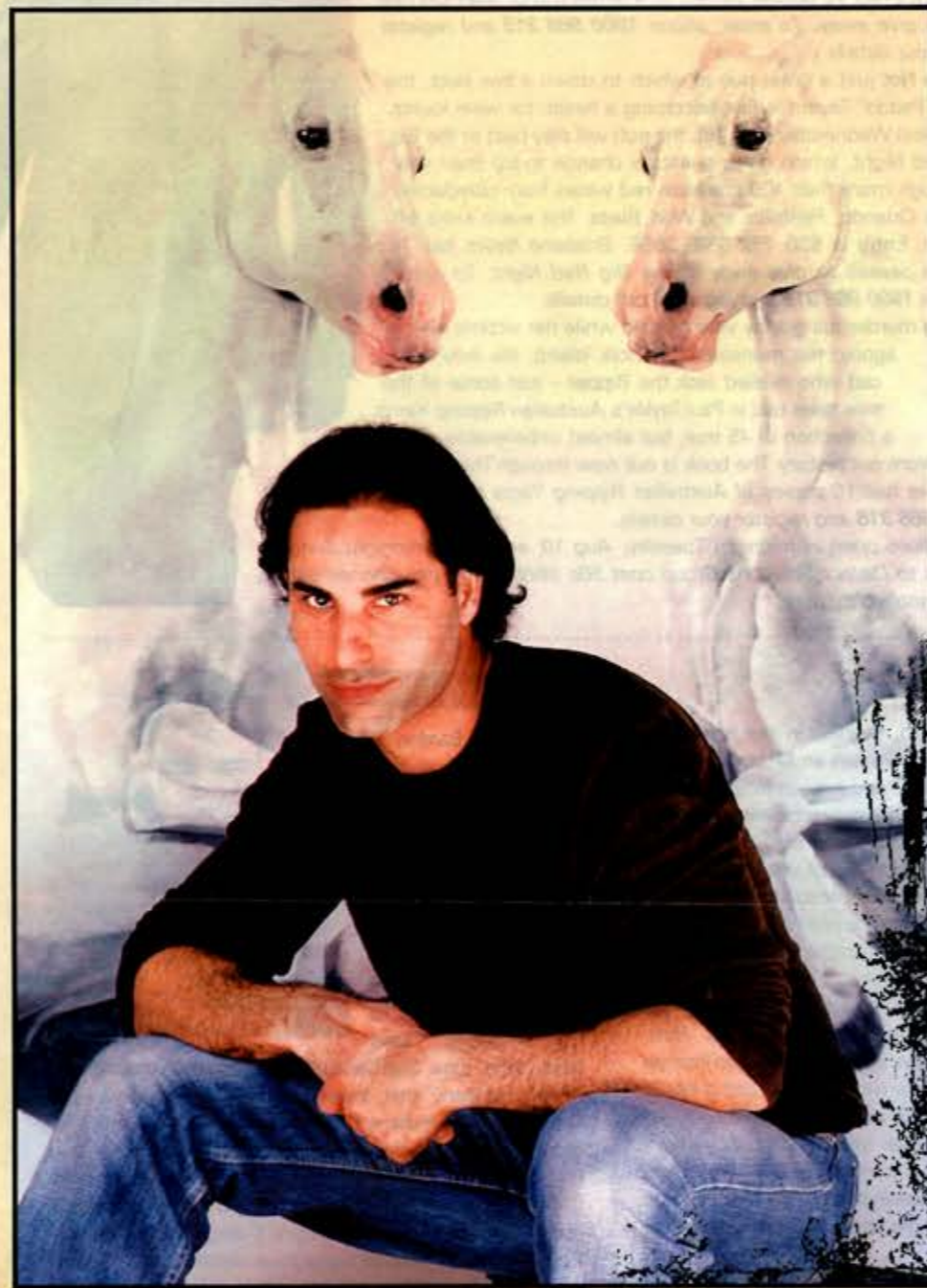


PAINTING *the* TOWN



Horses for courses ... Michael Zavros's work has a big following on the Gold Coast and interstate

From painted signal boxes to multi-million-dollar museum makeovers, Brisbane's art scene has never had a more extravagant and public face. **Phil Brown** talks to the artists, gallery owners and institutions behind this renaissance

The prosaic brick exterior and roller-door of artist Michael Zavros's Hawthorne home prompt a double take. Could this be where one of Australia's most fashionable artists lives and works?

The facade suggests a handyman in singlet, toiling away at a bench. But inside the garage is the 29-year-old painter, who looks like he could easily have carved out a career as a male model, working on his stunning equine paintings.

