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Journey inside The Red Queen

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MONA's new exhibition -- *The Red Queen* -- defies expectation.

Not only does it do away with the controversial, shock-value art MONA has become known for, it also removes some of the best known works from the museum.

The Red Queen looks at the question "Why do humans make art?" through more than 100 works by 46 artists.

The exhibition involved the dramatic re-hang of almost 80 per cent of MONA's collection. Previously unseen works from MONA owner David Walsh's collection are on show for the first time.

Step inside the exhibition

There are 16 pieces specially commissioned by MONA, while some works are on loan from private collections and the National Gallery of Victoria.

There are graffitied ping pong tables and trampolines with bells attached, juxtaposed with Ghanaian voodoo dolls and a video installation that screens inside a giant upturned boat.

MONA senior curators Olivier Varenne and Nicole Durling examine such questions as why we have creative urges and what motivates artists.

The Red Queen character from the Lewis Carroll novel is a symbol for the theory that we don't evolve to progress, but to adapt to our environment.

Mr Walsh said the exhibition explored hefty themes, but was not intended to be too taxing.

"*The Red Queen* has as its genesis the evolutionary background of creativity," he said. "It's a light-hearted look and will not be burdened by excessive narrative."

Sidney Nolan's *Snake* has been replaced for *The Red Queen* by Ryoji Ikeda's *data.tron* and *data.matrix* pieces.

Tasmanians have fallen in love with Ikeda's work *Spectra*, the white beam of light that shoots 15km into the sky from Hobart's Cenotaph.

The works that dominate the walls at MONA feature giant screens of scrolling figures and commands. Algorithms and data, including flight patterns and other randomly selected data, flash across these screens, lighting up the room in a mesmerising way.

The exhibits are grouped into themes or chapters including play, belief and memory.

The belief component contains a 4m-high Buddha made from eight tonnes of compounded incense ash collected from temples in China. The sculpture is slowly disintegrating, returning to dust, and within the next 10 days it will no longer take the form of a Buddha but a pile of ash on the floor. It challenges viewers to think about the transient nature of life and art.

British artist Tessa Farmer spent two months meticulously creating her commissioned work, *The Depraved Pursuit of a Possum*, with the help of three assistants. The installation comprises a freeze-dried possum, bones, crabs, shells, insects, arachnids, hedgehog spines and a wasps' nest. It depicts fairies who set about attacking a possum with the help of hundreds of bees and thousands of ants and spiders.

"Art making is completely excessive behaviour," Ms Durling said. "There must be some necessity for it, or why would



Tessa Farmer's *The Depraved Pursuit of a Possum*. Picture: SAM ROSEWARNE

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we keep doing it?"

An intriguing series of 10 works by reclusive American artist and writer Henry Darger occupy a dark side room at MONA.

Ms Durling said the paintings were not discovered until after Darger's death, so he never saw them exhibited.

Mr Varenne said *The Red Queen* was a new direction for MONA.

"We removed all our most popular works," he said. "We removed the *Snake*. We removed *bit.fall*."

The curators explained that *The Red Queen* was a more serious and engaged exhibition than anything MONA had done before.

Ms Durling said the exhibition would continue to evolve over the 10 months it was on display, with performance art concluding, works being moved and layers being added.

Mr Varenne said *The Red Queen* asked more questions than it answered. "Why for 20,000 years have all humans, all populations from everywhere, in a continuous way, always made art?"

The Red Queen is on at MONA until April 21 next year.

emma.hope@news.com.au



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