



IDRIS MURPHY
REAL PRESENCE

*There is language, there is art,
because there is 'the other'*
George Steiner

IDRIS
MURPHY
Real Presence

5 – 23 December 2017

King Street Gallery
on William

10am – 6pm Tuesday – Saturday
177 William St Darlinghurst NSW 2010 Australia
T: 61 2 9360 9727 F: 61 2 9331 4458
art@kingstreetgallery.com www.kingstreetgallery.com.au

Front Cover: *Flood tide* 2017 acrylic on linen 92 x 92 cm
Opposite: Studio 2017





Night light Durras Lakes 2017 acrylic on board 65 x 70 cm



Late moon rising 2017 acrylic & collage on board 122 x 132 cm



Desert coat of arms 2017 acrylic on aluminum 141 x 151 cm



Beach Lord Howe 2017 acrylic on board 35 x 40 cm



On the way to The Pinnacles WA 2017 acrylic on board 46 x 46 cm

CUTTING IN

What is empirical may not be felt. What is felt might not be seen. What is seen might not be known. And all of this forms the basis of both faith and doubt. The drama of memory is built on the porosity of perception. In the landscape this is compounded by the fact that the light is moving, the peripheral is sensed (but remains unwitnessed) and, inevitably, the 'truth' of the view is going to change. To acknowledge the impossible and the simultaneous, the fragile and the archaic, is to paint a modern landscape.

Evolution in the paintings of Idris Murphy is slow. Even a fleeting glance will note the signposts he has made his own: the solitary swollen tree, the brilliant counter-intuitive colour, land-masses restlessly bursting at the seams of the square. Through the colour alone, you can recognise his griffe at several paces. But the changes that occur within his work, if quiet, are important.

For some years colour in the hands of this painter was verdant, almost humid in sensuality and ripely inviting. His vision of the centre and the desert was a startling Medina, pouring water on the wound of the 'dead heart' and all that dry red earth. Colour, re-invented in his spectrum, explained all the mutations of weather and mass and cloud with a raw and brisk hand. Laying it down and moving into its core, his palette rarely seemed perplexed. Instead there was a conversation occurring within its own lexicon and the language was bold. Untethered from the burden of light source, Murphy cleaved Australian landscape away from its

perpetual obedience to tonal humility. In fact he heaved us out of the mud once and for all.

To me, it was like his painting was raining back into the well and breaking the drought. When he was younger and just back from London, other Sydney artists asked him why, why on earth, he wanted to paint the Australian landscape at all. "Busy mining the last coal face of late American Modernism they said to me 'mate, there is NOTHING out there.'" Such banal provocations were well timed. Perhaps intuiting that there was no greater abstract challenge than an uncharted (and underestimated) landmass, Murphy shed the mannered notes of his Eurocentric training and apprenticed into the bush. Akin to Francis walking out of Assisi, he shed pictorial conventions like unwanted robes. The horizon line was pushed up and out, shadow was abutted to its liminal limit, detail was evinced, illusion was flattened and foliage became as direct as a fingerprint.

The raw quality he invented was not mining the scene but cutting into painting itself, cleaving away the dead wood of metaphor, symbolism, and colonial anguish. Looking into the guts of these paintings I see rage inside the tranquillity, an impatient urge to scrape away the weight of habit and interrogate the vernacular. That impulse arrives in the new works with subtle inference. In these paintings, darkness shows its face and the touch, though always freshly nuanced, is rougher. Some works slide across aluminium instead of linen. Others use black as a colour rather than a tone.

He also introduces the industrial mineral sheen of metallic paints. The tension between a work being pictorially resolved and tightly replete or more vulnerable and uncertain is sustained in many of these paintings. Unlike the works where the landscape holds all, here are images that reveal the battle of process and the 'talk' inside their making. They are allowed to tremble.



Advancing trees with two clouds 2017
acrylic & collage on board 45 x 50 cm

On the studio wall there are shards of ripped paper and canvas. Moving from one frame to another Murphy cuts into the square with these fragments or takes a panel and simply inverts it. Some of the paintings consist of parts and they are moving parts. "The movement of

four panels, creates a fifth entity" he explains simply "and that entity is the unknown force outside the discipline of the square and the quadrant. It is the unstable element that energises and questions the whole." Compositionally, these are restless inventions. This finds full flower in a work like "Momentary Reflections" (Acrylic on aluminium and collage, 2017). Inside the magnetic diagonal pull of the painting it seems that landforms, time and light are compounding. As if a seismic volcanic energy was brewing beneath flat paint.

