



Hosier Lane.

Left to right: Andrew Watson / Getty Images; Adam Ford



Melbourne's Laneways.

The hidden art of Australia's cultural heart can be found in intimate alleyways.

By Adam Ford



The grid of alternating streets and laneways in the centre of Melbourne is packed with everything a visitor could want. The drawback, however, is that its smaller, more delicate elements can sometimes go unnoticed.

As home to many internationally renowned galleries, museums, and festivals, the main drags could leave any artistically inclined visitor satisfied. Sometimes, though, the alley less travelled offers the most rewards. If you're an aficionado of the inspiration offered by independent and contemporary art, the galleries located around Melbourne's iconic Flinders Lane are a must-see.

ARTIST-RUN INITIATIVES.

Follow Flinders Lane from east to west and you'll pass through the heart of Melbourne via one of its most vibrant arteries. Alongside high-end fashion and state-of-the-moment cuisine, waiting patiently in the nooks and crannies of alleys leading off alleys, inside lobbies and up and down unassuming stairwells, you'll discover some of the most exciting art in Melbourne today.

By their very nature, independent galleries are like the artists who run them: young, ambitious, creative, curious, and optimistic about the relevance of art to our everyday lives. Their passion creates a sense of authenticity that's amplified by the intimate spaces they occupy.

As the managers of Blindside, one of Melbourne's foremost artist-run galleries, put it, artist-run initiatives "play a vital role in the arts ecology of Melbourne and beyond. Artists working independently of galleries and institutions take up these platforms to continue to learn about their practice, what the work needs, and how to move it into the world."

UP THE STAIRS AND DOWN THE ALLEYS.

Sarah Scout Presents has been located on the first floor of the heritage-listed Victor Horsley Chambers at 12 Collins Street since 2014. The gallery's neighbours — dentists, barbers, and medical practitioners — suit its mission to “present challenging contemporary work in domestically-scaled settings”. You can either take the stairs or wait for the 20s-era lift to grind up to the landing where thoughtfully curated exhibitions bathe in the light from French doors overlooking Collins Street's trams, cars, and pedestrians.

It's a fitting placement, given that AC/DC Lane, another street-art hotspot, leads from here back to Flinders Lane.

AC/DC Lane is similarly adorned with a thrilling mix of commissioned pieces, like portraits of Jimi Hendrix and Frank Zappa, and smaller “non-commissioned” works. These walls are an amazing multi-artist exhibition that's continuously changing, with new works covering old ones on an almost daily basis. Like Herodotus's river, it's impossible to see the same wall twice.

Make sure you take the time to cast your eye over the full extent of these walls — sometimes the most

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Back at street level, walk south across Collins Street, skirt around the Sofitel Hotel's porters, and follow the escalator down to a short arcade that enters Flinders Lane itself. Turn right and cross Exhibition Street. Stick to the left-hand footpath until you come to Duckboard Place.

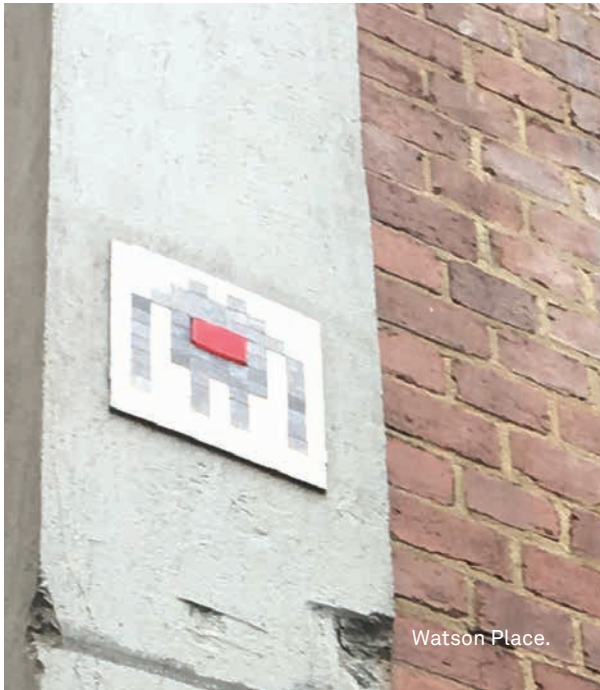
This is home to a vibrant collection of street art: murals, stencils, stickers, and paste-ups, torn and fading gig posters, Sharpie scrawls, and classic aerosol pieces. It curves around a corner and ends at a 20-story-high wall adorned with murals including a portrait of Malcolm Young, elder brother of Angus, the notorious school-blazer-wearing guitarist from Australian rock phenomenon AC/DC.

