Shine a light

One man’s push for public art solved a problem for a dark city street. SAMELA HARRIS reports.

AFETY and the arts form a beautiful alliance in a once-dark laneway off one of Adelaide’s most notorious streets, Blyth St, which connects Hindley St to North Tce, is now lit up by artists’ lightboxes – works of art which are both lights and lighted windows.

The Adelaide City Council helped set up this gallery, which comes into its own after sunset.

That’s when artist James Cochrane’s paintings take on their night life – and one looks up as if through train windows to see sleeping commuters.

Cochrane, also known as Jimmy C, an Adelaide community artist and leading aerosol enamel painter who was a finalist in this year’s Archibald Prize, created a series of these images, inspired by the Paris Metro Dodo concept.

“Metro, Boulot, Dodo is the French term used to describe the commuter’s tiresome routine – taking the train, working, sleeping...” Cochrane says.

“But I found it elsewhere on my travels, Tokyo, for instance.”

Cochrane says his long fascination with homeless people and society’s marginalised dovetailed into this study since there is a particular vulnerability to people in transit, from the awkward boundaries of not making eye contact to the intimacy of sleep, a private act in a public place.

“So there is something very voyeuristic about the pictures, people in their private moment. There is a ghostly quality and an intimacy, seeing sleeping souls perched above our heads in the street,” he says. “I tried to make the lightboxes like train windows, imagining how they look illuminated, the artificial fluorescent light of the inside of a train, sterile and stark.”

Cochrane says that although he has worked on murals and community projects, he had been “fishing” to create a public art work for Adelaide when the council’s quest for further light and safety in Blyth St arose.
“It was perfect. My art issue dealt with their light issue,” he says. “And the best thing is that it is now the Blyth St Lightbox Gallery with the lightboxes as a permanent feature. When my work comes down, other artists can have theirs on show. It's a flexible medium so it will suit all sorts of art — from photography even to text.

“Those lightboxes have an interesting future. And that feels good. I’ve been able to pass something on to Adelaide.”