If Idris Murphy's first project was to eliminate the limits of a "view" and to shatter the soothing decorative impulse, his second movement expands the polemic into harder reaches. Here is a skeleton tree reduced to a bleached harrowed line. Here is a strange shade of green not native to a dry interior. Or, a tense pink sky bursting with rain that won't fall. Revelation and mute ambivalence are sharing the same habitat. Very beautiful things push into the terrain of very plain things. And it contributes to a whole that has been building over decades. Brewing. Breaking down. Re-growing like a stubborn plant. These are landscapes that refute belief yet invite return. If faith has the power to silence doubt, even for a few moments, then painting still stands as a portal. Earth is assailed but obdurate. It is a still a place where the lovers rise up and the mountains touch the ground.

Anna Johnson, October, 2017



Falling light outgoing tide 2017 acrylic on linen 92 x 92 cm



Last light South Coast 2017 acrylic on linen 92 x 92 cm



Desert rain 2017 acrylic on aluminium 150 x 150 cm



Fence line 2017 acrylic & collage on board 150 x 150 cm





On the way to Gore 2017 acrylic on board 65 x 70 cm



Sky reflection water hole 2017 acrylic & collage on board 45 x 50 cm



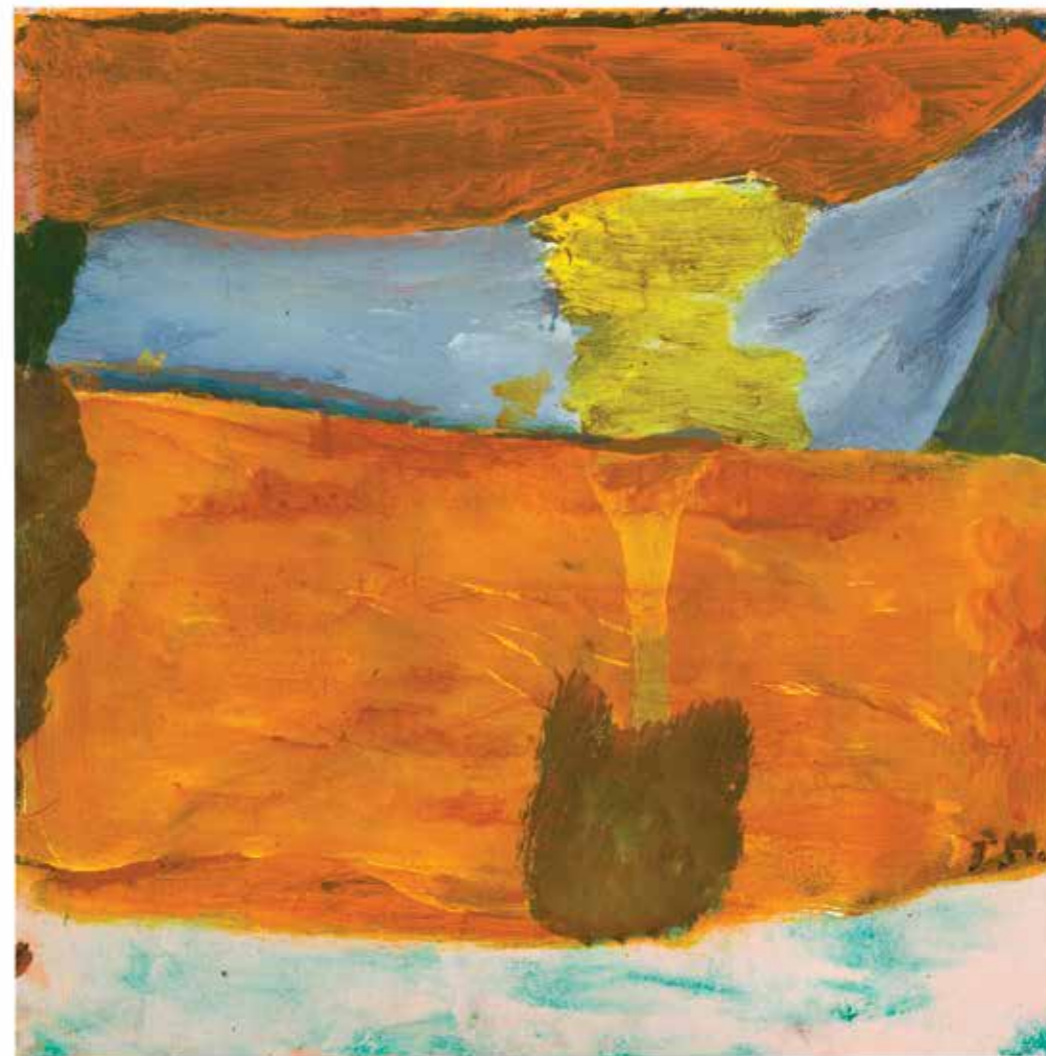
South Coast evening 2017 acrylic on board 45 x 50 cm



