

Rob McHaffie going native

I saw Rob McHaffie's recent paintings at his studio preview in the Schoolhouse Studios, Abbotsford. Destined for his solo exhibition in September at Darren Knight Gallery in Sydney, this was a one-night only affair, like meeting up with an old friend, several of them in fact. Rob McHaffie's inspiration, following his Asialink residency at Rimbun Dahan in Kuang, near Kuala Lumpur, brought up all those old flames: Matisse versus Picasso (and why I chose Matisse); the dark heart of Gauguin in Tahiti; imaginary encounters with Le Douanier Rousseau in the jungle; Chris Ofili, after he moved to Trinidad.

Going native is an arch suggestion to make of anyone, but in this globalized world, inspiration creates the only valid continuum. As a white man in the tropics, McHaffie continues a tradition but makes it more kindly and engaged, forging connections that are gentle and humorously self-effacing. Here, he is shown dancing like a puppet in *Synchronized dancers holding hearts* as in the portrait of *Matisse practising his foxtrot*. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, as in the enchanting nocturnal reworking of a Rousseau dreaming, *The first time I saw you was wild*. And the one of 'Eve' holding out the apple is for me (*Feeding the monkey but the monkey has enough*).

Everything here is, indeed, excessively luscious, clean, colourful, inspired by the flora and fauna, and the artist's encounters with the places and people he meets. These paintings work on a number of levels to create pictorial incidents and metaphors that McHaffie's own written accounts richly fill in with anecdotal detail. I like the tension, also, that he creates in showing the presence of religious belief in everyday life, doubling the traditional role of painting itself as, in essence, a devotional art. These narratives are explored in works such as *Mother and child* (a Madonna and child on a motorbike), *The naturopath* (sitting on the lap of Michelangelo's *Pieta*) and *Found him!* (Christ, with his loincloth and halo, brought back arm-in-arm with two new friends).

Rob McHaffie, studio preview, [Schoolhouse Studios](#), Abbotsford, Melbourne, 17 August 2012.

Rob McHaffie, [Let's see how we go](#), Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney, 1-29 September 2012.



Rob McHaffie, 'Synchronized dancers holding hearts', 2012, oil on canvas



Rob McHaffie, 'Matisse practising his foxtrot', 2012, oil on canvas



Rob McHaffie, 'The first time I saw you was wild', 2012, oil on canvas



Rob McHaffie, 'Feeding the monkey but the monkey has enough', 2012, oil on canvas



Rob McHaffie, 'Mother and child', 2012, oil on canvas



Rob McHaffie, 'The naturopath', 2012, oil on canvas



Rob McHaffie, 'Found him!',
2012, oil on canvas