The art of living in a city: contemporary art in the City of Melbourne collection

By Dr Chris McAuliffe

Forty years ago, the English travel writer Jonathan Raban observed that cities were becoming somehow *softer*. The density of the city—its bricks and mortar, its time-honoured geography—seemed to be dissolving in the face of intangible forces. Emotion, sensation, even fantasy could affect urban experience, giving it a more fluid and less rational character. Raban concluded that everyday urban life was no longer simply functional; it also had an aesthetic element to it. "Living in cities", he wrote, "is an art, and we need the vocabulary of art, of style, to describe the peculiar relationship between man and material that exists in the continual play of creative urban living".[1]

From heavy modernity to liquid city

So what kind of urban living do the vocabularies of contemporary Australian artists describe? Raafat Ishak's *Medication valley* (2007) is an evocation of a city that is both structured and fragmented, concrete and ephemeral. There are signs that engineers and architects shape this environment. Parts of the painting read like a plan, with schematic cross-sections and structural details awaiting fabrication. But elsewhere lines and planes take on a life of their own, forms splinter and spread like a randomly tessellated mosaic. The painting, and the urban space it suggests, offers two kinds of pleasure. One is the reassuring stability of crisp, stable structures. The other is the seductive, free-form flow of improvised shapes.

Figure 1 Raafat Ishak, *Medication valley*, 2007, acrylic on canvas, 60 x 40 cm

Ishak's painting plots the different urban experiences that have overlapped in Melbourne in recent decades. One is the hard city; a modern city of steel and glass, of gridded streets and analogue services. This city is a product of what sociologist Zygmunt Bauman called "the era of *hardware*, or *heavy* modernity".[2] In recent decades, this age has given way to "lightness", "weightlessness", "mobility" and "inconstancy".[3]

Once, the city was shaped by maps and master plans; it was purposeful, predictable, instrumental. Now, the city is awash with information technology, consumer carnivals and media spectacle. Such experiences are "slippery, shifty, evasive and fugitive".[4] Heavy

modernity plotted an integrated, machine-like city. In the age of "liquid modernity", the city is a place of "disengagement, elusiveness, facile escape and hopeless chase".[5]

In the nineteenth-century Melbourne had been envisaged as a city in which social stability and mercantile prosperity could be achieved through a network of infrastructure, institutions and governance. The historical collections of Melbourne's libraries and art museums hold many examples of artists' adoption of this vocabulary. In the State Library of Victoria's 1854 panorama of Melbourne by Whittock and Teale's the prominent "socio-technical orderings"[6] of civil society; government offices, courts, churches, schools and hospitals were all numbered and indexed beneath the picture. The booming city of Melbourne

Figure 2 Nathaniel Whittock and Goodman Teale, *The city of Melbourne*, 1855, coloured lithograph, 38.0 x 56.5 cm sheet. State Library of Victoria

was rendered coherent by its neat grid of streets, its interwoven systems of transport and commerce, and its network of agencies dedicated to civic improvement.

In contrast, Troy Innocent Troy Innocent imagined a postmodern world in his 2005 interactive software project *Ludica*. It is one in which an inherited landscape of nineteenth- and twentieth-century modernity is layered with virtual and networked spaces. Melbourne's familiar alleys and traditional mercantile buildings have been occupied by new digital tribes. Each speaks its own language of screen-style icons; the Neo-Materialists (orange), Post-Symbolic (green) and Post-Human (blue). Streaming and feeding on data as they compete

Figure 3 Troy Innocent, *Cloud*, 2005, digital C type photograph, 120 x 180 cm

for territory, these cyber citizens create a fluid, porous city. Melbourne is one giant Wi-Fi hot spot, a jumbled cloud of information, tags and emoticons. Innocent is not suggesting that this is all a good thing. While it's tempting to contrast his expansive, brightly-coloured field of icons with the shadowy, claustrophobic nineteenth-century alley, the interactive art work invites us to become an active member of one of the digital tribes. Once an identity is adopted and the game is in train, it quickly becomes clear that the brave new digital world is as harshly competitive and self-interested as the old.