Windy day Fowlers Gap 2017 acrylic & collage on board 30 x 30 cm



Transit of the sun 2017 acrylic on board 40 x 40 cm



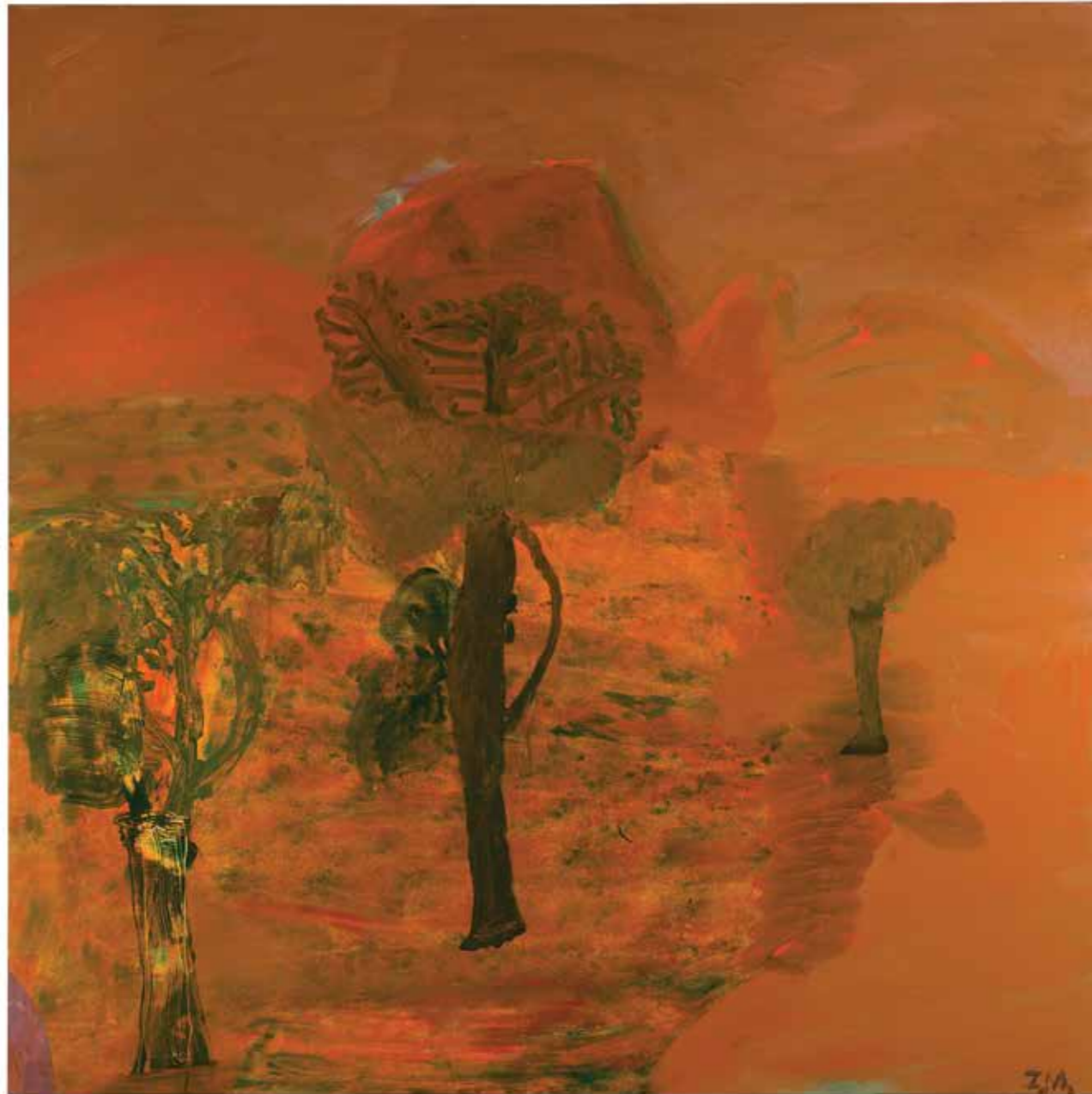
The reflections 2017 acrylic on linen 92 x 92 cm