Horses replaced men's fashion as Michael's subject matter a year ago, inspired by his teenage years as an equestrian competitor on the Gold Coast. The work is in demand and his Queensland art dealer, Art Galleries Schubert on the Gold Coast, is selling canvases for as much as \$16,000 – and the prices are rising. (The gallery has a long waiting list of buyers keen to own a Zavros while they can still afford one.)

Brisbane art lovers saw his work fleetingly in a show last summer at the Institute of Modern Art in Fortitude Valley. But collectors have to travel to the Gold Coast or Sydney, where he shows at Mori Gallery, to buy it. The fact that one of Australia's pre-eminent young painters lives and works in suburban Brisbane, though, says something about the city, which is now a vital centre for the visual arts.

Brisbane has always been fertile ground for artists – after all, Lloyd Rees started his career here early in the 20th century and now there are more artists than ever living and working in our city. The gallery scene, both institutional and

commercial, is burgeoning and the audience is growing apace as people become more art savvy. In the salons of the south, they have a hard time getting their heads around that idea.

Michael explains, languidly running a hand through his hair, that many regard him as a Sydney artist.

"After I was picked up to show at Primavera, which showcases new and emerging artists, at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney, in 2000, I suddenly became this Sydney artist in their minds," he says, smiling. "When I go down for my shows, everybody seems to think I'm from Sydney. And in a way I don't really feel like a Brisbane artist. But I like having my base here because you can have a much better lifestyle."

While Michael's wife, Alison Kubler, works as curator (public programs) at the QUT Art Museum, Michael does an eight-hour day at home, with occasional breaks for a caffeine fix in nearby Oxford Street, Bulimba.

"It's pretty intense and I try to leave the house at least every second day, otherwise I go a bit crazy," he says.

Crazy like a fox, that is, since his star is rising faster than almost any other artist's.

"Brisbane has always produced good artists," says Philip Bacon, the doyen of the Brisbane art scene. Philip Bacon Galleries in Fortitude Valley is considered Australia's finest commercial space. (A million-dollar makeover by Cox Rayner Architects in 2001 consolidated that position.)

"People who know about art have always



More in store ... Brisbane art scene stayers include Philip Bacon, above, and Fire-Works Gallery's Michael Eather, right, while artist Arryn Snowball, below right, is a relative newcomer



known that. When you think of painters like Margaret Olley, and Charles Blackman, who did his best work when he was living and showing here, and Ian Fairweather, Jon Molvig and others, it becomes obvious.

"Then there's the group that formed around the Ray Hughes Gallery in the '70s – artists like Joe Furlonger, Ian Smith and Davida Allen."

Allen is now firmly in the Bacon stable, as is the man many critics consider Australia's finest painter, Brisbane's own William Robinson, who lives and works on Brisbane's sleepy bayside.

"The Brisbane art and gallery scene has a strong history and before the Johnstone Gallery in Bowen Hills closed in 1972 it was the best gallery in Australia. Collectors came here from all over to buy work," Philip says.

In those days there wasn't too much competition. When Philip started his career in the mid-1960s with The Grand Central Gallery in the city, there were few galleries. "Now there are probably too many galleries, in the same way as there are too many cafes, to be economically sustainable," he says. "Eventually the laws of natural selection will apply and some will make it, while others won't."

As well as a vibrant commercial scene, we also have enough major art museums to keep art-focused visitors occupied for days.

The Queensland Art Gallery is our main temple to the visual arts. It once stood alone as a beacon of cultural hope, but is now part of a busy scene. That includes the excellent DELL Gallery @ QCA (Queensland College of Art), the superb QUT Art Museum, the Museum of Brisbane in City Hall, the edgy Institute of Modern Art in Fortitude Valley, and a stunning recent edition – after a \$6.5 million makeover of Mayne Hall – The James and Mary Emelia Mayne Centre at the University of Queensland, St Lucia. Work is underway on the \$260 million Queensland Gallery of Modern Art, due to be completed in 2006.

Of particular interest to many art lovers is our indigenous art scene. At the cutting edge is artist and gallery director Michael Eather, whose world-renowned Fire-Works Gallery in Newstead is a must on any art tour. (Indigenous art can also be seen at Woolloongabba Art Gallery, Andrew Baker Art Dealer in Bowen Hills and Redback Art Gallery at Gordon Park.)

Michael came to Brisbane from Tasmania

(via Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory) in the '80s and settled in. "I came here because you could get things done here," he says as we chat in his storeroom, surrounded by a riot of colourful works. "The reason I didn't set up in Sydney or Melbourne was that there were too many queues down there and studio space is so hard to find and so expensive. Back then, you could get all sorts of wonderful warehouse spaces around the Valley and Teneriffe. The Brisbane scene is still evolving. Sydney and Melbourne found themselves a long time ago."

