

we are family

Central Victorian artist Rob McHaffie's exhibition at Bendigo Art Gallery captures the humor and complexities of modern life, family, and urban/regional living through vibrant, satirical works.

By Emma Busowsky, Curator, Bendigo Art Gallery
Photography by Leon Schoots



If a naturalist studies the patterns of nature, perhaps the satirist considers the urban world as our natural habitat, turning a David Attenborough-like eye to the study of the human species in our own self-made environment.

In the way that long-running animated TV series *The Simpsons* uses satire to highlight the absurdities of contemporary life, Central Victorian artist Rob McHaffie taps into a tradition of observational humour in his experience of being a painter in the world today.

Super-cool hipsters, art-world aficionados, celebrities, love-struck teenagers, and mums and dads all equally feature in Rob's vibrant and colourful works.

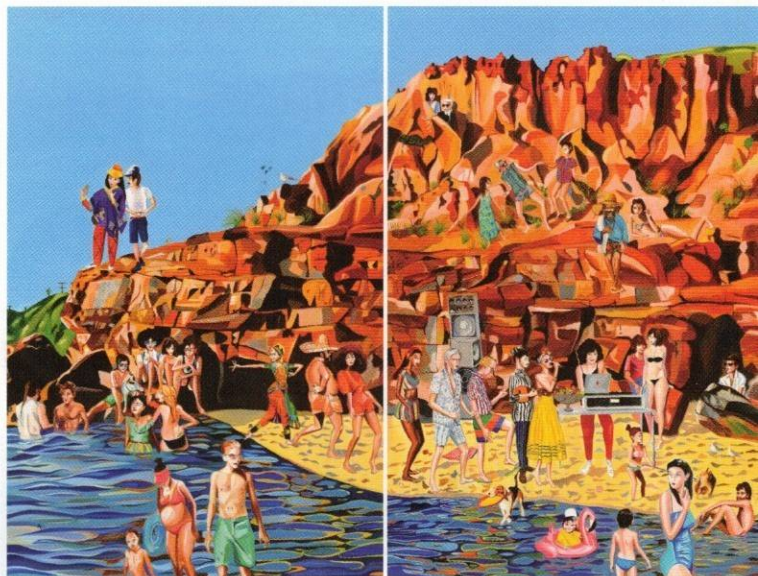
For the past 30 years, he has recorded his observations of the world around him in diaries. Snippets of overheard conversations, small social interactions, family moments and the myriad characters that cross his path in daily life are captured in sketches or in a few noted words.

These are moments the artist revisits later, and inspire the subject matter for his paintings, portraits, collages and ceramic sculptures. Works such as 'Where'd she get those legs? Where'd he get those shorts? And where'd they get that great floaty vest for the little guy?' (2018) or 'What if I'm left here or you're left there' (2016) describe relatable, everyday moments and also the anxieties many of us feel in navigating the contemporary world.

Rob's exhibition at Bendigo Art Gallery is the largest presentation of his work to date, and brings together recent and new paintings, collages, works on paper, and ceramic sculptures across five gallery spaces, spanning the last 10 years of his practice.

The exhibition is arranged into thematic rooms, which include the idea of the urban jungle and domestic life.

"'We are family' felt like a beautiful broad title that kind of encapsulates the essence of my work," Rob says, "which is ultimately all about relationships."



RIGHT: Rob McHaffie. Did you bring your polaroid? 2024.

oil on linen. Courtesy of the artist and Darren Knight Gallery.

ABOVE: Rob McHaffie. Word of mouth (Half Moon Bay) 2018, oil on linen. Bayside City Council.

