

Juliana O'Dean  
Visual Artist

# I and Thou

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*I and Thou* IDRIS MURPHY A Survey 1986- 2008  
Hazelhurst Regional Gallery 22nd August - 4th October 2009

*I – Thou*  
King Street Gallery on William 28th July - 22nd August 2009

Two significant exhibitions of Idris Murphy's paintings will be held in Sydney between July and October this year. The survey show at Hazelhurst Regional Gallery traces the development of an artist who is considered one of Australia's foremost landscape painters. At King Street Gallery on William, works completed by Murphy in 2009 will reveal an artist at the height of his powers.

Initial contact with Idris came about when, as a postgraduate candidate at COFA, I turned up to a meeting called to organise a two-week students' field trip. Notices had gone up around the painting studios asking students interested in making work in the far west of New South Wales to meet the organising lecturers for a briefing.

First impressions of Murphy, who was in charge of these expeditions, were of an open, measured, yet passionate personality, and of someone willing to articulate and share his knowledge, ideas and discoveries. The trip to UNSW Arid Zone Research Station Fowlers Gap, and Kinchega, turned out to be an extraordinary experience, opening up new visual, intellectual and conceptual landscapes.

During his 20 years of lecturing at COFA, Murphy organised 14 of these trips, giving hundreds of students the opportunity to make and discuss work in a range of arid landscapes. Many of us have found our artistic practice and understanding of country significantly influenced as a result. His work in this area has given impetus to the establishment, within COFA, of Imaging the Land International Research Institute. As a Director of ILIRI he has been instrumental in having residential artist's studios constructed at Fowlers Gap that allow Australian and international artists the opportunity of working for extended periods in unique desert environments.

Through his role as a highly regarded educationalist, (Murphy lectured in painting at COFA from 1988 until the end



Dr Idris Murphy discussing approaches to landscape painting with COFA students in the field at Fowlers Gap



Idris and Dr David Croft inspecting construction work on the new Postgraduate Studio at Fowlers Gap.

of 2007), Undergraduate students and his postgraduate candidates, found themselves participating in an educational experience in the true sense of the word. It was not the end product that was the focus, but opening up dialogue as to how, as an artist, you might travel forward developing a matrix of knowledge and practice to sustain the progress of your work. Murphy encouraged not only personal artistic exploration, but forays into philosophy, art history, theology, ethics, moral and cultural structures. The thesis for his Doctorate of Creative Arts sought to explore these issues within the framework of art education. In tracing the trajectory of Murphy's career, it is clear that his work as an educator is a crucial and satisfying element of his professional life.

The other element is his practice as a painter and printmaker, a commitment that has not wavered since completing 5 years of study at the National Art School in Sydney, from which he graduated in 1971. Recognition of his talent followed quickly, with Murphy's first solo exhibition at Macquarie Galleries, Sydney in 1972, and in 1975 he was awarded the Keith and Elizabeth Murdoch Travel Fellowship. This grant enabled him to take up post-graduate studies in painting and printmaking at Winchester College of Art in England.

It is interesting to note that in the period after his graduation, Murphy's paintings may have seemed somewhat dichotomous in approach as they crossed from abstraction to figurative images of the nude. He began to include landscape in his images while in England. Often painted from an interior space looking through a window, the weather being not always conducive to *plein air* work, these views of countryside could be considered the genesis of his future preoccupation with landscape.

Not content with making his own work during his stay in England, Murphy needed to thoroughly understand how other painters, particularly the Modernists, made their pictures. In trying to find out how and why these artists made the work they did, he became interested '*in the paradigms, the kind of structures people have invented to make pictures of the world around them. And when you start that, you also have to start looking at their belief systems, their world view, because all that comes into play.*'<sup>1</sup> Thus Murphy established a lifelong interest in the history of painting, philosophy, theology, literature and aesthetics.

