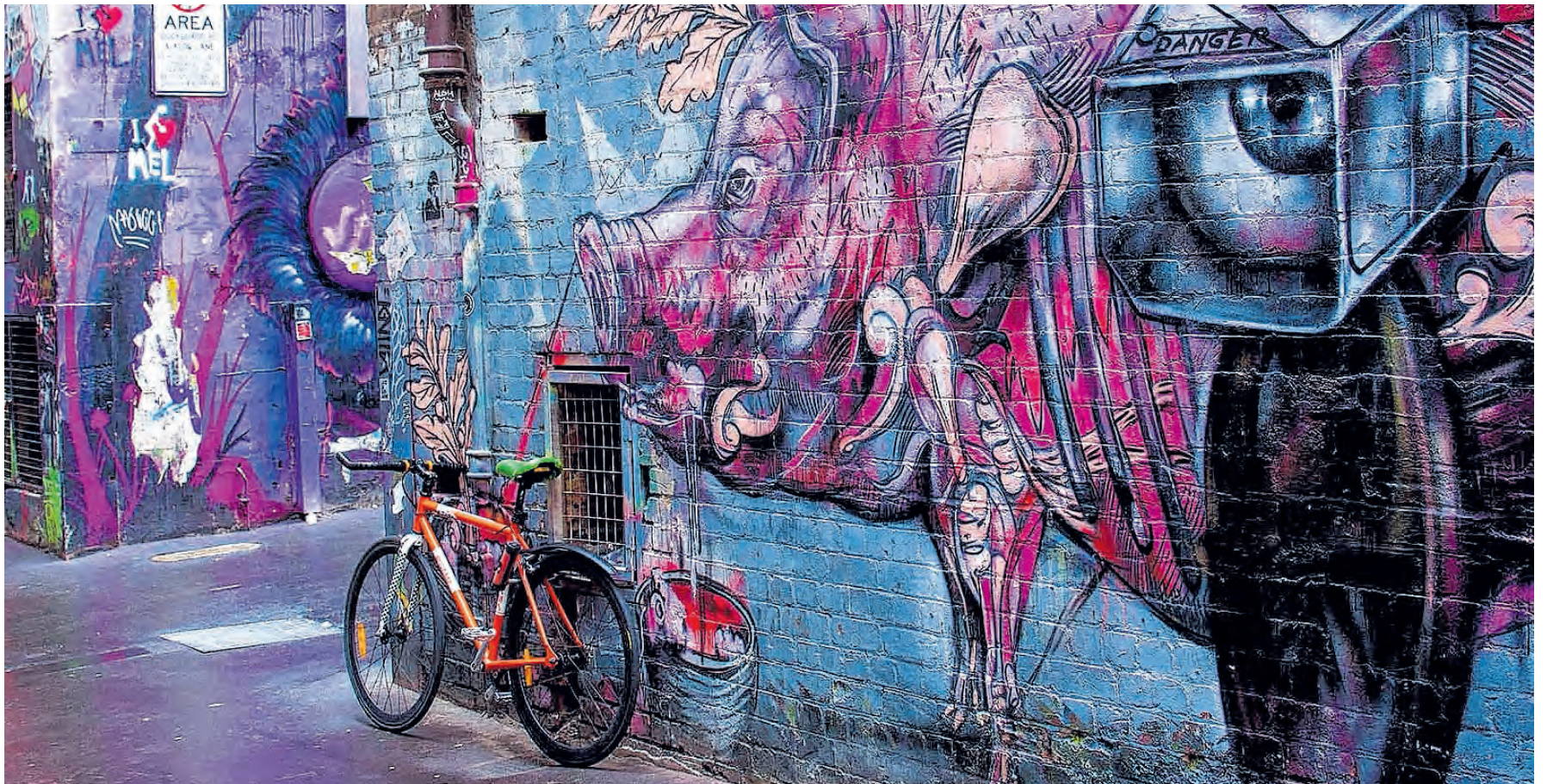


PICTURES COURTESY VISIT VICTORIA



# ART OF THE CITY







The Forum.

Whether it's subversive street art, historical treasures or frame-worthy food, Melbourne serves Julie Hosking one surprising delight after another.