Artists aren't merely the illustrators of urbanists' visions. If this were the case, the vocabulary of art would be limited to descriptions of the city future, for all of them—colonial boosters, modern planners and postmodern theorists— are preoccupied with what the city is becoming. Artists traverse time in their images of the city. They reflect on Melbourne's deep history, the here-and-now of the present, and the possibilities—both alluring and frightening—of the future. As Louise Forthun suggests in her layered images of multiple city views, past and present, Melbourne is a palimpsest. It is a new text written over those preceding it; the most recent one speaks strongest but traces of earlier voices constantly emerge. These cumulative historical echoes are another, deeper, element of today's liquid city. Melbourne's fluidity is not merely digital or postmodern; it is an effect arising out of the

Figure 4 Louise Forthun, *Pink*, 2006, oil on board, 100 x 90 cm

multiple cultures and histories ingrained in its spaces. Artists recognise, as Adrian Franklin remarks, that "Cultures don't disappear in cities, they bleed into one another … they challenge and create fusions and assemblages—often in the most surprising and hard-to-predict manner."[7]

Images of the city: a body of customs and traditions

If we accept Raban's idea that art describes urban experience, we must also recognise that the vocabulary of art is highly subjective. As Whittock and Teale's print shows, even a detailed, map-like representation of the city can incorporate imaginary and rhetorical elements. It was a booster's vision of Melbourne, an enthusiastic prospectus for a city bigger and better than it actually was in 1855. Melbourne's more recent history, as Emily Floyd shows in her exploration of community activist posters, has been shaped by diverse visions and competing rhetoric. What a city should be—what services it offers, what community life it sustains—is now an almost constant thread in public discourse. It might even be said that contemporary Melbourne is not simply a material place but a rolling debate on its own definition, one that outpaces not only planners and policy-makers but also artists.

Figure 5 Emily Floyd *Ripple 30,* 2013–14, Unique screenprint on BFK Arches, paper, mounted on aluminium dibond, 110 x 70 cm

Writing in his influential 1925 book, *The city*, Robert E Parks argued that a metropolis was "a state of mind, a body of customs and traditions, and of the organized attitudes and sentiments that inhere in these customs and are transmitted with this tradition".[8] The pictures that artists make of the city can also organize attitudes and sentiments, and are shaped by art's customs and traditions. In June 1889, Tom Roberts painted a small sketch of Collins Street, *The first tram* (private collection). It's an atmospheric image of a waking city, reflecting impressionism's fascination with modern urban experience. But there's also a more traditional moral element. Solemn church spires overlook modern streets, trams and gas lamps. The hurly burly of modern metropolitan life is set against the backdrop of faith and redemption. To which light will

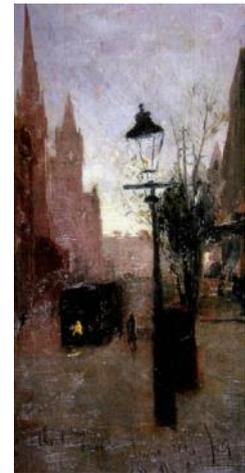Melburnians be drawn; the sacred or the secular?

Figure 6 Tom Roberts, *The first tram*, 1889, oil on cigar box lid. Private collection

Twelve decades later, in Peter O'Doherty's *Wet day* (2011), the tram is still being used to evoke the clatter and bustle of Melbourne's streets. And muted, shadowy forms still capture the sombre mood of a Melbourne winter. R E Park claimed that the twentieth-century city was an affirmation of the rational and mechanistic values of modern life. But it has now become customary for artists to seek the very opposite, to discover dream-like and sensual moods in Melbourne. Artists reinvent the city with each new image. Each representation of Melbourne is both a vision of the city and a dialogue with the accumulated artistic conventions that underpin the urban image.
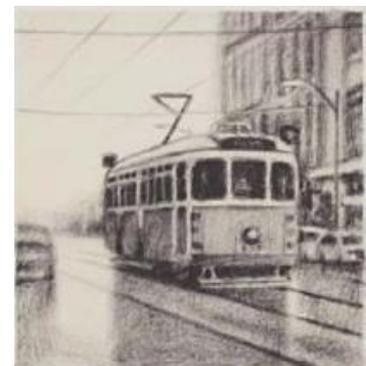

