



Futuristic 'robot light art' the shape of things to come

ANNABEL ROSS

As Tamara Barnett-Herrin sings of "slaves and queens and rainbows" in a small octagonal amphitheatre, a light fixed to a metal wand attached to a robot curls through the air in front of her.

This "dancing light robot" – dubbed the Ada Project – is part of Hobart's four-day music and arts festival, MONA FOMA (or MOFO).

Ada was born out of another project artist Conrad Shawcross started some years earlier – a graceful light sculpture for a ballet staged at London's Royal Opera House in 2012.

But in the Hobart exhibition, the machine isn't responding to music, rather the artists have composed pieces inspired by the pattern made by the light, known as the spline.

"What you saw in there isn't a clever disco light," said Shawcross after rehearsal on Wednesday. "The spline existed before the artists came in the studio, and they spent a week in my studio in London with the robot and my animator and robotees all trying to program these splines."

Shawcross' inspiration for the Ada project has an interesting kinship with David Walsh, the founder of Hobart's Museum of Old and New Art (MONA). Ada Lovelace, the mathematician and daughter of poet Lord Byron, was, like Walsh, a keen gambler. She also described herself as an analyst and metaphysician.

The drawings that Lovelace's colleague Charles Babbage did of the first mechanical computer, the unrealised Analytical Engine – which Lovelace also worked on – forms the basis of Shawcross' work. He has used key numbers and ratios from archival plans and drawings of the machine to map out his splines.

The robot, constructed from aluminium, motors and steel, is what Shawcross describes as "a cannibalised robot".

"There's the Victorian machine that we're kind of using as a reference point, but the robot is actually from the '90s. It's an old welding robot from a car factory. We've dwarfed some of the limbs, we've stripped it down,

we've kind of shop-glassed the finish."

The first four artists commissioned are a diverse group.

Multidisciplinary artist Holly Herndon "devised an alien palette of sounds and used the robot to try and make sense of them"; experimental musicians Beatrice Dillon and Rupert Clervaux combined field recordings of the robot's movements with recordings of a grand piano and harpsichord; Barnett-Herrin wrote a song inspired by Lovelace's life and work, the music composed by Scottish DJ and producer Mylo; and Melbourne soprano Teresa Duddy sang against a backdrop of music composed by artist Mira Calix.

After its premiere at MOFO, the robot will return to London, where Shawcross hopes to open the Ada salon.

"It's like a pop-up nightclub for a month or six weeks, with the robot in the centre, like here, and a bar and evening events and dance and music and programming around it," he said.



Light and sound: Conrad Shawcross was inspired by a 19th-century mechanical computer.

Photo: Peter Mathew