

An abstract painting with a dense, textured surface. The color palette is dominated by various shades of green and yellow, ranging from bright, vibrant yellows to deep, forest greens. The brushstrokes are visible and varied, creating a sense of movement and depth. The overall effect is a rich, layered composition that suggests a natural, perhaps forest-like, environment.

paesaggi  
francesco villicich



# paesaggi

francesco villicich

In memory of my father  
Simeone Villicich (1936–2007)

# Foreword



The Hon. Sheila M'Hale MLA,  
Minister for Culture and the Arts

I am pleased to be able to introduce Francesco Villicich's first solo exhibition in Australia. His works reflect dreamscapes of his previous home, Italy, but also speak powerfully to his adopted home in Perth, Western Australia.

The result of four years intense studio work, this exhibition provides the artist an opportunity to share the results of his creative process and in doing so gives us access to a new way of thinking about the world around us.

Villicich brings to his paintings the same professional dedication and technical strength for which he was renowned in his former career as a classical dancer. His large, tactile oil paintings evoke nature in all its strength and beauty.

The State Government of Western Australia is dedicated to promoting the arts and to enriching the cultural experience and opportunities for both artists and the community. Francesco Villicich's work adds to our artistic wealth and experience and it gives me great pleasure to welcome him to Western Australia.

[detail]

*Paesaggi #10* 2006

120 x 180 cm

oil and gesso on canvas



## Paesaggi: drawn to the light



Nature, perceived as energy, light and above all movement, has always been the inspiring force behind the paintings of Italian artist, Francesco Villicich. His conception of nature is that it involves great distances, culminating in light. And it involves a physical and metaphysical journey. For Villicich, this journey had its beginnings in Italian soil.

Villicich was born and educated in Parma, Italy. He graduated from the Istituto Artistico 'Gaetano Chierici', Reggio Emilia, in Fine Art at eighteen, having simultaneously studied from the age of twelve at the Accademia Balletto Classico di Reggio Emilia under the direction of the great dancers Liliana Cosi and Marinela Stefanescu. Following his studies, Villicich dedicated the first fifteen years of his professional life to ballet, culminating in five years as invited Principal Guest Artist for top companies all over the world. At the age of thirty five, still at the height of his career, he decided to discard his ballet shoes and re-dedicate all of his time and talents to painting.

To do this, in 2003 Villicich completely changed his lifestyle. From travelling the world and dancing in gala performances with renowned ballerinas, he retreated to a chalet in the northern Italian mountains above Bergamo, in the small hamlet of Selvino. Surrounded by dense forest, he lived in relative isolation for two years and resumed his personal quest to explore ways of visually expressing his sense of nature in its purest form. The forerunners to the paintings in this exhibition were created at this time; large energetic canvases that belied the Hansel and Gretel cottage in which they were painted and that had little relationship, topographically, with the literal landscape beyond the studio.

It is tempting to see structural references from his life as *Primo Ballerino* in Villicich's paintings. In their dramatic sense of light and in the distant horizon viewed through 'curtains' of arching trees, they have a strongly performative presence. But Villicich resists the chronology of this interpretation. He maintains that what has always driven him to paint has been the desire to capture the dynamic force of nature, conceding that a dancer's understanding of the role of lighting in creating drama and enhancing movement may, unwittingly, have spilt onto his canvases.

[following pages]

*Paesaggi #1* 2007

90 x 180 cm

oil and gesso on canvas

[left]

The artist's studio, Selvino 2005  
photograph Valentin Badiu Fanel

[right]

Chalet at Selvino, 2005  
photograph Valentin Badiu Fanel



What is of primary importance to the artist is his quest to give expression, through colour, to his vision of nature. He emphasises that nature is never still, never static, nor is it made up of single shapes that can be isolated and analysed. He experiences nature as an energised and ever-changing interaction between all its elements. It is the elemental push and pull of this ever-moving force for which he strives to find a visual, and visceral, vocabulary on his canvases, and to which the formal landscape elements that dominated in his earlier works are increasingly secondary and abstracted. He views the act of painting as being driven by the need to give life to an emotion, and one is reminded in this of Cezanne's dictum that a work of art which did not begin in emotion is not art.

