

'The private life of art': the Museum of Everything opens in Hobart

Initially innocuous, but dark and strange inside, the world's first wandering museum, currently housed at Mona, is for the art that wasn't meant to be seen



Untitled (all) Bogdan Zietek 1970-2010 Artworks included at the Museum of Everything, at Mona in Hobart. Photograph: Mona

Brigid Delaney

Tuesday 13 June 2017 20.00 BST

In the basement of Hobart's Museum of Old and New Art, you enter a house with Georgian facade. Initially it evokes a vanished, suburban England, the type skewered by Larkin and Orwell. There's the fusty lace curtains, the brocade wallpaper and uncomfortable furniture, the post box and striped lollipops, the two-bar fire and the porcelain knick-knacks on the mantle.

Then it gets strange. Going further into the house, you see a darker England - then an ominous, wider world filled with almost 1,000 pieces of art from almost 200 artists, collected from outside the mainstream.

They are artists who made work in institutions. Artists who never called themselves artists;

artists with disabilities. Artists who were Japanese sous chefs then began creating work in a fog of grief. There are artists who are retired dental assistants and artists who created in obscurity, to be championed only after their deaths.

The work has been collected by the Museum of Everything, which was founded by Englishman James Brett in 2009 and bills itself as the world's first wandering museum for non professional and private art makers. Starting as a temporary exhibition in a former recording studio in London, it has since enjoyed a successful stint at the Venice Biennale. With no fixed abode, it travels around the world, including shows in Russia and the Netherlands, and has been seen by more than a million people.

But for the next 10 months, it has a home at Mona.



'Each room begets the next': inside the Museum of Everything, at Mona Photograph: Mona

The early rooms are filled with art that recreates late 19th and early 20th century spiritualism. It's a world of channelling and tarot; seances and mediums.

“It evokes all the women who'd lost boyfriends and brothers in the first world war, trying to get back in touch with their loved ones by any means,” says Mona senior curator Jane Clark.

Some of the work was loaned by the Victorian Spiritualists' Union in Melbourne, including paintings by Georgiana Houghton: a 19th century English spiritualist said to be the first modern abstract artist. Another highlight is a piece by Perth handyman and electrician Stan Hopewell: a giant, 3D neon monument to the Last Supper, made as a living memorial to his wife.

Brett, who is in Hobart for the opening, says, “Each room begets the next.

“We start with time and the notion of time, then the fourth and fifth dimension, and that's when we get in the spirit world and seances ... then we get into faith and belief - particularly in African American folk art. Then you go to this whole room of religious material ...

“Everything weaves into the next work - but not in a didactic way.”

Brett is a collector of what some term “outsider art” (he prefers to describe it as “non-academic art”). He met Mona founder David Walsh at a party in London, and recognised that his collection would be a good fit with the sometimes playful, sometimes archaic

character of the Hobart museum.

But Walsh had to be talked around to it. “He [Walsh] said, ‘I don’t want to see this outsider art rubbish.’ Then I watched as Mona grew and we did more shows, and I thought, we have more in common than I thought,” Brett says. “We have quite a shared philosophy: What is art? How is it made? Who has the right to say what is art? What is it that binds us?”

The artists in the show, he says, are “people who make art not for us, but for themselves. It is the private life of art and it is rarely shown in museums and galleries.”



Untitled, by Calvin and Ruby Black (1955-1972). Photograph: Mona

The collection is vast and mind-blowing in its scope. It is not the sort of collection you would breeze through in an hour. Some of the art on display includes a creepy doll collection, intricate assemblies of components and parts, embroidery, handmade signs, decorative flints, woven figures and scarecrows.

Included in the exhibition is art by Henry Darger, a reclusive American hospital janitor who created work in private until he died in 1973.

His work - startling and creepy - encompasses drawings of little girls in the manner of children’s colouring books, except some of the girls are naked, with penises.

Brett is passionate in his defence of Darger, who created art without ever intending to show it to anyone. In it, says Brett, are manifestations of Darger’s own childhood sexual abuse. He warns me against viewing his work through the lens of “contemporary art.”

Also included in the show are Australian artists Julian Martin, Alan Constable and Terry Williams, who are all connected to not-profit Melbourne studio Arts Project Australia, which supports artists with intellectual disabilities.

Says Brett, “The show expands our notion of what art could be, and that’s really coming to the essential point. A man from a lower-socio economic status, from a marginalised community - why should he not be as important an artist as any other person in any other museum anywhere else in the world? If I didn’t think it was any good, it wouldn’t be in the show.”

Brett travels the world collecting art for his museum, and is about to embark on an epic trip of Australia to find work from unsung artists. As his museum becomes more popular, people have started coming to him as well.

“I travel, I listen, I have friends; everyone who finds a piece that could be seen as art contacts me. In this [outsider art] world, most are collectors who became dealers to satisfy their addiction. And we’re all quite sensitive to these other voices. A lot of these people aren’t from the visual arts but from applied arts - filmmakers, musicians, architects. They are not restricted by the handcuffs of the canon, the weight of art history - that’s been my greatest ally, and the greatest foe.”

● *. The Museum of Everything is open at Mona until April 2018*

Topics

- Mona
- Dark Mofo 2017
- Museums
- David Walsh
- features