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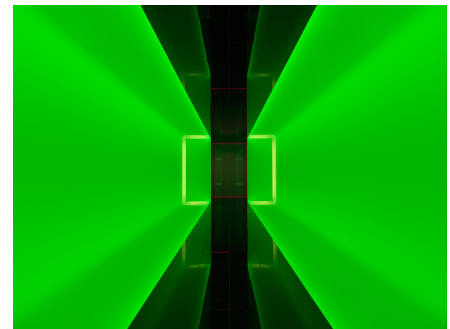
CULTURE

ART

Pharos at Mona: a labyrinth of sensory
delights

BY **Jenny
Valentish**

**The Hobart
museum's new
wing will mess
with your**



Beside Myself, © James Turrell.
Photo Credit: MONA/Jesse
Hunniford. Image courtesy of
the artist and MONA Museum
of Old and New Art, Hobart,
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senses, in the most wonderful way

During the construction of the monumental new Pharos wing of Hobart's Museum of Old and New Art (Mona), David Walsh arranged for Willy Wonka-style Walshie Bars to be dropped at more than 1000 homes in Berriedale, to apologise for the "shenanigans". Some chocolate bars contained a golden ticket to the gala opening in December, but mostly the Walshies seemed to be not so much a sweetener as a continuation of conscientious community involvement.

Being earnest doesn't really fit the Mona ethos, though, so Walsh finds ways around it. His two-year-old daughter, Sunday, appears to be a [dab hand at blogging](#) on the Mona site and doesn't hold back from digs at the old man. "It seems to me Daddy is a bit up himself naming the new bit of Mona after a Wonder of the World," she writes, as well as, "he defuses criticism with witticism".

Slightly anxious second-guessing of public opinion aside, Walsh created Pharos to facilitate our "ritualistic engagement with light". His fascination with the dying art of ritual as a tool to create oneness and meaningfulness is long established in his installations and [festivals](#). It is, says Sunday, "because he cares".

I visit Pharos during MONAFOMA, the museum's summer festival, held largely on its grounds. The entrance to the custom-built wing is through level B3's *Museum of Everything* – the temporary museum within Mona, dedicated to undiscovered, unintentional, untrained and unclassifiable artists. It's built into what seems to be a house, but a house that defies mental mapping. Now there's a new exit door at one end of it, and behind that, a neon tunnel that serves as a portal from that realm to the new wing. *Beside Myself* is one of four Pharos installations commissioned from American light-wrangler James Turrell, and it quite wonderfully messes with our depth perception.

The tunnel spits us out at Faro Tapas, a bar and restaurant with floor-to-ceiling windows looking out onto the Derwent. It's the new centre of the Mona maze, and allows some breathing space before we venture back in to the art-fray. Lest we feel too settled, Walsh seems to have arranged for a sea bird to menacingly peck at an eel on the jetty outside.

I'm here to meet Mona curator Jarrod Rawlins, whose job

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it is to facilitate Walsh's visions and to collaborate with the artists on their highly complex installations. In this wing, the installations are permanent. As Sunday writes in that blog post, "The staff will start meddling with Pharos the moment he breathes his final breath. Daddy knows that, so he made sure that the art was too big to take out through the tunnels."

Rawlins doesn't seem to mind that slight; in fact, he reveals there's a high level of security to deter other kinds of meddlers. "There are more cameras in here than there are in London," he says archly, giving rise to a mental image of Bond-villain-style mission control. Certainly one of the new works, Richard Wilson's *20:50* – a sump oil slick encased by steel – seems like the sort of diabolical creation Blofeld would have installed inside the SPECTRE volcano.

In the restaurant itself is another of Turrell's installations: the huge white dome of *Unseen Seen*. It's intended to be experienced just before *Weight of Darkness*, which is down a corridor off the dining room. They're separately ticketed to the rest of the museum, and it's too early to say at this point how far in advance that ticket (\$25 for both) would need to be bought. Only two occupants at a time can inhabit the dome, and the experience lasts around 15 minutes, as does that of *Weight of Darkness*.

