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VISUAL ART
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Idris Murphy: I and Thou

For Idris Murphy, there is no hit-and-miss experimentation, no meditation on social and cultural issues, yet Murphy- in his way – is even more raw and uncompromising in his vision of the Australian landscape.

It was a standard insult directed at modern artists that they suffered form some eye or brain disease that made them see the world in the most outlandish colours. One can imagine Murphy's work being greeted in this manner because his palette is like that of no other Australian artist. Where everyone else would paint a blue sky and parched yellow earth, Murphy will discover great swathes of imperial purple, cobalt, ochre, pink or green. His trees are exercises in radical de-skilling, being little more than childlike hieroglyphics. His skies are one perpetual apocalypse. Somehow, miraculously, it works.

We are faced with an exhibition that is completely understated but persistent. At first glance the paintings seem to melt away from one's gaze: they are dark, introverted and secretive. Slowly they reveal themselves to the viewer, like wild animals that have gradually come to accept one's presence. But this is only the case for those viewers who keep looking.

The key to Murphy's work is that he is not painting the appearance of the landscape but a highly subjective impression, shaped by his perceptions and feelings. This is why he has titled the show *I and Thou*, after the small but influential book by the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber. It is a basic existentialist idea, that one only becomes "I" through understanding one's existence in relation to an "Other"; but Buber extends this to the relationship between a human being and God, and even to his own relationship with a tree. It is the tree idea for which Murphy has a special affection. In the catalogue he quotes Buber's words: "In considering the tree I become bound up in relation to it. The tree is no longer It."

This intense identification with the landscape can be felt everywhere in this survey. It is a relationship that comes naturally to Aboriginal artist but requires strenuous efforts on behalf of Westerners, who have to break with the pictorial habits of a lifetime. Whereas most non-indigenous artists tend to objectify the landscape, Murphy tries to fuse his own subjectivity with the mood and spirit of a place. The results are far from realistic but they are powerful and persuasive. This quest entails a leap of faith on behalf of the artist, a willingness to believe in a greater truth that lies beyond the veil of appearances. In trying to discern the atmosphere conjured up by these paintings, one might use the word "spiritual" with confidence and "mystical" with only slight embarrassment.