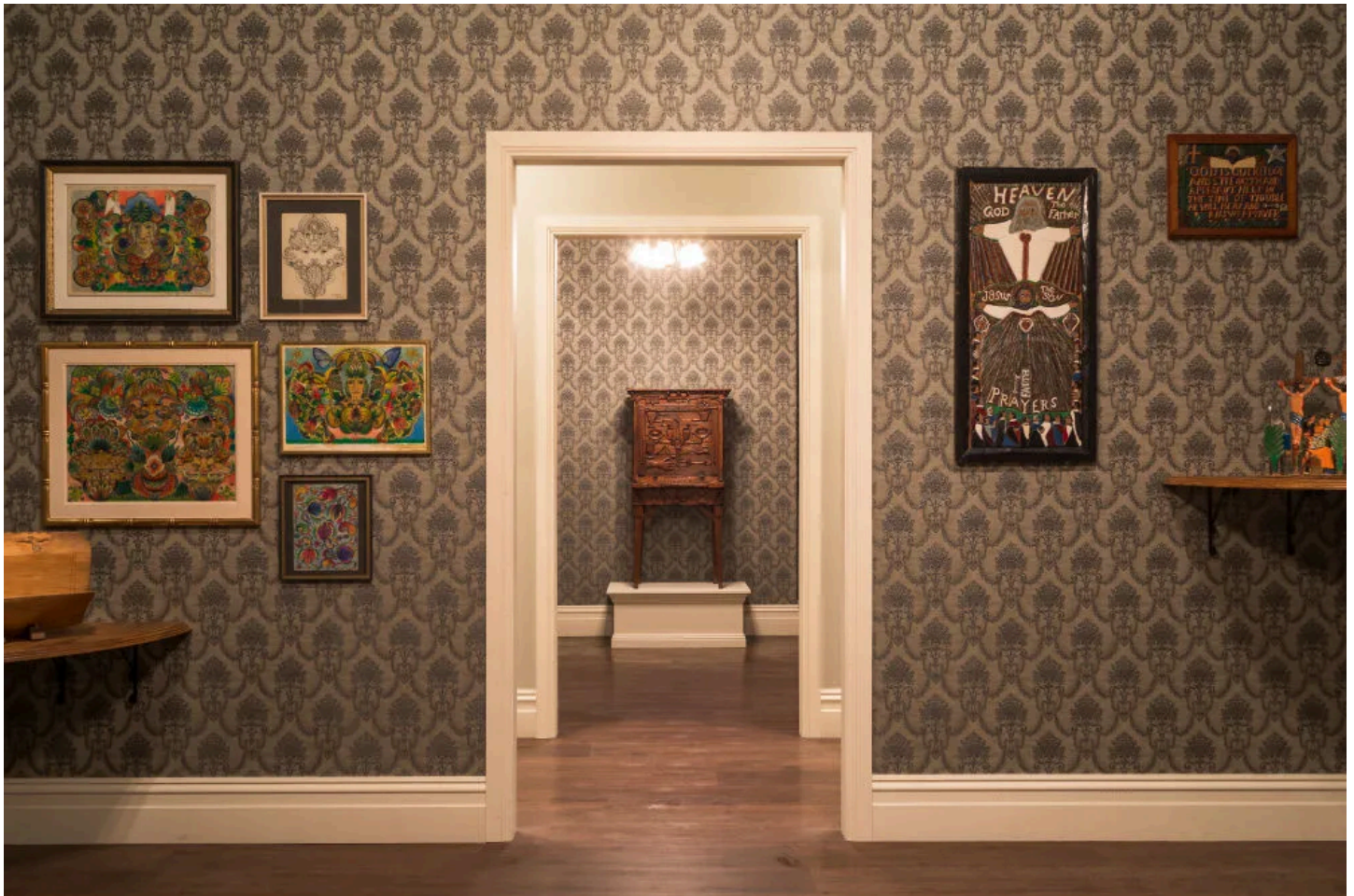


At The Museum of Everything, Art Doesn't Exist

By Wendy Syfret

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The role of almost every art institution in the world is to try and get you to engage. They want you to really *think* about art, *really think about it*. Who is the artist? What is their intent? What does it all *mean*? What is *life*? What is *existence*? Where did you go to *uni*?

I stress the “almost” in that opener. Because James Brett doesn’t want you to do any of those things. He’s the man behind the [The Museum of Everything](#) “The Museum of Everything” Privacy

Hobart's Mona—a rambling, kinetic, eternally and defiantly temporary collection of artwork by people who are not artists. I got to preview it at this year's Dark Mofo, and can safely say that the Museum is about a lot of things—found photos, spiritualist tools, homemade weapons, personal objects, and many, many paintings depicting the end of the world. But it's not about art. Well it is, but don't say that loud.

VIDEOS BY VICE

Rather, it's an exploration of creativity and a rejection of it. It asks why do humans create— *create* is a more favoured word than art—why are we all so energised by this desire to externalise our internal thoughts? For the record, if James reads this intro, he'll roll his eyes. Because the museum doesn't just challenge what is art—it baulks at the concept of it at all.

I'll be honest, this all makes for a tricky interview. One where the answer to a lot of questions is there are no answers, also there aren't really any questions. But, of course, the irony of this is that by rejecting all these notions, the project is totally engaging. Free from pretension and the shadow of traditional institutions it organically inspires the kind of conversations between members of the public that most curators quite literally faff over. Not James though, he just wants you to chill and look at the work.



BOGDAN ZIETEK (1970 – 2010) COURTESY OF THE MUSEUM OF EVERYTHING

Creators: Walking through this exhibition, there are some clear themes—religion, spiritualism, the environment—but when you're trawling through these pieces daily, what are the preoccupations you find people returning to again and again?

