

BEACONS OF HOPE

A languish rural stretch in Australia's wheatbelt has been given a new lease on life, thanks to a small group of artists with a bold vision. **Rosamund Brennan** cruises down the extraordinary Silo Art Trail in Melbourne and spotlights the unsung heroes who inspired it





HIT THE ROAD, JACK!

To travel the entire 200-kilometre trail takes a little over two hours. But like most road trips, it's an experience best enjoyed at a slow pace. Make the most of the journey by staying a night or two at one of the nearby towns, taking in the attractions, sampling local fare, and meeting the locals who star on the region's giant billboards.

siloarttrail.com

Eucalyptus trees, swirling red dust and wide, open roads – Wimmera Mallee is regional Australia at its most quintessential.

From stoic school teachers to farmers with sun-bleached hair, a cast of local characters have kept the region alive despite the usual foibles of rural life here: drought, bushfire, and dwindling population.

As agricultural researcher Deb Anderson once said, “Wimmera Mallee has been singled out as a poignant case of ‘struggle country’”, a place where harsh conditions met spirited sagas of community perseverance. As farming technology evolved at the turn of the 21st century, hundreds of wheat silos lay dormant; their collapse often signals the end for many

nearby shops, restaurants, and pubs that depend on local footfall for survival.

For Brisbane artist Guido van Helten, these silos represent more than just economic decline. He saw the perfect blank canvas, a mass of towering concrete amplified by endless sunburnt plains and cloudless skies. In early 2016, he fulfilled a long-held dream, transforming a wheat silo in Brim into a soaring open-air mural depicting a quartet of anonymous farmers.

van Helten's mural struck a chord. This wasn't just a case of “plonk art” where developers affix an arbitrary sculpture to appease council regulations; here was an artwork that was deeply connected to Brim – it was both for and of the

people. Before long, more artists followed suit. Street-art agency Juddy Roller came on-board, and Australia's largest bulk grain handler GrainCorp volunteered more silos. And so the Silo Art Trail was born.

With six silos stretching 200 kilometres, the roving gallery is now the country's biggest outdoor art exhibition. Linking the country towns of Brim, Lascelles, Patchewollock, Rosebery, Rupanyup, and Sheep Hills, each mural celebrates the enduring spirit of the Wimmera Mallee region's people, launching flight to otherwise faceless stories.

Just 300 kilometres from Melbourne – the trail invites visitors to hit the tarmac and relish a long-held antipodean pastime: the great Australian road trip.

**ABOVE
FROM LEFT:**
Strips of red and yellow pigment are used to give colour to the wooden pieces; An artisan painstakingly applies strips of lacquer using a spinning metal shaft.



FIRST STOP



RUPANYUP

Accomplished over several weeks and unveiled in early 2017, Russian artist Julia Volchkova's mural quietly honours the integral role that sport plays in Australian rural populations. The featured faces are those of Rupanyup residents and local sporting team members, Ebony Baker and Jordan Weidemann. Fresh-faced and dressed in their sports attire (netball and Australian Rules football, respectively), Baker and Weidemann embody a youthful spirit of strength, hope, and camaraderie. Rendered onto a pair of conjoined Australian Grain Export steel grain silos, the delicately nuanced monochromatic work is typical of Volchkova's realist portraiture style.



PHOTOGRAPHY XXX

SHEEP HILLS

Long before the wheat silos transformed the Wimmera Mallee landscape, Australia's Indigenous people lived and thrived off the land – and their connection to it remains sacred. Melbourne-based artist Adnate devoted his artwork to their stories. He spent four weeks with the community in late 2016 to develop his mural, which sought to celebrate the area's young Indigenous people and highlight the strong ancestral connection that they share with their Elders. Plastered over GrainCorp's Sheep Hills silos, Adnate's depiction of the local Aboriginal community shines light on the area's sacred Indigenous culture and the important mission to protect it.




from
Rupanyup
to Sheep
Hills


Drive time
25 minutes



from Sheep
Hills
to Brim



Travel time
25 minutes

BRIM

Featured as one of the pioneer painters, van Helten made a name for himself by painting large-scale photo-realistic murals from the US to Ukraine. Travelling from Brisbane to Brim at the end of 2015, he spent a month completing his epic artwork: four farmers rendered across six silos, rising 30 metres out of the baked earth. The figures – portrayed in documentary-style humanist street photography – appear to be silently ruminating on their collective struggles with immense economic pressures and the tangible impact of climate change.





PITSTOP CHECKLIST

Turn off the ignition and unbuckle your seatbelt because these charming spots found along the way that are worth getting off the vehicle for.

Visit the Pink Lake

This eye-catching lake in **Dimboola** has attracted worldwide attention for its striking pink hues. Stop to take a photograph, while admiring the yellow gums and paperbarks which line its circumference.

dimboola.com.au

Go surfing

There's no beach in sight, but that doesn't mean you can't go surfing. Head to **Snowdrift Sand Dunes** at Wyperfeld National Park for an adventurous day of sandboarding, four-wheel-driving, and picnicking.

parkweb.vic.gov.au

Glimpse relics of the past

The **Water Tower Museum** in Murtoa houses three floors of historical items including photographs and artefacts that chart the region's early German, Irish, and English heritage.

murtoamuseum



FROM TOP: This stunning blue vessel veers away from the typical red and yellow combination.


from Brim
to Rosebery


Drive time
20 minutes




from Lascelles
to Patchewollock


Travel time
35 minutes

LAST STOP 

ROSEBERY

Melbourne street artist Kaff-eine's artwork is a tribute to the region's past, present, and future. Completed in late 2017, the silo mural tells the juxtaposed stories of a female and male farmer.

The left silo captures the grit, tenacity, and character of the region's young female farmers who regularly face drought, fires, and other hardships living and working in the Mallee. In her work shirt, jeans and turned-down cowboy boots, the strong young female sheep farmer symbolises the future.

The silo on the right is a portrayal of the past, with the male farmer – pictured wearing an Akubra and sharing a quiet moment with his horse – typifying the traditionally male-dominated industry. It also expresses the indomitable bond between farmers and their animals.

LASCELLES

For his mural in the quiet town of Lascelles, Melbourne-based artist Rone painted local couple Geoff and Merrilyn Horman. As fourth generation farmers, they are an intrinsic part of the community in Rone and exemplify the no-nonsense, hardworking spirit of the region.

In mid-2017, Rone worked for two weeks to transform the two 1939-built GrainCorp silos. Utilising a muted monochrome palette, he added water to his paint as a blending tool to produce a ghostly, transparent effect – a signature of his distinctive painting style. Rone says that he wanted the mural to portray his subjects as wise and knowing, nurturing the town's future with their vast farming experience and longstanding connection to the area.

PATCHEWOLLOCK

Nick "Noodle" Hulland – a local sheep and grain farmer in the tiny wheatbelt town of Patchewollock – was enjoying a beer at the local pub after work when he happened to cross paths with artist Fintan Magee. The Brisbane artist was on a mission to get acquainted with Patchewollock and find his muse. The two hit it off, and the rest, as they say, is history.

Noodle's lean, lanky figure now peers down wistfully from a 35-metre-high canvas of the twin 1939-built GrainCorp silos. Completed in late 2016, the artist's depiction of the famously reserved Hulland portrays an image of the archetypal Aussie farmer – faded blue "flanny" (flannelette shirt) and all. His solemn expression and squinting gaze speak to the challenges of life in the Wimmera Mallee. 




from Rosebery
to Lascelles


Travel time
25 minutes



Scoot
flies four times
weekly to
Melbourne.
Book your flights
at flyscoot.com