Glennis Murphy kindly provided access to the letter of recommendation, written by William Crozier, Head of Department of Fine Art, Winchester College of Art, that Murphy received on the completion of his studies. It gives some insight into how Idris' career would develop on the basis of his broad interests and singular artistic abilities:

*I am very pleased to have this opportunity of recommending Mr Idris Murphy to you. During his stay at Winchester he has produced work of outstanding quality and he is certainly the most naturally gifted young artist I have met in twenty years of teaching.*

*He is urbane with an easy and charming manner. His interests are wide, whether in art, literature, music or the social sciences, as his opinions are sound and considered, based on detailed knowledge, experience and common sense.*

*As for his future, considering the energy, passion and dedication he brings to his work and his singular abilities of draughtsmanship, and execution in painting, I and my colleagues have every confidence that he could become an artist of the first rank.*

Wright's prescient assessment of Murphy's character and interests alludes to the influence that his innate curiosity and broad research interests would have in constructing his own intellectual and moral framework and approach to painting. Engagement with diverse cultural, philosophical, spiritual and ethical systems of knowledge was an essential activity in this development.

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<sup>1</sup> Janis Lander, *A Public of Individuals - Interview with Idris Murphy*, The College Voice - Archive, November 12 2006, Vol. 4 Issue 2.

Murphy returned to Australia in 1977 some twenty years after Fred Williams had completed the same journey, and there are some parallels and resonances between the paths and practice of these two landscape painters. Both artists 'came home' and saw their land anew, as many of us do after our first trip overseas. They also came to understand that while there are similarities in landscape among other regions in the world, nowhere else is there another place as strange, as old, and 'different' in so many ways as Australia. What they had thought of as 'normal' in the appearance of their natural environment before their travels stood out in stark relief as unique on their return.

For both Williams and Murphy 'seeing anew' and recognising this uniqueness created an impetus to find new ways of expressing the Australian landscape. Persevering to unearth these fresh truths through working *en plein air* and in the studio, both found ways of making images that departed from the approaches to Australian landscape painting prevailing in their time.

In finding new ways to articulate form in the landscape both artists drew not only on their Western artistic heritage and education but also on their observations of Australian indigenous art.

Murphy acknowledges a deep respect for indigenous people, their culture and art, saying that *'it's has given us a chance to reassess their paradigms in relationship to Western paradigms'*,<sup>2</sup> likening the *'crossing over of two completely different, yet related cultures, which are trying to deal with the land'*<sup>3</sup> in Australia to the mixing of cultural identities in America which produced Blues and Jazz. Indeed Murphy finds it exciting that he is working at a time when he sees the fusing of the European tradition of painting with Indigenous art, allowing *'a whole new sort of language base for contemporary painting'*.<sup>4</sup>

Murphy's first inland paintings were made at Fowlers Gap in 1994 while Williams' first set of inland images were made in 1967 at Tibooburra, a couple of hundred kilometres up the road, on a painting trip



Idris Murphy with colleague Badger Bates at Euriowie, during the 2007 International Symposium, 'Re-Cognising the Land'.

<sup>2</sup> Janis Lander, *A Public of Individuals - Interview with Idris Murphy*, The College Voice - Archive, November 12 2006, Vol. 4 Issue 2.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

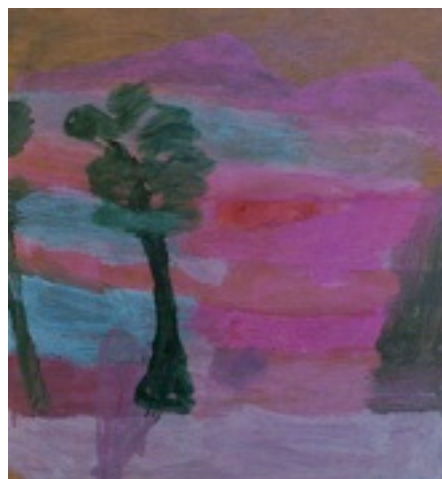
<sup>4</sup> Glenn Barkley, *Idris Murphy, Artist Profile*, Wolseley Media Pty Ltd, NSW, Issue 3, 2008, p.49.

with fellow artist Clifton Pugh. In both cases, the artists were struck not only by the form of the arid landscape but, as consummate colourists, by the range and relationship of hues and changes of colour that occurred at different times of day and night.

Patrick McCaughey, writing about Williams' Tibooburra images, makes a pertinent comment regarding the 'tough *'positivism' which proceeded from the observed'*.<sup>5</sup> Although primarily composed of marks, line and space, the viewer is still aware of the relationship of Williams' images to real and unembellished landscapes. It is that toughness and unromantic nature of Williams the painter and his need for '*something objective, form-building and form-creating*'<sup>6</sup> that connects us with what we think we know about the Australian landscape, albeit in the time frame of the 60's and in a radical way. We are drawn to his images because we recognise they are *about* our landscape.