Figure 7 Peter O'Doherty, *Wet day*, 2011, lithograph, 42 x 35 cm sheet

Choosing a particular artistic tradition shapes the version of city life that appears. In the nineteenth century Louis Buvelot applied the language of the picturesque landscape to the Melbourne scene. His small sketch of the Yarra River at Studley Park, in the University of Melbourne art collection, decoratively balanced nature both wild and tamed, expansive and contained. As a contemporary observer, Charles Rooking Carter, noted, Studley Park was a place of recreation in which one might encounter nature "in its primitive state" while also finding comfort in "the homely but neat and trim cottage".[9]

Figure 8 Louis Buvelot, *Yarra, Studley Park*, c1870, sepia ink and wash on paper, 38.5 x 36.8 cm. University of Melbourne Art Collection

In picturing the landscape both Carter and Buvelot drew on literary devices to trigger and resolve emotional responses. Carter declared that, in Studley Park, "the ever-flowing and devious Yarra performs its most eccentric movements, and riots wantonly in its manifold loops and curves, as it bends and winds serpent-like 'midst wandering mazes lost,' elaborating peninsulas by the way, as it meanders hither and thither along its torturous course".[10] In this description, the Yarra—Melbourne in a state of nature—is irregular, unsystematic and vaguely sinister. Reassurance can be found

in the disciplined labors of the colonists; Buvelot's neat house, or Whittock and Teale's socio-technical orderings.

Studley Park still suggests such contrasts to artists. While Andrew Browne commences with a photograph, he doesn't set out to record the facts of the scene. His painting updates the gothic mood concocted by Carter well over a century ago. The flaring light of a camera flash makes the foreground

Figure 9 Andrew Browne, *Untitled (Studley Park)*, 2005, acrylic on canvas, 121 x 366 cm

loom large and flattens out the night sky into inky blackness. Gnarled tree branches become eerie, grasping tendrils. Tangled and labyrinthine, they evoke entrapment and confusion, as if modelling the psyche of a city dweller suffering under the pressures of high-density urban life.

Projected through the languages of the nineteenth–century gothic and twentieth–century *film noir*, a fragment of the city—a section of a tree in a corner of one of Melbourne's many parks—gives voice to an urban unconscious, to a sense of risk and threat lying beneath the surface of civility. This is a painting about place, time and the seasons; Studley Park in the depths of a Mebourne winter night. It is about the human experience of the city, especially emotional responses to pressure, congestion and disquiet. And it is about a network of texts; the various ways in which anxiety and melancholy have been expressed in art, literature and film. There are still faint echoes of the colonists' insecurity in a new and occasionaly tumultuous environment. And a different, late-twentieth century fear intrudes; one that ssociologist Adrian Franklin describes as the fear of urbanism gone wrong, of a "dysfunctional, unsustainable and *inherently* probematic city".[11]

The look of twenty-first century Melbourne: towards an ecology of city life

In a single-discipline view of the city, Franklin asserts, "we seldom see … a totality of human and non-human networks of texts, software, culture, behaviour, architecture and trees and gardens."[12] It is a hallmark of contemporary images of Melbourne that artists now focus on such networks. Making a painting is one way of pooling those various elements of urban experience. But the goal is not simply, or only, to make a picture of the city. The diversity of metropolitan life is a challenge to painting, a test of its capacity to meaningfully engage with both the contemporary world and the traditions of the medium (just as it was for Roberts and his peers). Moya McKenna's *All parts held* represents aspects of her Melbourne world (a pedestrian footbridge, the red brick building housing her studio) but is more concerned with the problem of declaring intangibles (living, looking, creating) into the physical field of the canvas. All these parts are held, as

Figure 10 Moya McKenna, *All parts held*, 2009, oil on linen, 56.5 x 41 cm

the title suggests, by the artist's encompassing arms but still the essential question for McKenna is whether the painting itself holds together.

Reflecting on the material, historical, emotional and cultural layers that shape urban experience, artists approach the city as an ecology—as the interaction of organism and environment—rather than as an apparatus. In keeping with new theories of urbanism, contemporary artists see city life as "a multiplicity of relationships, cultures, objects and natures".[13] This shift in attitude can be seen in two versions of Melbourne's streets, painted fifty years apart. John Brack's *Collins Street, 5 p.m.* (1955), one the treasures of Melbourne's National Gallery of Victoria, epitomises the idea of the city as a machine, populated by robotic operatives. Footpaths become conveyor belts, channelling commuters to and from work. Dressed conservatively and bathed in a beige light, Melbournians of the fifties unquestioningly obey convention and the clock.