As an artist, Michael Eather has a national reputation and will be exhibiting in Sydney later this year. He has also worked internationally, promoting indigenous art.

"If you pull out a top 10 of indigenous artists of the past 15 years, there are a lot of Queenslanders and artists who have lived and worked in Brisbane – like Tracey Moffat, Gordon Bennett, Fiona Foley, Judy Watson and Richard Bell," Michael says. "The only thing we don't have here is the strength of client base that they have in Sydney and Melbourne, because of the size of the city."



Brisbane is still a city that's inspiring new gallery openings. The latest one to open is Jan Manton Gallery in Fish Lane, South Brisbane.

Jan, who has had a long involvement with the QUT Art Museum and is vice-president of the groundbreaking, Brisbane-based Flying Arts, has always been an art lover. "I've recently decided that since I love art I will live it," she says. "The local scene is definitely vital enough to support another gallery."

Her stable will include respected locals Judith Wright, Carl Warner and Daniel Mafe.

Of course, vital to keeping all these galleries going are the artists themselves. Mind you, 27-year-old new media artist Tim Plaisted could work anywhere. A graphic designer who uses "digital art", his work is shown around the world on the Internet.

He has had a solo showing at the Institute of Modern Art, but his works have also been downloaded, printed out and exhibited in Korea and Thailand, and he has a show in Singapore in October. "I can work here and exhibit anywhere," he says. "I've never felt the cultural cringe living in Brisbane."

Tim has received funding from the Australia Council for his work *Surface Browser*, which can be viewed online by anyone, anywhere, anytime at boxc.net.

He's part of a subculture of young artists, as is Arryn Snowball, who, like Michael Zavros, is a graduate of the Queensland College of Art. On a balmy winter day he's at work in a spare room studio of rented digs in Woolloongabba. Jazz plays in the background

as he enthuses about the Brisbane art scene.

"We have a very warm art community here," Arryn says. "You have factions and all that, but generally it's a friendly scene."

Two-and-a-half years out of art school and he's already exhibiting in Sydney, as well as here. He has to supplement his income by working part time at the QUT Art Museum and the DELL Gallery, but being able to work around art is fine by him.

"I'll stay in Brisbane because it's a good place to live and work as an artist," he says. "It's cheap and it has a nice climate."

Sunny skies, though, aren't reflected in his dark works, which reflect more the inner-urban landscape than the verdant suburbs.

Another QCA graduate is Beata Batorowicz, who lives in Newmarket and is exhibiting in the group show *Savvy* at the QUT Art Museum (see *Gallery*, Page 33). Her intriguing work *Little Red Riding Hood up to No Good* features in an installation piece that includes photos of the artist dressed up as the fairytale character.

She's positive about being a Brisbane artist, but confesses that it's difficult to make a living. "It is tough being an artist here," she says. "I had a scholarship after I finished my degree, but I'm having to think about how to financially support my art practice again."

Beyond the galleries and museums, art has gone public in recent years. At street level it's evident in the colourfully painted signal boxes that now pepper our city – a brainwave of artist and city councillor David Hinchliffe.

Brisbane is a city where public art is evident, thanks to enlightened developers, Brisbane City Council and the State Government's "Art Built-in" policy, requiring State Government departments to allocate two per cent of their capital works building project budgets to integrated art and design.

The government's Public Art Agency executive manager John Stafford oversees the project and says that since July 1999, \$11.4 million in public funds has been allocated for public art in Brisbane, creating jobs for hundreds of local and regional artists and administrative staff.

"The average city commuter or tourist is now seeing a lot of public art," says John. "Cab drivers even navigate by some works."

Most notable among cabbies is a work by Brisbane artist Sebastian di Mauro. The huge polished aluminium piece called *Chat* features a hand, with finger extending, and sits outside 175 Eagle Street. The work is known colloquially (particularly among cabbies) as "The Hopoate", after rugby league player John Hopoate's unsavoury antics a few years back.

Another major public artwork by di Mauro will be installed in the next few weeks outside a government building at 33 Charlotte Street in the city. This one, a \$396,960 commission called *Drift*, features two large sculpted seed pods and is, John says, about "new beginnings and growth, about how one building is knocked down and another is built in its place". Meanwhile, di Mauro is probably wondering what the cabbies will call it.



Through the hoops ... making a living as an artist in Brisbane is tough, says Newmarket's Beata Batorowicz