Rainbow water Bellinghen 2017 acrylic on linen 92 x 92 cm



Silver trees 2017 acrylic on linen 92 x 92 cm



Rainbow after broken drought 2017 acrylic on aluminium 150 x 150 cm



Sunset reflections 2017 acrylic & collage on board 46 x 46 cm

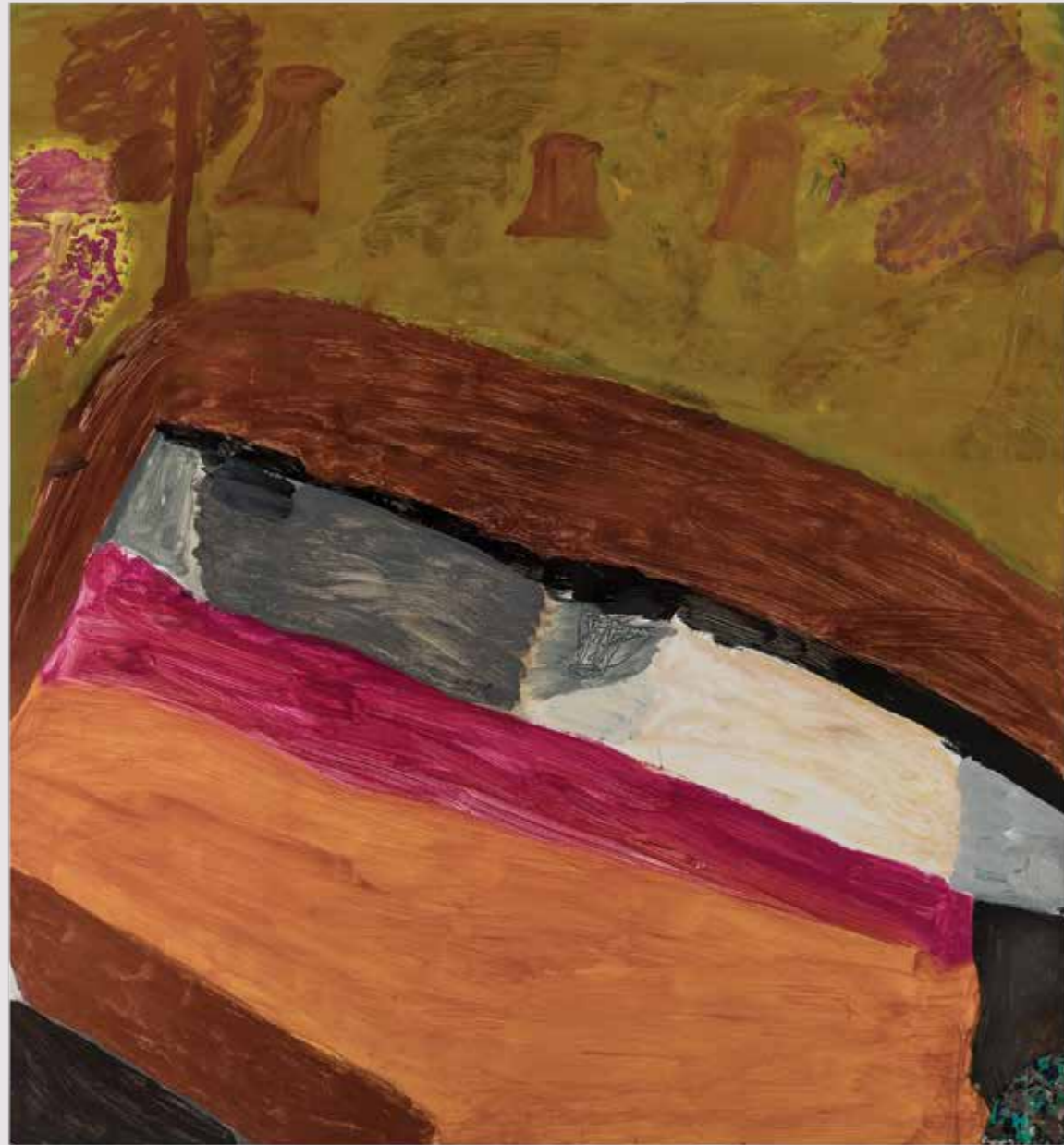




Running waters Queenstown 2017 acrylic & collage on board 65 x 70 cm



On the way to Gore, NZ 2017 acrylic & collage on board 65 x 70 cm



Momentary reflections 2017 acrylic & collage on aluminium 151 x 141 cm



Red wall and empty dam 2017
acrylic & collage on board 35 x 40 cm



The dam, homage to Howard Hodgkin 2017
acrylic & collage on board 46 x 46 cm



River colour NZ 2017 acrylic on board 30 x 30 cm



Evening with running clouds 2017 acrylic & collage on board 46 x 46 cm



Wild river 2017 acrylic & collage on board 122 x 132 cm



Evening Bellingin River 2017 acrylic on board 30 x 30 cm



The wharf 2017 acrylic & collage on board 151 x 141 cm



EVERYTHING WATER EVERYWHERE GODS

Paul Martin and Idris Murphy first met in London at the age of 22. After a lifetime spent making and painting, teaching and learning, they met again in Perth, Western Australia, a meeting that sowed the seed of this exhibition. In conversation they discovered much common ground: both had developed a deep concern for the environment and in their landscape painting both had been drawn to fragile and imperilled ecosystems, the 'edgelands' which give this exhibition its title, all the while seeking an understanding of what Martin has called *'the gritty sacredness of places and things'*. In addition they had been proposing to themselves similar questions about the nature and purpose of landscape painting itself. Edgelands is in part a response to those questions; it also invites viewers to pose questions of their own – what is it to look at a landscape painting, or indeed a landscape?

Part of what links Martin and Murphy as landscape painters is their insistence that art involves an engagement with nature, with that which is not art. Murphy has written elsewhere of his painting expeditions to the Australian bush and desert, which, he says, offer him enough to last him a lifetime; Martin's works meanwhile frequently incorporate natural materials obtained from the very landscapes he paints. Both men would reject an art that is self-reflexive, an art that refers only to art, an art reduced to a facile, if admittedly sometimes dazzling, po-mo play of surfaces. Which is not to say that surfaces aren't important of course: as Jean Dubuffet wrote, *'the purpose of painting is to decorate surfaces, and it therefore effects only two dimensions and excludes depth'*, a comment

