

THE ART OF THE ILLEGAL

Peter Barrett traces the evolution
of street art in Melbourne »

In a back alley in Brunswick, a grown man is behaving like a kid. Dean Sunshine should be running his family textiles business.

Instead, the lithe, curly-headed 50-year-old is darting about the bluestone lane behind his factory, enthusiastically pointing out walls filled with colourful artworks. It's an awesome, open-air gallery, he says, that costs nothing and is in a constant state of flux.

Welcome to Dean's addiction: the ephemeral, secretive, challenging, and sometimes confronting world of Melbourne street art and graffiti.

Over the past 10 years, Dean has taken more than 25,000 photographs and produced two books (*Land of Sunshine* and *Street Art Now*) documenting the work of artists who operate in a space that ranges from a legal grey area to a downright illegal one. "I can't drive along a street without looking sideways down a lane to see if there's something new there," he says. "And it doesn't always have to be about a beautiful mural that's painted, it can be the smallest little thing. I saw something hand-written with chalk on a wall the other day. It said, 'We can't believe that they used to eat animals. Signed, Future Generation.' Genius!"

For a complex set of reasons, street art has flourished in Melbourne over the past 20 years, to the point where its tourist drawcard has forced local governments to not only tolerate, but also embrace, certain aspects of it. These days councils, including the City of Melbourne, make a distinction between acceptable street art (artistic works done with the permission of building owners) and illegal graffiti (any writing or images carried out without proper permission). As a movement, street art is entering the mainstream.

The latest book to celebrate the scene is by Melbourne



“

It's an awesome, open-air gallery, he says, that costs nothing and is in a constant state of flux

artist, author and educator, Lou Chamberlin. *Burn City: Melbourne's Painted Streets* presents a mind-boggling diversity of artistic expression, from elaborate, letter-based aerosol "pieces" to stencils, portraits, "paste-ups" (paper works glued to the wall), sculptures, yarn-based works, stickers and even dioramas.

"There is so much happening that the hubs, such as Hosier Lane, Stevenson Lane and Presgrave Place, are so short of space that the art work is layered," Lou says. "Something you see one week can be replaced or covered by something new the next. It's this constant change and development that I think keeps the scene in Melbourne so alive and energetic."

One of the first people to document Melbourne's graffiti was photographer Rennie Ellis. In three books – *Australian Graffiti* (1975), *Australian Graffiti Revisited* (1979) and *The All New Australian Graffiti* (1985) – Rennie captured many of the cheeky, sardonic and protest comment he found on Melbourne walls, such as "NO STANDING, ONLY DANCING."

In 1984, American artist Keith Haring put the spotlight



PHOTOGRAPHY: DEAN SUNSHINE; WALLS: ARTISTS; AHERS; DOUBLE STREET: ADVANTAGE; SILVER TRAIL: VANDERHILLE



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Heesco and Dule Style works in Hosier Lane, Adnate's Hosier Lane wall, Brim Silo on the Silo Art Trail, the Sheep Hills silo in the making, Art by Vexta and Elle in Collingwood.

on street art when he painted several murals in Melbourne, including an iconic wall that survives today at the former Collingwood Technical College. Meanwhile, young, mostly male, graffiti "writers" made their illegal marks on trains and train lines around Melbourne. And, thanks to the city's topography (easily accessed with plenty of lanes tucked away from prying eyes), not to mention its rich artistic scene, street art began to rapidly evolve.

According to the National Gallery of Victoria's (NGV) senior curator of Australian Art, David Hurlston, Melbourne artists were influenced in those pre-internet years by the graffitied Brooklyn streets and subways they saw on music television (MTV) and films, such as *Beat Street* (1984). "But because Melbourne was isolated in the sense that it didn't have that direct connection, it developed what became a very interesting, independent style," David says. "It was clearly influenced by New York, but that's what makes it so unique."

By the early 2000s stencil art emerged as a genre above all others. These clever, often provocative images cut into card and then painted onto surfaces earned Melbourne

an international reputation, bringing artists and admirers from near and far. British street artist Banksy famously left several stencilled deep-sea divers and parachuting rats around the city in 2003.

