



MATLOK GRIFFITHS MUSIC TO MY EARS

VAULT swings by the studio of Melbourne artist Matlok Griffiths to reflect on his year in the Philippines, the influence of mentor-friends David Griggs and Manuel Ocampo, and the freewheeling rhythms and fleeting utopias that animate his loose, semi-abstract paintings.

By Peter Hill

The day I visited Matlok Griffiths's house and studio, I was feeling like Eugene Henderson, the main character in Saul Bellow's 1959 novel *Henderson the Rain King*, who relates his life story while tramping through the heat of Africa with a set of broken dentures. By contrast, I was in Melbourne's Clifton Hill the Saturday last December when the temperature reached 43 degrees. And I'd just broken a large tooth somewhere on the Upper West Side of my mouth.

Griffith met me at the station, guided me through empty streets in a haze of corporeal heat, and we were soon sitting at his kitchen table with Panadol and jugs of water. It was an appropriate temperature to be talking about the period he spent in the Philippines and the huge influence it had on his painting.

"My wife Katrina took a job in the Philippines with the Red Cross and the heat and humidity there could be incredible," recalls Griffiths, who studied visual communication at Curtin University in Perth, Australia, where he was born. "We lived in a small place called Dumaguete City, home to less than 200,000 people. We weren't married then, and for visa reasons I had to leave the country every sixty days, or pay a fine. Every couple of months I would fly up to Manila and meet up with the Australian artist David Griggs, who's become a really close friend. He's a fantastic person and a great artist, who has a full-on existence there. I would then fly on to Hong Kong or Singapore to renew my visa."

We are surrounded by paintings – small, large, abstract, semi-figurative. Very large ones line the hallway, and we have yet to visit the studio in the backyard where the sun, unobscured by shade, is at its fiercest. I met Griggs the year he built a circus tent at the Melbourne Art Fair, filled it with videos made on the streets of Manila and spontaneously filmed a family who picked up the life-size crucifix he had left on the street. Griffith informs me that he's since relocated to Quezon City. Griggs also introduced him to Manuel Ocampo, a Filipino artist who came into prominence in the early nineties when his heavily allegorical work caught the attention of Charles Saatchi.

"I really like what Manuel Ocampo's doing in Manila," Griffiths says. "He's planted this big seed in the Philippines and it's really taken off with a lot of young artists. The sensitivity is really Brutalist and extremely raw."

At the time, Griffiths – who tells me that Mattise's cut-outs and the work of Abstract Expressionist painter Philip Guston are also among his defining influences – was making paintings that were layered and labour-intensive, each taking up to six months to complete.

"People would always remark on how many layers my work had," explains Griffith, who spent the period before he left Melbourne establishing an intensive drawing practice while working at a School Care program two hours a day. "In the Philippines, I visited a gallery in Macadi City called Finale, and they had this fantastic show of Ocampo's, big paintings. These were so raw that you could see where the canvas had been re-stretched and extended and I wanted to achieve Manuel's directness. I hated the fact that painting for me had become so laborious. There was something quite oppressive about it."

Over the next hour, I get the chance to see what Griffith has been working on recently. I take in the change, the immediacy, the humour, and the complexity of his singular style, which feels like the work of a one-man-band. His new paintings, which will soon show at Sydney's Darren Knight Gallery, work on your senses in a way that's about as musical as possible without cutting off your ears and dropping banned substances. They are totally tuned into sounds.

Griffiths pulls out more canvases, some of which are covered with painted simulacra of vinyl discs and others scrawled with text. He says that one diptych was based on a curtain that used to hang in the general store, where they shopped in Dumaguete City. "It had a kind of Moroccan motif with a lion on it hanging over a security grill," he remembers. "Then one day the curtain was taken down and its replacement featured Charles Schultz's *Peanuts*. So I made paintings based on both those curtains."