that seems particularly relevant to the work of Idris Murphy. However Dubuffet also said, 'I want painting to be full of life – decoration, swatches of colour, signs and placards, scratches on the ground', and the relation of art to life is a primary concern of both Murphy and Martin.

While an engagement with nature is important, it is doubtful whether we can ever view a landscape with an entirely innocent eye: the landscape is always imaginatively transformed. In a celebrated passage in Alasdair Gray's *Lanark*, the central character, Duncan Thaw, is asked why no one ever notices the beauty of Glasgow. He replies, *'because nobody imagines living here ... if a city hasn't been used by an artist not even the inhabitants live there imaginatively.'* As with a city, so with a landscape: travellers to Italy in the early 18th century, we are told, would close the curtains in their carriage on crossing the Alps to shield their eyes from the abhorrent and frightful scenes of desolation all around. Less than a century later, after art had discovered the sublime, these same scenes would draw tourists from all across Europe. When the first convict transports arrived in Australia in 1788, that country had undergone no such imaginative transformation and an examination of the diary entries of the officers of the first fleet reveal a mixture of bafflement, and responses that baffle us today. One compares the landscapes of what would become Sydney to *'a deer park, as if intended for the purpose'*, while another talks of *'terass's, lawns and grottos, with distinct plantations of the tallest and most stately trees I ever saw in any nobleman's ground in England'*. Of course, this was not in fact an



Treescape Lord Howe 2017 acrylic on board 35 x 40 cm

The Australian painter, Ken Whisson who has lived in Italy for many years, said one of the things which appealed to him was that he could be an outsider, a foreigner with an insight into a culture not always examined or seen from the inside.

In a review of *'Edgelands'*, a title for a joint exhibition in Edinburgh in 2014 by myself and Scottish artist Paul Martin; Gregor Sloss was able to enter into a similar analogy.

I have received permission to republish the review in Australia.

I consider it particularly persuasive (from an outsider) in considering my own paintings and the context they may be seen in and understood.