James Brett: Well everyone wants to know what the hell it is being alive of course. I mean, why are we here? What are we doing? What's happening to me? Why do I feel these feelings? Why is she not attracted to me? What does that mean? Who is above? Who is below? Why is my brain fighting against me? Why does it seem to be working much better now? Why are these animals more like me than the people I know? That kind of thing.

So the *The Museum of Everything* is really about self-examination?

Well most of this work is made for the maker. It's not made for public consumption, or if it is made for public consumption, that's secondary. Our job as the *The Museum of Everything* is sort of to provide a safe environment for the work and maybe suggest there's another way to look at art, something that is much more interior.

You mention a lot of this work isn't made for other people. It's people trying to digest their own lives and make sense of their own world. That's also compounded by the fact a lot of these artists died long before they could give consent for it to be exhibited. What's the moral moral quandary of taking something created in private and presenting it as a public object?

There is no moral quandary whatsoever. We're an ethical organisation, we're a non profit organisation. If a work appears at a junk shop, what are you going to do about it?

If it seems so private and so personal or so strange that it shouldn't be shown, we wouldn't show it. But that's quite rare. What we really try and do is present the intention of the maker in a meaningful and honest way without projection—which isn't what our forebears did. They would often add ingredients in a way that perhaps reflected the work too much.



CALVIN AND RUBY BLACK (1955 - 1972) COURTESY OF THE MUSEUM OF EVERYTHING

So basically honour the creator's vision as clearly as you can see it?

We really just try to show the work in a correct assembly. That often means not showing works individually, which is why we often show big groups of works. Henry Darger is exhibited all around the world, but nobody shows him in sequence. Yet his images were created as one long sequential narrative, which describes a fictional version of his life story. If you don't know that, if you don't see it in sequence, as he intended, then you can't really understand what he is showing.

Some may see it as an innocent mistake, but when the landlord who discovered the work sliced the pages from out of the books, he destroyed the order which Darger had taken care to create. Some years ago I realised the works fitted together, my pet hobby became finding works by Darger and connecting them. We've got many sequences in the museum, but the storm sequence at Mona shows ten images which run like a film and is one of the unique surviving sequences from his original.

We're very lucky to be able to show so much of this work, and we feel an absolutely responsibility to communicate it truthfully. With the same integrity that we would want somebody to deal with our material when we pop off.

A lot of that respect is about not asserting yourself or your vision into these works, but leaving them as true to the artist's presentation as possible. But by putting them in the *Museum* you're making the statement that they're art, where a lot of the works weren't in fact intended to be seen like that. Which begs the question everyone asks of the *The Museum of Everything*—how does context define art? And how do you decide what is a piece of art, and what is just a strange artefact?

Oh well that question, with due respect, is entirely based upon the presumption that a human being has the right to call something a piece of art. You don't, I don't. Art is a misconceived word—it was created by the high and excludes a lot of the low. Art is in fact not this stuck, art is the behaviour of making, and it's true to all people from all cultures from all classes from birth.

Creativity tends to be educated out of us. There is no decision of what is a piece of art. Everything can be if it's an intentional piece of human making, created as a form of expression. However, most of it, obviously, I don't show, other people don't show, because most of it is not that unique and unusual. We are looking for the most unique and unusual pieces of expression. That's really where I'm coming from.

Okay, so art is a problematic construct that's undefinable. So maybe the question is, what are you looking for?

I want to find things I find astonishing, that amaze me, that reflect, back on me like a mirror. If somebody with a learning disability draws a picture of a cat—that's no less art than Matisse, frankly. The instincts for making are no different. Anybody who tells you that they have the right to classify something as art or not is, in my view, a fascist. That's a bit strong, but I do believe it.





UNTITLED, HANS-JÖRG GEORGI (2010-15) COURTESY OF ATELIER GOLDSTEIN AND THE MUSEUM OF EVERYTHING (INSTALLATION BY LUTZ PILLONG)

The question of democratisation in art, and the way institutions destroy creativity, is so interesting. But how do you manage those attitudes when you then go and collaborate with galleries?

It's really, really difficult. People come out of art schools with a straight jacket of art history which is itself a fiction created by people with particular points of view that are generally western and male. Not only that, but they are generally gravitating towards certain kinds of bias.

The first solo show of a learning disabled artist at an American museum was last year. It was Judith Scott's. She was in a hospital for most of her life, she had a twin sister who took her out and put her in one of these fantastic studios run by artists for artists. This one was called Creative Growth in California. It wasn't about art therapy, it was just about making art. But because artists like Judith often can't contextualise their own work, they remain invisible to most art critics and curators, because they're not saying "this is who i am, this is what my art is about."

Context is everything. But what if somebody can't provide their own context?



UNTITLED, MORTON BARTLETT (C 1950). COURTESY OF THE MUSEUM OF EVERYTHING

You now exist largely within that traditional art world, how do you break down those learned barriers in people?

I say art does not exist, art is a false word, art is a dirty word. You've got to understand that I just got into this stuff. I used to have it at my house, and then I had a girlfriend who made me invite some art people over—and back then I didn't really like art people. But they were like: this is really interesting, this isn't like anything else, and I started seeing that artists were engaged in it so I basically transitioned my home to the first museum we had. I suddenly went, actually, maybe this isn't wrong, maybe the same feelings I have about these materials, the same emotional transcendence is going on with other people.

***The Museum of Everything** continues at **Hobart's Museum of Old and New Art (MONA)** until April 2, 2018. Find out more [here](#). You can express your interest in submitting a work to the Museum [here](#).*

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