Local artists continued to test boundaries with police, producing more elaborate works in bolder, more publicly visible places. "It was exciting," says Berlin-born art curator Jan Dirk Mittmann, who ran the Melbourne Stencil Festival from 2004 to 2008. "Stencils were popping up like mushrooms in various lanes and back streets around Melbourne. But it was also very underground." Then, in 2005 authors Carl Nyman and Jake Smallman made the reputation official with their book on the scene – *Stencil Graffiti Capital: Melbourne*.

Of course, the Melbourne street-art scene hasn't stayed still. Today, private building owners and councils including Melbourne, Port Phillip and Yarra regularly commission works; street-art agency Juddy Roller has brought the movement to regional Victoria through the Silo Art Trail and the Benalla Street Art Wall To Wall Festival; and, while Melbourne street artists such as Rone, Adnate, Lushsux and Smug may not be household names yet, their combined 560,000 Instagram followers suggest that interest is building.

Geelong-born Rone moved to Melbourne in 2001 and experimented with stencils, paste-ups and hand-drawn posters before finding his rhythm with large-scale, freehand-painted portraits of female faces. In 2014 he painted several large murals inside the NGV for a Jean Paul Gaultier exhibition and now regularly flies around the world for commissions, where he has noticed many cities attempting to emulate Melbourne's look. "It feels very staged," he says of those overseas cities. "Melbourne has grown organically so it's »



more of a wild jungle of art compared to this finished exhibition feeling.”

Art collectors are getting on board, too. Melbourne-based couple Andrew King and Sandra Powell sold an impressive collection by artists including Sidney Nolan, Albert Tucker and Brett Whiteley to make room after stumbling across books on Banksy and French street artist Blek le Rat on a 2008 visit to London. “At that moment I just realised the audacity and the derring-do and the incisiveness of the social commentary,” Andrew says. “I bought the books and that was it.” Today, the pair, known as Sandrew, has amassed more than 2000 works of street art, including Australia’s largest Banksy collection.

It’s Tuesday, just after lunch, and we are standing in what our guide Dan, himself a street artist from Docklands’ Blender Studios, calls “the kiddie pool”: Rutledge Lane, a U-shaped, dumpster-lined alley that runs off the city’s most famous graffiti spot, Hosier Lane. It’s where many graffiti artists make their start and the walls have become so heavily adorned over the years that in places you can peel off layers of paint as thick as your finger. Dan, who uses found objects to create clever sculptures under the name Junky Projects, is taking us on a street-art tour of the city. Our group, which includes a Singaporean family of three, a Dutch 20-something, a young guy from Brisbane and two Kiwis, are here because of Melbourne’s international street art reputation.

Back in Hosier Lane, we stand aside while a troop of uniformed primary school children streams past; the lane is otherwise thick with camera-wielding tourists jostling for prime position in front of the art.

The tension here between unsanctioned and sanctioned art, free self-expression versus gentrification is not only



CLOCKWISE: A recent project from Rone, Blender Studios street-art tours, collectors SANDREW.



palpable, it’s audible. Behind a graffitied wooden hoarding, nail guns and electric saws thump and whine away, building the latest outlet for streetwear retailer, Culture Kings. As well as DJs and a barber, Dan says a basketball court is planned. “But does everybody get to play basketball? Do these guys get to come in and play basketball?” he gestures to a couple of scruffy looking homeless guys. “Or is it just about commodifying the culture and selling it to the tourists that come through?”

Later, Dan has us trawling through a few lesser-known laneways, eyes peeled for the tell-tale signs of particular artists: the concrete sculpted wine casks and firearms of Will Coles; the geometric-line drawings of Sunfigo; and yes, even a parachuting rat or two from Banksy. Soon I begin to see art almost everywhere I look. Maybe, I think, this is how the addiction starts. ✈



“

Soon I begin to see art almost everywhere I look

Travel info

Jetstar has great low fares to Melbourne from across the network.

To book, visit JETSTAR.COM

Reading list

- **Street Art Now**
Dean Sunshine, \$50, deansunshine.com
- **Burn City: Melbourne's Painted Streets**
Lou Chamberlin, \$29.99, hardiegrantgift.com.au
- **Street Art In Melbourne**
Free map, whatson.melbourne.vic.gov.au
- **Melbourne Street Art Guide**
Ewan McEoin and Din Heagney, \$29.99, thamesandhudsonaustralia.com