interesting pieces are hidden in plain view, tiny stickers applied at ground level or graphics obscured by concrete overhangs, like the fading stencil of a military drone lurking just beneath a windowsill near the corner of Flinders Lane, which bears a striking resemblance to the work of the world-famous Banksy.

The notorious street artist and prankster did visit Melbourne in 2003, and pieces he placed in Melbourne's laneways are well known to aficionados and fellow street artists. Over the years, though, many of his stencils have been lost to graffiti cleanups, renovations, and repairs.



Rolling Stones graffiti in Melbourne laneway.



GETTING CRAFTY AND INVADING SPACES.

Head back to the corner, cross Flinders Lane, then follow the right-hand footpath until you come to Watson Place. Just above and to the left of the corner wall's transition from dark grey concrete to bare bricks, you'll see a small alien creature constructed out of tiles. This little beast is one of the remaining mementos of the Parisian street artist Space Invader's 2003 tour of Melbourne. As with Banksy's contributions, many of Invader's works have since been "decommissioned" by construction and renovation, but one or two are still around today.

Craft Victoria can easily be found at the bottom of a stairwell, through a set of glass doors off to the right of Watson Place. This support organisation offers both a gallery space celebrating craft-makers, and a shop where artists and makers can sell their wares.

YOU'VE GOT MAIL.

Head a little further down the block to 141 Flinders Lane. The tiny Mailbox Art Space can be found on the first-floor landing, just beside the Art Deco stained-glass lift door that encapsulates the glorious interiors of this 1935 building.

Stylish wooden containers, formerly the mailboxes of the building's tenants, offer an interstitial space for contemporary artists; their exhibitions must fit the dimensions of these 19 glass-fronted cabinets, each measuring only around 6" x 3". Each month, a new exhibition takes over, making repeat visits highly recommended.

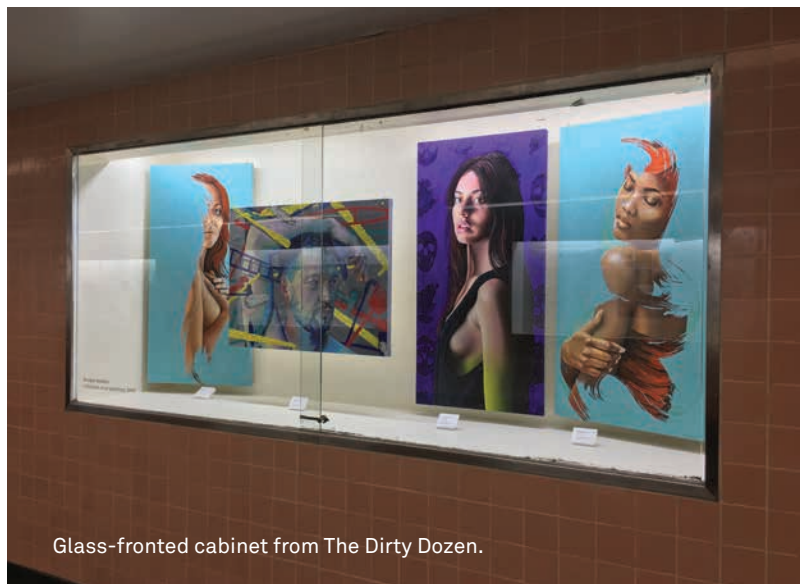
Continue west along Flinders Lane across Russell Street. Halfway down the block on your left is another street art hotspot. Hosier Lane is a wide bluestone alley with a marvelous cropped view of the crazy-paving patterns of the roof of the Australian Centre for the Moving Image. Densely decorated walls face each other, with zebras and videogame characters staring across the cobblestones, side-by-side with geometric patterns, dreamscape imaginings, and the general futz and clutter of stencils, tags, stickers, posters, and so on.





