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Entertainment

MONA shines light into the darkness

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Hobart's controversial art gallery pushes the boundaries with its inaugural winter festival, writes Debbie Cuthbertson.

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"When you shut your eyes you will still be able to see." So says David Walsh, founder of Hobart's Museum of Old and New Art, of what he is trying to achieve through his inaugural winter arts festival, Dark Mofo, which lit up the city at the weekend.

A different beast to the gambling millionaire's Mona Foma summer music festival, Dark Mofo takes the themes of sex and death so strongly identified with Walsh's \$100 million museum and pushes them further: "We let the mind's eye shine," he warns in the festival program.

I didn't expect to experience that so literally, or viscerally. But lying on the floor of Austrian artist Kurt Hentschlager's installation *Zee* on Saturday, after passing out five minutes into the 12-minute piece and trying to understand the images that had flashed through my own mind's eye, it seems Walsh had hit his target.

Anyone entering Hentschlager's work must sign a waiver and has ample warning of its potentially hallucinatory and dangerous effects. Part of Dark Mofo's visual arts program *Beam In Thine Own Eye*, housed in a former warehouse on Hobart's wharf, *Zee* is an aural and visual assault of strobe lights and sound in a room filled with fake fog.

While the battery of lights seemed to have no effect on some, in others they provoke shaking, a loss of balance, hallucinations and in some cases (such as mine) what Hentschlager calls an emergency shutdown by the brain as it struggles to process the onslaught.

Hentschlager said he had no way of predicting how individuals would react to his work.

"There's so many reactions. There are certain things that everybody experiences the same, certain frequencies of the light, the changes of the kaleidoscopic patterns ... [Then] there are other things that are individually processed in your consciousness.

"It is very much to do with your emotional state: if you are calm, if you are agitated, if you have eaten ... You are one of the people who can't deal with this sort of effect, this intensity," he tells me.

Other elements of the program have a far more soothing presence, such as Japanese electronic artist Ryoji Ikeda's installation *spectra [tasmania]* - a grid of 49 searchlights shining from the city's cenotaph up to 15 kilometres into the sky.

As it appeared at dusk on Friday night, showers conjured a rainbow that shimmered across it. Later, as the showers and cloud cleared, it became a solid, single, bright blue light piercing high up into the sky. The next evening, as the clouds sat low over the city, it took on a milky, translucent hue. An ever-evolving presence, it looks different every time you crane your neck to see how it has changed.

Ikeda was at pains to spell out his efforts to minimise its power consumption, saying it used the equivalent energy of 10 households each night as it appeared from dusk until dawn.

"I'm not afraid of being hated. Even if they don't like this piece, people will never forget it. It is something in their life, just one single experience. They can keep it in their mind or their heart."

A show that went straight to the heart of many locals was *Vandemonian Lags*, a musical by Steve Thomas and his brother Mick of Weddings, Parties, Anything fame, based on the stories of Tasmanian convicts. It received a standing ovation in Hobart's Theatre Royal on Friday night.



Japanese artist Ryoji Ikeda's searchlight installation illuminates Hobart's night sky. Photo: Remi Chauvin

The show features a roll-call of voices instantly recognisable to many Melbourne music fans, including Mick Thomas, Ben Salter, Darren Hanlon, Liz Stringer, Jeff Lang and Sal Kimber, plus narrator Brian Nankervis who acts as a colonial anchorman in a curious twist on his role in TV's *RockWiz*.

Tasmanian Premier and Arts Minister Lara Giddings, whose government contributed \$1 million a year over three years to the festival, described the show as exceptional. "We've not been very good at telling our own stories."

Dark Mofo runs until June 23. *Beam In Thine Own Eye* runs until July 28.

The writer travelled to Hobart courtesy of Tourism Tasmania.

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