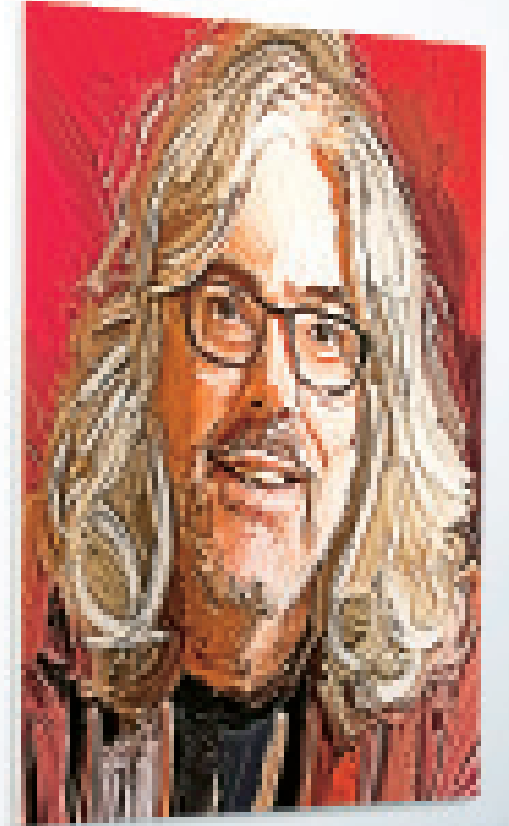
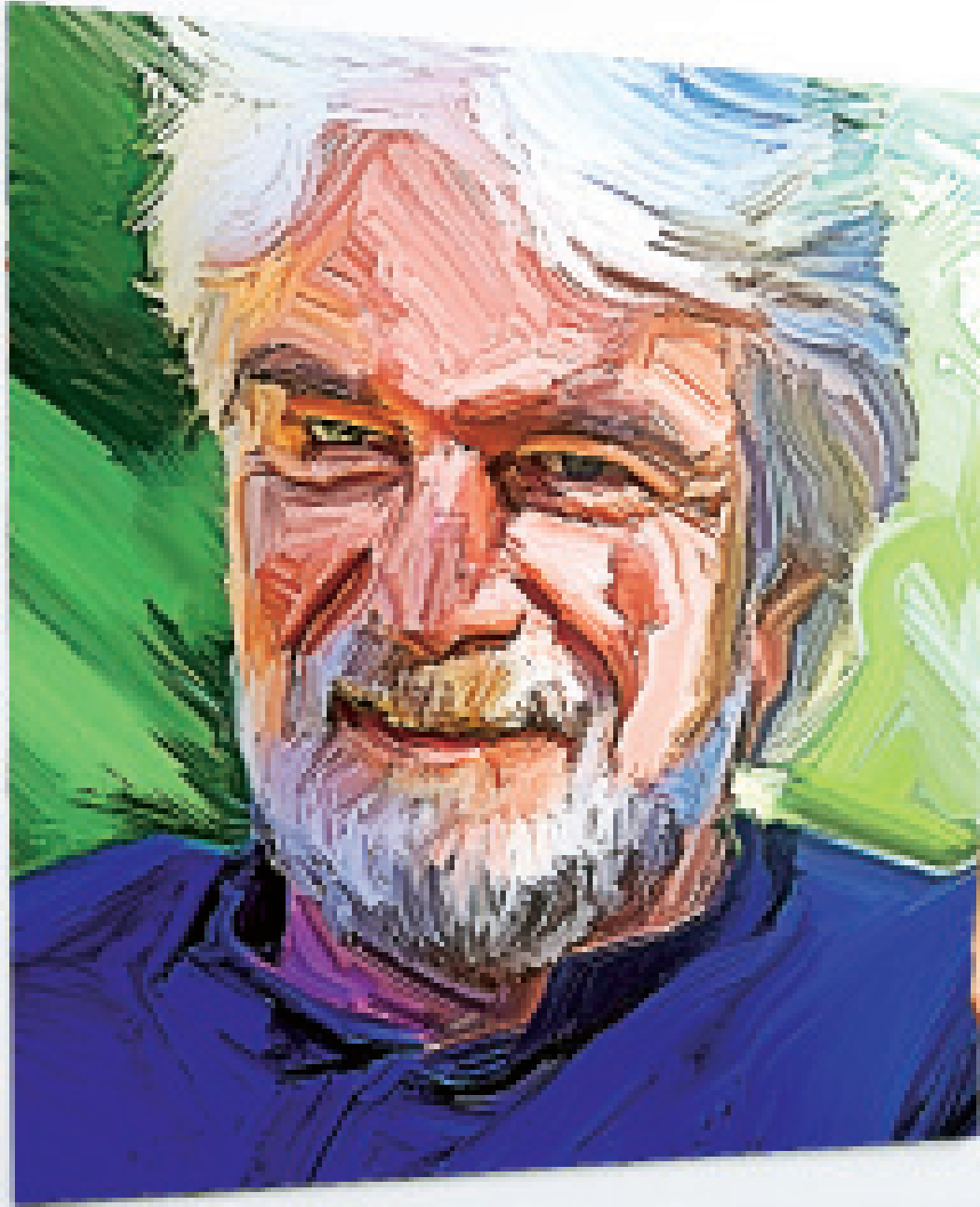


