

From single mums to the fixie owners, this artist sees us all



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In Rob McHaffie's playful work, you may recognise the outlines of familiar people and places. Across painting, ceramic sculpture, collage and works on paper, the artist splashes colour and humour into everyday scenes. From elegant women with jacketed greyhounds to NGV buskers and families at the beach, McHaffie captures it all.

"I'm trying to encapsulate the spirit of real people," he says. "Whether it's someone I've encountered or someone close to me, I'm always formulating a picture from someone that I know, and how their life or life experience influences me ... [The artworks] exist parallel to real life."



Artist Rob McHaffie at his Castlemaine studio. JASON SOUTH

Born and raised in Melbourne, McHaffie began his artistic career in the early 2000s, driven by a fascination with understanding other people through observation. His work takes stylistic inspiration from [John Brack](#) and [David Hockney](#), as well as culturally from his wife's Thai heritage.

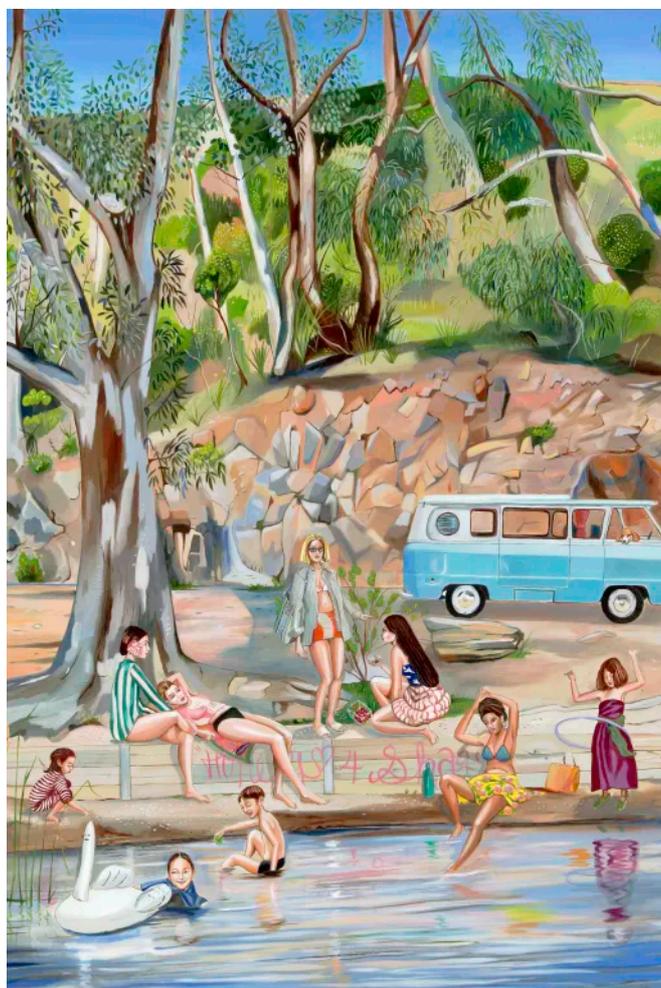
Moving to [Castlemaine](#) with his young family in 2020 gave the artist even more to draw from. "I started considering things that I hadn't felt licensed to consider, like painting the Australian landscape," he says. "The more recent paintings bring in a fair bit of Castlemaine's landscape and identity, and the type of person that I encounter around town ... The culture of the place is quite subtle, but kind of permeates everything."

All of this coalesces in McHaffie's biggest exhibition yet. *We Are Family* is spread out across five rooms at Bendigo Art Gallery and broken into thematic sections: family and home, urban landscapes, portraits, ceramics and diaristic sketches.

"There is so much great artistic talent in our region and Rob has been on our radar for a while," says curator Emma Busowsky. "His work is clever while also being accessible ... I love that his observations have a distinctive local element ... [and] also express something quite universal."

As a Castlemaine local and single mother herself, Busowsky especially relates to McHaffie's painting *Single mums at the Res (after Hermann Corrodi)*. The piece depicts women and children playing and bathing at Expedition Pass Reservoir, a popular swimming hole at nearby Golden Point. It reinterprets the late 19th-century Italian painter Corrodi's [Ladies of the Harem Bathing](#), which is also in the Bendigo collection; modernising that scene, McHaffie turns it into a bright celebration of community.

“The original ... is a sensational painting in terms of looking at women,” McHaffie says. “I wanted to draw it back to Castlemaine and pitch it around the local area ... We do have a lot of young, strong female role models around town that run local small businesses and support each other doing fun things for the kids.”



Single mums at the Res (after Hermann Corrodi)
ROB MCHAFFIE

McHaffie’s humour is not only visual – the titles of his works are short stories of their own. One ceramic sculpture of a woman wearing an elaborate gown and an anxious expression is called *My favourite party trick is not going*. A 2017 oil painting depicting a dapper bearded man on a bicycle staring admiringly at a tall, stylish woman might have inner-northerners covering in recognition with its wordy, hyper-specific title: *I saw her on the way to fix my fixie in Fitzroy. Was she visiting from Denmark or somewhere? I could show her the way to Smith and Daughters to share some bitey black beans and chewy hominy (like rehydrated puffed giant corn kernels)*.

These titles send up the performativity that often bleeds into contemporary urban living. “When we examine it, the role-playing that goes on in the world around us is kind of hilarious because identity is wrapped up in things like appearance and intelligence,” McHaffie says. “I play with that a lot ... the humour is part of the aesthetic of the work. I don’t paint depressive scenes, but there is a lot behind the surface.”

Through these astute, funny glimpses into ordinary lives, McHaffie’s work encourages viewers to take notice of the tiny things around them. The show’s title refers not to immediate family but the world at large, in all its amusement and surprise.

“It’s about our relationship to everything around us,” McHaffie says. “I’m interested in what changes when we take a person and put them in a different or unfamiliar setting – how our whole identity, and collective identity, forms around place and these interactions.”

Rob McHaffie: We Are Family is on at Bendigo Art Gallery from August 10 to January 27.

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