Fred Williams  
*Tibooburra*  
1967  
Gouache, 57 x 75 cm



Idris Murphy  
*Tree and Fence outside Broken Hill*  
2001  
Mixed media on board, 60 x 59 cm

Murphy's paintings, which are variously described as powerful, ugly-beautiful, seductive, naïve, revelatory or transcendent, elicit different responses. Their apparent clumsiness and sense of struggle describes nakedly the artist's search for truth, laying bare his own honesty about the difficulty of that process. There is no sophisticated calligraphy of mark making or the application of cool, intellectual reason, nor any apparent artifice or layers of obfuscation. There appears to be no distance placed between the viewer and Murphy's own experience in making the work.

John McDonald, in his essay '*The Australian landscape revisited*' comments, '*Murphy has honed his vision of the landscape over many years of toil and experiment...At first glance his colours seem unnatural to the point of affectation, while his brushwork looks like it was executed with a broom. But they hold you, these ugly-beautiful, beautiful-ugly paintings.*'<sup>7</sup>

That his images appear so spontaneous in the making belies the fact that Murphy is concerned with the formal compositional structure of his paintings. An invitation to view a work in progress in the studio will often lead to a discussion of the placement of structural elements, form, proportion and geometry. As Christopher Allen stated

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<sup>5</sup> Patrick McCaughey, *Fred Williams*, Bay Books Pty Ltd., NSW, 1980, p.196.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 152.

<sup>7</sup> John McDonald, *The Australian landscape revisited*, Sydney Morning Herald, Spectrum, 10.9.2005, p. 28.

in his critique of the 2009 Wynne and Sulman Prizes, '*landscape painting involves more than the depiction of one's surroundings*'<sup>8</sup>, a truth to which Murphy evidently holds himself.

This 'underpinning' in his paintings is evidence of Murphy's position within the continuum of the Western tradition of painting. While he may have left behind the Renaissance 'tonal/ perspective' approach to landscape, he has found an endless and challenging playground in generating the structural coherence of his paintings. It is the successful resolving of the compositional problems he sets himself that imbues his works with an underlying complexity and solidity, not immediately apparent, but released in a slow burn over time.



Idris Murphy  
*Window tropical view*  
1998/99  
Acrylic and collage on board 60 x 60 cm



Henri Matisse  
*La palme*  
1912  
Oil and pencil on canvas 117.5 x 81.9 cm

While Murphy has looked to both Cezanne and Matisse in terms of pictorial structure, it is Matisse who has been one of his primary influences in terms of colour. In 1990 Murphy visited the exhibition *Matisse in Morocco*, at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The journeys that Matisse made to North Africa had a profound impact on his paintings. He was searching for light, deliciously delicate, soft and mellow, and to find truthful ways of describing it. He discovered it in the blues and greens of spring in Tangier, deep mauve and violet shadows, oranges and earth hues. The translucence and lucidity of colour in the works made in Morocco was a revelation for Murphy. Colour is an embodiment of sensual experience for him, as it was for Matisse, but it is also a tangible element that imbues a transcendent quality to Murphy's Australian landscapes.

Colour and colour relationships in the arid zones of Australia are subtle, splendid, unreal, complex and dramatic, and working *en plein air* in these regions often demands suspending what one knows about



Idris Murphy  
*Hillside After Burning Off*  
2006/7  
Acrylic and collage on board 91 x 90 cm

<sup>8</sup> Christopher Allen, *Land's end*, Australian Weekend, Review, Visual Arts, March 28-29, 2009, p. 8.

colour and becoming immersed in the experience of it. Between the landscape and the studio is the space where memories of colour, space, form, detail and sensual reactions reside. Some of this data is readily accessible to the mind but the rest slips into the unconscious, to be retrieved when needed.

In the studio memories come to the surface of the conscious mind, to be used as matter in the instinctive playing of the creative process. In a sense it is an alchemical process that takes place. Pieces of “memory matter”, creative play, possibilities springing from the imagination, and knowledge and skills of the painter’s craft are the substances with which the artist works to produce paintings. Through this alchemical activity the components are transmuted through interactions and reactions to become a newly created and unified whole. In discussing the relationship between alchemy and the process of making a picture with Janis Lander, Murphy described it as ‘...*trying to find out what happens when you put these substances together. Not for a preconceived outcome, but for what might appear from it. And what that shows about imagination and possibility – and hope.*’<sup>9</sup> He believes that this process allows transcendence, a quality all good pictures have.