Figure 11 John Brack, *Collins St, 5 p.m.*, 1955, oil on canvas, 114.8 x 162.8 cm, NGV

Caroline Kennedy reprises Brack's iconic work in her *Collins Street (after Brack pt 2)* and *Under the clocks* (2007). In both, the theme of social regimentation is still evident. Crowds are funnelled through Melbourne streets, their movements directed by traffic lights, clocks and train schedules. But there are significant differences also. While Kennedy's pedestrians are more densely packed than Brack's, they are also more diverse in their appearance and more fluid in their motions. Look closely and you'll discover all kinds of distinctions within the crowd; clothing, hair, gesture and bearing. Some seem almost flamboyant in comparison to Brack's figures; an effect amplified by Kennedy's use of rich colour. Far from being a symbol of conformity, the crowded street is an environment teeming with life and energy. The artist approaches these citizens of the twenty-first century with fascination rather than despair. Certainly they are shaped by their environment but there is no predicting, much less mechanizing, their behaviour.

Figure 12 Caroline Kennedy, Detail of *Collin Street (After Brack pt 2)*, 2007, paint on glass with aluminium frame, 50 x 50 x 8 cm.

The idea of the inquisitive artist wandering city streets in pursuit of modern life has been a powerful one since the nineteenth century. It's hard to picture modern art without impressionist boulevards, expressionist night clubs and futurist railway stations. Today that curiosity is turned towards urban ecologies with their soft, incorporeal systems and deeply layered histories. In 2010, photographer Zoe Ali and writer Christos Tsiolkas went in search of the spiritual life of Melbourne. Where Roberts had spied only two, Christian churches on Collins Street, Ali and Tsiolkas discovered that "The multitude of

Figure 13 Zoe Ali & Christos Tsiolkas, *The new Jerusalem*, 2010, exhibition installation, City Gallery, Melbourne Town Hall.

language, religion and culture, which makes up this city is one of its most vital joys, one of the great pleasures of being Melbournian".[14] Ali's photographs are primarily of 'heavy' or historical markers of faith; churches, spires, minarets and monuments. But religious experience was not defined narrowly in terms of architecture or denomination. Instead Ali and Tsiolkas reflected on the expression of human values in an urban environment; "in walking the streets of Melbourne, finding respite by entering shrines, temples, mosques and cathedrals, contemplating a natural spiritual world in the heart of the concrete city, we also have come across moments of kindness and compassionate interaction between strangers. In our city there is joy, there is transcendence, there is ecstasy and generosity."[15]

When Whittock and Teale mapped Melbourne's religious institutions in their 1854 lithograph, numbers and labels did the trick. Ali and Tsiolkas scattered their findings across the walls of the City Gallery, mixing texts, images and artefacts. Not in order to suggest a jumbled, incoherent diversity but to speak of that idea of the city as a network of texts. Faith might relate to a place or a building but it is also embedded in ceremony, scripture, memory and tradition. Above all, it is part of an ecology; a complex mix of past and present, difference and commonality, self and community.

An urban ecology can be modest in size, not so much a city-wide geography as a little pocket of activity or behaviour. James Yuncken's *Cumulus morning of 23rd November 2010* (2011) portrays a quiet moment in a small Flinders Lane restaurant. Along with other paintings in an exhibition entitled "Walking to work", the picture was part of a personal itinerary through Richmond and Collingwood, a daily pedestrian commute from home to studio. While the artist was interested in the facts of the images—the light, the density of traffic, the architecture—it was impossible for him remain objective, even about an everyday walk to work; "my familiarity, my relationship to these places seeped in", says Yuncken.[16]

Figure 14 James Yuncken, *Cumulus morning of 23rd November 2010*, 2011, acrylic on board, 60 x 60 cm.

What interests artists is the dynamic, scalable character of ecologies that blend the tangible (streets, buildings) and the intangible (habit, pleasure). Melbourne has managed to elaborate the simple convenience of a café breakfast into a complex lifestyle ritual. When cafés cluster in a strip, and the strip generates a fashionable laneway culture, a morning latte starts to mean far more than a restful moment in an artist's life. It's an economy, a tourism campaign or a variable in the determination of a city's 'liveability' ranking.

