

# Pain and Suffering But Make It Art: A Weekend at Dark Mofo

By Wendy Syfret

June 20, 2019, 8:12pm



Share:

This year Dark Mofo finally went to hell. Well, at least MONA did with the opening of Alfredo Jaar's new multi-room installation *The Divine Comedy*. In his take on Dante's 14th-century poem the New York based, Chilean born, artists presents us Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven. The work is housed in Siloam, the museum's 27 million dollar extension connecting the original gallery (is it offensive to call MONA a gallery?) to the Pharos wing. It's in good company down there, with neighbours including Ai Weiwei, Oliver Beer, and Cr

Townend. Standing outside the first of its three rooms (hell), waiting to be ushered in, it struck me as odd that it took David Walsh over eight years to finally construct Hades in the bowels of his museum.

In his foreword of this year's Dark Mofo program, Walsh lists the themes of extinction, violence, silenced voices, and protest. Reading it in my hotel room on my first evening in Hobart I wondered if the Tassie locals ever wanted to talk about something else. This was my fifth visit to Dark Mofo and the festival's pet topics were familiar. But as soon as I stepped out onto the red light-washed streets of Hobart—a city now seemingly swallowed by the festival—I realise that MONA and Tasmania could easily spend eternity grappling with the state's past. And from what I can tell, David Walsh is fully prepared to.

## VIDEOS BY VICE

---



ONE OF THE MANY DARK MOFO FLAGS ON THE STREETS ON HOBART.

That tether, between the past and present, is perhaps most directly explored this year through Julie Gough's sprawling show at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, *Tense Past*. There the Tasmanian Aboriginal artist presents selections of her own video, sound, and sculptural work alongside historical artifacts and personal writing from the early 19th century. The mostly British selection of letters and diaries act as narration direct from the past that coolly discuss the obliteration of the state's First Nations people. Viewed together, they and Gough's art ask the viewer to examine the impact of colonisation.

---

+ ENGLISH

---

NEWSLETTERS

---

## Not Found

... ..

When Wash repeatedly brings his focus, museum, and festival back to extinction and violence he does so in a place where, as Gough notes, between 1790 and 1830s "most Tasmanian Aboriginal people, perhaps 5000, mysteriously disappeared."

That quote played on my mind as I walked out of Gough's show and caught sight of tourists snapping smiling pictures in front of the city's colonial architecture. Before walking into *Tense Past* I'd glibly wondering if Dark Mofo's obsession with pain and hell could become repetitive. After, it seemed impossible that anyone could ever focus on anything else.



JULIE GOUGH'S SHOW TENSE PAST AT THE TASMANIAN MUSEUM AND ART GALLERY.

That mood remained with me across the water at MONA as I waited to enter Jaar's vision of hell in 2019: the artist had written that *The Divine Comedy's* three rooms were designed as a response to climate change. My viewing of the piece was slightly delayed. A polite MONA employee apologised and said they were having a little trouble with the work. Hell and purgatory were working fine, but there was a chance I wouldn't be able to ascend to paradise today. The technical glitch seemed to perfectly fit with Dark Mofo's general vibe.

Eventually and luckily, the spiritual issues were overcome and my small group was lead into a waiting area and read a lengthy and intimidating legal disclaimer, waiving all rights to sue should something go wrong. While those around me shifted nervously at the list of maladies the experience could trigger I thought, *these waivers are always more exciting than the shows.*

Before we neatly filed into hell we were strapped to a steel rail and cautioned not to let go of our restraints at any time. I won't ruin what happens next, as I guess hell is a personal experience. But the heat, crashing water, deafening sound, and total darkness left me thankful for the rail and respecting



waiver. At certain times I wasn't sure if my vision or the room was distorting. The only image I was confident in was the distressed American tourist next to me.



THE DOORWAY TO HELL AKA, ALFREDO JAAR'S DIVINE COMEDY. PHOTO BY JESSE HUNNIFORD/MONA.

Eventually a door opened and we were gently ushered into purgatory; which was a black and white film starring American performance artist Joan Jonas. When it's finished I leaned across to the person beside me and said, "That was okay." They replied, "Yeah, that's exactly the point."