PORTRAIT GALLERY

From left: museum founders  
Bernardo Paz, Victor Pinchuk,  
Alice Walton and David Walsh



# IS IT ART — OR EXHIBITIONISM?

A new wave of super-rich art lovers are spending hundreds of millions on extravagant museums — privately owned, but open to the public. **Cristina Ruiz** reports



The journey begins with a descent into darkness. First you wind your way down a spiralling ramp 50ft underground. Then you follow the contours of an ancient limestone cliff, leading to the antechamber of the most astonishing art gallery in the world — freshly built, at vast expense. Laid out in front of you is a warren of darkened rooms full of works that shock, disgust and delight in equal measure.

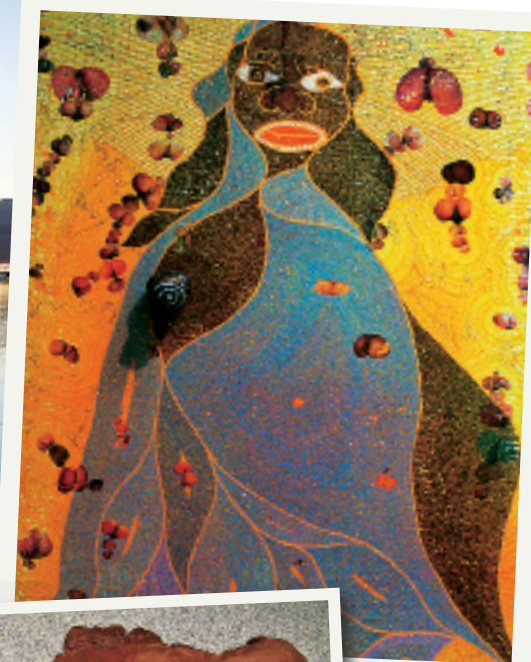
You'll come across a life-size sculpture of the mutilated corpse of a suicide bomber cast in chocolate. The American artist, Stephen J Shanabrook, based his work on a press photograph of a Palestinian teenager whose head, right shoulder and right arm were the only body parts to withstand the blast of his bomb; these have been rendered in gruesome detail. There is an installation by the Belgian artist Wim Delvoye that mimics the human digestive system and produces excrement apparently indistinguishable from our own in appearance, smell and chemical composition. The machine is fed twice daily; the food passes through a series of interconnected glass chambers suspended from the ceiling, where it mixes with fluids simulating intestinal juices. At 3.30 every day, "poo" is removed by a museum attendant and flushed down the toilet.

Welcome to the Museum of Old and New Art (Mona) in Tasmania, a stunning underground fun-house of displays intended to provoke, entertain and provide visitors with the thrills of a "subversive Disneyland" — in the words of the man who conceived, paid for, and now presides over the gallery: professional gambler David Walsh. With its 6,000 sq metres of display space over three floors, £65m collection of western antiquities, Australian modernist paintings, international contemporary art and a programme of high-calibre exhibitions, Mona is a flamboyant new arrival on the international museum scene. It attracted a staggering 400,000 visitors in the 12 months after opening in January 2011, almost a seventh of the number who went to the Museum of Modern Art in New York last year. And this is in Tasmania, which has a total population of half a million.

