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Museum of Everything founder brings 'outsider art' exhibition to MONA

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James Brett, of the Museum of Everything, says Australian galleries play it too safe. **Wolter Peeters**



by [Jemima Whyte](#)

Victorian drawings inspired by spirits and seances, a Perth electrician's paintings embedded with knick-knacks and images of visionary cathedrals at the time of the apocalypse by a Roman roadsweeper might not be regular sights in Australian cultural institutions. But The Museum of Everything founder James Brett says local institutions need to reconsider what really is art and

not play it so safe.

London-based Brett is mounting the first major exhibition of folk art, vernacular art or "outsider art" – a term he dislikes – with David Walsh's Hobart-based MONA, which will open on June 10 to coincide with winter solstice arts festival Dark Mofo.

"Australia feels to me like there is so much potential material, and there's a receptiveness, people are so open to ideas," he says.

"Some of the mainstream museums play it a bit safe – a lot more than we see in Europe and America."

The museum, which for this exhibition includes about 2000 pieces from 100 or so artists, gets around. In the last few years it has appeared at London department store Selfridges and the Tate Modern, the Venice Biennale, and Roman Abramovich and Dasha Zhukova's Garage Museum of Contemporary Art in Moscow.

There's less than a handful of Australian "makers" in Brett's "wiggly worm of a show", set in 30 rooms resembling "a posh house gone to seed" and filled with artists from the 1800s until today.

One Australian maker is Stan Hopewell, a Perth-based electrician, who began painting when his wife was diagnosed with dementia. He embeds knick-knacks in his

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work.

The show has also borrowed work from The Victorian Spiritualists' Union in Melbourne. Two Victorian-era drawings by mediumistic artist Georgiana Houghton are thought to be some of the earliest abstract drawings, inspired by Houghton talking to her spirit guides during seances.

"They are finally accepting that that work might be art and might be worth considering as art, and on equal par to other artists," says Brett. "As opposed to just weirdness...it's weirdness is undeniable, but it's also beautiful."

One of the museum's objectives is to take the show to the mainland and look for other "outsiders" or local makers.

"I find it a very us and them terminology and don't like it. Historically, art museums have used all these words – primitive, folk art, outsider art to not show this work or to show it as some little sub-club that's not really art," he says.

"That's actually the key to my thing which is there is this amazing art which goes on everywhere in the world, organically, just coming out privately and nobody really talks about it. And actually, it's the dominant visual culture in many ways. But the one we know is the art fairs, the big museum shows and the blockbuster shows.

"The monumental art, which is often about art, took over 400 to 500 years ago, and this high and the low split or division never recovered."

Brett, who has been travelling around Australia with a jar of germinating mung beans to stave off eating chocolate biscuits, says the museum is not profitable, but financial and venue partners help mount the exhibitions. In this case, MONA's David Walsh is acting as both.



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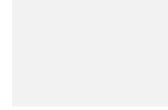
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