

Entertainment

MONA FOMA Made Me Wish I Gambled More With My Life

By Mahmood Fazal

February 1, 2018, 10:12pm



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Death feels like it's overshadowing you as you navigate up and down the birth canals of Pharos, the new, [Boullee](#) inspired wing of Hobart's MONA gallery. "You guys can't fuck this bit up!" was MONA founder and professional gambler, David Walsh's demand to leave his legacy unaltered. Or unadulterated. Either way, Pharos is how he wants to be remembered.

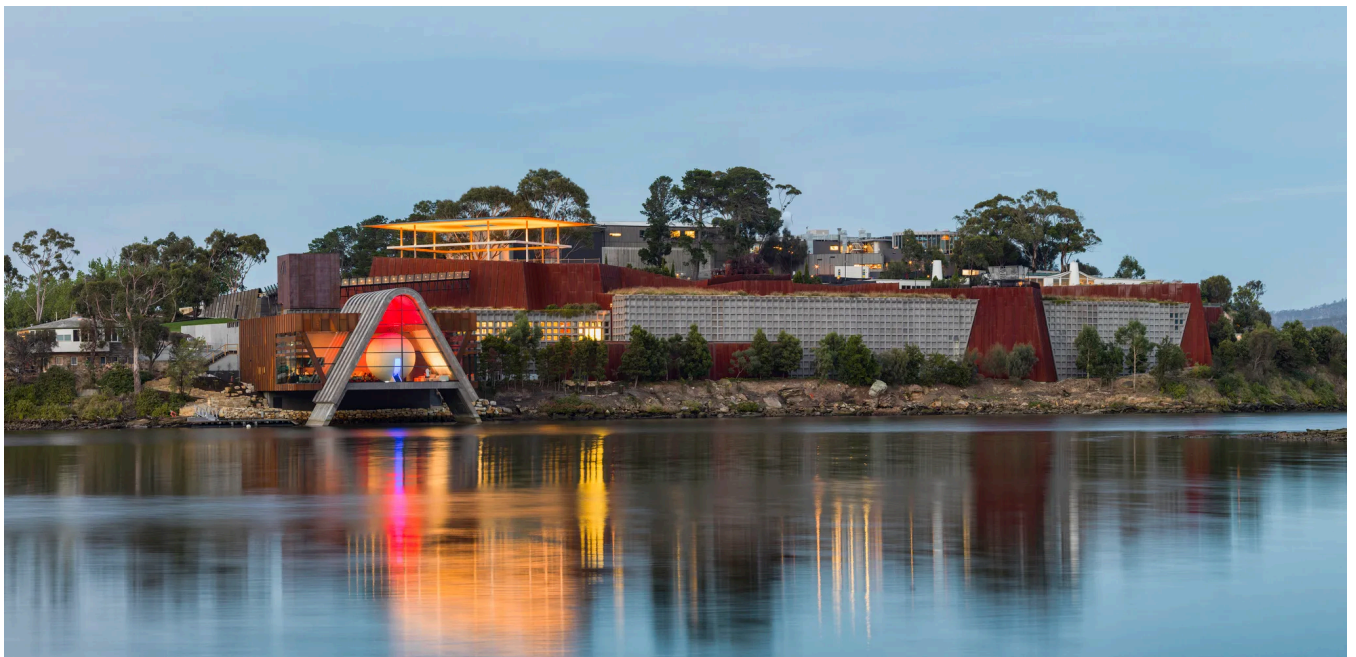
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When you're from Dandenong, poker machines allow you to flirt with the idea of materialising your fantasies. The synergy of clicking buttons and MIDI melodies from a pokie machine would often ignite a silent prayer in the heretics; a hopeful shortcut to riches, quickly interrupted by a declined ATM withdrawal.

VIDEOS BY VICE

There was always a glimpse of a buck in the chase. But David Walsh is a professional hunter. He hates the pokies, but made millions of dollars on the dogs and in casinos. One thing led to another, he cashed in his chips, took chances and built an art empire.

Technically, I've never been in the race. As I stood in front of an Egyptian artifact titled *The Butchering Scene*, I was confronted with a personal truth: I never had the balls to gamble. I had no conviction in my ideas. And often cowered to misinformed predictions about my odds. If it ain't broke, don't fix it. I wasn't broke but when my friend Yavuz offered me a tip on booming cannabis shares, I buckled and he bought a Lamborghini.



VIEW OF THE PHAROS WING AT MONA.

Anyway, if I had unlimited riches at my disposal I always dreamt of owning a contemporary art gallery that could hold its own against the big dogs of the art world, and I was dawdling around a better (or beta?) version of that dream at MONA.

