

ART

Sue Cramer

COMMENTING on his Ned Kelly series, Sidney Nolan said he wanted to "hear more of the stories that had taken place within the landscape."

On show at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art is 'The Dream and the Daemon', paintings by visiting Irish artist Michael Mulcahy, which similarly seek to capture the mythic life of the landscape, the stories and legends, beasts and demons that are the hidden presences within it.

Mulcahy is known to some Australian audiences for his two works in the Sydney Biennale this year, in particular 'At War', a gruesome image exploring the troubled seas of Irish nationalism.

The theme of the current work, painted in outback Australia, is an intensely romantic one, the mix and confrontation of an ancient Celtic sensibility (the "daemon"), with the primitivism ("the dream") of the Aboriginal land.

As the Kelly myth reminds us, an Irish spirit has long been part of a white man's presence in this country. But Mulcahy's images vary greatly in their capacity and strength, and the romantic myth, for all its poetry, is not always enough to carry the paintings through.

There are some high points, however. One of the best paintings, 'Central Australia I', distils a particular quality of experience from the stillness and quiet of the white crescent Moon, the cold blue grey rock and the ancient aura of a desert night.

Romantic myth not always quite enough

Mulcahy often uses a very deliberate, unprimed and primitivist mark. 'Desert Man I' is the strongest example. It is an iconic, tribal symbol, perhaps a mask or shield which seeks to focus some ancient primal power.

Elsewhere, brightly colored birds and snakes, the ungainly Cassowary, and blood red beasts, loom and roam the forests and plains, sometimes shifting and changing shape before our eyes. In the central diptych, 'The Daemon and the Dream', the masked white face of a man, hovers startled and ill at ease, surrounded by shrieking desert sands.

Mulcahy's exhibition is the first at the centre bringing together the international and the Australian, and romantic primitivism sounds the keynote. But the exhibition indicates that substantial one-man shows can be hung to full advantage in the relatively small spaces of the newly opened centre. And that presents an exciting prospect.

(The Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Dallas Brooks Drive, The Domain, South Yarra. Ends 28 October.)

IN her own idiosyncratic and evocative way, Rosalie Gascoigne draws upon stories and

memories from within the Australian countryside. Her exhibition at Pinacotheca Gallery of work from the past three years, shows little change or development, but a consistent commitment to a body of images which are by now identifiably her own.

Gascoigne's success (she represented Australia in the Venice Biennale 1982) was arrived at intuitively, and with little apparent knowledge of art developments. But her art nevertheless reflects the renewed emphasis on the "biographical" and the "personal" and on people (particularly women) making art out of the material of their own lives. This characterised the so-called post-modern "pluralism" of the seventies.

At times the work verges on the sentimental and the nostalgic, and Gascoigne's use of drink crates (Schweppes, Crystal) becomes more than a little repetitive. But that is not to undermine the essential appeal of her art which lies in her ability to "make do", or to improvise with "found objects", weathered wood, broken Laminex, boxes, cups, shells, grasses and newspaper. All are objects stumbled across within a particular radius of her home.

Pink can hint at the flight of ga-



'Desert Man I' 1984 by Michael Mulcahy: seeking to focus some ancient primal power.

lahs, blue suggests the sky, a flowery table top becomes a 'Herb Garden'. 'Smoko' combines layered newspaper with shimmering grass and subtly shaded gravel which looks like grain. 'String of Blue Days' evokes its title with

minimal expressive means. Gascoigne invents her own vocabulary in a gentle, poetic art, with just a touch of humour.

(Pinacotheca Gallery, 10 Waltham Place, Richmond. Ends 20 October).