The New Zealand artist Colin McCahon’s is a figure of influence for Murphy. McCahon’s knowledge of Martin Buber’s writings, his faith and his landscape paintings signalled that here was an artist who was worth Murphy’s interest. Also relevant to Murphy’s outlook was McCahon’s connection with Maori indigenous culture and his concern for the environment.



Colin McCahon  
*Waterfall*  
1964  
Enamel on plywood, 40 x 33 cm



Idris Murphy  
*Down to Pebbly*  
1993  
Acrylic and collage on board 61 x 61 cm

Viewing the exhibition ‘*Colin McCahon A Question of Faith*’ at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 2003 was a powerful experience for Murphy, an affirmation that exploration of the nature of spiritual belief through the medium of contemporary painting could produce profound works of art in an age of superficiality, irony and boredom.

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<sup>9</sup> Op.cit., Janis Lander.

Many of McCahon's works, including his paintings of landscape, contain overtly Christian images, symbols and quotations from the Bible. William McCahon, speaking of his father's *Waterfalls* series, states, '*Colin saw the waterfall as the earth bleeding – a sacrament of light issuing from the land recalling the blood shed by Christ in his passion; Christ becoming the earth.*'<sup>10</sup> This symbolic and transformative view of landscape is related to Murphy's spiritual belief that God exists in every thing. This belief becomes evident in his paintings by virtue their powerful immediacy, transcendent shimmerings and the sense of a quivering, dynamic force within.

Ken Kiff (1935-2001) was a British painter whose work Murphy was exposed to while studying for his Masters at Winchester College of Art. Not well known in Australia, Kiff was an important influence for Murphy. A figurative painter, he survived the post war period of abstraction, hard edge and conceptual art by resolutely continuing to make paintings which sprang from his imagination, landscapes inhabited with animals, birds, a little man, shapes and symbols, Painstakingly constructed in order that colour, line and shape "would sing out in being themselves",<sup>11</sup> Kiff made his work slowly, with meticulous proficiency in the painter's craft.

Kiff neither bowed to the dictates of fashion, the lure of celebrity, nor to other external pressures. He preferred to concentrate on the process of creation while allowing the finished product to take care of itself. A respected teacher at Chelsea and Royal College of Art until the mid eighties, Kiff influenced a generation of students.

Murphy was drawn to Kiff's work by its humanness, imagery, life force, innocence and poetry, and by the personal qualities Kiff embodied. Murphy doggedly continued to make figurative paintings, as Kiff did, when it was considered outmoded. Being unfashionable did not concern Murphy or Kiff, as it gave them time and space to develop ideas and work at their own pace, out of the mainstream. Kiff exemplified an approach to making art that Murphy found attuned to his own developing practice and validating of the direction of his work.

It would be remiss, having discussed some of the artists who have influenced Murphy, not to mention three major 20th century thinkers whose works have been formative in the way in which he engages with the world. He cites philosophers Martin Buber, Simone Weil and George Steiner as important to his intellectual, moral and aesthetic development and spiritual understanding.

The title of the survey exhibition *I and Thou* is homage to a short philosophical essay of the same name, published in 1923, by Martin Buber (1878 – 1965), a German Jewish philosopher. Buber's thesis of dialogical existence greatly interests Murphy, and the group of statements below encapsulates a core meaning of I and thou:

*I CONSIDER A TREE*

*I can look on it as a picture: stiff column in a shock of light, or splash of green shot with the delicate blue and silver of the background.*

*I can perceive it as movement: flowing veins on clinging, pressing pith, suck of the roots, breathing of the leaves, ceaseless commerce with earth and air - and the obscure growth itself.*

*I can classify it in a species and study it as a type in its structure and mode of life.*

*I can subdue its actual presence and form so sternly that I recognize it only as an expression of law – of the laws in accordance with which a constant opposition of*

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<sup>10</sup> Marja Bloom and Martin Browne, *Colin McCahon A Question of Faith*, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, Craig Potton Publishing, New Zealand, 2002, p. 32.

