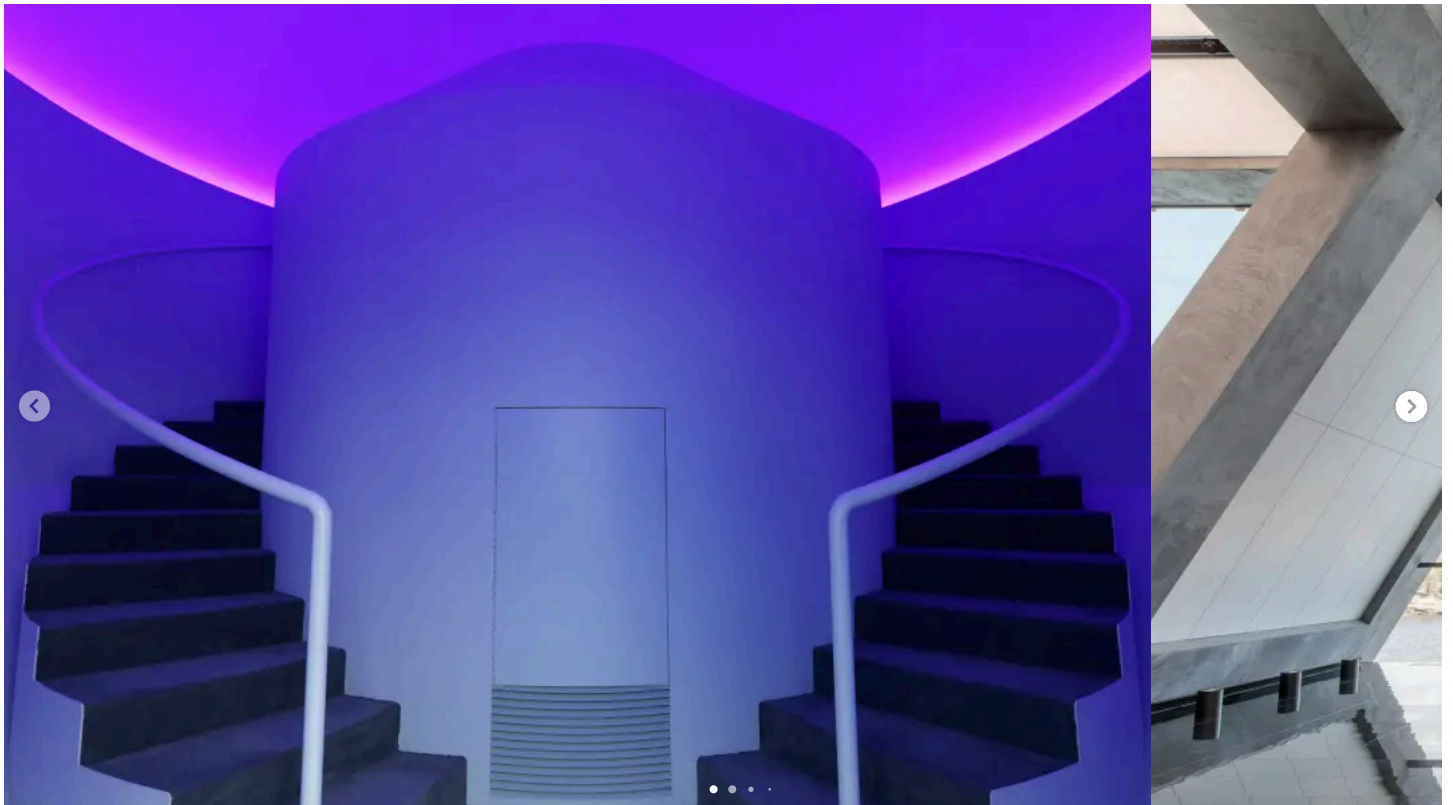




National > Article

Published 6 years ago

## A Chat About Mona's Brain-Bending New Wing, Pharos



Entrance to Unseen Seen · Photo: MONA/Jesse Hunniford

The latest addition to David Walsh's museum offers respite from the subterranean sandstone fortress. Kind of.

Words by MARCUS TEAGUE · Updated on 13 Apr 2018 · Published on 15 Feb 2018

A strobing pod. A room filled with oil. A glowing space with no visible definition. Another so dark you hallucinate. These are some of the difficult-to-describe artworks at Pharos, the newly opened wing at multi-millionaire gambler David Walsh's Mona in Berriedale, Tasmania.

