taking it to the streets

We've all seen them – those brightly coloured signal boxes that decorate Brisbane's streets – but has anybody actually ever seen someone painting them? *Image* finds out more about the traffic-stopping artform.

FLYING cockatoos brighten an otherwise rainy, grey day on the corner of Coronation Drive and Park Rd at Milton.

The brightly coloured traffic signal box (or 'TSB' to those in the know) on this busy local corner proved the launchpad for the artist who decorated it, and now the business behind the unlikely canvases is hoping you will volunteer to brighten up your own corner of Brisbane.

Over the past five years, Queensland Urban Ecology has coordinated hundreds of volunteers who have painted close to 1500 TSBs in South-East Queensland.

Project coordinator Nicole Gaunt says the artist behind *Cockatoos Over Brisbane River* went on to paint the *Bilby Village* mural at Rosalie Village after a man driving by saw her working on the cockatoos and commissioned her to do a piece.

With artists of all backgrounds and ages taking part, Nicole says the initiative is becoming more and more popular.

"Many organisations from across the world contact us about setting up similar projects in their cities," she says.

"We were invited to Dublin and Belfast last year and they are beginning Brisbane's initiative in Ireland.

"The very diverse and unique artworks on TSBs make up a public gallery that Brisbane people get to look at while they are driving around the city."

While past artists have painted everything from pets and family to human rights motifs and mobile phones, Nicole says inspiration can be found just about anywhere. With a new book *Brisbane Traffic Art 1* out now, the good folk at Queensland Urban Ecology hope to expand their website so Brisbanites can view TSBs available for painting as well as the artworks that have been painted across all the programs they manage.

But with so much art adorning the streets of Brisbane, is it even possible to have a favourite?

"There are so many fantastic boxes it's a very hard decision," Nicole says.

"But I have to say *The Sea on the Tide* by Scott Bennett, on the corner of Turbot and Edward streets in the city is a favourite."

ART SPACE Nicole Gaunt

But, like the proverbial plumber with blocked pipes, Nicole is yet to paint a TSB of her own.

"I'll probably paint a pattern, geometric shapes or something like that," she laughs.

"As a kid I was good at colouring-in but not so great at freehand drawing which is probably why I'm good at managing all the TSB data instead."

If you would like to paint a TSB, visit www.qldue.com.au

PORTRAIT OF A TSB ARTIST

Artist name: Evan Thomson

How did you first get into painting TSBs? I have visited famous street art in New York and there are a lot of big sites in Chile. When a friend told me she had done a traffic signal box for Brisbane City Council, I started to notice them everywhere and thought I'd have a go.

What is your "real" job? I'm an accountant – it doesn't involve a lot of art.

What's the most interesting thing that's happened while you were painting a TSB?

I was doing a TSB on the edge of the city late one afternoon and these tough-looking young guys stopped. One asked me if I had been "busted by the cops" yet for graffiti? We ended up having a bit of a chat. It was one of those great community moments.

GIVEAWAY

To win a copy of *Brisbane Traffic Art 1* visit the *Image* magazines' website www.imagemagazines.com.au and click the competitions link. Entries close October 27.

get savvy

Owning a small business can be an uphill battle but with community support, that hill won't seem as steep.

MONETTE Gardiner is a savvy operator.

She owns Home Savvy on Stafford Rd at Stafford. The store is an Aladdin's cave of giftwares and fashion lines that is pure eye candy for the seasoned shopper.

Monette started the business in 2001 from home and sold goods through party plan. In the early days, the range extended to candles, Mexican pottery and other artefacts.

She'd lived in the Stafford area for many, many years and felt a connection with the people there so when a shopfront became available at 613 Stafford Rd – an ex-Chinese restaurant no less – she jumped at the chance to open her first store.

"The first customer I had was a woman who told me no one would come to Stafford for this kind of thing," she says.

But the customer was wrong. Business began to blossom, so much so that she relocated to the larger, adjacent butcher's shop when it became free some three-and-a-half years ago.

Monette puts her successes down to the fact that she returns the support shown to her by her local community. She supports her local schools and seniors and gives back to other larger charities.

Having said that, it's also easy to see why people keep coming back. If the smell of freshly-brewed coffee doesn't grab you, then the hundreds of glorious homewares, jewellery and knick knacks will.

"It's important to us that people enjoy their shopping experience," Monette explains. "We wanted to create a homely environment, not a sleek and sparse modern space."

STARTING OUT

Here are Monette's tips on succeeding in small business:

- Listen to your customers' needs
- Be sincere and make the effort
- Be a part of your community and it will look after you
- Have a point of difference
- Remember that you can't please everyone, but you certainly have to try