Villicich is not, by any token, a landscape painter, even though this exhibition bears the title *Paesaggi*. In English, 'paesaggi' is translated as 'landscapes', but Villicich maintains that the English word does not bear the same metaphysical weight as does the Italian. Maybe the Australian indigenous use of the word 'country' comes closer to his notion in the multivalency of its meanings that move between physical and metaphysical spheres. The landscapes Villicich portrays are imagined, not copied. He is never interested in copying nature. He maintains, even if desirable, this would be an impossible task since everything in nature is in a constant state of movement, which blurs its edges. What he hopes to do is to render the sense and feeling of nature, its 'paesaggi' or 'landscapes' of light, colour, air, movement and space. In this, I think, we must judge him extremely successful.

In many of his works, there is a compositionally formal, almost narrative structure. Stubble, astride furrows of ploughed ground, creates a perspective path to a vanishing point, while trees act as a curving, cave-like frame. This serves to draw the viewer's eye to the horizon, where the light is at its most intense. In fact, in its incandescence, the light appears to emanate from somewhere beyond the horizon. In one of his novels, the Italian writer Pino Cacucci, talks of "the need to go beyond the horizon, the only true motive of every true journey."<sup>1</sup> This idea of a metaphysical journey is a constant theme playing through Villicich's works. The horizon is the most infinite thing a human eye can see, beckoning, teasing but never attainable. And in some of his paintings it is vertiginously curved, simultaneously attracting and destabilising the viewer; a reminder that journeys are not always straightforward.









[detail]

*Paesaggi #2* 2006

180 x 120 cm

oil and gesso on canvas

The mood of the paintings is at times broodingly Gothic, at times more Romantic, and here one can sense the moods of the forest at Selvino and a life lived mainly in a European environment. The application of the paint, however, takes the viewer on another journey.

The visual language Villicich has developed to convey his view of nature is to stress the surface of the canvas before applying any colour. Working quickly and instinctively, he splatters the primed canvas with multi-directional splotches, lines and curves of pure gesso. This is both a conscious and intuitive process, reminiscent of the way Jackson Pollock viewed his technique of applying paint, not as random, but as 'controlled chaos'. As nature is never entirely rhythmical or repetitive, Villicich has mastered a way of applying the gesso to render this sense of an unending and unpredictable flow of energy. The surface is alive with tension and movement. A flat surface, to Villicich, signifies death.

On to this energised surface, the artist applies thickly layered, tactile slashes of pure oil paint in the simplest, most spontaneous way he can in the hope of "exciting the most sensitive nerve of the viewer." In the areas of pure light, the almost three-dimensional shapes the paint makes create a molecular dance of colour, like energized photons of light pulsating through space. The surface is alive with chaotic excitement, even when the structure of the composition attempts to pull it towards order.

Villicich talks about paintings as being like the footprints of a hunter, of someone who is searching for something that is always fleeing, like the horizon that is constantly elusive. "The horizon is only, and always, visual; you can never catch it. It is always distant. These footprints that you leave behind you are your paintings. They are the residue of the painter, the means by which you seek to express an emotion."

In his earlier paintings, Villicich portrays human domination over nature with his inclusion of ploughed fields, fences, and built structures. The tenuousness of this imposed man-made formality becomes apparent in his later

[detail]

*Paesaggi #7* 2007

120 x 180 cm

oil and gesso on canvas



paintings. The vigour of the underpainting begins to take over. The super-structure of human imposition becomes less evident, while the chaotic energy of the oil paint plays wildly over the surface. In the large green and yellow painting, (*Paesaggi #16*), the last to leave the studio, fence posts are reduced to thin sticks, unconvincing as to their purpose. The ploughed fields are present, but far less visible. In the pink, red and yellow painting (*Paesaggi #7*), all human structures and elements have completely disappeared, except, perhaps, for the eye of the viewer which still seeks the horizon through the vortex-like centre of the composition. What is left is the essential energy of light and colour. Villicich, a collector of Australian indigenous art, is familiar with the way in which ceremonial paintings and designs drawn in the sand were destroyed at ceremony's end. One senses something of the same happening here.

An exhibition gives viewers the opportunity of experiencing the trajectory of an artist's thought, its translation into form. In this exhibition we see the beginning of a move away from formal compositional elements which evoke an Italian sense of landscape, to an increasingly abstract and dynamic space.