The building itself, which cost £48m, is the fruit of gargantuan architectural ambition. The architect, the Melbourne-based Nonda Katsalidis, had to remove 60,000 tonnes of earth and limestone from the side of a cliff before construction could even begin. Arrive by road and Katsalidis's spectacular creation is nowhere to be seen. It is only if you approach by boat along the river



**SEX AND DEATH**  
Gambler David Walsh (below right) has the sculpted remains of a suicide bomber and Chris Ofili's Holy Virgin Mary (right), in his Hobart museum (above)



Holy Virgin Mary, the canvas decorated with elephant dung and tiny images of vaginas, which caused a political storm when Charles Saatchi's exhibition Sensation



Derwent that the structure's concrete lattice facade rises up to greet you.

The grandeur of Walsh's vision is matched by a handful of other super-rich collectors who are now building museums around the world. These men and women are reshaping landscapes and spending tens, sometimes

hundreds of millions of their own money to turn their visions into reality. Most are billionaires several times over, whose vast fortunes have hardly been dented by the global recession. They include the fourth-richest man in the world, Bernard Arnault, chairman of the French luxury-goods conglomerate LVMH, who commissioned Frank Gehry to design his museum on an island in the Seine in Paris, scheduled for completion next year. Other super-museums are expected in Los Angeles and Shanghai. Not since industrialists such as Solomon Guggenheim and John Paul Getty built museums in their name in the mid-20th

century have we seen an era of private museum construction on such an epic scale.

If David Walsh did not exist, you would have to summon the imagination of Ian Fleming to invent him. It's not just that he's built himself an underground palace as elaborate as any Bond villain's, it's also his

most prolific punters, betting about £500m every year on international sporting events. But even he says he has limited ready cash at the moment and has had to borrow to build Mona.

## 'IT'S ABOUT GENERATING ATTENTION, PARTICULARLY IN THE CASE OF MEN, WHO ARE JUST TRYING TO GET LAID'

air of slightly demented genius. With his shoulder-length grey hair, slogan T-shirts and ripped jeans, Walsh, 50, looks like an ageing rock star, but you wouldn't be too surprised if he suddenly revealed a plan to take over the world. A mathematical savant who was raised by his single mother in a council house in Glenorchy, a working-class district of Hobart, the Tasmanian capital, Walsh dropped out of university to count cards at blackjack. "That stuff is easy," he tells me over lunch in the restaurant overlooking the Derwent river at Moorilla, his estate north of Hobart. "Anyone can do it." Today, Walsh is one of the world's

Walsh describes himself as a "full-on secularist" who believes in Darwinian readings of human behaviour, and he is straightforward about his motives for buying art and putting it on show. "Most of what we do is just about generating attention, particularly in the case of men who are just trying to get laid. Women are, too, but men are much more up-front about it." The money he has made has "evolutionary value", he says, because it makes him "appear more attractive" to women. As a teenager, he says, he was a geek who couldn't get a date, but now "I f\*\*\* a lot". This he does with his Californian-born girlfriend, Kirsha Kaechele, 35, a curator he met at an art fair in Switzerland five years ago. She moved to Tasmania a year ago.

The themes of Walsh's art collection are "sex and death", and these are explored through some of the best-known art works of our time. Included in the gallery is Chris Ofili's

travelled to the Brooklyn Museum of Art in New York in 2000. Mayor Rudolph Giuliani called the Ofili painting "sick stuff" and blocked the Brooklyn Museum's city funding when Sensation opened. Eventually a federal judge ruled against Giuliani and restored the museum's money, but not before the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra — which was supposed to host the exhibition next — cancelled as a result of the controversy. Thanks to Walsh, who bought many of the show's signature pieces from Saatchi, Australians have finally been able to see what all the fuss was about.

The current contemporary art boom really began in the 1990s, and the trend has accelerated in the past decade. From London, Berlin and Moscow to Sydney, Beijing and New York, the very rich are buying art

and flaunting it like it's a competitive sport. Everyone is doing it. Even George Michael opened a space in Dallas with his former partner Kenny Goss to show their collection of work by the YBA generation.