Entrance to Centre Place laneway.

Julien Vriy / Getty Images



Adam Ford

Glass-fronted cabinet from The Dirty Dozen.

In contrast to the clutter of Watson Place itself, the space Craft Victoria occupies has been designed along traditional curatorial lines. It is a calming and peaceful space that inspires contemplation and consideration. The friendly staff are always happy to answer questions, or just to have a chat about what's on display.

NAVIGATING THE HALLWAYS.

Occupying the corner of Flinders Lane and busy Swanston Street, the Nicholas Building has been part of the cityscape since 1926. Modest rents for the small rooms have facilitated this former department store's reinvention as a vertical arts precinct, densely populated by hundreds of artist-practitioners who have located their offices, studios, and galleries within its 10 floors.

Two notable Nicholas Building galleries are Blindsight and Caves, artist-run initiatives celebrated for their boldness, ambition, and innovation. They're both best accessed via the well-loved lifts that open



Philip Game / Alamy Stock Photo

City centre laneway.

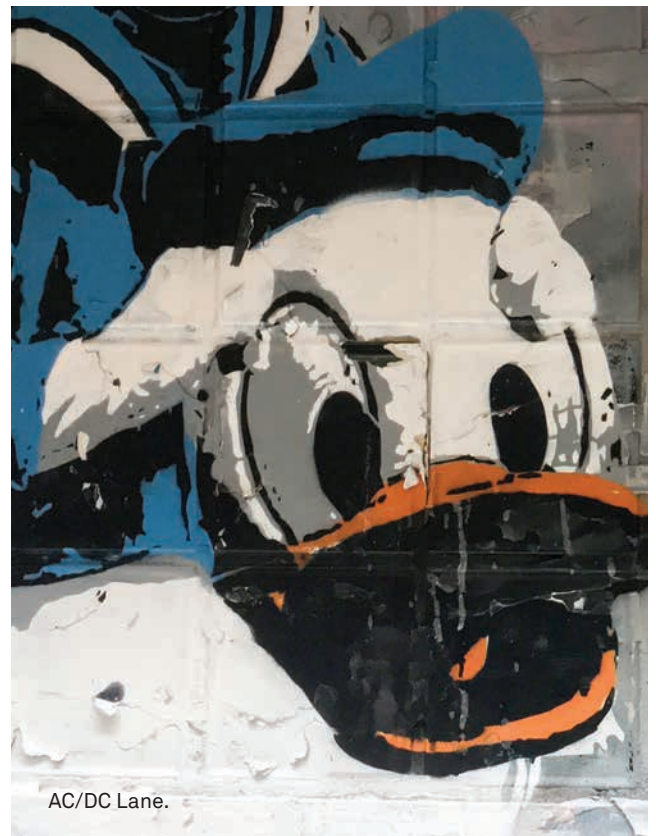


Mailbox Art Space.

Stylish wooden containers, formerly the mailboxes of the building's tenants, offer an interstitial space for contemporary artists.

onto the charming ground-floor arcade with its cafés, sushi bars, and fashion houses. On upper floors, the opening doors reveal tiled and labyrinthine corridors that seem to spiral around themselves, but there's enough signage, both improvised and permanent, to guide you to your destination.

Located on the southwest corner of the 8th floor, Blindside's rooms often house multiple exhibitions, from drawing and sculpture to video installations and performance art. Blindside encourages artists to develop work that challenges themselves as well as their audiences. Exhibits are supported by critical texts which allow the visitor to delve deeper.



AC/DC Lane.

Adam Forc (2)