



Public art projects are proving a boon for tourism in rural Victoria.

By Nathan Dyer

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Paint it and they will come

On a cool winter morning in July, Brim farmer Shane Wardle stands in the shade of the small town's grain silos watching a procession of vehicles come and go. Despite the activity, there's not a single grain truck in sight. Today's visitors are all tourists, here to see one of Victoria's most impressive public art pieces.

Etched across four 30-metre-tall concrete silos on the edge of the Henty Highway, 75 km north of Horsham, the Brim Silo Art Project towers above the surrounding wheat paddocks. Painted by Brisbane street artist Guido van Helten over 21 days, and finished in January 2016, the giant mural of local farmers has put this Wimmera township on the international art map.

"Everybody knows where Brim is now," says Shane, president of the Brim Active Community Group, as he watches tourists crane their necks to take in the full canvas. "We've had people from Queensland, and quite a few drive up from Melbourne and stay overnight, people from Adelaide and even from overseas."

WORKING TOGETHER

A combination of van Helten's dream to paint a large silo, coordination from Melbourne street art outfit Juddy Roller, and support from silo-owner GrainCorp and the Yarriambiack Shire, among others, Shane says the impact on the close-knit farming community of 100 people, hit hard by recent droughts,



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- 1 Artwork by Guido van Helten on a water tank at Winton Wetlands, Victoria.
- 2 Grain silos at Brim, Victoria, painted by Guido van Helten.
- 3 Marian Jones and Chris Smith behind the counter at the Brim general store.
- 4 A work titled 'Tessa' by street artist DVATE in Benalla, Victoria.
- 5 Street art by Matt Adnate on a wall in Benalla, Victoria.

has been greater than anyone expected.

"Probably without this we'd be struggling to have a pub now, it's just made that much difference," says Shane, adding that surrounding towns such as Donald, Birchip, Hopetoun and Warracknabeal have all benefited, with Brim-bound tourist buses regularly stopping for meals and accommodation.

Chris McPherson, whose family owns the Brim general store, says the initial tourism surge was unexpected. "Usually in the summer, at the time when Guido was painting, it's a relatively quiet time for us, but when the tourists started coming all of a sudden we sold out of ice creams and drinks, and that happened two or three times."

The store, pub and garage are now selling stubby holders, tea towels, bumper stickers and postcards emblazoned with the silo artwork. "It's really put us on the map," says Chris. "Once, when you told someone you were from Brim they'd say, 'Never heard of it', now they say, 'Oh yeah, the silo place'."

CIVIC PRIDE

Other rural Victorian towns are also embracing art to attract visitors. Four hundred kilometres east of Brim, the Wall-to-Wall Street Art Festival has turned the small High Country township of Benalla into a regional art mecca. Launched in 2015, and initially facing scepticism from some locals, the



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groundbreaking project has now created 28 large-scale public artworks in the rural community of 10,000 people.

Benalla Street Art committee member Geoff Calvert says the project has created a strong sense of civic pride. "When we were talking with the community about it the first time, people didn't have a good grasp of what we were talking about, there was no context, it was hard to explain to people that street art wasn't graffiti," he explains. "It's now become a feature of the town and when locals have friends come to town they want to go and show them."

Geoff says the artworks were a way of differentiating Benalla from nearby towns. "We're flanked by towns that may or may not have other advantages," he says. "Wangarrata, for example, is bigger and much closer to the wineries and the snow, and then we've got Yarrawonga to the north where they've got the lake and water activities," explains Geoff. "So we wanted to create something with a lasting effect, to encourage people to come to us."

With more and more people visiting the town to view the artworks, Geoff says the project has achieved that goal.

MORE THAN ART

Melbourne-based Regional Arts Victoria director Esta Anatolitis says public art projects give regional communities a place of focus. "I think there is now more understanding about how artistic projects that are really visible, and particularly in public spaces in smaller regional towns, can create a place where people can gather," she says.

Although the artworks become assets for the towns in which they are created, Esta says the process of collaboration can transform a community's ideas of what is possible in their town. "It's as much about all of those things, as it is about the artwork," says Esta.

BUILDING ON SUCCESS

Back in the Mallee, they're already talking of bigger and better things, with another five silo art instalments on the drawing



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6 Lascelles and Patchewollock publican Greg 'Wally' Wallace.
7 President of the Brim Active Community Group, Shane Wardle, stands in front of the now-famous Brim silos.

board, part of a planned Silo Art Trail linking a series of small, out-of-the-way towns in the Yarriambiack Shire.

Publican Greg 'Wally' Wallace, who owns hotels in Lascelles and Patchewollock, both earmarked for silo trail artworks, says the project already has strong community support. "It's a very untouched area here and this is a good chance to put us on the map so people can experience the Mallee and the joys of what it's got to offer," says Greg. "For a town like Patchewollock, for example, with some art on the silos, it'll give people a reason to go there."

With work on the silo art trail set to begin later this year, Yarriambiack Shire mayor, Ray Kingston, says the project will build on Brim's success. "The Brim project has been such a point of pride for the whole region, not just Brim, people are just so excited to see a positive story coming out of country Victoria," says Ray. "I've never seen a project that people were so excited about from across our whole region," he says. "The impact has been profound." ■

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