For those who have never been to the Museum of Old and New Art, the dramatic new building perched over the Derwent River will seem

Enter email



Invalid email address

I met with Mona senior curator Nicole Durling in Pharos's lavish new restaurant, Faro – which serves, among other things, a black Margarita garnished with a pig's eye encased in ice – during the recent summer Mofo festival to discuss the new wing. As our chat attests, not even Mona fully understands what goes on at Mona.

Never miss a moment. Make sure you're subscribed to our newsletter today.

SUBSCRIBE NOW

Pharos is built around several works by American artist James Turrell: *Event Horizon*, *Weight of Darkness*, *Beside Myself*, and *Unseen Seen*. The latter is housed inside what looks like a Stanley Kubrick-style space pod, which sits inside Faro. Only two people can enter at a time. Choosing either the “hard” or “soft” setting – and holding a panic button should they need to stop the experience – visitors climb in and lie on a cushioned mat facing a domed ceiling. A palette of colours begins flickering above, building rapidly to an intense swirl of pixelation that floods the eyes so fiercely that shutting them just displays the pattern in negative. The experience lasts for around 10 minutes and is a peculiar mix of serene and overwhelming.



The entrance to *Unseen Seen* by James Turrell

Broadsheet: It's interesting going into *Unseen Seen* with someone else.

Nicole Durling: We wondered what that experience might be like. Even if they're a complete stranger.

Invalid email address

ND: Your pupils fully dilate. You have to succumb. The artist refers to these works as meditation spaces, or “perceptual cells”. I’ve been in different ones, where you sit upright or sit down with your head inside a box. Each time it’s that thing of letting go. Not fighting against what you think it should be or [what you think you] should be experiencing. Turrell doesn’t say, “This is what you will experience, this is what you will have.” There is no narrative spoiler alert because there is no narrative.

BS: *Unseen Seen* reminded me of the *ZEE* from the first Dark Mofo in 2013. That intense personal onslaught to withstand has always been a factor of the festivals, be it *ZEE* or *Bass Bath*. Basically, artworks you need to sign a waiver to experience. I like how now it’s a fixture here.

ND: I don’t want to put words into your mouth, but it is about being reminded of your own mortality. That’s not an easy thing to do. And without being flippant about it or kitsch, there aren’t many artists that capture that in an environmental space such as Turrell or Kurt Hentschläger, who made *ZEE*.

There are a couple of people who have said to me of *Unseen Seen*, “Oh, it’s a nice experience but it doesn’t really grab me.” But it’s your own journey. You take it by yourself, regardless of what comes of that. I think that’s what we’re trying to achieve with the museum as a whole. This is not us presenting art or an experience that’s easily explained or understood. There are spaces and gaps and fearful moments. They’re all a part of it. So come on in and see how you feel.



Memorial to Sacred Wind or the Tomb of Kamikaze by Jean Tinguely

Invalid email address

*Wind or the Tomb of Kamikaze is a 1969 artwork by Swiss sculptor Jean Tinguely. Appearing at first to be a scrappy pile of machinery chained to the floor, it periodically lurches to life and scrapes along rails in a cacophony of screeching. Next to it is UK artist Richard Wilson's 20:50, a room flooded with engine oil. A waist-high barrier extends into the room allowing viewers to walk into it without touching the still, black mass. Museum staff repeatedly tells viewers not to touch it. Walsh acquired the piece from British collector Charles Saatchi, who had housed the work in his eponymous London gallery since 1987.*

**BS:** I asked the girl working next to the Jean Tinguely machine and 20:50 if it was the most stressful place in Mona to work. She said, "Oh, by far." They offer a very different emotional and sensory experience to the Turrell works. It can't be accidental they're next to each other.

**ND:** Well, David refers to the space as a whole. The evolution of the way the museum has evolved, the exhibitions and the way we hung the collection, there was a purpose to it and our approach. But some of the decisions were serendipitous or fortuitous. We have a tendency to make statements in retrospect, but here there's definite intention. With the discussion and placement of the Turrell pieces, it's the first time I've seen David with a definite intention.

It was always going to look like this. These works are so big, we can't crane any of these things out. Pharos is considered as a whole, in companionship to the museum and also learning from what we learned when we built the museum.

**BS:** How involved were the artists?

**ND:** Pharos was built around Turrell's works. The architect, David and the artist were in complete conversation. Jean Tinguely is deceased.