Idris Murphy.

unimagined country, merely one alien to the European imagination. The indigenous peoples of Australia had been imagining – or dreaming – that harsh yet beautiful landscape for 40,000 years or more. While Idris Murphy is an artist steeped in the European tradition, he also acknowledges that the awakening of interest in and the encounter with Aboriginal art in the 20th century has utterly transformed and re-invigorated Australian art and that no Australian artist can fail to have been affected by Aboriginal art and the ideas about the landscape it embodies. These ideas are perhaps best summed up by Peter Sutton in his book *Dreamings*: at one point he describes travelling downriver in northern Australia with a group of Aborigines when one young man indicates the landscape all around and tells him, *'epama epam', 'nothing is nothing'*. The world was created by, and is still sustained by, the *Dreamings*, and all that we see are the marks that they have made: everything is intentional and imbued with meaning. As Sutton puts it, *'there is no wilderness'*. An Aboriginal landscape painting is a representation of a representation. Sutton quotes the words of an artist from a coastal community in Cape York: *'the land is a map'*.

In Aboriginal thought the distinction or dichotomy between the physical existence of the landscape and its internal story, its meaning, does not exist, but a post-Enlightenment European sensibility finds it difficult, if not impossible, to accommodate such ideas. Nature is there to be named, measured, quantified, used, it is food and fuel for our own paramount desires: beyond this it has nothing to tell us. Where it has meaning at all, as in art, as in poetry, it is meaning as metaphor, the meaning we bestow upon it: we claim, like Humpty-Dumpty, that it means what we say it means, neither more or less. Outside of us nature is a mere blind, booming, buzzing confusion. To get beyond this we must adopt a quite different cast of thought.

'Signatures of all things I am here to read, seaspawn and seawrack, the nearing tide, that rusty boot': this is Stephen Dedalus walking into eternity along Sandymount strand. Dedalus, of course, is one who has gone beyond Enlightenment paradigms, or rather gone before, for his head is full of Aristotle and Aquinas, and even that phrase *'signatures of all things'* comes from an alchemical treatise by Jakob Böhme. This passage, from Joyce's *Ulysses*, is one that springs immediately to mind as we contemplate the works by Paul Martin in this exhibition, works inspired by other, Scottish shores, works which depict, or indeed contain, a similar assemblage of disparate objects ranging from seashells and seaweed and sand to banal shoreline detritus – Joyce has a rusty boot, Martin a discarded set of false teeth. Martin, too, seems to invite us to view what he has to show as at one and the same time physical objects, as being that which they are, and as being something else, a story, a signature, a sign. *'The god whose oracle is in Delphi,'* writes Heraclitus in one of his fragments, *'neither tells nor conceals, but gives a sign.'* In a gallery we can see, though not perhaps read, these signs because we approach the work with an aesthetic gaze, in what Stephen Dedalus, discussing Aquinas, calls the *'luminous silent stasis of esthetic pleasure'* – luminous, and perhaps also numinous. We are arrested by beauty, by the refulgent glow of Martin's triptych *Remembering Lot's Wife*, the vibrant emerald freshness of Murphy's *Shadows and Pines, Turkey* or his jewelled yet brooding *Sliding Trees, Dam Reflections*; we are drawn in, we look deeper, we see more. Perhaps, though stasis is not enough. In one of his letters, the poet Rilke points this up. *'In order for a Thing to speak to you'* he writes, *'you must regard it for a certain time as the only one that exists, as the one and only phenomenon, which through your laborious and exclusive love is now placed at the centre of the*



The Bellingen River 2017 acrylic & collage on board 40 x 40 cm

universe'. What is interesting about this letter is Rilke's conception of things which *'speak to you'* – *'are you prepared to devote all your love to me,'* he imagines them asking, *'to lie with me as St Julian the Hospitaller lay beside the leper ... because [his] motive was love, the whole of love, all the love there is on earth.'* Such is our relationship to objects in the gallery: perhaps, this exhibition suggests, we could when we exit the gallery door take that reflective, maybe even reverential, sensibility back into the outside world.

As the first of the pre-Socratics, the Greek Thales stands at the headwaters of all Western philosophy; he lived at Miletus, at the mouth of that great flâneur among rivers, the Meander. We know him only by reputation, through Herodotus and Aristotle, and none of his writings survive, except – if the words are in fact his – for one curious phrase: *'everything is made of water and there are gods everywhere'*. Perhaps this

