

Collecting

Gambling mogul and museum-founder David Walsh: ‘Art is all about sex and death’

He made millions betting on horseracing before pouring it into Tasmania’s underground Museum of Old and New Art

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When I meet David Walsh, the Australian gambling mogul, art collector and founder of one of the strangest museums in the world, almost the first words out of his mouth are expletives. They are not directed at me but at the person who arranged the meeting: he’s double-booked, as he complains in no uncertain terms.

Having vented his displeasure, he turns to me: “You will just have to come along. Are you recording? Give me the recorder.” And with that he takes off towards the entrance of his private art space, the Museum of Old and New Art (Mona), which currently displays some 300 works from Walsh’s 3,000-strong collection. Walsh made his fortune gambling in many forms, including horseracing, blackjack, poker . . . you name it, his syndicate bets on it. Australian casinos collectively banned him and his syndicate members for card-counting.

Dressed in faded grey jeans and a yellow sweater with his shirt untucked at the back, long grey hair framing his face, Walsh has said he believes he is on the autism spectrum, a condition sometimes associated with remarkable mathematical skills — the kind that have allowed Walsh to beat the house so successfully — but also with difficulties in social interaction.

Scurrying behind him towards the museum is his head of communications and another person who needs some documents signed. Halfway there he stops on the zigzag path leading down to the museum's mirrored entrance and signs the documents, propping them on the grass, before setting off again. We move under the bright Tasmanian sun and suddenly we are in the darkened museum.



David Walsh, founder of Mona © Mona/Jesse Hunniford

As we walk, I ask him what motivated him to create Mona, and whether he deliberately made it the antithesis of a traditional museum. “I don’t think people know why they do things!” he says. “We do things because we are a social species, the way we perform is the way we show off.” This is very much his belief: that all motivations are about attracting a mate. It is often said that sex and death are the dominant themes of the museum. “That is not my choice, but the artists’: *their* work is all about sex and death.”

And this is clear inside Mona. Among the works on display — which have shocked many — are a wall of vulvas by Greg Taylor, Egyptian sarcophagi and Wim Delvoye’s faeces-making machine, “Cloaca Professional” (2010). One of his most provocative pieces, the remains of a suicide bomber cast in chocolate (“On the road to heaven the highway to hell” (2008) by Stephen J Shanabrook), has been taken off view. Others have been sold, for example Chris Ofili’s “Holy Virgin Mary” (1996), a portrait of a black Madonna with elephant-dung breasts.

The new exhibition, *Oceans of Air*, by multidisciplinary artist Tomás Saraceno, includes visionary work wrought from spiders’ webs, radiation balloons, dust, local flora, fine particle pollution from the skies of Mumbai and more.



'Webs of At-tent(s)ion' (2022) from a new exhibition at Mona, Tomás Saraceno's 'Oceans of Air' © Tomás Saraceno

But the collection has a huge range, going back to the ancient world. Walsh started by collecting antiquities because, he says, he had been unable to export some winnings from South Africa in cash and bought a Yoruba palace door instead. Then, “I built this little antiquities museum, I wanted to look after them. But it looked like every other museum in the world.” Because of ethical difficulties in sourcing these objects, he built something new. “I hope [Mona] is the expression of a different hypothesis; it can be much more performative and much more tongue-in-cheek because there is no moral imperative behind it.”

I don't really have art in my own home as until very recently my home was in the museum

So is his museum deliberately a challenge to the remit and philosophy of more traditional ones? “If you take state museums,” he says, “their motives are the binding force of religion — to make you believe you are in the presence of greatness, you walk upstairs past Greek columns and this makes you feel small. That is why Mona is underground, I don't want to give

visitors the visual clues of the experience in advance,” he says. “Also, I had these two houses and I didn't want to fuck them up visually.”

The reply is pure Walsh: disjointed and uncensored. Typically Walsh as well is Mona's advertising campaign featuring some of the one-star reviews it has received on social media (“I left with a feeling of disdain for all galleries and museums”).

Does he have art at home? “I don't really have art in my own home as until very recently my home was in the museum,” he says, but adds: “I could see Sir Sidney Nolan's giant artwork ‘Snake’ every day.”



Ai Weiwei's 'White House' (2015) © Jesse Hunniford/Mona



Mona can be accessed by ferry © Mona/Stu Gibson



Tunnels lead between underground chambers and galleries © Mona/Jesse Hunniford

The museum is dug three floors down through the sandstone underneath his houses. Works are displayed in rooms sometimes more like caves, often in deep gloom, connected with tunnels and walkways. The impression is not so much a museum as an immersive art destination doubling as a rich man's lair with his eclectic accumulation of the vulgar and the remarkable.

Mona was a gamble when it opened in 2011: it sits outside Hobart in Tasmania, the southerly island off the Australian mainland, a place that was until then hardly visited except by local tourists in camper vans.

It wasn't easy at the beginning, he says: "When you are in a backwater" — he corrects himself — "in an *eddy* in a backwater, you can't get anyone to make anything for you. James Turrell is a case in point. I contacted him directly and indirectly many times and he wouldn't do anything for me. And *then* he discovered that the largest Quaker school in the world is in Hobart, and suddenly he became incredibly amenable to coming out here . . . Since then we have become friends and now he's prepared to do anything I want him to do." Now four immersive light installations by Turrell are among Mona's most impressive works.



Mona's Pharos wing, featuring 'Unseen Seen' (2017) by James Turrell © Mona/Jesse Hunniford

Almost 12 years after its opening, the place has become a rip-roaring success, attracting almost 4mn people since opening and transforming the fortunes of the whole island. Restaurants, bars, hotels and shops have sprung up, benefiting from the influx of domestic and international tourists. To one side of the vineyards that flank the entrance to Mona is a construction site, a new wing in the making. It will house a new five-storey-high work by Anselm Kiefer, related to a building-artwork at his studio in the south of France. “I am about to spend another £28mn just on the construction! As for running costs, they are enough to run me into the ground — about £10mn a year. But if I was only doing what I could afford to do, I wouldn't be doing anything at all.”

So how will the wildly expensive, eccentric museum continue? Walsh says revenue from his gambling syndicate will support it, plus streams of cash from other sources. The brilliant O app which visitors to Mona use is a location-aware device which gives them information about the works they are standing in front of and enables virtual queueing for some displays. He sells the technology, notably to the J Paul Getty Museum in LA and the Bob Dylan Center in Tulsa. “Mona is the largest shareholder in the company — Art Processors — and that is how I hope to assure its future.”

He wrote in his 2014 book, *A Bone of Fact*, “I built Mona to absolve myself from feeling guilty about making money without making a mark.” I ask him about this. “That was certainly true when I built Mona, but I feel a lot less like that now,” he says. “Maybe I have become more self-assured, and I have done sufficient penance.

“I’m pouring money into it and I can continue to do that. When I am no longer here I can assure its future — and it will be substantial.”

‘Oceans of Air’ runs to July 24. mona.net.au

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