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Theatre of the World

MUSEUM OF OLD AND NEW ART, HOBART, TASMANIA

'Theatre of the World', 2012, Installation view

In his book *L'Idea del Teatro* (The Idea of the Theatre, 1550), philosopher Giulio Camillo proposed that everything in the universe can be arranged into seven categories – 'the seven pillars of wisdom' – which would, in theory, allow the beholder access to all knowledge. 'Theatre of the World' at the Museum of Old and New Art (MONA), curated by Jean-Hubert Martin, employs Camillo's template as his starting point. However, rather than being a celebration of such encyclopaedic urges to categorize the world, the show focuses more on the majesty apparent within such systems.

'Theatre of the World' draws on the collections of both MONA and the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery (TMAG), with additional works sourced internationally. MONA is a private museum funded by mathematician and evolutionary anthropologist David Walsh; its collection is housed in the museum's subterranean space and spans antiquity to the present. Martin's curatorial trajectory is typified by his desire to free objects and works of art from museological taxonomies, allowing for context to be set through interconnected ideas, regardless of culture and age – a methodology he famously explored in 'Magiciens de la Terre' (Magicians of the Earth) at the Centre Pompidou and the Grande Halle at the Parc de la Villette in Paris (1989) and, more recently, 'Artempo' at the Palazzo Fortuny in Venice (2007). Both Walsh's collection and Martin's curatorial style reflect the idea that material culture can potentially be interlinked through common human urges to order. As Walsh explains in the exhibition catalogue: 'What we see as beauty is mostly the phenomenon of order, extracted from complexity, chaos or caprice.'

'Theatre of the World' includes nearly 400 objects and artefacts

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clustered under 13 sub-headings, such as 'Genesis', 'the Cleave', 'Corpus', 'Phantasm', 'Aura', 'Afterlife' and 'Shamanism'. Martin refers to his curatorial process as 'semiophoric', where 'each work of art is a lexical item from which new sentences, constructions and discourses can be constructed'. In 'Theatre of the World', meaning accumulates in gradual increments. The handles of a Greek cup, *Kantharos Panticapaeum* (c.320–250 BCE), for example, mimic the rounded curve of a South American Owl Butterfly's wing; a World War I pocket bible, embedded with the bullet that saved its owner's life, sits beside Gregory Green's series of bombs concealed inside copies of the Koran, the Torah and the Bible – *In the Name of God (Koran), In the Name of God (Torah)* and *Bible Bomb #1845 (Russian Style)* (all 2005). These groupings encourage curiosity without being didactic or hyperbolic.

In the first gallery, a watercolour by Erwin Wurm, *The Artist Who Swallowed the World* (2006), depicts a figure with a globe in his stomach. It's placed alongside a 1658 world map, which, in turn, hangs alongside an untitled 1990 painting by Indigenous Australian artist George Tjapaltjarri, featuring dots reminiscent of a map or diagram. This sequence emphasizes Martin's wish that viewers approach the exhibition as if it were their own world, employing subjectivity at every opportunity. He reiterates this with the inclusion of an edited snippet of the gruesome eye-slicing scene from Luis Buñuel's *Un Chien Andalou* (An Andalusian Dog, 1929). Viewed through a peephole drilled into the gallery wall, the film echoes the idea that vision is subjective.

In his catalogue essay, Martin argues that the idea of the 'renaissance man' has been rendered obsolete as a result of scientific and intellectual specialization making it impossible for the casual polymath to claim cross-spectrum knowledge. However, 'Theatre of the World' is not free of the curator's somewhat colonial, encyclopaedic tendencies (an enthusiasm he developed as Director of the Musée national des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie in Paris). In an exhibition characterized by its diversity, it was surprising that Martin chose to include the entire TMAG collection of Indigenous bark paintings and Pacific Tapa cloths. Hung together in a large, almost reverent, gallery space they are curiously offset by Alberto Giacometti's *Grande Figure (Femme Leoni)* (Standing Woman, 1947). The grouping constitutes a break from the rest of the exhibition's narrative, revealing a distinctly Eurocentric appreciation of these objects as primitive creative expressions – in the exhibition catalogue they're referred to as being from 'zones of oblivion'. Martin narrows the value of the Tapa cloth (a material that is very much alive and active in this part of the world), focusing solely on its relevance to Western geometric abstraction and simplified anthropomorphic forms, which he then compares to Giacometti's sculptural rendering of an emaciated female form. Here lies the problematic crux of all exhibitions that recontextualize cultural artefacts within a contemporary art context: the original use or status of the object persists, clinging to the object through associations that defy the scrambling of 'semiophoric' curatorial practices.

However, perhaps this is all part of Martin's raison d'être. Whilst he does release the objects from their often-fusty taxonomies, the narrative that he then embeds them in is unashamedly authored. Told in pulses and hunches, with little interest in dictating meaning, it's as if he simply connects essence with essence, opening space for disagreement or personal association in the process. He encourages us to engage with our own visual language so that we might make sense of possibly unfamiliar objects. And here, paradoxically, we become part of Martin's grand plan with our activated eye being the ultimate goal of his method.

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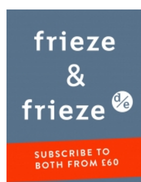

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