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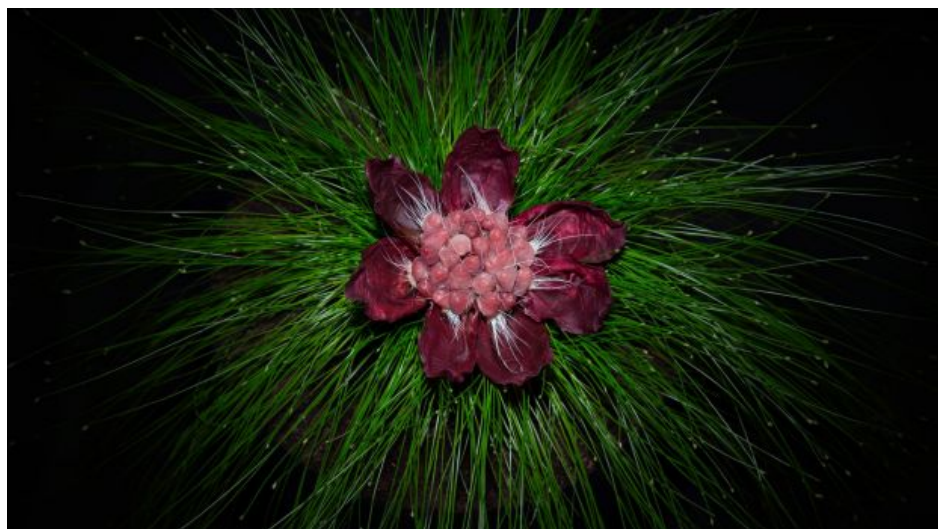
Is art really just about bonking? MONA's David Walsh ruffles feathers (again)

John Bailey

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When David Walsh opened his Museum of Old and New Art in 2011, he explained the spur that drove him to erect such an outrageous shrine to human creativity: "Better build a museum; make myself famous. That will get the chicks."

From anyone else it would be a throwaway quip, but that same year he asserted that all art is "about going back to being young, trying to get laid". MONA has always trained its laser focus on the twin poles of mortal existence – sex and death – but you can now see its history as more than a mere succession of confronting and titillating exhibitions.



Aures rubri cuniculorum, capita fetarum musum, palpebrae vaccae (Beet-dyed Rabbit Ears, Heads of Baby Mice and Cows' Eyelashes) (detail) 2013, by Heide Hatry. Silver halide print. Photo: Heide Hatry

From day dot, Walsh has had a master plan. If MONA's cliff-edge labyrinth of decadence and wickedness has felt a bit Bond Villain at times, Walsh's latest exhibition is as close to the climactic Bad Guy Monologue as we're going to get.

On the Origin of Art, which flips the finger to decades of academic theory by arguing that all art has its roots in biology, boasts more than 230 exhibits, from MONA and beyond, and includes nine new commissions. Walsh handed over his collection to an international quartet of co-curators, and has chosen them – in another f--- you to the art world – from the realms of science and

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evolutionary theory.



Ajax and Cassandra (detail), 1886, by Solomon J. Solomon. Oil on canvas. Photo: Art Gallery of Ballarat

The most provocative might be American evolutionary psychologist Geoffrey Miller, who argues that art-making is and has always been a mating strategy. "People freak out about the idea that the visual arts serve some courtship functions," he says. "They're happy to admit that professional artists get paid, but they don't want to admit that artists get laid. They'd rather treat high art as if it's produced by altruistic, asexual virgins pursuing beauty for its own sake."

A Van Gogh self-portrait is just a Tinder pic *avant la lettre*? The co-curators of the exhibition expect to encounter some who will "bristle at the idea that art has analogies to animal ornamentation, or deep prehistoric roots, or evolved functions, or reproductive pay-offs," says Miller. "Most of these objections come from folks who have never taken a serious look at a peacock or a bowerbird, who haven't actually read Darwin, who don't understand the basics of sexual selection theory, and who haven't talked with many living artists or their lovers."

I've done all of those things, and Miller still sounds like he has sex on the brain. The surprising thing is that Miller's co-curators agree.

"I don't think sexual selection is the driver of art," says Brian Boyd, of the University of Auckland. "I think it's another gear for art. Human beings live in tightly knit social groups and without that social co-operation no human could have survived in prehistoric days. Miller seems to forget that and think only about the competitiveness of sexual pursuit and sexual display."

Boyd's section of the exhibition begins with an illustrative example: one of the *Dot Obsession* rooms by Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama. The 87-year-old Japanese artist has voluntarily lived in a hospital for the mentally ill for three decades and has only had one romantic (though non-sexual) relationship. Kusama is arguably at her most popular these days, but is hardly the centrefold model for *Hot Genes Monthly*.

But Miller's argument isn't simply that the art world is populated by a bunch of



the art world is populated by a bunch of horn-dogs. It's that sexual selection plays a part in art's transmission, even if there's no "conscious or sublimated sexual motivation" on the part of the artist. "This is the fallacy that evolutionary function equals subjective motivation," he says. "Wrong. We do lots of things because of sexual selection that work to attract mates, but that don't feel very sexual, such as getting university degrees, driving flashy cars and doing virtue-signalling in our political comments on Facebook."

