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BACK TO BALI

A WARM WELCOME AWAITS

Page 10

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Priscilla Presley at the Bendigo exhibition opening, Elvis at Graceland



SOLID GOLD

Elvis stars on a heritage art trail

JEREMY BOURKE

Bendigo, central Victoria's stately gold rush boom town, is displaying a different sort of glitter today. Its Victorian-era gallery, which produces must-see fashion and design exhibitions that draw crowds from all over the state and the country, has taken a sharp turn somewhere between Blue Hawaii and Viva Las Vegas, and Elvis: Direct From Graceland has Bendigo all shook up.

You see it in the streets (you won't miss the Viva Bendigo sign in 2m-high letters), in the cinemas, the vintage clothing shops and on the menus. Fancy a Blue Suede Choux éclair?

An annual blockbuster has become de rigueur for Bendigo Art Gallery, which is leading the way, in Victoria at least, in making event exhibition tourism as important for regional cities as for state and national capitals. For a decade, a focus on distinctive couture has delivered Balenciaga, Mary Quant and Edith Head, style icons Grace Kelly and Marilyn Monroe, plus insightful views of white wedding dresses and underwear.

For its 2022 rendition, gallery director Jessica Bridgfoot asked the Presley estate for outfits and artefacts that "would position Elvis as an original style revolutionary, how he expressed himself and crafted his celebrity through his personal fashion, costumes and the objects he surrounded himself with". So there are plenty of jumpsuits, contrasted with the demure outfits he and Priscilla (who attended the opening) wore for their wedding. And there's the ephemera: a red MG he drove in Blue Hawaii, a gold telephone and the bongos that were a Christmas gift from his wife.

Bridgfoot is conscious of the role galleries now play as economic drivers for their regions. "The drawcard exhibitions allow us a degree of freedom to stage more experimental contemporary exhibitions and grow and highlight our collection," she says.

Bendigo is just one stop on a tour of significant art destinations in Victoria's Goldfields. In a line to Ballarat, 120km to the south, is a range of historically significant galleries that nevertheless use contemporary art to shine an light on perceptions of our past.

Unlike Bendigo's, the Castlemaine Art Museum isn't lost in the colonial crowd; its facade is a standout art deco building in this gold rush-era town. It has a horde of expected Australians – Roberts, McCubbin, Preston, Smart – showing on the day I'm visiting, in an exhibition devoted to the nuances of light. But the main event is the Len Fox Painting Prize (until June 13), a biennale for living artists who en-

gage with the ideas, techniques and sensibilities of Heidelberg School stalwart E. Phillips Fox, the prize-giver's uncle.

The gallery acquires the winning work, which this year is Greg Creek's Killing-Jar Painting, an assembly of figurative fragments floating before the layered exterior of the artist's family home in Bendigo. Creek says his work represents a political perspective on personal and public histories.

"It will be interesting to see how this fits in with our collection," wonders a volunteer at the front desk.

Castlemaine's other deco destination is Theatre Royal, which works as a live music venue, a boutique pizza restaurant and, on weekends, a beer garden. But its main job is as a cinema, and on July 1-3 it is hosting the Castlemaine Documentary Festival. Meanwhile, galleries and workspaces occupy corners of the labyrinthine The Mill, a former carpet factory that also houses two vast vintage

goods outlets, where orange is definitely the new bric-a-brac.

In Daylesford, the privately owned Convent Gallery says it has seven display spaces but that's surely a guesstimation; every nook of this pile displays art. It's a co-operative space for artists but it wouldn't work without the force of nature that is Tina Banitska. A ceramicist, she first saw the property in 1988 and knew she wanted it. Built as a private residence in the 1860s before being converted to a convent and school, the Italianate mansion had been vacant for 15 years. It took a decade to beg and borrow the resources to renovate the convent, although many remnants, including the chapel and some of the nuns' cells, remain intact.

"Every little bit of this place belongs to the artists and people who come here," Banitska says. "There's nothing elitist." She displays mainly Victorian artists, who get six to eight weeks on the Convent's walls. "I want art for

everyone," she says. "We don't have to love it but we have to experience it."

Founded in 1884, the Art Gallery of Ballarat stands proud in a heritage streetscape, and its 11,000-strong collection was built on Australian Impressionist paintings, but since it was a UNESCO Creative City of Folk Art and Craft in 2019 it's been growing its ceramics and Aboriginal art holdings. The latter featured large in the recent Call and Response exhibition where contemporary works were paired with historical paintings that addressed similar ideas, themes and concerns, and it became a commentary on the impact of white settlement on Aboriginal people.

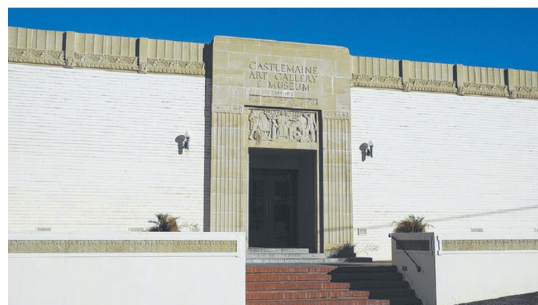
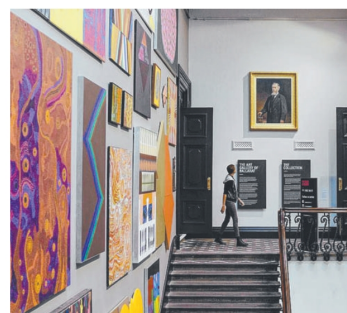
Its next major show, from May 21, is a shift in look and feel. Light and Shade focuses on the "misty and muted" world of tonalism as espoused by polarising Melbourne artist Max Meldrum between the wars. He wanted to get below the surface of a subject to depict its deeper tonal variations, and he lured many fine artists to a form that was also dubbed "Meldrumism".

The Ballarat International Foto Biennale attracts photographers from around the world, and the 2021 event, centred on a Linda McCartney retrospective, was extended well beyond its usual spring timeslot. It's hoped a new National Centre for Photography in Ballarat will be completed in time for the 2023 Biennale. Ballarat's most permanent exhibition is the Prime Ministers Walk in the Botanical Gardens, which has busts of them all up to Malcolm Turnbull. Incumbents don't qualify, so we won't know when the next one will drop until the people have spoken.

Jeremy Bourke was a guest of Visit Victoria.

IN THE KNOW

Elvis: Direct From Graceland runs in Bendigo until July 17. And on September 3, the city has its take on an event that's lit up Melbourne for many years. White Night Bendigo will feature visual art and light projections on many of its handsome buildings, along with music and family events.
bendigoregion.com.au/bendigo-art-gallery
artgalleryofballarat.com.au
castlemaineartmuseum.org.au
conventgallery.com.au



Ballarat Art Gallery, top; Castlemaine Art Museum, above; the Convent Gallery, Daylesford, right