was merely mistaken observation: perhaps Thales, standing on the Milesian shore and watching the river debouch the alluvial silt that would eventually choke the city's port, did indeed think that the very earth he stood on was made of water. We might remember, though, that for Heraclitus, who flourished fifty years later in nearby Ephesus, water was the embodiment of flux and constant change: perhaps that gnomic utterance of Thales is saying that while life is indeed all flux, all booming, buzzing, confusion, there exists everywhere in nature that which, if gazed at steadily, if listened to intently, can offer us spots of time, epiphanies, can reveal some deeper truth, some order, can offer what Heraclitus would term *'logos'*. If we are to understand Thales thus then that sentence might provide a motto for this whole exhibition. Cosmos out of chaos, chaos containing cosmos: our minds shift between the two levels of being just as, John Berger says in his essay *'Painting a Landscape'*, the painter's *'glance constantly moves between the scene itself and the marks on the canvas'*, just as we constantly negotiate between the object itself and the story it has to tell. *'Objects no longer confront us,'* Berger writes. *'Rather relationships surround us.'* This is certainly true of the work of Murphy and Martin, whose encounters with landscape are, to quote Berger again, *'a ferocious and inarticulate dialogue ... [a] burrowing under the apparent.'*

On another shoreline, Sir Isaac Newton once imagined himself as a boy *'diverting myself in ... finding a smoother pebble or a prettier shell than ordinary, whilst the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered before me'*. Perhaps, with a different gaze, that pebble would have had more to tell than he imagined: perhaps, with a different gaze, we could see the world in a grain of sand.

Gregor Sloss, Warburton Gallery, Edinburgh



Silver trees and dam 2017 acrylic & collage on board 30 x 30 cm



Road into Moonee 2017 acrylic on board 40 x 40 cm



Apparent light contradiction 2017 acrylic & collage on board 120 x 130 cm

Idris Murphy

Born

1949 Sydney, NSW, Australia

Studies & Work

1988-2007 Lecturer, College of Fine Art, University of New South Wales, Sydney

1997 Head of Drawing, National Art School, Sydney

1994 Doctorate of Creative Arts, University of Wollongong, NSW

Solo Exhibitions [selected]

- 2017 *Real Presence* King Street Gallery on William
New Work Alcaston Gallery, Melbourne
- 2016 *Drawing Breath [works on paper & heliographs]* King Street Gallery on William, Sydney
- 2015 *Tide-Lands* King Street Gallery on William
- 2014 *Landscapes Inscapes* King Street Gallery on William
 Idris Murphy & Paul Martin, Warburton Art Gallery, Edinburgh UK
- 2013 *Everywhen* King Street Gallery on William
- 2011 *Interrogating Appearances* King Street Gallery on William
- 2010 *I & Thou: Survey Exhibition 1986-2008* Broken Hill Regional Art Gallery, NSW
 Idris Murphy at Bett Gallery Hobart, Tas

Group Exhibitions [selected]

- 2017 *Artist Profile Australasian Painters* Orange Regional Gallery, NSW
Hadley's Art Prize Hadley's Orient Hotel, Hobart, TAS 2016
Paint my Place Coffs Harbour Regional Art Gallery
- 2015-17 *Country & Western: landscape re-imagined* [curated by Gavin Wilson], launching at Perc Tucker Regional Gallery, Qld-travelling Qld, NSW, Vic, NT
Hazelhurst Works on Paper Award Hazelhurst Regional Gallery
NSW Parliament Plein Air Painting Prize Parliament House, Sydney
Your Friend the Enemy, 100 Years On, Gallipoli The Drill Hall Gallery
Your Friend the Enemy, 100 Years On, Gallipoli Travelling: SH Ervin Gallery, Bathurst Regional Art Gallery
A Salute: Drawing Show Goulbourn Regional Gallery, NSW
- 2014 *Oz to Waiheke* Waiheke Community Art Gallery, NZ
Gallipoli Art Prize Exhibition Gallipoli Club Sydney
- 2012-2013 *Not the Way Home* [curated by Owen Craven] SH Ervin, Sydney & traveling
- 2012 *KIAF/12 Korean International Art Fair*, COEX Building, Seoul
Virtual Reality: Interpreting the Landscape [King Street Gallery @ Newcastle University Gallery] Newcastle, NSW
- 2010-11 *On this Island* [Eleven prominent artist paint New Zealand] curated by Owen Craven, Hazelhurst Regional Gallery and Arts Centre, NSW; Bathurst Regional Art Gallery, NSW; King Street Gallery on William, Sydney; Bowen Galleries, Wellington, New Zealand
- 2010 *Recent Acquisitions* Broken Hill Regional Art Gallery, NSW
Three Artists [Euan Macleod, Idris Murphy, Ann Thompson] Bega Valley Regional Gallery, NSW
Recent Acquisitions Charles Sturt University Art Collection, Wagga Wagga, NSW
Prints from Cicada Press [curated by Michael Kempson], Bowen Galleries, Wellington, NZ

