

I had intended to begin this review of Rod McRae's exhibition by relating a conversation I'd had with a young artist while I was viewing the six large paintings on show at Pinacotheca. The conversation seemed important, for it placed McRae's work in some sort of historical context and touched on the way his paintings had evolved since his first exhibition in 1985. Both my acquaintance and I agreed that McRae's work had improved quite dramatically in the space of just four years. But when I began to untangle the substance of our discussion, I couldn't help thinking of another conversation which had taken place soon after the first one. My acquaintance had barely said goodbye when a stranger stepped out of the shadows and bluntly asked: "What are we supposed to see in them?" Those who have spent any time in galleries will know that this question is repeatedly asked before works of modern art. Indeed, it forms the matrix of any number of cartoons - cartoons which ideally show either a blank square or an unholy mess. But Rod McRae's paintings are neither of these. Fate - luck call it what you will - must have been with me on this day, for the notes I'd made some 20 minutes before had anticipated the stranger's question. "McRae's rendered world", I had written, "Is an imaginary one. You could not hope to find its counterpart out there." These jottings were still fresh in my mind when the stranger appeared, so I prepared to quote them. But as there was an outside chance that he was in fact playing Socrates, I decided that I would do the same. Thus, I mentioned the bit about the absence of a counterpart and hoped that he would make the necessary inference about Rod McRae's belief in the imagination. The alacrity with which he did so leads me to believe that he would make an ideal art critic. On my reckoning, just five minutes elapsed before he walked up to 'Edge', lightly tapped its surface with the back of his index finger, and acknowledged the point.

"He's invented this himself", he observed. "He hasn't taken it from anywhere else." Just so, but during those five minutes we both stood before one painting and took turns to liken its various configurations to things out there. One stranger pointed to a shape and said it reminded him of a wave-eroded rock the other stranger pointed to an adjacent shape and likened it to the whorls of the human ear. And both strangers agreed that the painting was something else: it stood apart from the world, its coherence guaranteed by something other than fact.

In one way, Rod McRae's paintings do exactly what I have done in this review: they converse with ghosts. The stranger, I must insist, was actually there in the monastic gloom of Pinacotheca, yet through my presentation of him he enjoys another existence and has, I hope, become a sort of necessary angel. Rod McRae treats his varied experiences in a similar way. As my first interlocutor will acknowledge, he has looked at the history of art and drawn such things as the airy plenitude of Baroque ceiling painting and the Cezanne-inspired cubist passage into an unlikely synthesis. But he has also looked at those things which the stranger and I mentioned as we stood before one work - things like shells, rocks and the delicate whorls of the human ear. They, along with the phenomena mentioned above, have somehow been blended in his imagination, which is a disciplined and powerful one. Indeed, the power of McRae's imagination leads me to believe he could well turn out to be an outstanding painter. But whether or not he does so in some sense depends on you. He

needs enthusiasts. And he also needs those who, on seeing his paintings, will immediately be led to ask. "But what are we supposed to see in them?"

The Socratic art of conversing with ghosts, Gary Catalano, THE AGE, 17 May 1989