What differentiates Walsh and a few others from the great mass of collectors is the scale of their ambition. More than 9,000 miles from Tasmania, another collector is bringing contemporary art to a public that has never seen it before. Since opening in a converted hotel in 2006, the Pinchuk Art Centre (PAC) in Kiev has shown Damien Hirst's sharks in formaldehyde, Jeff Koons's balloon rabbits in stainless steel, and Japanese artist Takashi Murakami's sculptures of sperm-wielding adolescents. The appetite for these works in Ukraine has proved to be as enormous as it is in Tasmania: nearly 1.2m people have visited PAC in its first five years, 60% of them aged between 16 and 30.

"Our society, especially young people, accepted contemporary art in a great way, in an unexpected way," says Victor Pinchuk, a steel magnate worth \$4.2 billion who funds the gallery and has put himself at the centre of efforts to modernise Ukraine. Pinchuk, 51, is a smart, savvy, sharply tailored political operator who hangs out with former American presidents, rock stars and artists and has teamed up with Tony Blair's Faith Foundation. He believes nothing, bar scientific innovation, has a greater impact on society than art. "I absolutely believe that contemporary art is one of the most revolutionary forces in the world, and it works, I am absolutely sure."

It is especially important, he says, in former Soviet countries where decades of communism stifled innovation. "People who will later become social and political leaders have to become much more open-minded," he says. In a rare

interview, Pinchuk tells me he is now embarking on a bold museum-building project to give PAC a purpose-built home. We are sitting in the grounds of his 50-acre estate near Kiev, in an apparently perfect replica of a Japanese garden, "the first in Ukraine", he says.

There are wooden bridges, ponds filled with carp, scholars' stones and hundreds of Japanese maples, each one approved by the billionaire, now ➤➤➤





**SPIN**  
Damien Hirst (left), with Ukrainian Steel magnate Victor Pinchuk, one of his biggest collectors, at the opening of his show in Kiev



the second-richest man in Ukraine. But making money isn't as satisfying as giving it away, observes Pinchuk, who says that he now wants to transform the image of Kiev by building a "landmark" museum designed by a top international architect.

"It has to be an important, iconic building for our country. I hope the image of this art centre will be on the most popular postcards," says Pinchuk, adding that he already has the land for the building and estimates that construction will be finished in five years.

The new museum will show Pinchuk's collection of work by Damien Hirst, one of the world's largest, as well as his significant holdings by the American Jeff Koons, including the artist's Hanging Heart (Magenta/Gold), which cost the Ukrainian \$23.6m (£14.6m) at Sotheby's in New York in 2007, alongside large groups of work by British artists Sam Taylor-Wood, Antony Gormley and Gavin Turk.

Pinchuk declines to say which architectural firms are on his shortlist, but sources close to the project suggest the billionaire is in advanced talks with Herzog & de Meuron, the Swiss duo who converted a Thames-side power station into Tate Modern and who have also designed the extension to the London museum, which is currently under construction. An attention-grabbing building by a

IMAGE COURTESY OF THE PINCHUK ART CENTRE

## 'CONTEMPORARY ART IS ONE OF THE MOST REVOLUTIONARY FORCES IN THE WORLD, I AM ABSOLUTELY SURE'

leading architectural firm would certainly open a bold new chapter for the city of Kiev. It might also help assuage lingering animosity towards Pinchuk, in a country where resentment over the privatisation of state assets is still festering.

**M**eanwhile, another collector on another continent is planning an even bigger splash. Bernardo Paz is a Brazilian mining tycoon whose ambition dwarfs that of fellow museum-builders such as Walsh and Pinchuk. For the past decade, Paz has been quietly assembling what will easily become the grandest contemporary art museum ever conceived — a city of sculpture in the middle of nowhere.

Belo Horizonte, Brazil's third-largest city, is less than 40 miles away from Paz's massive art park, but it takes more than two hours to drive there on small, dusty roads through sleepy, impoverished towns. It is worth the effort. Inhotim, named after a village nearby,

is astounding: it consists of 17 galleries dotted around the landscape, with several more under construction. Many of these are clustered around artificial lakes which have been created in the landscape and contain the work of a single artist. Reaching the furthest pavilions involves hiking through the wilderness or hitching a ride on one of the electric cars driven around the site by youthful employees.

Then there are the open-air sculptures and installations, about 25 of them, most of them massive. They include Chris Burden's Beam Drop, sited on a plateau on top of a hill with stunning views of the surrounding landscape. It was installed by having a crane lift 60 steel beams into the air and then drop them into a pool of wet concrete below. Where the beams landed, they remain. Artists who are invited to place their work here are told to realise their boldest plans, with time and money no object.

