

By continuing to use this site you consent to the use of cookies on your device as described in our [cookie policy](#) unless you have disabled them. You can change your [cookie settings](#) at any time but parts of our site will not function correctly without them.

FINANCIAL TIMES

Home UK World Companies Markets Global Economy Lex Comment Management Personal Finance Life & Arts

Arts || FT Magazine || Food & Drink || House & Home || Style || Books || Pursuits || Sport || Travel || Columnists || How To Spend It || Tools

February 4, 2011 10:01 pm

Tasmanian devilry

By Gareth Harris



David Walsh at his Museum of Old and New Art near Hobart, Tasmania

A subterranean museum hewn from a sandstone cliff on an Australian island, founded by a maverick gambling millionaire, sounds like a far-fetched art world fantasy. Fill the gallery with some of the most provocative and striking art works of the 21st century, from a faeces-making machine by Belgian artist Wim Delvoye to Stephen Shanabrook's mutilated body of a suicide bomber sculpted in chocolate, along with Egyptian mummies and modernist Australian pieces, and the saga sounds even more implausible.

But such a place exists: the Museum of Old and New Art (Mona), which opened outside the Tasmanian capital of Hobart late last month, houses the collection of 49-year-old David Walsh, mathematician, vineyard owner and professional gambler. At 6,000 square metres, it is Australia's largest private art gallery.

Walsh is quite unlike your typical art collector. Raised in the Hobart suburb of Glenorchy, the algorithms virtuoso says he was a "misfit kid", a typical computer nerd. But the geek cleaned up, dropping out of the University of Tasmania in the late 1970s to fine-tune gaming systems, hitting on a formula that meant blackjack croupiers dreaded dealing him a hand (mastering card techniques was "easy", he says, but finding a way to win on the horses took him most of the early 1990s).

To say that Walsh is a complex figure is an understatement. The entrepreneur, who once described himself as "a mess of little boys fighting in a sack", dwells on sex, death and defecation. Raised a Catholic, he would sneak off to the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery aged 14 instead of attending mass. For him, Mona is a "secular temple", a laboratory that strips humanity to the bone. "We make [art] to appease, to get laid, to satisfy. It's a biological imperative," he says, which makes sense coming from a man mad about Darwin.

To that end, he has assembled a staggeringly eclectic 2,200-piece collection over the past 20 years, not unlike the pursuits of the eccentric English architect Sir John Soane, the 18th-century magpie who gathered curiosities from across the ages. Walsh's holdings, which he says are worth around A\$100m (£62.6m), include ancient Greek tetradrachms, key pieces by Australian 20th-century practitioners such as Sidney Nolan's incredible "Snake" (1970), made up of 1,620 individual panels, and more than 600 contemporary works by such art market darlings as Chris Ofili, Damien Hirst and Jean-Michel Basquiat (less obvious names include Claire Morgan, Cassandra Laing and Jon Pylypchuk).

He paid more than A\$2.5m for Anselm Kiefer's "Sternenfall" (2007), a large-scale lead-book installation, and A\$3.2m for Oz artist Arthur

Boyd's sought-after "Melbourne Burning" painting (1946-47).

And where does he acquire his antiquities? "Plenty of museums go broke. There's always a market for mummies," he quips.

Around 20 per cent of the collection is on show at Mona, located on Walsh's six-acre Moorilla estate overlooking the River Derwent, which he bought for A\$2.5m in 1995. But after an arduous 10,500-mile trek from London, finding the museum entrance proves my biggest challenge. There's no obvious sign of an entry point above ground, just other emblems of Walsh's business empire – including eight luxury accommodation pavilions and his "Moo" brewery, which launched in 2005. Bizarrely, a queue is forming across a tennis court in front of a discreet mirrored façade.

And then Walsh appears, a striking figure with a shock of grey shoulder-length hair who leads me round a winding staircase that descends into a three-storey underground space flanked by a monumental 14 metre-high sandstone wall. It dawns on me: if outside was underwhelming, this internal, cacophonous warren, created by removing 60,000 tonnes of earth, is astonishing, its burrows containing both monumental and minuscule art installations that demand further inspection.

This is Walsh's A\$75m "unmuseum", his "anti-Tate", more than three years in the making, where visitors unfurl his nihilistic vision step by step. In spaces drained of natural light – embellished with plush red curtains, bottomless display cases where artefacts hang in mid-air, and Dante-esque tunnels – certain images stay with you. Examples are Julius Popp's waterfall that spells out words in mid-air ("Bit.Fall", 2006-07) and a searing image of a man and dog copulating (Oleg Kulik's "Family of the Future, 9", 1997).

Moving through a room filled with carnal, immediate pieces by Young British Artists, including Mat Colishaw's "Bullet Hole" assemblage (1988-93), Walsh is in full flow about the motivation behind Mona. "I want normal people to be aware of what they do, their actions. I'd like them to realise that they're responsible for f***ing the world up. Don't people realise that they eat meat, that they pollute? How do you remove yourself from what you do?" he says.