"It will be beautiful one day and it will be blooming, and the next day it's dead – that's the beauty of it, it's not meant to be forever."

Dan Lynch is not talking about the gardens in Melbourne's stunning botanical gardens, but another kind of transitory beauty, although beauty is very much in the eye of the beholder, given the wild array of creations springing up overnight.

I thought I knew the city where I was born and to where I returned to live as an adult for nine years, thereafter getting a regular fix as often as time and money permitted. Turns out I've been looking in different directions.

Long drawn to Melbourne's charming arcades and lively laneways, I would gravitate to the ones where you could get the best coffee and a quick work-time lunch, or revisit my old favourite, the magnificent Block Arcade for cinnamon toast and a pot of tea at Hopetoun Tea Rooms.

Dan is leading our small group down alleys and up lanes of a decidedly less sophisticated, and occasionally somewhat smellier, orientation. Streets with names to match, such as Hosier, Croft, AC/DC, and Duckworth.

There are grey walls, awash with political statements and twisted faces, others a riot of colour and confusion. There are huge murals and postage-stamp sized pieces that only the ultra observant will notice – unless someone like Dan, part of the Blender Studios street art collective, happens to be at hand to point them out.

It's art, at once subversive and mainstream, on show free of charge for anyone who cares to wander down the lane. Just don't get too attached to a piece because chances are it might be painted over the next day. Dan thinks that's part of the charm, though he's not as fond of tourists getting in on the act with witticisms such as "Italians do it better".

"See this wall here, it's Michael Fikaris, this wall is all about fossil fuels and some of the horrible invasive



AC/DC Lane.



feature

# ART OF THE CITY

we have to try to access them," he says. "Melbourne is a collective call to the Silent Army; they do a lot for local culture. And the real issue is about do-it-yourself culture and not just accepting whatever they're passing off as culture these days."

Dan's own work is emblematic of that culture, fashioning art from rubbish he's collected from streets. You could amuse yourself for hours trying to find his Junky Projects dotted around the laneways.

"That's me," he says, pointing to what looks like an old tin can beaten into an oddly endearing creature. "Michael has painted over it. I like it when they get painted, they become camouflaged, almost like chameleons."

"When you start getting things covered in plexiglas and they start putting graffiti-proof coating on things, it creates an elitism in a culture that is supposed to be egalitarian. Anybody can do this."

The Victorian capital is well known for its street art, in fact it has an international reputation for its wonder walls of expression.

Street art.



"It's not just about the artist painting the city, it's about the city looking like an international city," Dan maintains.

"Some of the most important art cities in the world, the real big walls have got these kinds of murals on them."

Many artists who (quite literally) made their marks on Melbourne's walls now, as Dan puts it, "get paid top dollar to travel the world on a lifelong spray-cation to paint in Tahiti, Miami or whatever".

It's clear the commercialisation doesn't sit well with Dan, who reckons once money gets involved, the waters get muddied. Now shopping strips and trendier laneways are getting in on the act, commissioning large works by the likes of street artist Murder.

But Dan's particularly disparaging of councils who attempt to become art curators.

"They've come and restored the stencil and painted around the street art," he says, indicating some of their handiwork. "I don't know if you guys know any council workers who have an art degree but I'm not sure they're the most qualified for the job. This is your everyday hi-vis wearing council worker on the street deciding for you, me and everyone else in this city what is art."

Art is, of course, subjective. Certainly for every work that makes me stop and marvel as we wander in and out of the inner city's web of painted byways, there are a handful more that do nothing for me.

But then I feel the same way about pieces hanging in carefully curated exhibitions in more conventional galleries we visit with Prahran Art Aficionado director Jane O'Neill. Some say take me home immediately (if money were no object) and others look like something my cats did (they're very talented felines). Stand someone else in front of the same art, however, and I'm sure the feelings would »



## feature

« be reversed. And who's to say which one of us is right?

Jane is also in-house curator of the Art Series Hotels, boutique getaways where you can sleep with a renowned contemporary Australian artist, or at least one of their creations. Artists such as John Olsen, Charles Blackman and Adam Cullen. It is to the Cullen, in fashionable Prahran, that Jane leads us.

