

# FINANCIAL REVIEW

## Exhibitions| MONA bets on bark

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MONA's barkcloth room with Giacometti's Grande Figure (Femme Leoni) 1947, Michael Fitzgerald



MONA's David Walsh. Photo: Louise Kennerley



Curatorial alchemist Jean-Hubert Martin wants to take audiences on an alternative journey.

For those lucky enough to have got lost on the way to the 2007 Venice Biennale, the exhibition *Artempo* at the Palazzo Fortuny was nothing short of a revelation. The interiors of the 15th-century Venetian palace had been transformed into an Aladdin's cave, where unexpected combinations of objects – a Lucio Fontana slashed canvas from 1960 alongside a Khmer Buddha's head, a French medical mannequin and a Papua New Guinean effigy – somehow linked through time and space to enchant the viewer.

The curatorial alchemist behind the show was Frenchman Jean-Hubert Martin. Already highly influential for his 1989 Paris show *Magiciens de la Terre* – which radically mixed Western and non-Western art, including that of indigenous Australia – Martin had spent the intervening years as a museum director at leading European institutions such as the Centre Pompidou and Dusseldorf's Museum Kunst Palast.

But it was *Artempo* which brought the curator's cross-cultural vision to a new generation of art lovers – and to the attention of Tasmania's David Walsh. In 2007 the maverick millionaire was in the stages of planning his audacious Museum of Old and New Art, combining his collection of classical antiquities with cutting-edge contemporary art. With *Artempo* Walsh found his dream curator – someone who could connect the dots. And someone as unconventional in his thinking as Walsh himself. "I wouldn't put Jean-Hubert in any category," says Walsh's long-time art adviser, the curator Olivier Varenne. "I think he's out of the box."

Martin helped hone the opening hang of MONA in January last year, but it was always with the view that he would create his own special project further down the track.

Five years on from *Artempo*, Martin last night unveiled his own sequel of sorts at the Hobart museum on the banks of the Derwent River. But rather than trading on Walsh's artistic predilection for sex and death, *Theatre of the World* will stake its claim on more edifying values – the pursuit of human knowledge, no less. Its curatorial ambitions bring it head to head with the 18th Biennale of Sydney, which launches but a few days later.

"For me it's a very important show," says Martin, 68, a refreshingly down-to-earth character for someone with such lofty goals, "because I had the chance to meet David and he gave me carte blanche. He said that he loved *Artempo* and that we should do something like that. And this is exactly what I was looking for – I mean, I didn't expect any proposal more open than that."

As its title suggests, *Theatre of the World* doesn't think small. Just as *Magiciens* brought indigenous culture to the centre of contemporary art and *Artempo* helped collapse the usual categories of art history, so *Theatre of the World* is expansive, seeking to enlarge the possibilities of the modern museum by combining two very different and eclectic collections – Walsh's treasure trove with that of Hobart's Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery (TMAG), known for its colonial art and ethnographic and natural history displays.

For the past two years, Martin has been granted rare access to TMAG's storage facilities. Among the racks of clothing and personal items, he discovered a sense of collective memory that surprised the Paris-based curator. "The objects are not so valuable in [monetary] terms, but you can see they all have a history and a memory and they were valuable because they belonged to people," Martin says, "and this is actually very moving because it's a real history of a community."

But the biggest discovery for Martin was TMAG's rich collection of Pacific barkcloths, known as tapa. They have been little seen since TMAG first began to acquire them from 19th century missionaries disembarking at Hobart's Sullivans Cove, then a thriving gateway to the Pacific. Martin was well aware of the cultural and ceremonial significance of tapa in their marking of genealogy, but he also recognised their aesthetic importance for modern artists such as Henri Matisse and François Morellet, who were influenced by their extraordinarily dynamic geometric patterns.

Quickly the curator realised he had the basis for a show.

"To the contrary of many colleagues, I don't start with an ideology, a hypothesis or theory," Martin says. "I start with the object and then comes the idea of combining that with the history and then you make the links."

Installed along MONA's cavernous central gallery, these 80 barkcloths from TMAG's collection form the heart of Martin's show – the spectacular stage around which *Theatre of the World* revolves, linking art of this region to the advent of European modernism in a fresh and original way.

In the surrounding labyrinth of galleries, viewers can stumble on sundry other surprises – Picasso's *Weeping Woman*, borrowed from Melbourne's National Gallery of Victoria; Max Ernst's *L'imbécile* from Sydney's Art Gallery of NSW; and Alberto Giacometti's *Grande Figure (Femme Leoni)* from the Fondation Maeght in the south of France – "short circuits", as Martin calls them, in his unconventional but frequently thrilling tour through art history.

With such a naturally Surrealist eye, it's hardly surprising Martin now has his sights set on Salvador Dali, the movement's master showman: the curator is planning a Dali retrospective for the Centre Pompidou, which is due to open later this year.

It will be the artist's first big survey in Paris in 33 years, and audiences can already expect the unexpected. Forget the moustachioed painter of melting clocks. Once again, Martin wants to take audiences on an alternative journey.

“Dali was a pioneer of performance art and he influenced very much Warhol in terms of the way he used the media,” Martin says. “Nobody has really cared about these ephemeral works, the many performances he made, and I’ve tried to make an inventory of them.”

In the meantime, Dali’s spirit seems very much alive in Hobart. While the artist’s work hasn’t been included in MONA’s forthcoming show, Dali’s eccentric house museum on the Costa Brava, where stuffed animals and other surreal objects vie for attention, has been one of the inspirations for Martin’s marvellously maximal hang. One imagines that Dali, more than anyone, would feel quite at home in this Theatre of the World.

**Theatre of the World, Museum of Old and New Art, Hobart, ends April 8, 2013 - The Australian Financial Review**