



Outsider's bold move pays off

MONA, with its sometimes shocking exhibits, has become Tasmania's biggest tourism drawcard

MICHAELA BOLAND

IT'S almost a year since Tasmanian gambling millionaire David Walsh opened the doors to his sprawling \$101 million Museum of Old and New Art in Hobart.

In that time the art gallery, which was originally free to enter but now charges non-Tasmanians via an honesty system (\$20 entry), has become the state's single biggest tourist attraction.

The numbers are a little tricky to compare but MONA reports 330,000 visitors since it opened in January. By comparison, Tourism Tasmania estimates in the year to September, 233,000 tourists visited Port Arthur and 291,000 went to the weekly Salamanca Markets.

Walsh, 50, is thrilled to have been embraced so warmly.

"The local community expresses it in the most poignant way. They refer to it as 'our MONA', and refer to it as a gift," he says.

It's the morning after the night before, when Walsh hosted a party for about 350 people to launch MONA's first artist survey, for the Belgian experimental artist Wim Delvoye.

Guests kicked on until about 2am drinking and dancing. It's now 11am and Walsh has emerged, recently showered, from

the apartment in which he lives, adjacent to the museum.

His trademark long grey hair is hanging wet and he grabs a soft drink from the fridge of the cafe. "You can have a coffee, I don't drink it," he says as we take a seat outside.

The sun is bouncing off the water on a glorious summer Hobart day as visitors begin turning up to view Delvoye's exhibition.

His most famous works are machines that mimic the human digestive system, taking in food and producing faeces. They are incorrectly titled cloacas — because a cloaca is actually a bird's body part that triples as a vagina, anus and urethra.

Delvoye is a headline hunter: another artwork is *Tattoo Tim*, a tattooed 35-year-old Swiss-born Londoner Tim Steiner, whom the artist "sold" to a German collector for \$205,000. Beyond some of these nuttier works, Delvoye's beautiful and intricate metal sculptures can attract some serious prices.

The artist met Walsh when the collector walked into his studio in 2008. "I thought he was astonishing because I'm used to another

type of collector who is bald and greying," Delvoye says.

Walsh is unmistakably greying. "He looks like a rockstar and he's well informed about art and well informed about me," Delvoye says.

Delvoye took some convincing but he eventually sold Walsh *Cloaca Professional*, the only one of nine Cloacas made to have sold (it's not entirely clear if anyone else ever seriously wanted to buy one).

The installation typifies MONA's sex and death theme. Other works include Chris Ofili's famous Virgin Mary painting featuring vaginas cut out of porn magazines. There is a wall of plaster-cast vaginas. And elsewhere, a space housing Philip Brophy's vagina simulator.

Art auction house veteran Mark Fraser helped Walsh establish the gallery. But Fraser left early this year and now Walsh is the site's most senior curator. His displays freely juxtapose collections of Egyptian relics, coins and collectables next to paintings and video installations.

MONA's walls are mostly dark and wall labels have been junked



in favour of individual wireless navigation devices.

Walsh said before the site opened that the mainstream museums would be challenged by his gonzo approach, which so proudly shows little regard for the conventions of the art world. A world that, frankly, thrives on convention.

Ever the outsider, Walsh said at the outset: "I'm pretty well anti-everything. My brother once said about me that I'd rather be outside a barrel pissing in than inside the barrel pissing out."

So when I tell him the director of the National Museum, Andrew Sayers, credited MONA recently with shaking up the paradigm of conventional museums, he tries to stifle a very gratified smile.

"When I get that (recognition), it's really important to me," he admits.

Walsh is deeply admired in the broader Hobart community. No cab or bus driver or local shopkeeper is without an opinion on him. They note his chutzpah and say: "Look at everything he's done for Hobart."

What about the art? Does it offend you? The chocolate sculpture of a suicide bomber? The photograph of a naked vagina with an ugly man's head?

The answer tends to be that not

everyone likes the art, but MONA is a private museum and if people don't like it, they can stay away.

There's a little part of Walsh that wishes people were not so pragmatic, that they were picketing his front entrance in outrage.

Walsh was reared a Catholic and says three priests privately have offered him their congratulations. He shrugs and says with a laugh that he must be doing something wrong. This year, the outsider has become an insider.

Walsh observes that when people visit Venice they see the many palazzi and wonder who lives inside. Visitors to MONA are similar, he says. They come with some curiosity about him; they want to peek into his life and, from one of the downstairs galleries, they actually can if they look through the glass ceiling into his apartment.

Tasmania is famous for its gambling millionaires. There's the Farrell family, founding owners of Australia's oldest hotel chain the Federal Group and its Wrest Point casino; and the island state is home to many heirs of the fortune made by Tattersall's founder George Adams.

Then there's Walsh, the maths whiz who grew up in the working-class Hobart suburb Glenorchy and not long after leaving school

began honing a mathematical system from which he has generated a fortune gambling at casinos and on horse racing, mostly abroad.

Given his working-class roots and the unusual way Walsh generates his income, he had little choice but to cast himself as a gonzo in the art world.

When MONA opened, the heads of the nation's leading state galleries were there, as were artists and dealers, mainstream media and Walsh's family and friends.

He wore a pink T-shirt emblazoned with the slogan "F . . k the Art — Let's Rock and Roll" and mingled nervously on the fringes while people swarmed through his gleaming new \$101m purpose-built part-underground Nonda Katsalidis-designed site beside Hobart's Derwent River.

He did a handful of interviews in which he said: "I'm standing on my soapbox and I'm shouting my views like they mean something."

A year later the site is beginning to pay for itself. The annual running costs, of course, are higher than the anticipated \$8m but the adjacent winery, brewery, hotel and restaurants are ticking towards profitability and, suddenly, Walsh is beginning to make sense.



PETER MATHEW

MONA owner David Walsh, seated left, and artist Wim Delvoye with Delvoye's *Tattoo Tim* on Tim Steiner