<sup>11</sup> Janet McKenzie, *Ken Kiff, 1935-2001*, Studio International e-Journal, 2001



*forces is continually adjusted, or of those in accordance with which the component substances mingle and separate.*

*I can dissipate it and perpetuate it in number, in pure numerical relation.*

*In all this the tree remains my object, occupies space and time, and has its nature and constitution.*

*It can, however, also come about, if I have both will and grace, that in considering the tree I become bound up in relation to it. The tree is no longer It. I have been seized by the power of exclusiveness*

*To effect this it is not necessary for me to give up any of the ways in which I consider the tree. There is nothing from which I would have to turn my eyes away in order to see, and no knowledge that I would have to forget. Rather is everything, picture and movement, species and type, law and number, indivisibly united in this event.*

*Everything belonging to the tree it is in this: its form and structure, its colours and chemical composition, its intercourse with the elements and with the stars, all are present in a single whole.*

*The tree is no impression, no play of my imagination, no value depending on my mood; but is bodied over against me and has to do with me, as I with it – only in a different way.*

*Let no attempt be made to sap the strength from the meaning of the relation: relation is mutual.*

Martin Buber, *I and Thou*

Buber is saying, in the first six sentences, that the relationship of himself with the tree is one of I and It, a relationship in which he differentiates the tree from himself by his perceptions and actions. 'I-It' signifies a distancing activity where the 'I' is dominant. If we move to the position of being bound in relation to the tree by our encounter, we then enter a state where there are two parts to a whole (the encounter) and 'I' perceives the other, whether it is a tree, an animal, a rock or a person, as Thou. It does not require replacement of any of the other ways in which the tree can be understood. When this shift in perception takes place it engenders a shift in position, view and way of acting. The encounter becomes a shared moment of existence for I and Thou.



Idris Murphy  
*Sturt National Park 4,5,6*  
2006/7  
Acrylic and collage on board 30 x 30cm

The 'openness' of Murphy's images and the lack of 'distance' experienced between the artist's expression and the viewer could be understood as effects of the 'encounter' between Murphy (I) and the landscape (Thou) that he is painting. That Murphy experiences a mutual relationship with the elements of the landscapes he works in allows an intimacy that is communicated directly to the viewer

Simone Weil (1900-1943) and George Steiner (1929 -) were both born in France to agnostic Jewish parents and became two of the most significant philosophers of the 20th century. In Weil's relatively short life she became an educator, philosopher, French Resistance worker, political activist and Christian religious mystic. George Steiner's interests traverse literature, language and society, exploring cultural and philosophical issues. He is a metaphysician, prefers generalisation over specialisation and believes it is essential to find a path to sharing aesthetic and philosophical experience which makes us more, rather than less responsive to human suffering.

For Murphy, engagement with the writings of Buber, Weil and Steiner has informed his own life philosophy and the approach to the way he practices his professions of artist and educator. He finds that the ways in which they have thought about the human condition, as polymaths and universalists, and in Weil's case, through the experience of her faith, offer valuable insights as to how we might live in a better relationship with the world and our fellow human beings.

'*Art is the illusion of spontaneity*' is a Japanese proverb that could well apply to the paintings of Idris Murphy. A world of meaning is held in these six words that describe the Japanese approach to aesthetics. The Japanese painter, calligrapher or potter is expected to reach a level of the highest technical excellence in his craft. But this is not enough to be considered an artist. The Japanese artist has the capability of making a work that appears completely spontaneous and effortless, that embodies spirit and life force, perfection and imperfection, and is, at the same time, transcendent but of the physical moment.

The ability to make such a work comes from a lifetime of study and effort, failure and success, personal exploration and reflection, and the ability to take risks. In looking at these joyfully spontaneous, perfect and imperfect, transcendent and spirited paintings of Idris Murphy, it is not just their physical appearance that illuminates us, it is the whole of the artist's being.

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Photos 1,2,and 3: Juliana O'Dean

Images 5,6,8,10and 11: Idris Murphy's paintings, courtesy of King Street Gallery on William and Randi Linnegar

Image 4: *Tibooburra 1967*, Fred Williams Bay Books Pty Ltd, Sydney, 1980

Image 7: *Waterfall, 1964*, Colin McCahon *A Question of Faith* Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, Craig Potton Publishing, Nelson, New Zealand 2002