Deferring responsibility is his principal gripe; "Any problems we encounter as a species is down to our need to compartmentalise," he adds. So sanitisation goes out the window: in an unmarked toilet cubicle, visitors can see exactly how shit happens by watching their sphincters release waste through a four-way mirror system installed by Austrian art collective Gelitin. "We spend too much time hiding from ourselves," observes Walsh.



Visitors at the museum's opening last month look at 'Snake' (1970) by Sidney Nolan

But you'd be missing the point if you believe that Mona is only a shrine to bodily functions and that Walsh simply wants to court controversy. "Some of the works are immensely subtle, like the bronze 'Leda and the Swan' sculpture (Roman, AD1-100). There's lots of drama and stillness [in the museum]," he says. He wants people to have fun in his subterranean *Kunstkammer*, his "subversive adult Disneyland", as he likes to call it, with the putrid underbelly of art offset by a lighter touch.

There's nothing more tongue-in-cheek than displaying an urn with your father's ashes (Walsh says his dad doesn't mind being on show at Mona) alongside a well-stocked bar ("We have bands and DJs which will piss off academics. Pissing off academics is fun. Cemeteries and bars are fun"). This full-on humour even permeates the trail-blazing iPods used by visitors to navigate the space. The devices include sections such as "Artwank", with art historical details, along with Walsh's own off-the-wall ruminations and great gossip (artist Gregory Barsamian initially fell out with Mona, details the handheld gadget, because news of his "Artifact" giant skull work was leaked to the New York press).

With no captions in sight, the rule book on traditional museological orthodoxy is ripped to shreds. In addition, Walsh considers curators to be a waste of space, likening the practice to "mental masturbation. What pisses me off is when a curator takes credit for everything," he adds, while acknowledging the efforts of his team. Mona, which has no board of trustees, is nonetheless a massive, vainglorious personal statement which overwhelmingly bears the imprint of its founder, something Walsh savours.

His staff seem happy to go along for the ride. "I'm fed up with white cube-esque galleries which are all very antiseptic. Throughout the Enlightenment and over the past 250 years, museums have become more taxonomic and lost the ability to actually engage visitors. The non-linear approach here makes the works more desirable, there's an aspect of window dressing," observes Mark Fraser, Mona director.

It's true that this approach is invigorating. Where else would you see Erwin Wurm's "Fat Car" (2006) sculpture alongside a sarcophagus fragment dating from 664BC? "What is interesting about the museum is that it's so different to private galleries in Europe and the US – for instance in Miami – where the spaces and art all tend to be identical," says Cristina Ruiz, editor-at-large of The Art Newspaper.

So what's next for Walsh, a relatively new art world player? Dealers and auction houses are courting the autodidact, while the collector fosters relations with leading artists worldwide (he is in talks with Gregor Schneider to reproduce one of the German artist's famous sculpted "rooms" at Mona). Plans are afoot for a hotel at the complex while a new library will open on-site in April housed in an existing building, the Round House, which was designed by the late Australian architect Roy Grounds and built in the late 1950s.

But as we watch a live "big-brother" video feed from French artist Christian Boltanski's studio in Paris, another challenging Mona art initiative, Walsh admits that he is never going to cover the cost of running the museum – around A\$8m annually – through revenue from other Moorilla ventures such as the winery.

Admission to the museum, which receives no state funding, is free. "I'm just a rich commie. I have a tremendous amount of guilt about huge wealth," he says, to my surprise. He now hopes to boost income by working on "exportable technology", with plans to formulate Mona tours for computer tablets like the iPad.

But will anybody outside Australia actually get on a plane to Tasmania? Walsh doesn't care about being an art scene fixture and would rather his gallery became a "must-see on the tourist circuit", building Mona into a brand. Last weekend, for the opening celebrations, 4,700 people turned up; the real test will be the long-term tally.

Fraser points out that "this could be a destination for affluent European collectors after Art Basel [the Swiss fair] ends in June, for instance, when there is nothing for artaholics to do in the dead season". They should make the pilgrimage: an offbeat visionary is showing some great art at the end of the world.

www.mona.net.au

Most Popular on Social Networks

Lunch with the FT: Steve Coogan

Singapore cracks down on social unrest after Little India riot

Dead or alive? The puzzle of Schrödinger's markets

Hazards that could derail the rally in 2014

N Korea's Kim has uncle executed for treason

Malala Yousafzai

Samantha Power

Julia Gillard

EU reaches landmark deal on failed banks

German probe into gold and silver market rigging

Person of the year: Jack Ma

India stages dramatic comeback from being on the brink of crisis

Bitcoin start-up raises \$25m in vc funding

Uruguay is right to opt out of the world war on drugs

Europe faces a bigger threat than German caution

Ireland's barristers prosecute campaign against bailout reforms

When did the Irish become so accepting of their lot?

Forget the Fed, prepare for Tokyo 'taper'

Hedge funds bet against Manchester United

Advisers play at activism to pre-empt the next Icahn

Printed from:

<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/705ed106-2fe3-11e0-a7c6-00144feabdc0.html>

Print a single copy of this article for personal use. Contact us if you wish to print more to distribute to others.

© THE FINANCIAL TIMES LTD 2013 FT and 'Financial Times' are trademarks of The Financial Times Ltd.