

# On the origin of artistry

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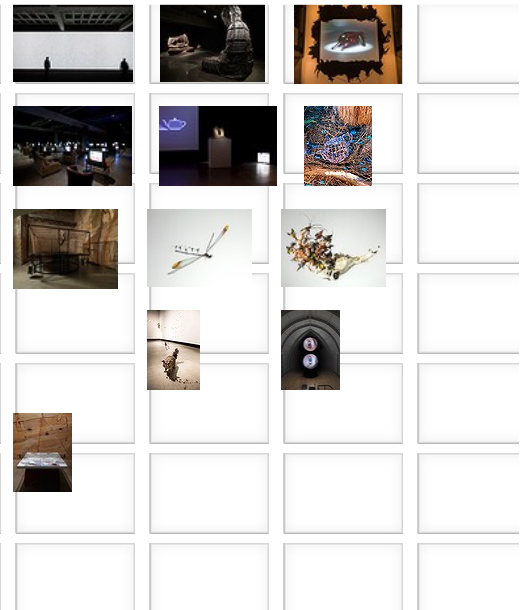
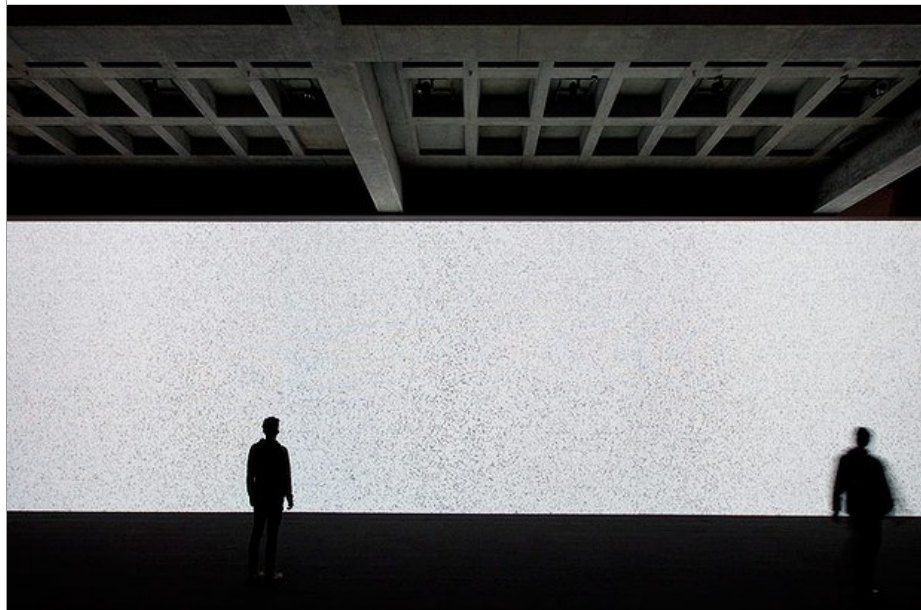
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## The Red Queen exhibit at MONA

data.tron, Ryoji Ikeda, 2009. Photo: MONA/Rémi Chauvin



Evolutionary psychologist Geoffrey Miller once wrote that art had always been a puzzle for evolutionists. Is it founded in our nature, in culture, or a splicing of the two? The rest of us puzzle over art, too: not so much over the content (though it can be baffling) but over why we have always made it.

Miller doesn't have easy answers and writes at length about decorated hand axes, which might have been the first art objects ever made. They appeared with our ancestors, the early hominids, more than 1.6 million years ago, long before larger-brained *Homo sapiens* emerged (about 200,000 years ago).

In his book *The Mating Mind: How Sexual Choice Shaped the Evolution of Human Nature*, Miller suggests they were used for social display and, thus, reproductive advantage. He goes further, saying that what we refer to today as "fine art" is just a fancy extension of the ornamentation we have always used during sexual selection to attract the best mates. "One might even view all of recorded art history as a footnote to the hand axe, which reigned a hundred times as long," he writes.

At the Museum of Old and New Art (MONA) in Hobart, a hand axe would fit easily into the new show, *The Red Queen*. The title is drawn from an evolutionary biology theory named after the character in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*: the Red Queen says, "It takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place." This was recast by scientists into a hypothesis that says an evolutionary system needs to continually develop - to "run in place" - simply to maintain its competitive fitness against other evolving systems. If evolution is all about survival of the fittest, the theorists argue, surely there must be a reason for our art-making; otherwise, it would be a waste of precious time and resources.