**BS:** David Walsh wrote that Richard Wilson is unhappy about 20:50 being here?

**ND:** I can't speak directly to what potentially his concerns are. But the intention of that work was that it was to flood an established

Invalid email address

Sometimes that happens: artists don't intend their work to be shown in a particular way. But who knows? Richard may come out here and think it's better than he ever intended it to be. Or he may say, "Told you." That's a risk of working with artists and making work. But it's wonderful to have that work here. I remember it from its first iteration in London (1987) and it really made an impact on me. I remember how I felt, what I was wearing, how I got to the gallery, the steps up to it. It's a really extraordinary work.



*Inside Grotto* by Randy Polumbo

*Looking down from the mezzanine at 20:50, it's hard to make sense of the room's perspective. The still black oil reflects the honeycombed concrete of the walls, creating an optical illusion. I wonder how many people will drop their phones into the eerie mass while trying to take a picture. I'm up here a while before realising there's another tunnel nearby, which leads to US artist Randy Polumbo's silver grotto festooned with "jubilant glass dildos."*

**BS:** Have people been using the new spaces like you thought they might?

**ND:** They never do. You can never predict how people are going to respond. The week leading up to opening the space [a soft launch in early December 2017] we did a series of private events. I was in much anticipation to see what people would do. Every night they were different. I remember what that was like when we opened the museum. I had this moment where the museum was perfect, until we let people in.



Invalid email address

down. They can see some natural light and take a breath. Was that our intention as to why this was built? I never heard that as part of the brief in conversation. But maybe it's an intuitive thing. We knew we needed a place of respite. Because the way we approach our exhibitions in the museum can be confronting and overwhelming for some people. Sometimes they might just need a nice velvet chair to sit on and some water to look at.

**BS:** Which is happening 10 feet away from *Unseen Seen* where someone is having their neurons split. Then they're having to walk down past Tinguely's machine roaring like it's going to break off the wall.

**ND:** The beautiful thing about that Tinguely work is the artist made it particularly for a world expo-type thing – it was his gesture towards his disgust at [such a refined showcase]. He wanted to make this clumsy, noisy, grating machine. You mentioned the dichotomy in this space where you've got these beautiful round, voluptuous surfaces, then a few steps farther you feel like your neurons are being split. Whether this environment is exploring the push and pull of what we are as human beings or [it's just] a contemplative space, at Mona we often end up exploring those same dichotomies, in one form or another.



Interior of the Faro restaurant housing James Turrell's *Unseen Seen*

**BS:** It's interesting as a curator to have a space that isn't going to change. There won't be new works here in six months.

**ND:** Well, David never told me that directly. But I have read it. He's one of the most outspoken people about the evolution of Mona, so it makes me chuckle to think of David saying: "Well my curators aren't allowed to mess with this."

Invalid email address

I think perhaps it's a restriction on himself from changing his mind. Having to make definitive decisions is confronting and challenging, not just for me as curator but for David. The roadblock's self-imposed.

**BS:** There's more to come here, with Charles Ross's "rainbow room" and also Cameron Robbins. Are these being purpose-built for Pharos?

**ND:** The Charles Ross is purpose built and the Cameron Robbins work is close to new. The first iteration of it we commissioned for our 2013 exhibition *The Red Queen*. It's a machine that draws every day of the year. It's an almost-impossible work for a museum to buy and install. It took us a while to find the right location. But it will be great to see and it will be self-generating drawings hopefully very soon.

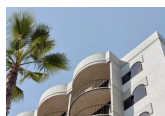
What was your experience? I've had my office here next door for the past 18 months. I'm very close to it. I'm curious about other people's responses.

**BS:** I was excited about coming to a new section of Mona. It gave me that little tingle like the first time I was here and didn't know what I was doing.

**ND:** I'm coming into my 13th year working for David. People ask me what it's like and it's an impossible thing to answer. It's different for me than it would be for any other colleagues. But I'm always curious to see how everything fits together. *Does it fit together? Does it make sense next to that? ...* Mona is like a little Eden Project in a way, a microclimate. So with Pharos we've just introduced a new species and I'm curious to see how we're going to evolve.

*For your city's latest, subscribe to the Broadsheet newsletter.*

#### YOU MAY ALSO LIKE



Two Australian Hotels Made the World's 50 Best Hotels List



Dubbo the Fun: Wake Up in the Wild at Taronga Western Plains Zoo



From Cusco to Pisco - How To See and Do the Best of Peru