BOTTOM LEFT: Rob McHaffie. Saag paneer, some basmati rice and an aloo paratha 2017, oil on linen. Courtesy of Buxton International Collection, Melbourne



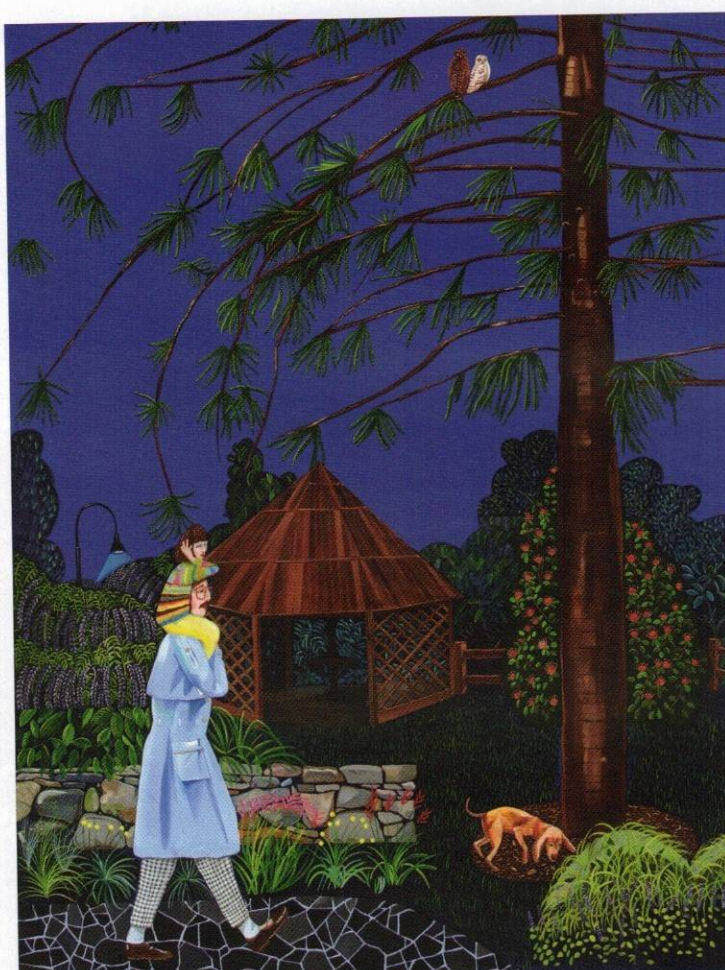
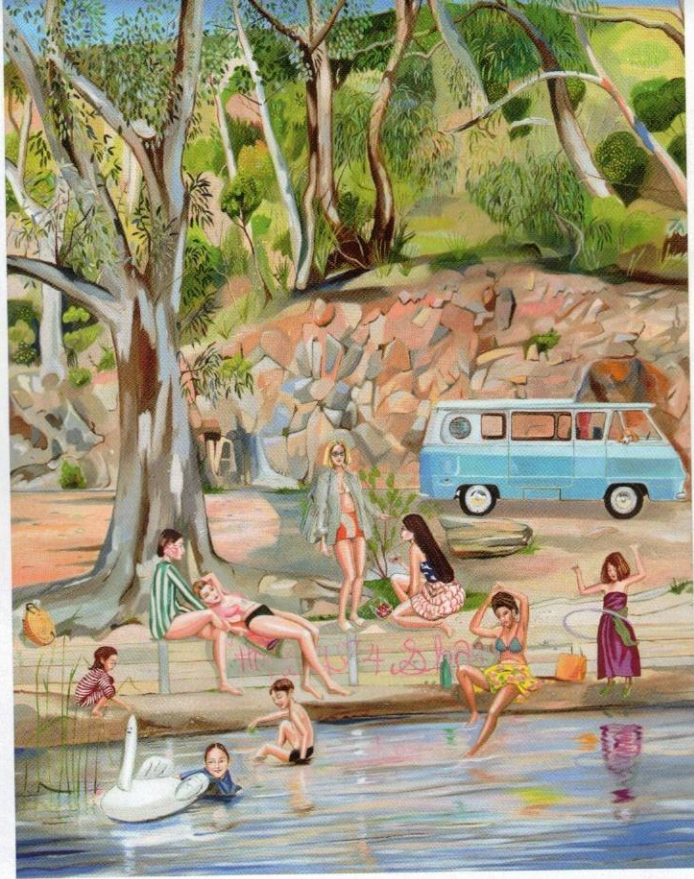
Born in Melbourne in 1978, Rob spent his formative years in Bayside before moving to Castlemaine with his young family more recently.

