and contexts. In Murphy's head, there is an amazing exhibition that draws upon his work and ties it up with the work that has inspired him. It reflects

the living and working life of the artist. On the reel screening in Murphy's mind, a steady stream of ideas, writing and images ebbs and flows, with the constant being a need to rearticulate the world in new and dynamic ways.

In the end, it comes down to producing works that hold their own place in the world and that move among us, that change as we change, as our friends change, as ideas or places we once held dear move away from the centre, like the light changing from dawn to evening and the sun hitting a patch of grass.

As Murphy says: "I just have to make something that is the best thing I can make."

05 **Night Series 4**, 2007, Acrylic and collage on board, 30 x 30cm

06 **Red Jump Ups**, 2007, Acrylic and collage on board, 30 x 30cm

07 **Night Series 3**, 2007, Acrylic and collage on board, 30 x 30cm

08 **Desert Night Sky**, 2007, Acrylic and collage on board, 60 x 60cm

All images courtesy the artist and King Street Gallery on William

For more on Idris Murphy:
www.kingstreetgallery.com.au