In 2006, Villicich moved to Perth with his fiancée Alessandra D'Arbe, a dancer with the West Australian Ballet. Australia's expansive horizons and stark blue light may have played their part in loosening his connection to the more intimate nature of the Italian countryside. Or perhaps what we are witnessing is the artist disengaging from figurative boundaries to explore less constrained and freer ways of expressing the unbounded energy that is his sense of nature.

Jody Fitzhardinge Curator

Fremantle, Western Australia, 2008

Notes

1. Curator's translation, Pino Cacucci, *Demasiado corazón*, Feltrinelli, 1999 (p176)



*Paesaggi #2* 2006

180 x 120 cm

oil and gesso on canvas

*Paesaggi #3* 2007

180 x 120 cm

oil and gesso on canvas







*Paesaggi #4* 2006

120 x 180 cm

oil and gesso on canvas

[detail opposite]

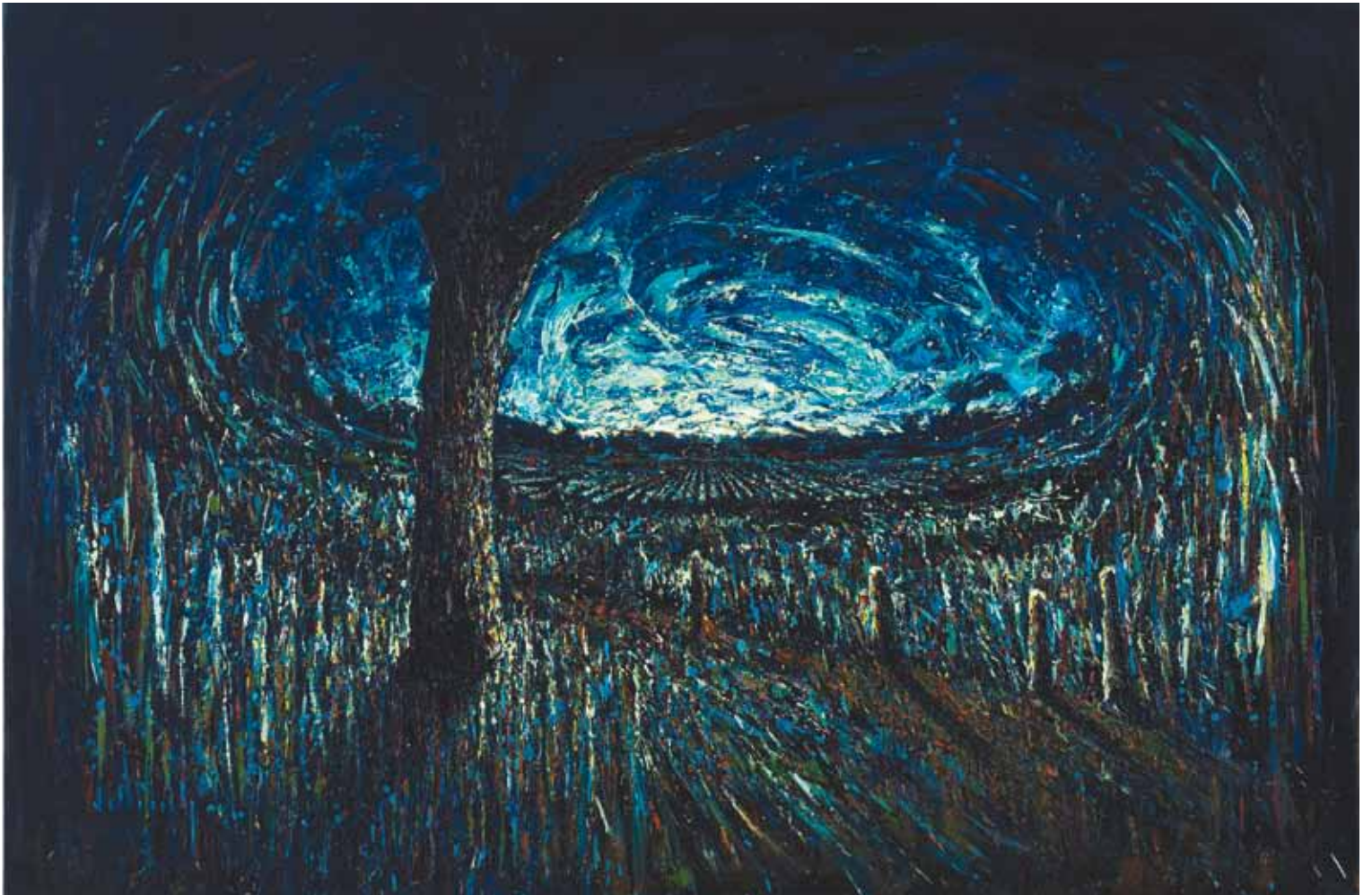


*Paesaggi #5* 2007

120 x 180 cm

oil and gesso on canvas





*Paesaggi #6* 2006

120 x 180 cm

oil and gesso on canvas



*Paesaggi #7* 2007

120 x 180 cm

oil and gesso on canvas

[detail opposite]

[following pages]

*Paesaggi #8* 2007

90 x 180 cm

oil and gesso on canvas









*Paesaggi #9* 2006

120 x 180 cm

oil and gesso on canvas



*Paesaggi #10* 2006

120 x 180 cm

oil and gesso on canvas







*Paesaggi #11* 2007

120 x 180 cm

oil and gesso on canvas

[detail opposite]



*Paesaggi #12* 2007

120 x 180 cm

oil and gesso on canvas



*Paesaggi #13* 2006

120 x 180 cm

oil and gesso on canvas



*Paesaggi #14* 2007  
120 x 180 cm  
oil and gesso on canvas  
[detail opposite]





*Paesaggi #15* 2007

120 x 180 cm

oil and gesso on canvas



*Paesaggi #16* 2007

140 x 230 cm

oil and gesso on canvas

[following pages]