Like many other cities, Melbourne is becoming more self-conscious about its distinctive ecologies. Urban planners see local character and street life as an antidote to the regulated, rationalised cities of the modern era. Laneway graffiti has grown from an illicit subculture in a heavily-promoted feature of city life; urban ecologies are now incoporated into branding strategies. Street art offers tourists a colourful, romantic experience; there are back alleys, night life and a whiff of outlawry. The subject of many of David Jolly's paintings is the double-edged idea of Melbourne's 'look'; what you see on the street and what is projected as the city's image. He is often struck by the difference between everyday street life and the spectacular cultures of branding and major events. One day, a park; the next, a Grand Prix circuit. One moment, it's bin night in a Melbourne laneway; the next, a tourist's selfie is flowing through cyberspace.
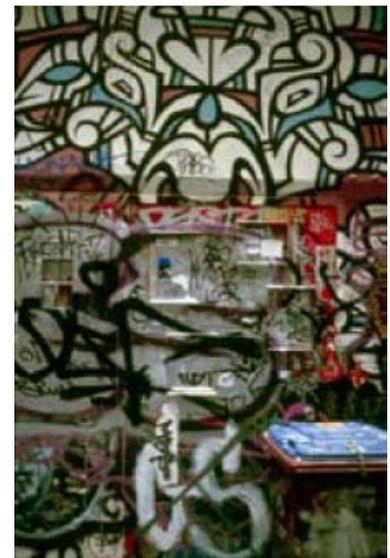

Figure 15 David Jolly, *Text*, 2008, oil on glass, 70 x 45 cm

Because an urban ecology arises from the human experience of culture and society, it is not likely to appear as a smooth-running, seamlessly-integrated machine. It will include conflict and disadvantage, as well as uncertainty about identity and place in the sysytem. Trevor Nickolls' *Clash of cultures* (2006) is one of his many paintings exploring the multi-layered consciousness that emerges in response to the twentieth-first-century city life. As an Indigenous artist living in the city, Nickolls engaged with both dreamtime (the deep heritage of indigenous culture) and machinetime (a fast-paced culture combining art, money, power and status). What emerged in his paintings was a divided self, presenting numerous faces to a mobile, fragmented world. It was a self combining both black and white parentage, powerful artistic ambitions and uncertain professional standing. Jagged-edged profiles and flailing arms suggest discord and confusion, but the gentle melding of curving black and white profiles indicate that Nickolls had succesfully balanced his several urban identities. "Everything is coming together', he said shortly after making this painting, 'everything is gelling, my life, my work. Everything is flowing into one".[17]

Figure 16 Trevor Nicholls, *Clash of cultures*, 2006, synthetic polymer paint of canvas, 78.5 x 78.5 cm

Moments of disorientation—when a city seems inhospitable and a feeling of not belonging prevails—are a familiar urban sensation, especially to newcomers and travellers. A person adept at responding to an urban ecology will make a positive out of such discomfort. "[A]t moments like these", writes Jonathan Raban, "the city goes soft; it awaits the imprint of an identity. For better or worse, it invites you to remake it, to consolidate it into a shape you can live in".[18]

But not everyone can shape the city to their needs or feel comfortable with the way it shapes them. *Man about town* (2003), one of a series of 1957 photographs of her father that Croft discovered after his death, is quietly enigmatic. Here is a smartly-dressed Indigenous man, standing in Lonsdale street among signs of Melbourne's post-war modernity. In the distance is the framework of the ICI building, one of the city's first skyscrapers. And in the foreground are new-fangled parking meters, introduced just two years earlier. This is an eerily quiet street. It's as if Croft's father has waited

Figure 17 Brenda Croft, *Man about town*, 2003, giclée print on hahnemühle paper, 80 x 119 cm

