

## An Invitation to Darkness

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### **An Invitation to Darkness: MONA's New Tasmanian Tunnel**

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Emma-Kate Wilson / MutualArt

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Central tunnel in Siloam, Mona's new underground extension. Photo Credit: Mona/Jesse Hunniford. Image courtesy Mona, Hobart, Tasmania, Australia

MONA is a spectacle of architecture, starting from the top, stemming from two Roy Grounds buildings, and connecting through a series of tunnels and rooms that run under the heritage houses in an Alice in Wonderland-esque utopia. Like Alice following the white rabbit, the museum burrows into the ground. Or perhaps, more fitting, like a Tasmanian Devil taking shelter in a wombat burrow. This is not your usual museum.

The new zone of MONA, Siloam, adds to the experience of disbelief and wonder as you explore the tunnels that snake through the earth, filled with art of epic proportions. Jarrod Rawlins, a curator at the museum, believes that "one of the important parts of the overall design is that it's not clear exactly where you are. You might actually be a bit lost!" Perhaps it's refreshing, in a world charted almost entirely by Google maps, to be simply adrift.



Siloam, Mona's new underground extension. Photo Credit: Mona/Jesse Hunniford. Image courtesy Mona, Hobart, Tasmania, Australia

Siloam, named after the biblical pool and tunnel in Jerusalem, invites questions of space, ownership and religion, which echo through the artworks on show. The gallery was purpose-built to hold four ambitious pieces, while also allowing museum-goers to access the 'Pharos' wing when some galleries are closed for installation. Principally, however, Siloam expands upon the museum's vision of productive disorientation. Nonda Katsalidis, the head architect, explains, "David [Walsh, the owner of MONA] takes a different approach to most, the randomness leads to the unexpected. And because of this, you get a museum, and relationship to the artworks, that is quite unique."

The tunnels house the artworks and, in turn, themselves become the artworks. For example, Chris Townend's sound installation, *Requiem for Vermin* (2019), is a multichannel sound-based artwork with 230 speakers, which interacts with the user as they travel through the tunnel. *Requiem for Vermin* is a narrative of unfamiliarity, even as its ambience eases your transition through time and space. It's easy to let go of thought entirely and just let your body glide through the installation. In Katsalidis' words, visitors should "surrender themselves to the experience."



Museum of Old and New Art. Photo Credit: Mona/Jesse Hunniford. Image courtesy Mona, Hobart, Tasmania, Australia

As MONA has become the tourist destination in Tasmania, queues are to be expected, perhaps especially with audience-interactive pieces like Oliver Beer's, *Mona Confessional* (2019). Luckily the 'O' device, an iPod with the MONA app built-in, helps visitors gain some sense of where they are going. It allows viewers to 'check-in' to the installations and therefore keeps tabs of the limited number of spaces in each.

Once in the *Mona Confessional*, you are invited to share your secrets through a giant ear connected to the outside of the museum. It challenges the virtual-ness of social media, the supposed invisibility of online presence.

Just as your eyes are getting used to the darkness, you are propelled into light. Dazzling rays of sun stream through an opening in the ceiling, illuminating Ai Weiwei's *White House* (2015).



*White House*, 2015, by Ai Weiwei. Photo Credit: Mona/Jesse Hunniford. Image courtesy Mona, Hobart, Tasmania, Australia

The pearly structure is perched on clear orbs seemingly full of water, reflecting each pillar and the viewers. The room acts like a sacred space and makes the audience feel as though they are in a temple, or a shrine to a bygone era – lost first to politics, and then to commercialism.





White House (detail), 2015, by Ai Weiwei. Photo Credit: Mona/Jesse Hunniford. Image courtesy Mona, Hobart, Tasmania, Australia

Also appearing in Siloam is *The Divine Comedy* (2019) by artist Alfredo Jaar, a three-stage journey through the chambers of the afterlife: hell, purgatory, paradise. Inspired by Dante's famous 14th-century poem, the artwork takes you through three rooms. The first involves being strapped in and led through a spa-like chamber, with water swirling below as you stand on a bridge watching from above. The water fills, the ceiling drops, and the room heats. With the soothing sound of rushing water and a warm atmosphere, 'hell' appears to be quite pleasant.

The lack of sound is the first contrast between 'hell' and 'purgatory'. In this second space you are propelled into silence as you unclip from your safety harness and sit before a video by performance artist Joan Jonas. The black and white film often centres on the artist's aging face, as she stares through the screen. Each line and crevice of her skin fills the frame, a stark reminder of our mortality. The metaphor continues into the dead roses that cover her floor, on which she slowly rests her body, thorns and all. The end of the video sees the ceiling lift upwards, letting in the view of the gumtrees from outside, slowly swaying in the wind, and the dizzying whiteness of the sky.



Entrance to *The Divine Comedy*, 2019, by Alfredo Jaar. Photo Credit: Mona/Jesse Hunniford. Image courtesy of Mona, Hobart, Tasmania, Australia

The last room, 'Heaven', is not an experience that can be described so easily. The room fills with echoless silence. You can hear your own beating heart as you watch clouds fill the room. "Things can be done at MONA," says Rawlins, which expand on the realities of many galleries, museums, curators, and artists' budgets, especially in the current art-climate in Australia. Walsh can connect the specialists to the artworks, thanks to lack of aforementioned budgets. *The Divine Comedy* saw Rawlins working directly with Jaar and Walsh from scratch. "It started with a drawing on a napkin with three boxes." MONA turns a speculative drawing into a reality of clouds, water, and ceilings that lift off.

As a final point, I asked Katsalidis why he told Walsh to 'stop building tunnels for no reason.' He shares, "most other institutions would usually spend money on the artworks or the sculpture." However, he realises that "as an architect you receive pragmatic briefs, [with Walsh it] really is quite different. It's a unique opportunity. This particular project is about the building, and the artworks relying on having a sympathetic building." Just as MONA has always pushed boundaries, Siloam is a web of tunnels that continues this theme, displaying the largest, and most complex, of multi-disciplinary artworks; art as architecture, and architecture as art.

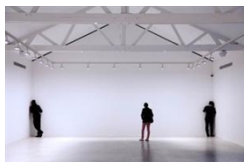
## Related Artists



**Ai Weiwei**

Chinese, 1957

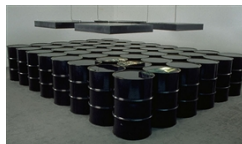
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**Oliver Beer**

British, 1985

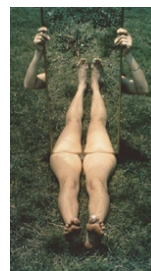
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**Alfredo Jaar**

Chilean, 1956

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**Joan Jonas**

American, 1936

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