Residencies & Awards

- 2017 The Western Front, France
2016 Moonee Beach Artist in Residence, Coffs Harbour Regional Art Gallery, NSW
2014 Gallipoli 'En plein air' project conceived by Robert Linnegar- in association with Artist Profile Magazine
Waiheke Island Residency in association with Waiheke Community Arts Centre, New Zealand
2013 Gallipoli 'En plein air' project conceived by Robert Linnegar- preliminary visit
2011 Working tour of Fowlers Gap & Broken Hill, NSW by invitation of Artist Profile Magazine
2009 Working tour of New Zealand's North Island by invitation of Artist Profile Magazine

Bibliography

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Hadley's Art Prize Exhibition Catalogue, Hadley's Orient Hotel p39
2016 Stranger, Lucy: Idris Murphy Drawing Breath, Artist Profile p
2015 Wilson, Gavin: Country & Western Exhibition Catalogue Perc Tucker Regional Gallery pp46-7
Your Friend the Enemy Gallipoli Centenary Catalogue [contributing writers]: Dr Nelson, Brendan,
Maloon, Terence, Yip, Andrew, McDonald, John & Manera, Brad, April pp5-15 & pp36-9
Stanger, Lucy: Your Friend the Enemy, Artist Profile magazine 100 year Anzac publication, March pp22-7
McEwen, Sandra: From Goulburn to Gallipoli Catalogue Essay, A Salute Goulburn
Regional Gallery pp32-3
Winton, Tim: 'A Walk at Low Tide' catalogue essay, Edgelands, Warburton Gallery
McDonald, John: Your Friend the Enemy, An artist odyssey to Gallipoli Art Almanac April p40
Little, Elizabeth: Lila Jean Vintage Magazine Issue Two Autumn p63-67
Grishin, Sasha: The Canberra Times, Artists' work re-visits the battlefield, April
Hammond, Bradley: CHROMA Exhibition Catalogue, 2015, pp
Cush, Jane: A Salute Catalogue Essay p5
Sebag-Montefiore, Clarissa: BBC Interview and blog with Amanda Penrose Hart and Leo Robba, March
McDonald John, Anzac Evolution, SMH Spectrum April 25-26th
2014 Kemp, Emma, 'Love letters inspire Gallipoli Art Prize' The Australian, Apr, 24, p12
Burke, Justin: 'Prized depiction of Gallipoli,' The Australian Arts, Apr 24
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O'Brien, Sean: In the Field at Fowlers Gap <https://vimeo.com/69856349>
2013 O'Brien, Sean: Idris Murphy Exhibition Everywhen <https://vimeo.com/72794671>
2012 McDonald John: 'Beyond the Pale,' Spectrum, SMH, Jan 21-22, pp20-21
2010 'King Street Gallery on William,' A Guide to Australian Art and Galleries-2010, jointly produced by
Australian Consulate General in Shanghai Commercial & Shanghai International Culture Assoc. pp182-185
Year's First Exhibit,' Barrier Daily Truth, Feb 5, p2

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Collections

- Allens Arthur Robinson
Art Gallery of New South Wales
Artbank, Australia
Drill Hall Gallery, Australian National University, Canberra
Coffs Harbour Regional Gallery, NSW
Cowra Regional Art Gallery, NSW
Gallipoli Memorial Club
Australian Graduate School of Management
Australian Library of Art, State Library of Queensland, Qld
Bendigo Regional Art Gallery, NSW
Bibliotheque National de Paris
Brisbane Grammar School, Qld
Broken Hill Regional Art Gallery, NSW
Charles Sturt University, NSW
Clot/Bramsen et Georges Studio, Paris
Kedumba Drawing Collection, NSW
Long Gallery & Art Collection, University of Wollongong, NSW
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
National Library of Australia, Canberra
Northern Rivers CAE, NSW
Orange Regional Gallery, NSW
Parliament House, Canberra
Rockhampton Regional Art Gallery, Qld
State Library of New South Wales
Telecom Collection, Melbourne
Tyrone Guthrie Centre, Ireland
UBS Warburg, Sydney
University of New South Wales
Westpac Collection, Australia



The tree 2017
bronze rose wood & iron
46 x 22 x 22 cm



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art@kingstreetgallery.com
www.kingstreetgallery.com.au

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