One of them, Anish Kapoor, visited for the first time in January to choose a site for his Shooting into the Corner, which consists of a cannon firing 11kg balls of red wax. ➤➤➤➤➤

**FLOORED**  
The Goss-Michael Foundation in Dallas (right) and Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art (below)

The man behind this astounding place is a short, wiry, white-bearded 62-year-old with aquiline features. He speaks quickly in broken English as he tells me the story of Inhotim. Born in Belo Horizonte, Paz has lived there his entire life, presiding over the iron-mining company Itaminas for much of it. He tells me he started to buy land here about nine years ago. "I first bought an iron mine and there was a farm that came with the mine." As the land surrounding his was threatened with development, Paz began to buy contiguous farms, forests and mountains, and eventually amassed 3,000 acres, of which only about a tenth has been developed. The size of his property "enabled him to conceive of a legacy: a cultural fantasy where great art could be experienced in relation to extraordinary gardens and the lush natural landscape", says his chief curator, Allan Schwartzman.

In the next few years, Inhotim will continue to expand at breathtaking speed until it contains around 45 separate galleries or pavilions, giving it more display space than any other museum in the world. "It will happen fast," says Paz. To keep the place running, an additional 2,000 staff will be hired in the next few years.

So do the new super-museums have any credibility? Although they reflect the tastes of the individuals who build them, Walsh, Pinchuk and Paz alike have hired teams of curators, many of them distinguished professionals, to run their museums and advise them on acquisitions and temporary shows, which gives their institutions a broad scope. But it will take some time for the new museums to be accepted by the art establishments.

In cities rich with cultural traditions there is still considerable snobbery about the upstart institutions, in particular when these new galleries snap up art coveted by state museums. When the reclusive Walmart heiress Alice Walton beat the Metropolitan Museum in New York to an Asher Durand



painting, *Kindred Spirits*, sold by the New York Public Library in 2005, she was described in *The Wall Street Journal* as a "hovering culture vulture, poised to sweep down and seize tasty masterpieces from weak hands". The painting is now on display in her Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Bentonville, Arkansas, which opened in November last year.

While most collectors buy contemporary art, the supply of which is virtually endless,

the negative press reaction to her art shopping spree. "It hurt my feelings," she said.

A similar establishment reaction greeted David Walsh's successful auction purchase of a classic Australian painting, John Brack's *The Bar*, which the National Gallery of Victoria had been keen to buy.

Such outright prejudice will be hard to maintain if visitor numbers to these new galleries remains so high. So are the new museums sustainable? Paz has no doubts.

## THERE'S CONSIDERABLE SNOBBERY ABOUT THE UPSTART INSTITUTIONS IN CITIES RICH WITH CULTURE

Walton is attempting something remarkably ambitious: to create an encyclopedic collection of American art starting from the 17th century and reaching the present day — a tall order, as many of the best works are already in museum collections and therefore off the market.

"Art wasn't accessible to me as a child and I hope that changes now for people in this region," she once said.

She certainly has the money to do it. Walton is the third-richest woman in the world, worth about \$23.3 billion (£14.4m). She began buying for her museum just seven years ago and has so far assembled about 1,000 works, including a 1797 portrait of George Washington by Gilbert Stuart. Walton says she was surprised and confused by

"Inhotim is for eternity," he says. At Mona, Walsh has also diversified his income, and has installed a restaurant, winery, brewery and pavilions offering luxury accommodation onsite, with plans to expand further. But Walsh professes to have no interest in what happens to Mona after he is gone, saying it will be up to others to keep it running.

"I don't believe that I am anything other than organised matter and I am quite sure that whatever is the essence of me will cease to be [after I die]," he says. "I find projecting myself into the future beyond the point where I am organised matter is of no interest to me at all."

He's not kidding. Because of the way it is built, Mona is virtually programmed to self-destruct. "If I cared about longevity, I wouldn't have built a museum a couple of metres above sea level. The Derwent is a tidal river. In 50 years, there's going to have to be a lot of money spent on Mona or it's going to be under water." ■



TOP PICTURE: IMAGE COURTESY OF THE GOSS-MICHAEL FOUNDATION; BOTTOM: TIMOTHY HURSELEY/CRYSTAL BRIDGES MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART