

# The Museum of Non-Artists

A review of *The Museum of Everything*

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There is a strange divide in the world of art: between the art of academic elites, and the art of ordinary people. An artist creates to express their thoughts, emotions, desires, and beliefs. So how does one define what makes an 'art maker' an 'artist'?

You've probably asked yourself a similar question while wandering through Hobart's modern, controversial art museum, that is MONA. Modern art can be so minimalist, it barely seems to be art at all. How could we forget the gallery hoax of 2016, when a 17 year old prankster placed a pair of glasses on the floor of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and people gawked at its artistic splendor. The 'artist' knew it wasn't art. But people believed it was, and he henceforth became an accidental artist, featured in one of the most prestigious galleries in the world.

It seems that contemporary art has stooped to an all-time low. Where is the skill and attention to detail, I ask? Thankfully, *The Museum of Everything* at MONA, a collection of 'non-art' that contradicts all that we know about the academic art world, is here to restore your faith in the ancient ritual that is artmaking. The travelling institution opened in London in 2009, and features a collection of nearly 2000 artworks by 200 non-artists and private art makers. The exhibition arrived at MONA in June this year, and will be on display until April 2018, making it MONA's longest running exhibition to date.

James Brett is the mastermind behind the institution, which features a collection of ordinary people who create extraordinary and fascinating artworks. So can the works of these non-artists be considered 'art'? The work on display, though not created with the intent of ever being displayed in a gallery, is often far from amateur.

*The Museum of Everything* aims to stretch preconceived ideas of who has the right to be an artist. These artists featured don't have art degrees, but what they do have is a vision. Some are mentally or physically ill. They do not create as a means of expressing intellectual ideas, themes and storytelling. This art is the product of each individual's intense drive to create.

They are the self-taught architects, the scientists of space, and inventors of new language and visual folklore. They produce art within their own homes, or even whilst residing in hospital or prison. They are the unknown makers who produce art outside the established art world, for their own personal cause. The focus of this art is on the creation, the ritual process, and the transcendent connection between artist and method.

The Museum occupies the entire basement level of MONA's underground gallery floors. The entrance is the

set of a three story, brick Victorian terrace home. Beyond the door are over 25 exhibition rooms of varying shapes and sizes. In contrast to the spacious, minimal aesthetic MONA's previous large exhibition, *On The Origin of Art*, this Museum has a homely feel, with nostalgic furniture, old couches, wallpaper, and curtains that lead you from room to room.

Sculptural and two-dimensional works that explore personal and world culture are found within the first large room. If you're a fan of collage or visual communication, you will enjoy the large, mathematical drawings that utilise headline style typography, contrasted with detailed, hand written lists and graphs. These works are products of the photographic memory of the artist, detailing historical events like the sinking of the Titanic. In the center of the room, we see a collection of biologically perfect dinosaur fossils, made from found objects and rubbish. Children smile and laugh at a triceratops made entirely



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from plastic toy dinosaurs. There is a central theme that draws together the context of artworks in each exhibition room. However, the formal qualities and content of each work are greatly different.

The next few rooms of the Museum explore themes of faith, focussing heavily on American exceptionalism and religious fundamentalism at the turn of the 19th century. A 'faith room' includes a reinterpretation of Leonardo da Vinci's famous painting, *The Last Supper* of Jesus Christ. This work was made by an electrician who used found objects and lights to express his intense religious belief through sculpture. Within the same room are a collection of detailed paintings that illustrate both real and fanciful Catholic cathedrals. Travel next through rooms of African American independence, and religious freedom! They say 'The Lord is good', and the gospel has never looked more colorful and bright. These spiritual works evoke a sense of hope, love and fundamentalism. Each work is an expression of the artist's deep devotion to their faith.

Beyond the evangelistic faith artworks, we enter a room that is filled with religious works that reference hell and death. These artists are less driven by hope, but more by fear of 'the end'. Horrific paintings of the apocalypse are displayed, alongside satirical collages and humorous illustrations of the *Devils of Play* that torment humans. As we leave the collective rooms of religious expression, we enter the arousing room of 'desire' full of sexual fantasy, illusions of gender, and imagery of witchcraft. The Museum then explores the themes of 'love', 'youth' and 'childhood', which form a visual timeline of mixed-matched art. These are followed by the room of 'power', displaying war, guns, and heroic figures in bold colour. At this stage the Museum has taken the viewer through a journey of religious expression, human emotion, and now begins to explore human invention, capability, and scientific endeavour.

Half way through the Museum is a library, with bookcases, retro armchairs, and tables in a cozy, small room. Here you can sit and read about folk art, and self-taught art. Unfortu-

nately there are also televisions on the wall, which makes the room less relaxing. But these show MQNA-made films of the exhibition, the works, and the installation of the Museum, which was fascinating to watch. The library is a quaint, relatively quiet space where you pause to engage further with the history of non-professional artists. After the library, you enter the 'cosmos' room. This room features 20 cardboard airplanes, some several metres in length, hanging in the center of the space. You can walk between the colossal paper flying machines, while you gaze at paintings of spaceship graphs and diagrams of planets fill the walls. The content of these works connects back to the earlier rooms that explored spirituality. The journey to the moon can be compared with the religious quest to reach the divine. The Museum concludes with an exploration of 'ritualism', 'utopia', 'architecture', 'landscape', and 'creatures'.

The colossal size of the Museum is rather daunting, but at the end you can sit down and enjoy a nice French biscuit in the Gift Shop Tea Room as you reflect upon the Museum.

Lay back on the fake grass while you gaze at the red and white awning above the gift shop counter. If you're as lucky as me you may even get your tea and madeleine biscuit served to you by a charming, handsome Frenchman. The Museum of Everything challenges the concept of 'art' and 'the artist'. To appreciate its very nature, we must forget our preconceived ideas of the gallery and the art world. The exhibition does not require or ask us to find meaning or context from each work. Instead it poses the question, why do we create? What is this desire artists have to externally express their internal thoughts? We are left standing in awe of the splendor of human creativity, spirituality, and the intense drive that caused these 'outsiders' to draw, paint, sculpt, and embody their lives with their artwork.

Images: Maddie Burrows