for it to empty so that he could rehearse his place in the city without an audience. It doesn't seem likely that he'll remake the Melbourne. Instead Melbourne seems to demand that he remake himself, to become a modern man in a modernising city. With enough practice, perhaps he could join Brack's Melburnians a couple of blocks away on Collins Street.
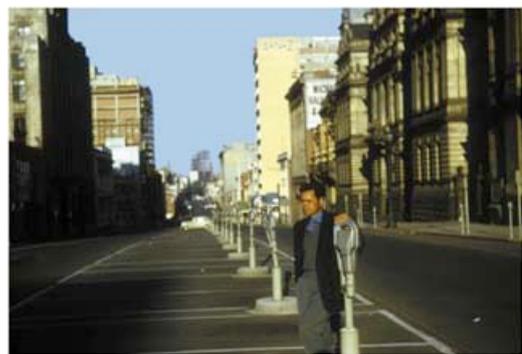
It's not surprising that artists, along most of Melbourne's 4 million-plus inhabitants, are fascinated by the city's human ecology. But this interest in human urban experience can obscure the natural ecology of the city, which has survived 180 years of intervention since European settlement on the banks of the Yarra river. This natural ecology currently encompasses 41 vegetation classes, 1,810 plants, 460 animals (including 338 birds), 32 freshwater fish and over 533 insects. Many Melburnians will have seen

Figure 18 John Wolseley, *The nocturnal life of Melbourne's parks and gardens*, 2011, watercolour on paper, 111 x 244 cm

foxes, bats and possums after sunset. In drought conditions, kangaroos have re-entered the outer suburbs and there have been sightings of platypuses in the Yarra River within ten kilometres of the city centre. With greater attention by local governments to the planting of native flora, rosellas and other parrots are now competing with the city's ubiquitous sparrows and mynahs. John Wolseley's *The nocturnal life of Melbourne's parks and gardens* (2011) is a compendium of such encounters during a month of night-time rambles in the city. While the image documents falcons, foxes and frogs spotted in Melbourne parks, there's more to it than field notes. Using watercolour—a lush, flowing medium—and building a compressed, overlapping space, Wolseley reasserts the presence of a riotous nature that pushes streets and buildings into the background. It is not simply that nature has a presence, Wolseley proposes that nature, as well as humans, has claims on Melbourne's space.

Other people's reasons: maps and mysteries

The displacement of nature by culture is the great contrast that city dwellers address, often unconsciously, on a daily basis. The metropolis is an environment, to be sure. But it's one that we compare unfavourably with the 'real', natural environment every time we complain about noise, dirt and congestion. It's one that wins out over nature every time we fail to notice the city's teeming flora and fauna or resign ourselves to another master plan projecting population and infrastructure growth. Along the way, the urban environment becomes ever more dense; the city becomes a collection of compressed, fragmentary spaces.

Figure 19 Jill Anderson, *Melbourne*, 2010, compressed charcoal on paper, 185 x 280 cm

What is often at stake in artists' image of the city is the fate of human agency in the face of the triumph of culture over nature. To what extent can such agency survive the city's massive material and procedural presence? As Raban remarks, 'Streets, shops, cafes, houses, underground railways, office blocks are not, for most of us, matters of choice or reason … The city dweller is constantly coming up against the absolute mysteriousness of *other* people's reasons.'[19] Whatever the capacity of individual agency, whatever the fluidity of postmodern culture, artists like Michelle Hamer make it clear that city life is still a profoundly directed and channelled affair.

Figure 20 Michelle Hamer, *Two way traffic*, 2011, hand-stitching on perforated plastic, 57 x 78 cm

Artists use the street map and aerial view to highlight this conundrum; four million people live their lives in an environment shaped by the decisions of perhaps a few thousand experts, civil servants and speculators. The map is the schematic city; planned, regulated and operational. It is a technical, even technocratic, environment not a natural ecology. Maps show what the city dweller is up against; as Raban argues, "we live in a world which is patently not of our devising, in which we are perpetually baffled and inconvenienced by people we don't know and whom we suspect we wouldn't like".[20]

Figure 21 Shumei Kobayashi, *Melbourne*, dyed hemp, 90 x 170 cm

As well as being a territorial chart and directional aid, the map can become a register of our engagement with the city. As Peter Atkins suggests, up until quite recently, Melburnians would have regularly handled copies of the Melways street directory. A compendium of facilities and services, as well as a collection of highly detailed maps, the Melways helped people pursue their interests, not just find the shortest route between two points. A well-thumbed Melways was a kind of prehistoric Facebook; a folded-down page corner was an analogue version of 'liking' a park or golf course, while declaring your map number was a way identifying your patch. In cartographic terms, successive annual updates of the directory plotted the expansion of the city and the increasing complexity of its services and infrastructure. But in human terms, it was a kind of register of the desires and behaviours of Melburnians. The map is not entirely pragmatic and may itself become an historical archive of urban behaviours. In 1971, for example, the map-makers of Melways determined that croquet clubs were important features of the urban landscape, alongside post offices and fire stations.