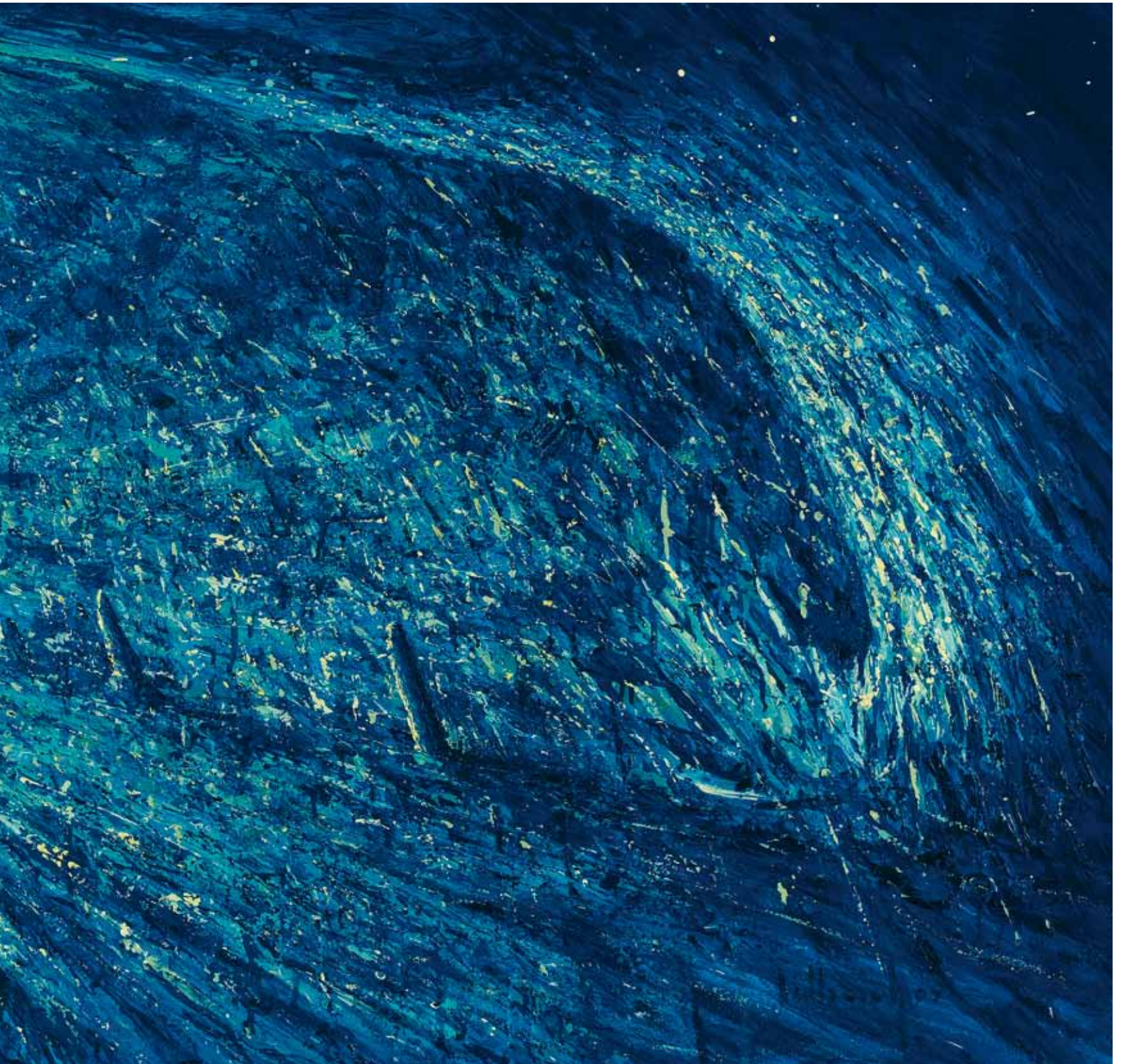
*Paesaggi #17* 2007

90 x 180 cm

oil and gesso on canvas

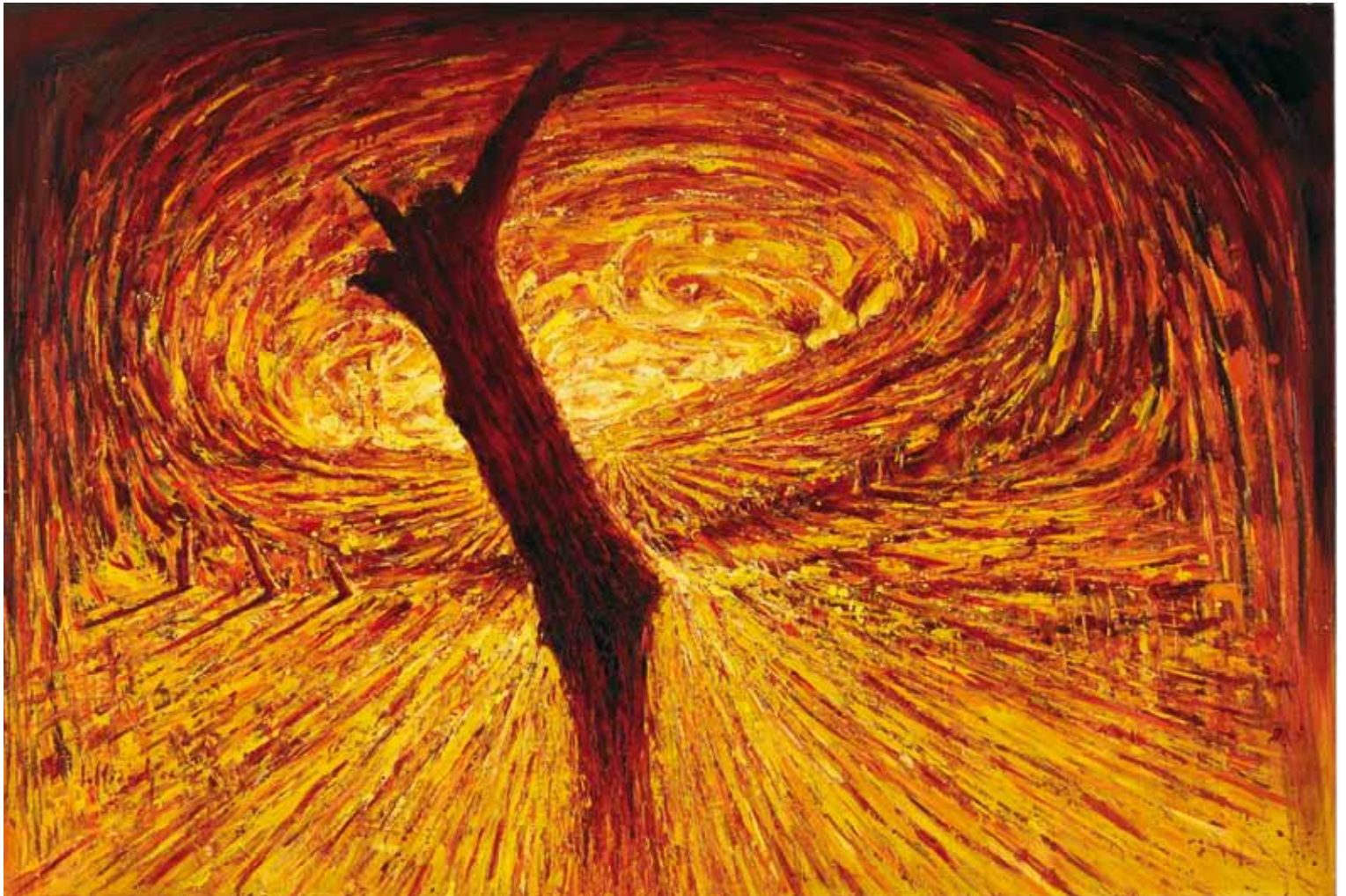








*Paesaggi #18* 2006  
120 x 180 cm  
oil and gesso on canvas



*Paesaggi #19* 2006

120 x 180 cm

oil and gesso on canvas

## Biography



Born in Parma, Italy, in 1965, Villicich's artistic talent was fostered from childhood by his parents, who, although both medical specialists, were also great lovers of art and actively encouraged the creative force that drove their son.

At the age of twelve, Villicich was accepted into the prestigious Accademia Balletto Classico of Reggio Emilia where he learnt the discipline of classical ballet under the direction of the great dancers Liliana Cosi and Marinel Stefanescu. Simultaneously, he studied piano privately and was enrolled in the Istituto Artistico 'Gaetano Chierici', Reggio Emilia, from which he graduated at eighteen with a Diploma in Fine Arts.

At twenty, Villicich's ballet career was launched. He danced for four years with the Accademia in Reggio Emilia before pursuing an international career. For the next six years he was Principal Artist in various companies, first in England and then throughout Europe, including Germany, France, Spain and Portugal. At thirty, he decided to become a freelance dancer and was invited to be Principal Guest Artist with a number of top international companies, partnering many renowned *Prima Ballerinas* in gala performances around the world. Despite this heavy schedule, he managed to keep painting, bringing to his canvases the same intensity, professionalism and 'musicality' for which he was noted as a dancer.