In particular, the new Pharos wing (a reference to the lighthouse of Alexandria) houses four major works by James Turrell and one each from Jean Tinguely, Charles Ross, Richard Wilson, Randy Pumbao and Nam June Paik. David Walsh wrote on the [Mona Blog](#), “whereas Mona is intended to be an antidote to closed mindedness, Pharos is open-heart surgery.” David and I come from starkly different places but the art he has collected makes sense to my closed-mindedness. Maybe through a shared appreciation of Jung’s shadow archetype, or because I respect an old fashioned larrikin smartarse.

I scored tickets to the *Unseen Seen* by James Turrell. The title made me think about David’s writing on “unknown knowns” in his book *A Bone of Fact*. The Turrell work is a sci-fi style capsule, and only two can enter at a time. I was greeted by a Scottish woman in a white lab coat, who was to debrief me before I entered. You lie down and are exposed to a dizzying array of flashing kaleidoscopic beams. I opted for the “hard” setting and was sucked into a strange trip that made me feel like I was levitating beside cubic structures, shapeshifting in my mind (in my mind because when you close your eyes the inverse colours of the structures remain). And that wasn’t even the trippy bit.

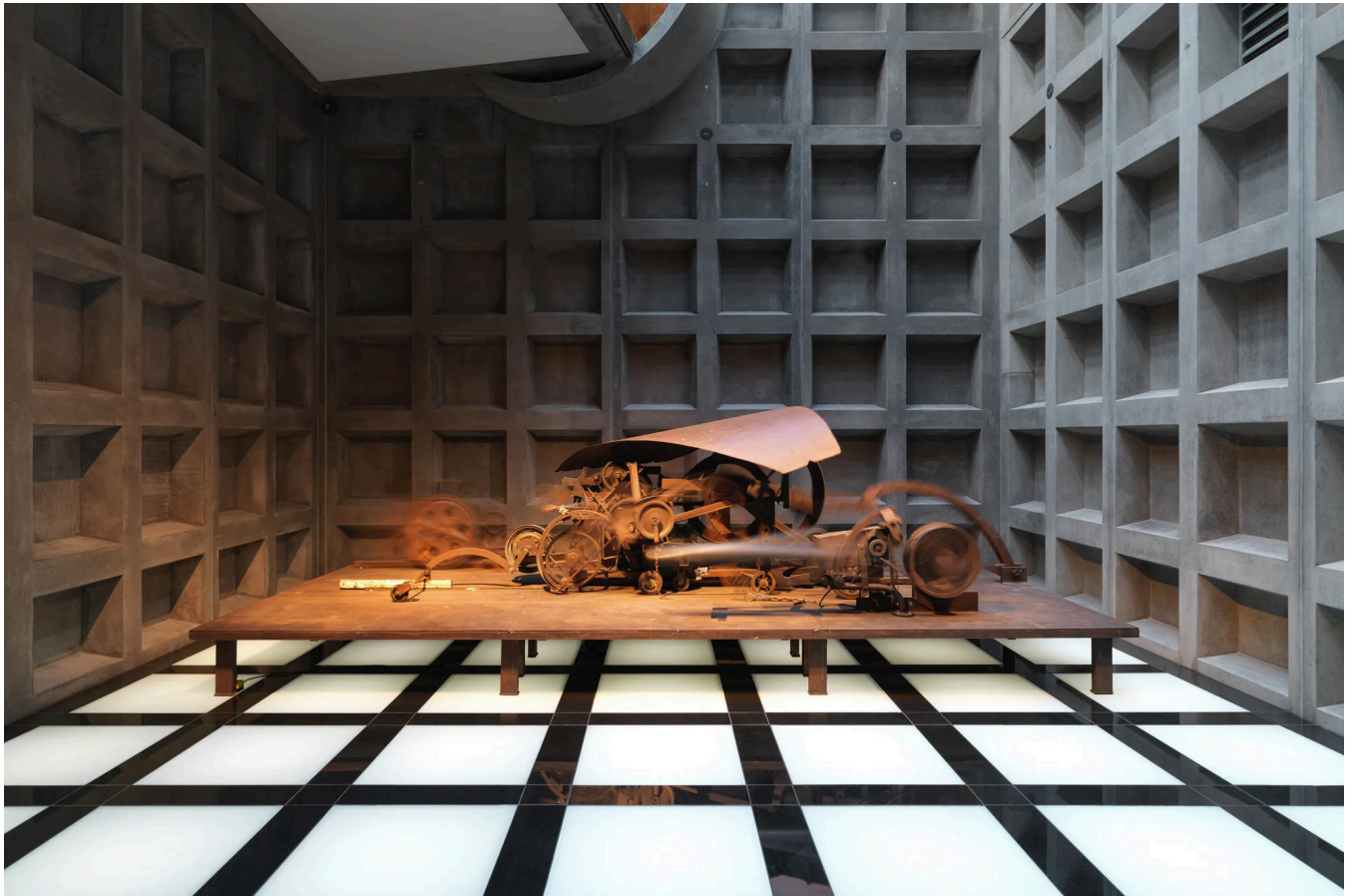


UNSEEN SEEN BY JAMES TURRELL

Immediately afterwards, you are walked down (everything feels like it's spiralling down at MONA) into a room called *The Weight of Darkness*. It's a totally blacked out space with no sound, and you're locked in for roughly 15 minutes. After anxious memories of incarceration passed, I thought I could see snow globes with the Phantom of the Opera Mask stretching and contorting as it dropped to the floor. Then I thought I could see the orange hue of an alleyway I got lost in, when I was in Fes a month ago. It was out in the black distance and it made me nervous. Suddenly, I awoke to the loud buzz of a beeper, and another assistant with a torch brought us back to light.

