



Let there be light

The hypnotic *Volume*, by United Visual Artists, is part of the Festival of Light in Federation Square.

PICTURE: RODGER CUMMINS

Electricity is the new paint for artists illuminating our city streets this winter. **Liza Power reports.**

CHRIS Bird would never admit to a God complex, but somewhere between having his work described as a "religious experience" and being commissioned to design stages for the likes of U2, the Arctic Monkeys, Kylie Minogue and Jay-Z, it dawned on him that playing with light might be the closest an artist can come to crafting the divine.

"There's something incredibly basic about light. It dictates life's simplest rhythms of day and night and we're drawn to it, like moths to a flame or primitive creatures around a campfire. It hypnotises people."

Bird, co-founder of the British design collective United Visual Artists, is here for Federation Square's Festival of Light. He's brought a sound and light installation titled *Volume*, originally designed in 2006 by his creative team for London's Victoria and Albert Museum. It has

since been staged in five cities, along the way capturing the imagination of Melbourne's festival director Robyn Archer. At her behest, its enchanted pillars of light will occupy a corner of Federation Square for the next month, where it is hoped passers-by will be seduced as much by its play of colour as its Massive Attack soundscape.

Volume is just one component of this year's festival. Archer says she's particularly excited about the *Gift of Light* project. Bringing together the work of 13 artists from a diverse spill of Melbourne's communities — Vietnamese, Afghani, Sudanese, Indian, Turkish, Tuvalu-South Pacific, Greek and Italian — it will explore the place and significance of light in each.

The works will be illuminated on June 20, the Saturday of the winter solstice.

Quite apart from the festival in Fed Square, numerous other light installations will splash corners of the city with colour this winter. Alexander Knox's kinetic light work, *Maxims of Behaviour*, will play across the facade of Bourke Street's Royal Mail House until the end of August, while the ethereal domes of *LightScraper*, crafted by innovative Melbourne design

MAKING LIGHT OF THE SITUATION

■ Maxims of Behaviour

Alexander Knox's projections are inspired by Melbourne street-scapes. Run on green power, with Royal Mail House (cnr Bourke and Swanston streets) as its canvas. After dusk until winter's end.

■ The LightScraper

PART giant musical instrument, part rainbow factory. Design company EnEss' *LightScraper* illuminates the Docklands until June 14.

company EnEss, will find a home at the Docklands as part of the *Ignite Festival*. The National Gallery of Victoria in St Kilda Road will also be illuminated during its Salvador Dali exhibition.

We've come a long way from fairy lights. The wizardry of UVAs installation *Volume* derives from a complex interplay of technologies. In simple terms, *Volume* comprises 46 LED-studded light pillars arranged across a stage in a grid. The pillars are flood-lit with infrared light and a camera monitors the paths of people wandering around the columns. Maps of their movements, captured at 15 frames a second, are fed back into a computer system that

■ City Dream

Described as electric graffiti. Artist QingLan Huang's work explores history, memory and senses. It will light a wall of Lingham Lane (off Flinders Lane) starting on June 15.

■ Light in Winter Festival

Highlights of the Federation Square festival include *Volume*, the "canvas" installation, *Lighting Context*, and *The Gift of Light*. Runs until July 5.

translates them into a geography of light and sound. Wandering the grid, the columns take on an almost human quality, illuminating and singing as you draw near.

For 37-year-old Bird, the primal appeal of light stems from the fact that it's non-figurative and thus able to cross cultural boundaries in ways other forms of media can't. The same qualities make it open to interpretation in powerful and intensely personal ways. "People draw from (*Volume*) what they like. So many people liken it to a religious experience, something that draws them because of the nature of the light and the way it feels. When they get inside the space, they

have a really individual experience. They feel like something is talking to them, like they're inside a living being because of the responsive and dynamic nature of the work.

"But they're also sharing a group experience with the people who are on the stage at the same time, watching their responses, too."

Some four years later, Bird still delights in watching people interact with the installation, and the way the work changes depending on the site and the crowds. The night *Volume* opened in Melbourne, it was visited by a group of 20 besuited men whose white shirts and pale faces reflected the spectrum of light travelled by the columns. In Paris, a gaggle of street performers once monopolised the site for hours, performing stage pieces to a nearby crowd.

Bird says the most common response to the work is a simple sense of wonder. "If you took photographs of people's faces from different places, I'm sure you'd find there are similar expressions. If you could map the way people move around it, you'd see how it acts as a magnet for the particular location it's in. People walk past and feel compelled to come in and take part."