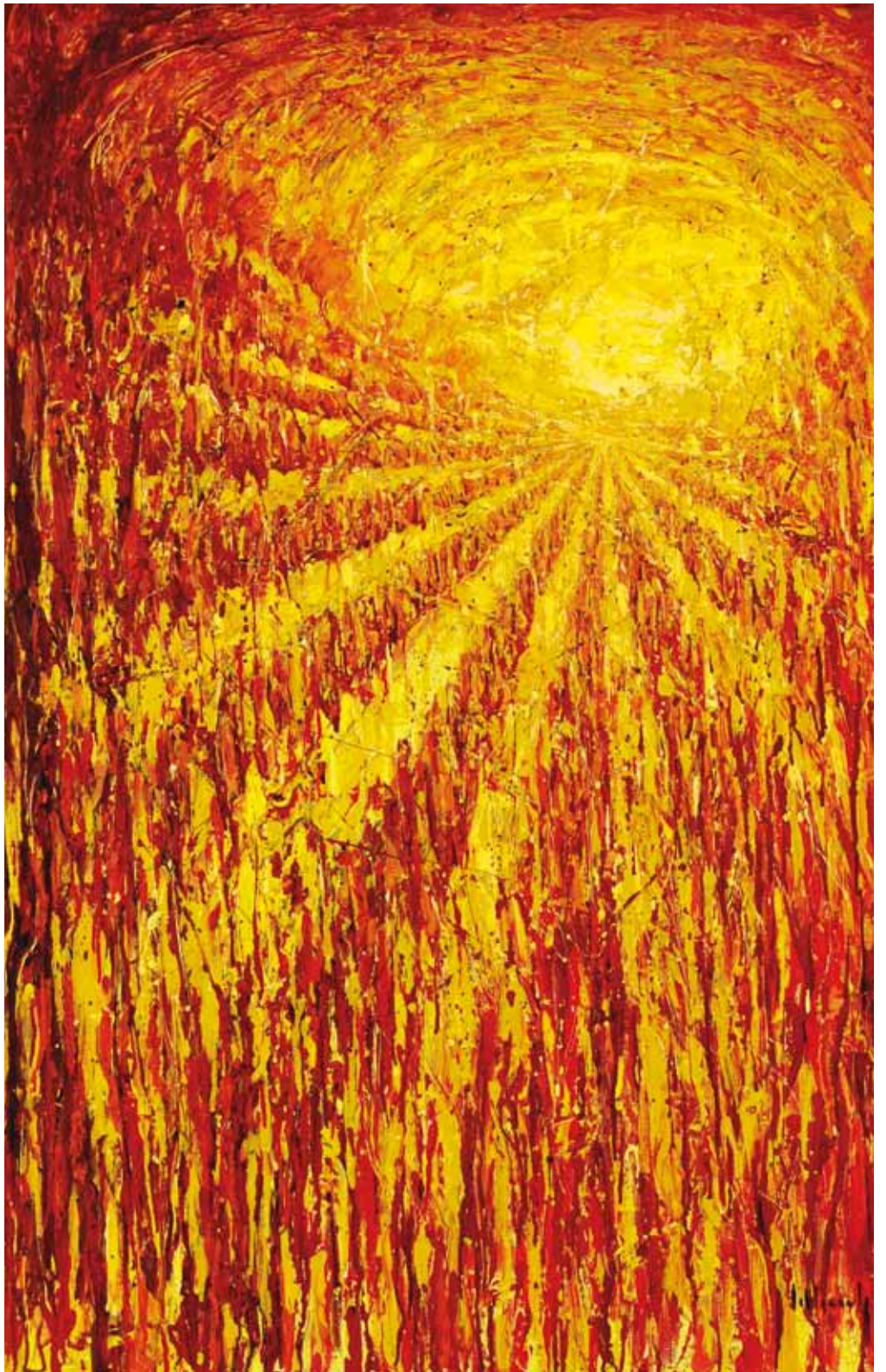
At the age of thirty five, when still at the apex of his international ballet career, Villicich decided to leave the world of classical dance and to dedicate all his time and creative talents to painting. In 2003, he took up residence in an isolated chalet surrounded by dense forest in the small village of Selvino, above Bergamo, in the mountains of northern Italy. For two years he continued his personal quest to find a visual language to express his sense of nature in its purest form, using oil paint as his medium.

Some years earlier, in 1997, Villicich had held his first solo exhibition in Windsor, England, with works in a range of media, including oils, watercolours and pastels. Following this, he held a number of solo and group exhibitions in Italy, winning prizes and recognition from both public and critics. His paintings have been bought by important private collectors in England, Italy and the United States.

During his career, Villicich has received favourable reviews for his paintings from numerous art magazines and newspapers, including *The Times* (London) and its Italian equivalent, the *Corriere della Sera*. He has recently been included in *Dizionario Comanducci*, the prestigious international encyclopaedia of artists.