Cullen was still at the College of Fine Arts in Sydney when he gained notoriety – and the attention of international dealers and curators – for walking around with a rotting pig's head attached to his leg as a performance arts piece.

“Part of the reason I'm with the hotel is to educate staff,” Jane explains, “and it's the staff who have to work the hardest because the work has some pretty hard-hitting themes. But I also feel that it's good that there's not a pared-down or light version of his work, that the hotel is quite true to his aesthetic.”

Even art-loving guests will be relieved to hear this does not mean pig's heads in their rooms. The one Jane shows us is light-filled and beautifully appointed. It just happens to have a large print of Ned Kelly – part of a series Cullen painted for the hotel – standing over you with a gun.

“We really do try to maintain the artist as a starting point for the decisions around interior design. So the palate for this suite is black and white with splashes of colour, so that it chimes with the paintings.”

Cullen, who won the Archibald for his portrait of actor David Wenham (a relatively tame rendition by his standards), died not long after the hotel opened. But those who love his work, or are just interested in taking a closer look, can check in any time.

“People stay here for lots of reasons but it is really important to the group that if someone is curious about the artist that we nurture that,” Jane says.

“Even locals can come in for a free tour. That's something we've always tried to strongly maintain – that openness and democratic approach, not to have art that is elitist or inaccessible.”



It's an approach that extends to nearby galleries, which welcome groups from the hotel for morning tea or a champers while curators talk them through the ever-rotating exhibitions. At MARS Gallery, where industrial dryers were working overtime after a water pipe burst in the basement (fortunately, no art was damaged), a lightbox exhibition showcases a group of artists, none more compelling than *The Birds Are Coming*, Moonis Ahmad's striking avian portraits that also tell stories of exploitation and trafficking.

At Station Gallery, I was drawn to Melbourne artist Dane Lovett's arresting array of pooch paintings – (the not-so) Standard Poodle 5, for instance, wouldn't

Federation Square.

Cullen

be out of place on an album cover, the vivid purple hound giving new meaning to Best in Show. Having spent much of the past few days staring at walls, I remind myself to do as Meltours' Kathy Deacon suggested on an earlier ramble around the city's streets and look up – there are so many beautiful buildings that can only be appreciated fully when you take in their entire length, their exquisite detail.

While I may be something of an art philistine, I love Melbourne's grand dames of architecture, none more so than The Forum (though the art-deco Manchester Unity Building isn't far behind). While seeing a show in this lovingly renovated theatre is a delight, every time I every time I walk out of the modern Federation Square, an impressive structure in its own right (though I didn't like it when it was first built, it's grown on me), towards the Forum its beauty makes me catch my breath.

Kathy's takes on Melbourne, which also include Miss Fisher's Murder Mysteries, art and “hidden shop” tours, encourage you to hit the pavement and – like Dan – see the city from a different perspective.

On my final day, I duck into the National Gallery of Victoria. As with the laneways and galleries, there is plenty to inspire, confound and enlighten.

Tonight, the outside walls will be the star attraction, coming alive with tales of migrants who've made a new life in Australia. Part of White Night, a visual feast and grand street party that is also a feat of endurance, that's a whole other chapter in Melbourne's ever-evolving artistic story. ■

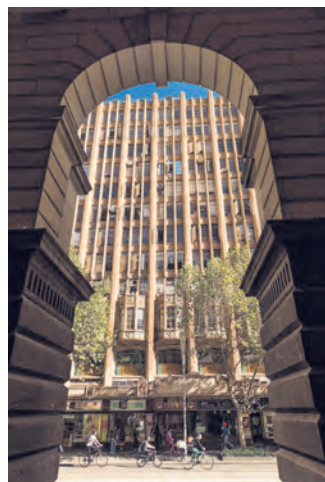
The author was a guest of Visit Victoria.  
[theblenderstudios.com](http://theblenderstudios.com);  
[artaficionadotours.com](http://artaficionadotours.com); [meltours.com.au](http://meltours.com.au);  
[artserieshotels.com.au](http://artserieshotels.com.au); [ngv.vic.gov.au](http://ngv.vic.gov.au)







The Manchester United building and (right) a room at the QT.



Wilson & Market.



Atlas Dining.

