

“LOCAL KNOWLEDGE”

**TRISTIAN KOENIG
TRISTIAN KOENIG GALLERY**

Tristian Koenig is the founder and director of a contemporary art gallery in Collingwood in a precinct known for its gritty urban texture and quietly evolving creative vibes. Speaking with the passion of a local, Tristian talks to Clare Kennedy about his impressions of the area that he's been intimately acquainted with since student days playing in a punk band and pulling beers at the Tote.

C.K. Has Collingwood changed much since you first lived here in the early 90s?

T.K. I lived in Collingwood from 1993 to 2009 and I've seen more development in the last three years than I have in the last 25 years of being in the area.

It's interesting, it's still very gritty and working class, and there are lots of students. Proximity to the city is amazing and the ease of getting to Richmond and Southside is really good. There's great transportation, great food. So a lot of those things are basically why galleries like myself and artists and studios have moved in.

C.K. What prompted you to set up the gallery in Collingwood?

T.K. In 2013 I was offered a deal too good to refuse, so I relocated the gallery from South Yarra to Collingwood. I was in those premises for a year and a half, and encouraged another gallery to move into the street. Then the landlord wanted to sell so I was kicked out, which was disappointing.

I was looking for a space for a long time, and it was really difficult. I began looking near Church and Swan Streets near Cremorne, and then this space became available. I literally walked up the stairs and I could see the potential. At the time there were three other galleries in the area, and you could feel it was undergoing a kind of transformation, so it was the right time for me to move into the neighbourhood.

C.K. Describe your gallery space?

T.K. We're part of a very large former industrial factory that has been broken up into separate units. We're on the first floor. We have two domestically scaled rooms ... and we have south facing natural light, which is a really wonderful thing for a gallery to have, so that was the clincher.

C.K. Tell me about the next show?

T.K. Our next show is by Ry David Bradley, who is from Melbourne. We did an exhibition in February last year that went really, really well. The National Gallery of Victoria bought a diptych of work, and we had a sell out show, which is really amazing.

C.K. How can locals engage with the gallery?

T.K. New shows begin every four to six weeks, predominantly solo exhibitions, but we do group shows as well. The focus is painting. We do an opening on a Wednesday night. Generally speaking the opening is more a celebration for the artist than



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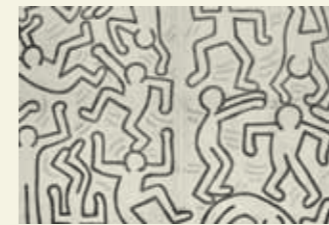
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a formal thing with clients. Then we go up to a place on Peel Street called Laser Pig, which does beer and pizza, so we continue on there for a while.

C.K. What points of interest would you mention to someone thinking of moving in to the area?

T.K. On the corner of Johnston and Wellington you've got the Tote Hotel, which is like a cultural mecca for Australian music, kind of like the CBGB in New York which is now closed. Behind the former Collingwood Technical School there's an amazing mural by Keith Haring that's incredible in terms of his oeuvre.

There is all this texture and history in the area. I lived here for a long time and it's very comfortable. It's very easy to go downtown. And it's easy to get to Northcote and Fitzroy and Collingwood and Abbotsford, so the location is priceless really.

That's one thing I've found in my experience of living here and doing business, I guess. It's one of the few places left that has weird industrial buildings that haven't been completely redeveloped. And the proximity to the city is amazing.

C.K. Is there a piece of art that has a particular resonance for you?

T.K. Keith Haring. That mural is a very powerful work. I used to work at the Tote pulling beers, and before that playing in a punk rock band so I do have that connection to Collingwood and the neighbourhood. But that Keith Haring mural just off Johnston Street is a world-class piece of contemporary art. It's just incredible. And it's not actually very well known.

C.K. And you moved inner city when you left school?

T.K. Yeah. It seemed to be the kind of place to live way back then. It was fairly cheap to live. You could ride a push bike everywhere or take a tram or train. I went to university at La Trobe so I could get the 86 all the way out. Yeah... Fitzroy, Collingwood, you could spend your whole life in this area and go from one crappy bar job to the other supporting study or whatever. The attraction, I think, to Collingwood is not just the proximity to downtown, but everything is literally very, very close.

We had an artist out here from LA in January for a show and, you know, in LA you drive everywhere. We put him up in an Airbnb and he could walk to the supermarket, the art suppliers, the gallery, and he was sort of incredulous and saying, 'Wow this is amazing!' You have all those utilitarian sorts of things, being able to shop for clothes and food and things, but also just being able to go out.

Everything is in the neighbourhood. You don't really have to leave it. Yeah. ●

- 01 Soft light in the main gallery at Tristian Koenig.
- 02 Piece from Ry David Bradley's 2015 show *Border Protection*.
- 03 The Tote Hotel, corner of Johnston and Wellington streets.
- 04 Keith Haring mural on the side wall of the former Collingwood Technical School.

Below: Tristian Koenig walking to the gallery.