His wife, Nartchanok, and children Larina and Kuli, feature extensively throughout his work. In imagined scenes such as an epic beach party in 'Word of mouth (Half Moon Bay)', the family dances alongside celebrities David Bowie, Karl Lagerfeld and Solange Knowles, while in 'Carnegie (after dumplings)' from 2021, a sweet, post-lockdown memory of a family dinner out in Melbourne is captured.

While the artist attributes his prolific use of joyous, high-keyed colour as a by-product of becoming a father, the challenges of domestic life are also wryly depicted in works such as 'Warm night (it is what it is)' (2018) and 'A little more foliage should block out the Empire State bastard next door' (2016). In these works, Rob astutely observes the social phenomena of the suburbs, and the common patterns of family life for many.

The recent move to Castlemaine has seen a proliferation of local places, themes and characters featured in Rob's work. From the large wall drawing 'I didn't think I'd fall for a country guy' (in which a stylishly bearded gent quips, "I moved from Coburg to Castlemaine two years ago") to works such as 'Harcourt Hard Rock' (2021) or the major new painting 'Night Walk with Powerful Owls' local sites and characters are featured.





ABOVE: Rob McHaffie. Single mums at the Res (after Hermann Corrodi) 2024, oil on linen. Courtesy of the artist and Darren Knight Gallery

LEFT: Rob McHaffie. Night walk with Powerful Owls 2024, oil on linen. Courtesy of the artist and Darren Knight Gallery.

TOP LEFT: Rob McHaffie. Busking at the NGV 2021, oil on linen. Courtesy of the artist and Darren Knight Gallery.

BOTTOM LEFT: Curator, Emma Busowsky

'Single mums at the Reservoir (after Hermann Corrodi)' is another major new work produced for the exhibition. It takes its inspiration from the popular swimming spot at Golden Point, near Castlemaine, and the 19th century painting 'Ladies of the Harem Bathing', by Hermann Corrodi, in Bendigo Art Gallery's permanent collection.

'Single mums at the Reservoir' is a humorous homage to the strong community of women and diverse families in Rob's adopted hometown and, as do many of his works, features likenesses of his own family.

"This exhibition has been a great opportunity to work on a much larger and more ambitious scale, and to consider the major themes of my work," says Rob. "Urban/regional life, portraiture, family... all these things draw upon observations I have recorded in diaries for the past 30 years."

The final room of the exhibition offers a glimpse into the artist's mind and working process.

In an intimate space called The Drawing Room, visitors can see a collection of materials from Rob's studio, including diaries, books, sketches, drawings and new works in progress. They may also recognise reference material and preparatory drawings the artist has used in the making of the finished artworks in the show.

It is revealing of the way that drawing is central to Rob's practice, and the ways he applies collage techniques to portraiture and narrative painting to reassemble and re-picture people, settings and moments, both real and imagined.

Through pop culture references to musings on domesticity and human relationships, Rob's work reveals his enjoyment of life, and gentle amusement at the human condition.

The exhibition Rob McHaffie: We are family is on at the Bendigo Art Gallery until January 26, 2025. Entry is free and the gallery is open daily from 10am-5pm, excluding Christmas Day. ■





ROB MCHAFFIE

WE ARE FAMILY

10 AUGUST 2024 –
9 FEBRUARY 2025

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bendigoartgallery.com.au  

Rob McHaffie, *Single mums at the reservoir* (detail) 2024, oil on linen. Courtesy of the Artist.