Finally we made it to heaven. Again, I don't want to blow the conclusion of all human existence for you. But I'll say heaven is beautiful and overwhelming. An experience that balances your body and nature in a way that leaves you unsure what's real and what's artificial.

The theme of climate change and ensuring our own destruction carried on across the tunnels of Siloam to New Zealand artist Simon Denny's show *Mine*. Here it's considerably more literal though. *Mine* is a meditation on big mining, artificial intelligence, augmented reality, data collection, and the way it could all melt together for a near future where humans are mountingy miserable and obsolete. Although here humanity's self-imposed mental and social destruction

is presented in parallel to the King Island Brown Thornbill—an endangered native Tasmanian bird.



SIMON DENNY'S MINE. PHOTO BY JESSE HUNNIFORD/MONA.

The Thornbill acts as a literal augmented reality guide and a metaphorical warning. Earlier this year the ABC reported that it was “the Australian bird most likely to become extinct over the next two decades,” due to climate change and land clearing across King Island. Ironically, while technology and data collection threaten us, here they could ensure the survival of the bird through sophisticated environmental protection efforts.

Of course, there are no real happy endings at Dark Mofo, just big chewy moral dilemmas. In this case the technology helping the bird is made possible through the resources that mining provides us. Confused? That's okay. The whole situation is presented as a human-sized board game you can circle as the resurrection/destruction of nature and humanity spin around your brain.

At its simplest, *Mine* is a great “canary in the coal mine” joke. At its most complex it's a reminder—like all of Dark Mofo—that humans might b

but we sure are clever.

*Dark Mofo is kicking on this weekend, get tickets and more information [here](#).*

---

Tagged:

[ART](#) [CULTURE](#) [DARK MOFO](#) [HEAVEN](#) [HELL](#) [HOBART](#) [TASMANIA](#)

Share:

**ONE EMAIL. ONE STORY. EVERY WEEK. SIGN UP FOR THE VICE NEWSLETTER.**

Subscribe

By signing up, you agree to the [Terms of Use](#) and [Privacy Policy](#) & to receive electronic communications from VICE Media Group, which may include marketing promotions, advertisements and sponsored content.

## MORE LIKE THIS



### The Deadly Mafia Party Bombs of Naples

BY CLAUDIO MENNA 05.21.24



### 'Shit Was Like a Cheese Grater': All the Ways You Can Break Your Penis

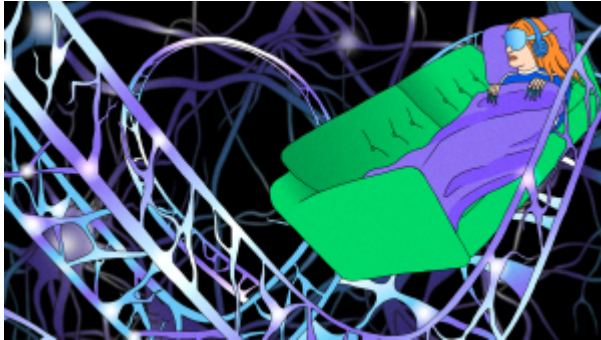
BY ARIELLE RICHARDS 03.27.24

Privacy



## The 50 Best Christmas Songs of All Time

BY LAUREN O'NEILL AND VICE STAFF 12.13.23



## I Had Ketamine Therapy. This Is What It's Like

BY BECKY BURGUM 10.05.23



## Night Out Receipts: Dark Mofo's Night Mass, Squid Lollipops, Margs

BY VICE STAFF 06.15.23



## I Survived 5 Days Without Light at a Darkness Retreat

BY MATTHA BUSBY 05.31.23

**MORE  
FROM VICE**





## I Tried Augustinus Bader's Very Expensive Face Cream (and It Rocks)

05.30.23 BY ANGEL KILMISTER

---

04.11.23 BY BECCA BLASDEL

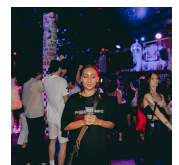
### Where to Buy Kitchen Wall Art (That Makes You Look Worldly)



---

04.04.23 BY JULIE FENWICK

### Is Sydney Nightlife Dead? I'm Going Suburb to Suburb to Find Out.



---

03.05.23 BY JOSS PETER

### Can You Pray Your Hangover Away?



