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Review

It's time this most original Australian artist got the attention he deserves

By John McDonald

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Idris Murphy in his studio. ELLA BURRETT

In this country, some of our greatest artists, such as Drysdale and Dobell, faced a long struggle for institutional recognition, followed by a rush of success when everyone jumped on the bandwagon. Recently, there's been a different pattern, with younger artists singled out as fashionable stars whose work is collected early by all the museums. What often follows is an equally rapid forgetting, as last year's prodigies become next year's nobodies.

It's time Australia's public museums gave up these vices and paid attention to consistent artists such as Idris Murphy (b.1949), who have acquired a strong following among private collectors with no encouragement from the institutions. It was the same story with Elisabeth Cummings – a much-admired painter who was ignored for decades before some belated recognition came her way. I could mention dozens of others.

A partial answer to this state of affairs has been the shows arranged by Terence Maloon and his colleagues at the Drill Hall Gallery in Canberra, over the past decade or two. Artists have been selected for the quality of their work and long-term achievement, not because they are addressing some of-the-moment issues or showing with a cool dealer.

If the Drill Hall can host these landmark mid-career surveys, one wonders why the bigger galleries, possessed of vastly greater resources, cannot. The simple answer is that they are not interested. The museums' sudden, overwhelming obsession with identity politics, means that ageing white male artists such as Murphy are *persona non grata*, not even eligible for that late, lukewarm recognition extended to Cummings.

The survey of Murphy's work currently on display at the S.H. Ervin Gallery debuted at the Drill Hall last year and has also travelled to the enterprising Orange Regional Gallery. It's a convincing performance by a hard-working painter who has lived in Sydney for most of his life, having shows every year or two. Yet when one looks at Murphy's representation in the Art Gallery of NSW, there is only a 1988 suite of prints based on Morris West's novel, *The Heretic*. These were donated by fellow artist Kevin Connor. In the National Gallery of Australia, it's a similar story, with prints but no painting.

Helicopter View with Dry Waterfall, the Kimberley (2012).

This is a concerning omission because Murphy is one of the most original landscape painters in this country, and landscape is one of only two areas in which Australia may be said to have made a unique contribution to world art. The other is Indigenous art, which is finally making its presence felt in the international marketplace.

When the NGA botched the *Australia* exhibition at the Royal Academy, London, in 2013, it was a lost opportunity to alert the world to the strength of local landscape. Although this was ostensibly the theme, the display was a confusing show bag of anything and everything, that left audiences cold.

Today, we are repeating that neglect at home, with the result that many excellent landscape painters are not getting their due. With an artist such as Murphy, part of the problem may be that his work does not provide an instant hit. Indeed, his sense of colour is so unusual, his brushwork so cack-handed, and his forms so simplistic, that some viewers will take a quick glance and walk away. But with work like this, which defies every cliche and convention of Australian landscape, one has to keep looking. Spend time with this exhibition and its subtleties become apparent. Look at Murphy's paintings over a number of years, and they become compelling.

Here is an artist with his own stubborn vision, who paints the landscape as he sees it, even if nobody else sees it in the same way. In time, he hopes we will come around to his point of view, or at least appreciate the integrity of his efforts.

Murphy is not trying to create an exact record of the landscape – he allows the mood and atmosphere of a place to find distant echoes within his own sensibility. A patch of brown, dusty

earth takes on a weird gleam as he analyses the way it responds to sunlight or shadow. Some scenes have a surprising vividness, others become muted and blurred. What seems at first profoundly unnatural, is revealed as merely another way of portraying what is *most* natural – to get beneath the skin of appearances and unearth the fundamental character of the country. To be more literary, one might call it the *genius loci* - the spirit of place.

Reflections and Shadows Fowlers Gap (2011).

It's unlikely that anyone else has ever seen such patches of bright green allied with brown-gold, metallic trees and shadows, as found in Murphy's *Green Tree Waterhole* (2019). Not many visitors to Hill End will have observed the same patchwork of loose, murky green-brown squares that Murphy discovers in *Poussin and me at Hill End* (2003). Can we believe in that bright blue in *Weipa Harbour Storm* (2005)? Or the opaque brown sky in *Helicopter View with Dry Waterfall, the Kimberley* (2012)? Few painters are willing to experiment with such dramatic collisions of bright and dark colours, such stark divisions of a picture plane into segments that may be banded, squared up, symmetrical, or completely lop-sided.

Weipa Harbour Storm (2005).

The colours Murphy uses are as much a product of his mind as they are of the landscape. In this sense he is more of a Symbolist than an Impressionist, relying on the 'inner eye' rather than the retina. He takes the data of the physical world and sifts through it, like a prospector panning for gold, seeking to capture what is most valuable. He is not merely responding to what he sees, but to the feelings a scene engenders in his own peculiar psyche – and I'm not using the word "peculiar" in a derogatory manner. One of the great virtues of artists is that they teach us to view the world in a different way, finding new dimensions in scenes that have grown dull through familiarity.

With repeated viewings, one notices small details such as the frequent use of collage, in which Murphy sticks a piece of painted paper onto the canvas to make a last-minute alteration. These discreet additions also change the texture of a work, introducing a tiny element of discord. His paintings can be immersive, but they are never harmonious in the manner of Streeton or Heysen. He doesn't want us to imagine ourselves gazing at a gum tree on a sunny day. With these landscapes, we need to pause and consider our relationship to a series of complex environments, picking out trees and paddocks, roads and distant hills. In time, we can accustom ourselves to the kind of view

Green Tree Waterhole (2019). IDRIS MURPHY

we are contemplating, be midday or twilight, dry and dusty earth or lush with new grass.

Murphy's most extreme invention is the image reproduced on the cover of the catalogue, *Reflections and Shadows Fowlers Gap* (2011). In this painting, he has reduced the landscape to three squiggly trees embedded in a band of pink revealed through a strip roughly torn from a great slab of black. We are immersed in this void, able to discern only a few ambiguous outlines of objects. It's as if we were gazing at the landscape through the eyeslot of Ned Kelly's helmet, with our view restricted to a mere sliver of countryside. At this point the artist has laid down his brushes and left the rest to our imaginations.

***Idris Murphy Backbocks* is at the S.H. Ervin Gallery, Millers Point, Sydney, until March 26.**

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