However, the most confronting "excavation of the underside" at MONA was *Memorial To The Sacred Wind or The Tomb Of A Kamikaze* by Jean Tinguely. It would infrequently erupt into an abrasive mechanical maneuver that achieved nothing. I thought about the abrupt feeling of loss and the autonomous rolling of analogue slot machines that often gave you nothing in return. There was something inherently violent and opaque about it. The kinetic rhythm

grinding steel reminded me of the sound from the chain of a boxing bag, screeching in agony from every whistling blow. But still, somehow you felt like the loser.



MEMORIAL TO THE SACRED WIND OR THE TOMB OF A KAMIKAZE BY JEAN TINGUELY

In his book, David refers to himself as a coward after running away from a friend who falls in a creek. “I was mentally pretty strong, I don’t shy away from dangerous ideas but, in Australia at least, dangerous ideas don’t cost you an arm or leg.” I grew up around heroin dealers in Dandenong. I was in many ways the opposite. I was mentally weak but a sharp boxer. I had no problem rising the ranks of an outlaw bkie club and putting myself in situations where blokes almost lost an arm or a leg. But I struggled to make confident business decisions or back myself on a steady career path.

I asked Karim Wasfi who was performing at MOFO about inevitability and whether it was an anxious mindset provoked by invasions in the Middle-East. Karim was the conductor of the Iraqi National Symphony Orchestra before the war, who now plays the cello in bomb sites across Baghdad. He was a tall man

with an AFL frame. And he was wearing a coat with gold detail that looked like it was looted from Vienna in the late 1700s.

There were no murmurs in the crowd as he plucked and fiddled the strings of his cello in the Nolan gallery, a fragile testament to perseverance and intellectual survival. I learnt about stability in the face of horror. He was an all or nothing man, he performed in war zones. I admired him because he had the balls to take a chance.



KARIM WASFI PLAYING IN THE NOLAN GALLERY.

The next day, Brian Jackson sung songs of lyrical struggle from one of my favourite records, Gil Scott Heron's "Better Days." David was in attendance, miming along to some of the lyrics. It was kind of overwhelming, I could feel a rising tingle in my temple that turned my eyes rosy. Brian Jackson was playing songs of protest from Nina Simone and Gil-Scott Heron's oeuvre and was backed by the Southern Gospel Choir. They were songs about a turbulent time. It was all very hopeful. They sounded like a testament to securing a better future. Brian Jackson is probably a smart gambler.

But with hope, comes decay. Either way, I lived out the dream of my angsty youth and saw infamous Norwegian black metal band Mayhem play live. There was a sea of black T-shirts with fonts that were about as difficult to read as toy-graffiti on the Cranbourne train line. Mayhem was a refreshing shift into gear from the gaggles of interpretive dancers flailing their arms about in slow motion as if every act was part Bollywood melodrama and part Woodstock. Mayhem was a brutal awakening to whatever all that dancing was about.

The horror in their music, highlighted Mayhem as the point of emotional catharsis in my experience of MONA FOMA. I'd pick Mayhem because it's the same emotional release I feel when I'm repeatedly punched in the face in long bouts of sparring at my boxing club. Maybe David feels the same when he's gambling. The low tuned guitars feel like some of the heaviest decisions you've ever had to make, at some of the worst times. There was corpse paint and sonic violence as frontman Attila smoked out the candles for "Dom Sathanas," to close the festival on Sundays sunset mass. It was an emotional burden worthy of a punters dollar.



MAYHEM PLAYING "DE MYSTERIIS DOM SATHANAS."

According to Aristotle, catharsis refers to innate, natural drives that culminate in some form of expression. In the arts, the term is used to describe the arousal of pity or fear in a work.

In the [Handbook of Psychiatry](#), the pleasure that derives from the thrilling risk of gambling is referred to as catharsis. And in Christopher Matthews theses [The Thrill of the Fight](#), he argues that the violence in boxing performs a cathartic function that allows the socially safe release of natural drives and instincts.

Whether it's purgation, purification, masturbation or whatever. MOFO has shared a variety of emotional trajectories, offering either a solution or an escape. In Blackjack you can hit, stand or surrender. I might not be a gambler, and David might not be a prizefighter, but as we both watch the *Memorial to a Sacred Wind*, none of that shit really matters.

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