

ESCAPE The Cullen, 164 Commercial Rd, Prahran, Melbourne | **Karen Milliner**

A betted by a glass of Victorian pinot, I set about deconstructing Adam Cullen's cow and misquoting Marie Antoinette. The result, on the little canvas I was given when checking into the new hotel branded with Cullen's art, was an acrylic jumble of bovine bits and the words "let them eat steak".

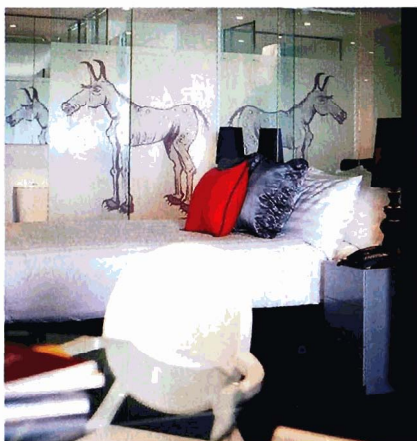
Having a go at "painting Cullen's cow", with his drawing as a guide, has been part of the opening fun at the \$48 million, 115-suite hotel in Melbourne's bohemian-inner south-east. The Cullen is the first of six luxury Art Series hotels planned for the Victorian capital; the second, the \$90 million flagship and showcase for the works of John Olsen in nearby Chapel Street, takes its first guests this month.

Those familiar with Cullen's work – the 2000 Archibald Prize-winner was labelled the "enfant terrible" of the Sydney art scene – needn't worry about slumbering amid beastly creatures and dripping blood. Room prints are mostly portraits from his commissioned Ned Kelly series, some with a mischievous nod to Kelly Gang proclivities for disguising themselves as women. Other Cullen prints hang in the hallways of the six-storey hotel, and there are originals in the entrance foyer plus two life-sized cow sculptures (inspiration for the guest painting competition).

We stayed in a standard studio suite which, like most of the other rooms, is small in floor space. However, clever design involving mirrors and a frosted glass bathroom wall (with an art watermark) means you don't feel cramped, plus you get the luxury of a king bed, sofa, dining table and chairs, and a kitchenette with microwave and hotplate.

Self-catering is easy with gourmet food mecca the Prahran Market directly across the road, and for a breakfast croissant the Eugenie French Cake Shop around the corner is a must. The Cullen also has two ground-floor restaurants: the Terrace Bar & Bistro, a hotspot with latte-loving locals, and HuTong, which serves fantastic duck and dumplings. It was packed both nights of our stay, so you'd be wise to book.

Commercial Road is a busy thoroughfare with trams rattling along at all hours, but while we watched them from our corner-room window we could barely hear them. Soundproofing is one of the many things this



the deal

PH (03) 9098 1555
WEBLINK www.thecullen.com.au
RATES From \$249 per night for standard studio suite; check website for bed & breakfast specials.

THE VERDICT
 Artfully engaging.

hotel has going for it. Staff were friendly, though towels removed when our bathroom was serviced were not replaced and it took two phone calls to get some sent up.

For those interested in art, there is a library of reading material provided in each room and in-house curator Jane O'Neill can organise tours of Melbourne's plethora of galleries. If you don't give a toss about art, The Cullen is still a great accommodation choice. It's fresh and funky, close to the CBD, with public transport at its doorstep and bicycles and zippy Smart Cars for hire.

It's the perfect base from which to paint the town any colour you like.