Figure 22 Peter Atkins, *Edition #5, 1971. New features - Caravan Parks, Croquet Clubs, Fire Stations, Ice Skating Rinks, Post Offices and Public Weighbridges*, 2009, acrylic on plywood, 33 x 33 cm

Nevertheless, a map is an abstraction; this, after all, is Atkins' point in treating Melways covers as found abstract paintings. Out there in the real world, the cool geometry of a map is modified by the psychological intensities Melburnians invest in particular places. In the Melways, there's a small green oval labelled Melbourne Cricket Ground. Louise Hearman sees it differently. This a site for historically- and culturally-sanctioned mayhem; where spectators as well as players succumb to white line fever, abandoning reason and decorum until the final sirens sounds.

Figure 23 Louise Hearman, *Untitled 1365*, 2012, oil on masonite, 39 x 30.5 cm

Crowds have a latent psychological intensity. The apparent randomness of human behaviour makes them inexplicable and vaguely threatening. Who are all these people and what are they doing? What maintains their civility? What might push them over the margin into anarchy? Such questions inject a certain frisson into street life. Nineteenth-century writers like Charles Baudelaire and Edgar Allan Poe saw crowded city streets as the cutting edge of modern society; here you could find such disruptive figures as the dandy or the criminal rubbing shoulders with respectable citizens. Simon Terrill's staged crowd events seem like a challenge to the city and its inhabitants. If an artist invites around 400 people to occupy a contemporary urban site, will any of that Baudelairean friction appear? Can the city still exercise its mysterious catalytic effect, or will the crowd simply shop and buy coffees?

Figure 24 Simon Terrill, *Crowd theory (Southbank)*, 2007, photograph, 170 x 229.2 cm

Many artists still believe in the magic of the city and are seduced by its challenging density. Today's managed and regulated urban spaces make them nostalgic for a time when cities were dynamic, romantic and enigmatic. Those were the days, when surrealists wandered the streets of Paris, stumbling across the startling urban sights they dubbed '*le merveilleux*'. Try doing as Alexi Keywan does. Shift your perspective, lift your eyes from the straight and narrow, discover the surreal landscape of cables and clouds hovering overhead.

Figure 25 Alexi Keywan, *The passenger no. 10*, 2011, pen on paper, 29 x 20 cm

Or, like Richard Larter, look beyond the slabs of concrete and rows of cars. Try to imagine the pulsing waves of energy—electricity, microwaves, emotion, desires—that throb through the city.

Figure 26 Richard Larter, *Offices*, 13-15 March 2001, acrylic on canvas, 85 x 124.5cm

Other artists insist that elements of modern street life have never gone away. A curious, semi-visible cast of characters still populates Melbourne's footpaths. Today's street vendors are not very different from their nineteenth-century antecedents in both their behaviour and social status. Sangeeta Sandrasega's *Untitled* (*flower seller)* (2007–08) is a contemporary version of the shadowy urban underclass that fascinated modern painters like Edouard Manet. Reduced to a black outline, the street vendor is a type rather than an individual; representing convenience and an element of luxury for the customer but also the ground zero of urban commerce. Such hurried and anonymous street transactions are reminders that an old-fashioned urban ecology—one centred on status, opportunity and class—still functions in contemporary Melbourne.

Figure 27 Sangeeta Sandrasega, *Untitled (flower seller)*, 2007–08, felt and cotton, 170 x 177 cm

The continual play of creative urban living

If, as Raban wrote, living in cities is an art, what do the contemporary works in the City of Melbourne collection tell us of this life? In the first instance, that a city can't be encapsulated in a single image or even in a single image-making system. Maps, for artists, are schematic geographical notations rather than encompassing overviews. The vast majority of what we see everyday is fractured, partial and distant. What artists notice is the sheer number of inexplicable scenes we encounter in the city. Which means that Melbourne's secrets are likely to be discovered in a momentary glimpse of figures in an alley. The task, then, is developing an alertness to incident, to be attuned to urban ambience.