## WHERE TO EAT

### Atlas Dining

Fancy a trip somewhere special? At wunderkind Charlie Carrington's small but perfectly formed restaurant in South Yarra, the executive chef explores a different part of the globe every four months. You can choose between a five or seven-course degustation and given the effort that goes into this menu, I recommend the latter. We went on an adventurous journey through Peru, with flavours both familiar (a zingy ceviche) and surprising (grilled fig and eel). Drinks were tailored to match, with a refreshing Pisco sour a great kickstarter. With service every bit as good as the food – Charlie even pops out to deliver some of the dishes – this is an adventure worth taking at least once every four months. The chef is now exploring France until September. See [atlasdining.com.au](http://atlasdining.com.au).

### Wilson & Market

I may have turned down the generous platter of oysters that had my fellow diners in raptures but every bite delivered to the table thereafter was devoured. British-born chef Paul Wilson loves his produce – much of it sourced from the biodynamic Transition Farm on the Mornington Peninsula – and he treats it with respect at his restaurant tucked just inside Prahran Market. Each dish is a work of art in itself, and there is undeniable substance behind the style. His famous truffle egg, polenta and parmesan is a must, while I'm still salivating over a sesame-encrusted tuna (and I don't normally eat tuna). Portions are also very generous for this standard of cuisine – I'd recommend sharing a few dishes. See [wilsonandmarket.com.au](http://wilsonandmarket.com.au).

### Long Chim

While you can obviously have your fill of David Thompson's undeniable spicy Thai food in the basement of the State Buildings, the Melbourne experience takes things up a notch if you can get a table on the terrace. Watch the passing parade as you snack on dried prawns with ginger-toasted coconut or dive into the pork and pineapple curry. It's also one of the few places I could eat a plate load of cabbage – trust me, it's divine. Busy, noisy and a lot of fun, Long Chim is the perfect spot to kick off a night on the town. Start with one of the dangerously good cocktails. See [longchimmelb.com](http://longchimmelb.com).

### Hopetoun Tea Rooms

OK, it's nanna on steroids but who cares? Sometimes old-fashioned comfort is just what you need. Be warned, though, this is hugely popular

with tour groups, so a quiet cuppa may turn into a noisy affair. If you see a queue at the door, just head to one of the laneways. If there's one thing you can count on in Melbourne, it's that there's always a great place to eat or drink around the corner. See [hopetountearooms.com.au](http://hopetountearooms.com.au).

## WHERE TO STAY

Creative souls will love the quirky QT Melbourne, which also happens to be a perfect starting point for exploring the city's laneways. You could easily walk past its unprepossessing entry on Russell Street, even the signage is understated. But as soon as you step into the lobby, you know you're staying somewhere with personality. The design is eclectic, blending stone, timber and steel in a way that somehow makes sense even as your eye bounces from one to the other. The grand yet intimate spaces welcome but also engage and entertain, perhaps in a nod to the building's former life as a cinema complex. Multi-coloured curved chairs that are more comfortable than their irregular shapes would suggest beckon on one side; The Cake Shop, a cute cafe that serves tempting treats and next-level coffee, on the left. Up the staircase (covered in Yves Klein carpet for the design aficionados), is Pascale Bar & Grill, where executive chef Paul Easson serves European bistro-style dishes and bartenders specialise in cocktails inspired by the French Quarter. The QT Rooftop Bar, with great views matched only by the smooth sounds, does a roaring trade with the cool kids. And there is art everywhere, digital installations taking pride of place in all the public spaces. But my favourite place is the bedroom. If you'd told me that industrial chic would make a great sanctuary in the city, I would have laughed at you. Until I stepped into one of QT's suites, where wooden floors are covered with rugs tagged by graffiti artist James Beattie and brass light fittings offset richly upholstered furniture. The enormous bed is so comfortable, it's a struggle to get out in the morning. Then there's the bathroom, one of the biggest I've seen in a hotel. Elegant black slate makes the room feel warm rather than cold (don't ask me how), encouraging this bath-phobic guest to ditch the walk-in shower one evening and sink into the luxurious bath. Trust me, once you've checked in to the QT, you won't want to check out. See [qthotelsandresorts.com](http://qthotelsandresorts.com). 