

Josh Cohen spent six months producing his "Metcard Art". Right: Detail from the mural.
Photos: Eddie Jim



Metcard mural's

Tom Cowie

Before Melburnians used myki to pay for public transport, there was Metcard.

Thin cardboard with a magnetic strip on the back, the tickets were well liked but incapable of being topped up. Whether a two-hour trip or yearly pass, their usefulness diminished greatly once they were done.

Unless you used them for art, as Josh Cohen did.

His intricate "Metcard Art" recreations of Melbourne landmarks such as Flinders Street Station and Luna Park were a hit when he posted them online recently. But like any piece of art, it's worth tracking the provenance to find out just where it came from. This story involves one of

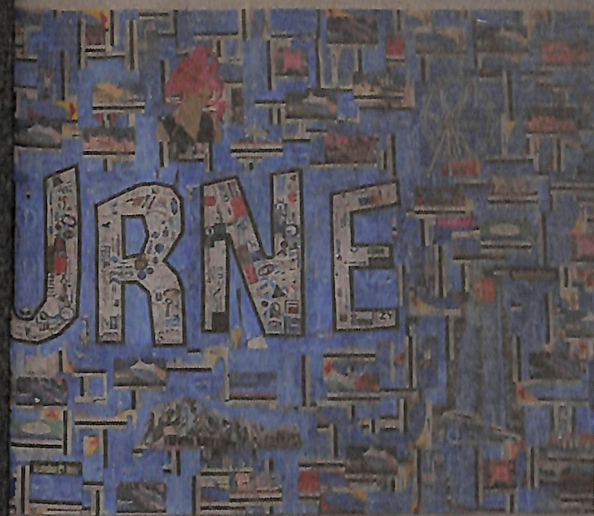
Australia's richest art prizes, Eddie McGuire as a judge and a secret stash of Metcards.

"It's a funny, weird thing that happened to me just before I started my music school," says 35-year-old Cohen. "I didn't even understand it; I would never do it now."

In 2007, he was in his mid 20s and finishing his university degree when he heard about the Signature of M art competition.

Described by organiser Benjamin Jung as a "historical footprint for the city and a time capsule that future generations can look back upon and ponder", the competition offered a \$150,000 first prize.

To fund such a lavish amount (three times that of the Archibald), hundreds of businesses paid \$2200 to be involved, with entrants required to incorporate the



long and winding journey

businesses' logos in their artwork. "Melbourne's personal signature is guaranteed to generate extensive public exposure nationally and internationally, and with time will become a lasting icon," the competition website said.

However, the competition was not well received by all artists. One who entered the Sydney version described it as a "complete farce from beginning to end".

The Melbourne launch brought together a who's who, including former footballer Ron Barassi, socialite Tottie Goldsmith and the frontman of the band Thirsty Merc, Rai Thistlethwayte. Then-newsreader Mal Walden joined McGuire and former NGV deputy director Frances Lindsay as judges.

"I thought 150-grand might be a nice cash cow," says Cohen. "You

'I thought 150-grand might be a nice cash cow.'

Artist Josh Cohen

had to do something that was pretty Melbourne."

And what was more Melbourne than Metcards, he thought. Myki was about to be launched but would not be fully operational until 2012.

With piles of tickets left over from school and more sourced from friends and eBay, he spent six months producing his entry.

"I think the MCG took about 40 hours; I remember it being a full working week," he says. Those who have seen his pieces online probably

wouldn't realise they come from one mural. In the middle is the word "Melbourne" filled with the logos of brands such as Coles, Visy and Westfield, something he winces at now. "Then they had an exhibition down at the Docklands; I came fourth. I should have won."

In the end, the entries were auctioned for charity. A bidding war erupted between Cohen's father and the boss of Metlink. The piece now sits in one of Cohen's music schools.

As for why he posted his work online more than 10 years later, Cohen says he wanted to offer some lightness at a difficult time.

"I think people really liked the Metcard system, particularly when myki was such a flop," he says.

"They had a bit of culture as well, they had different designs ... They were very Melbourne."