Figure 28 Rick Amor, *The chefs*, 2007, oil on canvas, 81 x 100 cm

Artists also see the city as mysterious and resistant; it doesn't willingly reveal itself to the casual observer. There's remarkably little transparency in the city's material form; it's not possible to see its interiors. Signage on façades makes shorthand statements about what's going on inside but our gaze often rebounds from mirrored surfaces. Contemporary artists are alert to the abstract, almost crystalline, geometry of urban space. The streets are gridded, buildings façades are uninflected and even rooftops start to look like an expanding field of minimalist

sculptures.

Figure 29 Stephen Bush, *Pool hall*, 1980, oil on canvas, 120 x 120 cm

At the same time, cities speak loudly, in an ecstatic voice. But what we hear is the ecstasy of communication, not the heart of the city. While attentive artists cock an ear to Melbourne's whispered secrets, speculative capital shouts from the rooftops in a cacophony of logos, brands and vendor hoardings. There are competing voices, then. Artists will always look for those deeply embedded in the city's history and culture, rather than being swept up in the delirium of the real estate booster.

Figure 30 David Wadelton, *Sold #3*, 2011, archival digital inkjet print, 53.5 x 80 cm

Artists listen for the voice of the common people; exclamations on the street, suburban slang and overlapping voices on a tram. They reflect on the historical and cultural layering of voices; the voices of the Wurundjeri, of nineteenth-century colonists, of the native-born and migrants. Such encounters are not always draped in the lyrical poetics of heritage. Clinton Nain's incantatory repetition of the vowels, the building blocks of the English language, speak of an imposed language, white words overwriting black foundations.

Figure 31 Clinton Nain, *aeiou—all of you*, 2006, acrylic and bitumen on canvas, diptych 152 x 182 cm

Above all, artists understand that "cities are too complex and dynamic to hold still; they have to be in permanent flux, always becoming something else; something better (hopefully)".[21] That's what makes the city such a powerful and challenging subject for the artist. There's far more to it than making art about the streets where you live. Those streets present a physical terrain, a deep history and a diverse culture caught up highly mobile experiences of liquid modernity. Living in that landscape can be bewildering and frustrating. Capturing its mood and appearance, its past, present or future is a daunting task. Ultimately what artists seek (and what they offer their audience by way of guidance) is the capacity to engage effectively with a human ecology in permanent flux. As Jonathan Raban wrote, just as "heavy" modernism began to give way to the "soft" city, "Competence in the uniquely imaginative and creative life of a big city is something to be proud of … More than anything else, I would like, sometime, to be a capable citizen".[22]

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[1] Jonathan Raban, *Soft city*, Fontana/Collins, Glasgow, 1975, p 10.

[2] Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid modernity*, Polity, Cambridge, 2000, p 115.

[3] Bauman, *Liquid modernity*, p 2.

[4] Bauman, *Liquid modernity*, p 14.

[5] Bauman, *Liquid modernity*, p 120.

[6] Adrian Franklin, *City life*, Thousand Oaks/Sage, London, 2010, p 76.

[7] Franklin, *City life*, p 11.

[8] Robert E Park, *The City*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1925, p 1.

[9] Charles Rooking Carter, *Victoria, the British 'El Dorado', or, Melbourne in 1869*, Ward Stanford, London, 1870, p 69.

[10] Carter, *Victoria, the British 'El Dorado'*, p 69.

[11] Franklin, *City life*, p 91.

[12] Franklin, *City life*, p 9.

[13] Franklin, *City life*, p 118.

[14] Christos Tsiolkas and Zoe Ali, *The new Jerusalem: faith and the city*, City Gallery/City of Melbourne, 2010, p 7.

[15] Tsiolkas and Ali, *The new Jerusalem*, p 11.

[16] James Yuncken, 'Artist's statement', 'Walking to work' exhibition, July 2012. http://www.jamesyuncken.com.au/walking_to_work_text.html

[17] Gabriella Coslovich, 'The Stuff of Dreams', *The Age*, 23 May 2009. http://www.theage.com.au/news/entertainment/arts/the-stuff-of-dreams/2009/05/21/1242498866671.html

[18] Raban, *Soft city*, p 10.

[19] Raban, *Soft city*, p 161–162. My emphasis.

[20] Raban, *Soft city*, p 163.

[21] Franklin, *City life*, p 11.

[22] Raban, *Soft city*, p 245.