When Griffiths returned to Melbourne in September 2014, he started working as an installer at the National Gallery of Victoria, along with an artist friend Andre Piguet. Piguet introduced him to the house music that inspired his new series of paintings and a shift in his work.

"When I'm painting I always have music on and albums often rise up and down through different tracks," he says. "But when we were working, Andre would put on these mixes that were quite hypnotic, coming off the tail end of disco, that would go on for a couple of hours. He also gave me all these mixes, which have a kind of sustained rhythm. That music inspired these paintings, and the exhibition for Darren Knight Gallery in Sydney."

Griffiths' new show, *Buffoon Seeks Pleasure*, is loosely based around a fictional character that has gone to the discotheque. Unusually, sunglasses and doorknobs regularly recur in this new body of work. "This one is similar to the painting of sunglasses that Darren Knight took to the Spring Art Fair," he says, gesturing at a painting. "And this one," he adds, picking up another, "is a more orderly pile of sunglasses. Sunglasses and doorknobs have become a point of entry. During the new show, I'll also be showing some cast sculptures of door knobs that are being made at a foundry in Castlemaine."

I quiz him about the next painting, waiting in line for our scrutiny. "This is called *49 Great Records to Dance to* and it's about that sort of crossover between disco and house music," he explains. "The sort of thing Frankie Knuckles produced and Jonathon Richman developed. It's a Jamaican rock steady sound. When you pull back from these paintings they become their own abstraction. It's similar to my *Uppers and Downers* series. There are lots of bits to pull you in; or you can stand back and enjoy the overall abstraction and you can see where a bit of oil stick snapped off in the process. That doesn't bother me any more."



Previous page
 MATLOK GRIFFITHS
*Lady Reclining In Front
 Of Her Favourite Mirror
 (in morning light)*, 2014
 acrylic and oil on cotton
 170 x 109 cm

Left
 MATLOK GRIFFITHS
*Lady Reclining In Front
 Of Her Favourite Mirror
 (under fullmoon)*, 2014
 acrylic and oil on cotton
 170 x 109 cm

Below
 MATLOK GRIFFITHS
*Uppas 'n Downas
 (Peanuts & Fanta)*, 2014
 oil on cotton
 109 x 93 cm

Opposite
 MATLOK GRIFFITHS
*Sunglasses in Lost
 Property*, 2015
 oil on cotton
 123 x 77.2 cm

Courtesy the artist, Darren
 Knight Gallery, Sydney and
 NKN Gallery, Melbourne



"Like the rawness of Ocampo?" I suggest.

"Exactly," Griffiths says.

For Griffiths, titles play an important part in his creative process, particularly in light of his upcoming show. "This one's called *Sometimes After Midnight I Did Inappropriate Things* and these ones I call *Disco Paintings*," he offers. "They started as studies for the Upper and Downer paintings. But they become their own little segue. And this one here is called *For a Brief Moment On Saturday Night Utopia Existed*. You can see this fictional character is vacuuming his carpet, and he's fallen over and got tangled in the cord, and he's getting older, and given up the disco scene."

The trapped air is now approaching 50 degrees inside the tiny studio and trying to focus through my toothache and heat exhaustion, I tell Griffiths that the title seems vaguely familiar. He reminds me why.

"Katrina and I recently saw the author Jonathan Lethem at the Wheeler Centre," explains Griffiths, who released *Comfort Form Rooms*, an 80-page book featuring the drawings he made in Dumaguete City, in July 2015. "A few months before he was staying at this huge hotel one Saturday night and there was a *Star Wars* convention going on. He used the phrase, 'for a brief moment on Saturday night Utopia existed' in relation to the event. And then the next morning it's all packed up, the cleaners are in vacuuming, and picking up the rubbish. Utopia is finished." **V**

Buffoon Seeks Pleasure shows at Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney from February 20 to March 24.

Matlok Griffiths is represented by Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney and NKN Gallery, Melbourne.
darrenknightgallery.com
nkn-gallery.com