The MONA show, with much newly commissioned work, doesn't propose particular theories - it uses them as a springboard for discussion, with lots of fun, emotion and intelligence. We are treated to a provocative wander through variously themed rooms that might make us put a few connections together: the way humans play, imitate, use languages, see patterns and seek status, or the way we use memory, information and belief systems to our advantage. All these

things make links between art, culture and biological imperatives.

US scholar Ellen Dissanayake was one of the first to suggest art is entwined with our evolution and unlikely to be a biological hiccup. Dissanayake, who recently gave a lecture at MONA, points to three things that have led her in this direction: art is ubiquitous, across all cultures and times; it is a source of pleasure, and evolution privileges pleasurable behaviours that are adaptive; and art entails effort, which is rarely made without some adaptive reasoning behind it.

MONA is renowned for its wily way of seducing us. It also vigorously avoids conventional curatorship and didactic statements drenched in art-speak. So curators Nicole Durling and Olivier Varenne started not with the wealth of texts that can be found about the relationship between evolutionary biology and art-making, but with going down rabbit holes and finding artists whose work seems to bring out these connections. It was their continuing "wrangling and research" - the refining process, Durling says, of the paths they are interested in going down. It is, in other words, an intuitive, smart adventure that bears riches.

Looking around one of the rooms in *The Red Queen*, Durling observes that ever since humankind emerged, after sorting out basic needs - shelter, food - they immediately started painting on cave walls, ornamenting, dancing, singing, playing.

"Is art really necessary?" she asks. "What is the value of it? It is very time-consuming, it is risky, it takes a lot of energy and resources, you are exposing yourself. To what benefit? There must be some biological imperative behind that."

She, Varenne and MONA's owner, David Walsh (who has a deep interest in the drives underpinning creativity), don't claim to offer answers.

As Walsh writes in an essay for the forthcoming *The Red Queen* catalogue, the show is "a lighthearted look at the evolutionary background of creativity and will not be burdened by excessive narrative". So they give hints of the thinkers we might consult: Miller, Dissanayake, cognitive scientist Steven Pinker, English professor Brian Boyd, or Leda Cosmides (psychologist) and John Tooby (anthropologist).

We investigate all this by looking at art works and feeling our way through ideas and emotions they ignite. Take the spaces that deal with play: there is a work by Australia's Laith McGregor that doubles as a ping-pong table (yes, you can have a match); an enormous trampoline, underneath which are suspended cannon shells and Buddhist bells (yes, you can jump on it, making the shells/bells chime); or a video work featuring an Istanbul butcher whose knife skills teeter between the hilarious and the hypnotic.

They might all seem loosely connected - and they are - but they indicate that through play, great things are discovered; creative play is fundamental to idea-making.

Similarly, in the rooms about display, connections emerge between animal mating rituals and art that is consciously made to be seen by audiences. There is Tessa Farmer's *The Depraved Pursuit of a Possum*, a dreamy display of suspended bees, ants and fairies, or Francis Alys' film *When Faith Moves Mountains*, where hundreds of people shovel an enormous sand dune into a different place.

Or there is "outsider" art that is certainly not made for any audience: the reclusive Henry Darger wrote a 15,000-page novel with hundreds of accompanying illustrations. Why go to all this effort?

As for humans' propensity for spiritual investigation, MONA gives us some beautiful works: Zhang Huan's *Berlin Buddha*, an enormous statue of crumbling, compacted incense; Mircea Cantor's video *Tracking Happiness*, in which women majestically sweep away their footprints in the sand; or Sarkis' mini-museum of little voodoo statues embedded in oil paint on paper, resting on wire racks. The paint leaches its oil on to the paper, putting an aura around the statues that, Varenne says, represents different desires or concerns.

Many works are potentially quite moving. While no one at MONA is going to tell us what to think, that we are likely to circle the works with heart and mind instinctively engaged says a lot. As one of Dissanayake's books describes us in its title, we are *Homo aestheticus*, an intelligent species with a deep need for art-making.

The erudite Walsh concurs: he writes that all human creativity "may have as its generator the fact that creativity aids survival and stimulates cognition".

"That the evolution of cognition and creativity may be part of a closed loop that caused some hominids to become human is astonishing and will potentially become the subject for further exploration at MONA," he writes. "As an individual with an interest in evolution and art, I feel tremendously gratified that I can, at least in my limited domain, and at least for a short time, highlight some of the oft-ignored characteristics of what we do and why we do it."

■ ***The Red Queen* is at MONA until April next year.**



Co-curators Olivier Varenne and Nicole Durling. Photo: Peter Mathew

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