In 2006 Villicich moved to Perth, Western Australia, where he practises full-time as a painter. *Paesaggi* is the culmination of four years work, begun in Selvino and finished in Australia. This is the first time this series of paintings has been shown together in a solo exhibition.

*Paesaggi #20* 2007  
150 x 100 cm  
oil and gesso on canvas



# Acknowledgements

Firstly, I would like to deeply thank Jody Fitzhardinge for her precious help in making this exhibition possible, and for her very sensitive essay on my work.

My sincere thanks go to the Hon. Sheila McHale, MLA, Western Australia's Minister for Culture and the Arts, both for opening my exhibition and for writing a foreword for the catalogue.

I would also like to thank the following people for their support and helpful advice throughout the making of this exhibition: Richie Kuhaupt of the Moores Building; Louise Howden-Smith; Andrew Carter; Brimo Ferroni for sharing with us his experience and vision on arts and life; Rita Pasqualini; Jayne and Jon Smeulders for their friendly support and kind appreciation of my work; Valentin Badiu Fanel for his sensitive photographs of my period in Selvino; Milton Andrews of Square Peg Design and Adrian Lambert of Acorn Photo Agency for their great work on the catalogue.

To my dearest Alessandra: my love, my strength, my life.

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COVER

[detail]

*Paesaggi #16* 2007

140 x 230 cm

oil and gesso on canvas