Before I delve in, a little background. Visitors to Mona's winter festival Dark Mofo in 2013 still talk in reverential tones about the Kurt Hentschläger installation, *Zee*: "Do you remember Zee?" Rawlins remembers *Zee* – it was just before he came on as a curator but he visited as a punter – and he says the staff still talk about it, too. Categorised as "psychedelic architecture", *Zee* used artificial fog, stroboscopes, pulse light and surround sound to produce dense geometrical shapes that unnervingly replicated an LSD trip.

Unseen Seen is different, but a joyous return to altered states. Participants can choose between hard or soft settings, and then lie on a bed before being sealed into the dome with only a panic button each. Having chosen "hard", my companion and I are immediately assailed with 3D structures of ever-morphing colour, with a saturation rarely experienced. At some points the effect appears inches from our eyes; at others, the colour seems to permeate our beings. Closing the eyes brings completely different hues, just as vivid: green and pink might switch to black and red, and become even more densely structured and complex than before. To say it is profoundly beautiful would be an understatement. It feels like a gift.

Committed psychonauts talk of an "afterglow" in the days following psychedelic trips, and some *Unseen Seen* participants report feeling an odd bond with the strangers they've been paired with. For some, that bond is strengthened further by experiencing *Weight of Darkness*: an entirely black and soundproofed room, around which

the participants have to guide each other to find the two armchairs. Some report seeing colours and apparitions, and my companion comes close to pressing the panic button. I would have just watched the clock, had I been able to see one. Perhaps we can explain this discrepancy between experiences through the character trait of self-transcendence. Those who score highly on the trait tend to excel at meditation and mindfulness, and – we might assume – at *Weight of Darkness*.

Another early hit at Pharos is Randy Polumbo's luminous *Grotto*. This commission is already Insta-famous, thanks to its staggered silver banquettes, which mimic eroded sandstone caves. The visitor reclines upon them and takes in the gently glowing lights and clusters of glass-blown dildos. The effect is part-'50s sci-fi, part-octopus's garden in the shade (with thanks to the baby boomers lolling next to me for that last observation).

The odd one out – if considering the theme of light – is Jean Tinguely's *Memorial to the Sacred Wind* or *The Tomb of a Kamikaze*, from 1969. This hulking metal contraption sits motionless for the most part, until it suddenly springs into life, dragging itself painfully up and down its runners, its rusted parts shrieking and groaning in protest. Rawlins laughs. "David was really chuffed when that was finished, standing in front of it. Everything else is sleek and fluid, and this thing's welded together. It's a juxtaposition. It's a break in the sleekness, like punctuation."

In fact, Pharos is so sleek that Rawlins thinks it must be the most high-maintenance section of the museum. It requires constant de-fingerprinting and de-fluffing. The biggest challenge may be yet to come: there's one more installation still under construction, by Charles Ross – an American artist from the same school as Turrell and Michael Heizer, who makes land art on an ambitious scale. Just as Turrell's remodelling of the Roden Crater (a dormant volcano in Arizona) is 30 years in the making, Ross has been working on *Star Axis* – an 11-storey, chambered, naked-eye observatory based on star alignments – in the New Mexico desert for even longer. For Mona, Ross is building a room of rainbows, using light prisms.

Since *The Museum of Everything* will close in April to make way for another exhibition, the current entrance to Pharos will be off-limits for a few months. That's okay, because there's another, as-yet secret entrance to the wing. It's up on the roof of Pharos, but Pharos is so far into the Mona labyrinth that I can't for the life of me figure out where on the concourse that door would emerge. Rawlins laughs at my inability to get my bearings.

"It's never lost on me that in the grand design of things David doesn't want you to work out where you are," he says. In fact, it's a bit like being caught in a rip – it's best not to struggle.

“I met this lady walking around this morning. She saw I was wearing a lanyard, so she said, ‘I’m lost, can you tell me where I am?’ I said, ‘No, that’s great.’ I saw her half an hour later and she just laughed,” he says. “You’re supposed to be disorientated. It’s not the kind of place where you need to know where the European masters are. Just go in – that’s Mona.”

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Jenny Valentish is a journalist and novelist. Her first nonfiction book, *Woman of Substances*, was recently published by Black Inc.



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