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Review

Review: Idris Murphy's exhibition at Drill Hall Gallery, Backblocks, is inspiring and lyrical

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Idris Murphy: Poussin and me at Hill End, 2003. Picture: Supplied

Idris Murphy: *Backblocks*. ANU Drill Hall Gallery, Kingsley Street, Acton. Until October 16. dhg.anu.edu.au.

Idris Murphy is a unique phenomenon in Australian art. His art predominantly involves painting country - the sparsely inhabited "backblocks" that have a special resonance with the artist.

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in the smaller paintings and with acrylic paints on aluminium with the larger works. Unlike artists who are concerned with a literal transcription of the landscape and are preoccupied with the passage



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sees before him. He does not view himself as being outside the landscape, but as painting from within - he is part of the country that he paints.

This very large exhibition of his paintings is the largest survey of his work that we have seen in Canberra and tours to the Orange Regional Gallery and next year to the S.H. Ervin Gallery in Sydney. Although it has a selection of a few pieces of his earlier work, it cannot be called a retrospective and has a focus on his paintings from the past decade. In some ways this is a pity, as Murphy is overdue for a retrospective exhibition that would include some of his quirky student work and the sophisticated explorations of colour from his years in London as well as a selection of his drawings, lithographs and his fascinating sculptural assemblages.

Murphy is predominantly a colourist - he adores Henri Matisse - and has devised his own peculiar palette. He was one of the earliest professional painters to embrace metallic paints and explains his conversion that when looking at a land full of gold, silver and copper colours, he felt that a certain authenticity could be achieved by painting with metal in your paint. The luminous radiating canvas *Poussin and me at Hill End*, 2003, simply resonates with rich flows of paint that are subtle, effective and possess a concentrated intensity.

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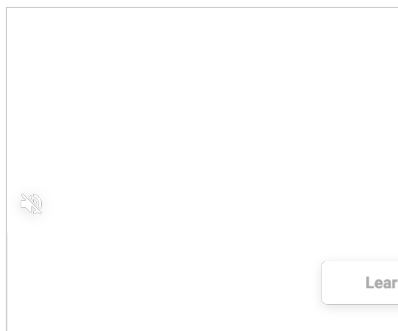
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Idris Murphy, Warnum. Picture: Supplied

Murphy enjoys sparseness with simplified blocked-in forms and sometimes scratched in designs. He describes himself as a "God botherer" and the spiritual dimension is never distant from the surface of his paintings. Although some of his canvases may be described as colour saturated, the colour is not there for show, it seems to intuitively belong. An intense painting on board, *Warnum*, 2011, seems to glow with desert heat and as you peer into the surface you notice elements of collage that have been incorporated into the surface to create an underlying structure.

Many artists, who like Murphy have developed a sense of visual intelligence, plunge into a repetitive hollow rhetoric where they repeat reliable tested strategies to create pleasing effects. In contrast, Murphy is happy to create awkward paintings in which you can see traces of hard-won victories in paint, struggles and strategic retreats. He does not paint from sketches, photographs or studies, but each painting is resolved on the hard surfaces. The smaller paintings are executed or at least commenced "en plein air", while the larger works are done in the studio.

What is inspiring about this exhibition is that the artist, after painting and exhibiting professionally for many decades, treats each painting as a new challenge - as if seeing and discovering country for the first time. There is a boldness, freshness and toughness - from the hallucinatory intensity of *Half Moon at the Nek*, 2015, set in Turkey at Gallipoli, to the sombre but joyous *Reflections and Shadows, Fowlers Gap*, 2011.