What the *Origin* curators concur upon is art's evolutionary basis. Boyd points to another work from the MONA collection as evidence: a 15,000-year-old spear-thrower adorned with an intricately carved sculptural doe giving birth. It must have taken several hundred hours to shape, he says, which means that someone was being allowed a vast amount of time off hunting and gathering to do what? Make a pretty yet useless decoration?

"You've got to explain why such extravagant wastes of time, energy and material weren't selected out, if they didn't yield some sort of survival or reproductive benefit," agrees Miller. "And once you confront those cost-benefit trade-offs, you're already in the domain of evolutionary theory. A purely cultural explanation just can't work, because the genetic propensities to do culturally cool but reproductively useless activities would get eliminated within a few dozen generations of selection."

The arts and sciences have no shortage of \$5 words but their exchange rate is what economists would call volatile. "Humans are such a clever species that we invent all kinds of things that press our pleasure buttons without being evolutionary adaptations," says co-curator Steven Pinker, a Canadian-American cognitive scientist. But when Pinker described art as so much "cheesecake" in his bestselling book *How the Mind Works*, some art lovers found other buttons being pushed.

From a scientific viewpoint, cheesecake is fascinating, he argues: "a confection that combines sweet, creamy, and fruity sensations, not because that maximises offspring, but because it gives us pleasure." From an evolutionary standpoint, making something that sets buzzing all of these responses we inherited from our hungry ancestors for no other purpose than pleasure is itself



Brandon Ballenge, DFA 186, Hades, 2012. Unique Iris print on watercolor paper. (Copyright Brandon Ballenge) Photo: Brandon Ballenge



Untitled 1994/95, by Bill Henson. Type-C photograph, adhesive tape, pins, glassine. (Copyright Bill Henson) Photo: Bill Henson



Paradisus Terrestris, 1989-90, by Fiona Hall. Cut and moulded sardine tin; aluminium, tin and steel. (Copyright Fiona Hall) Photo: Fiona Hall

a marvel.

American theoretical neurobiologist Mark Changizi understands the perils of applying purely scientific methods to the analysis of art: "Science is too stupid to say anything smart about art. Scientists can only deal with one parameter or two parameters at a time in the lab. But artists as a community discover deep truths about the things that excite the mind or get your brain vibrating."

Changizi's contribution to *On the Origin of Art* explores the notion of cultural selection – that humans have selected certain common stimuli across cultures and centuries, and have done so because they appeal to processes we evolved for other reasons. We don't have an instinct for reading and writing, for example, but our writing systems piggy-back off our evolved abilities to see contours and patterns in nature.

Elsewhere his contentions are more esoteric. Our emotional responses to colour in art may hitch a ride on our evolutionary ability to recognise skin colours as indicators of fear, lust, disease and so on. His theories of music are even denser. He walks me through doppler shifts and loudness modulation and inverse squares – oh my! – before stating that "music at baseline is what humans sound like when they move".

But where is the ugly in all of this? If art just pushes pleasure buttons or reminds us of great-great-great-uncle Grug's romantic proclivities, what do we make of the long tradition of grotesque or abject works that repel as much as attract? One of the most striking inclusions in *Origin* is in Pinker's corner. Heide Hatry's *Aures rubri cuniculorum, capita fetarum musum, palpebrae vaccae* (*Beet-dyed Rabbit Ears, Heads of Baby Mice and Cows' Eyelashes*) looks like a sumptuous floral arrangement but is, as the title reveals, composed of something far more stomach-turning.

"My interpretation of Hatry's work is that she ingeniously pits several features of our psychology against each other," says Pinker. "Our instinctive response of attraction to beautiful faces and flowers, and our instinctive revulsion to unfamiliar animals parts and to the possible products of violence and violations of the body envelope.

"The simultaneous push and pull forces us to question our naive realism and to appreciate that our aesthetic responses are in fact features of our psychology



We Share Our Chemistry with the Stars (AJ 280R) DIL2214, 2009, by Marc Quinn. Oil on canvas. (Copyright Marc Quinn) Photo: Todd-White Art Photography

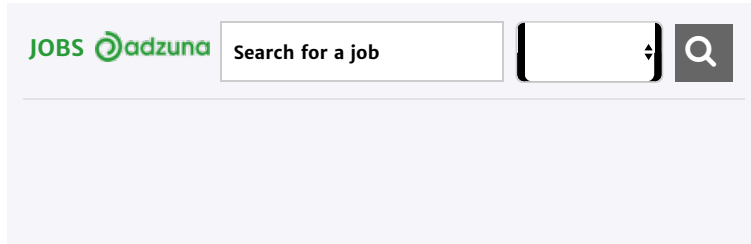


Dots Obsession, Tasmania, 2016, by Yayoi Kusama. Mixed media installation. (Copyright Yayoi Kusama) Photo: Mona/Remi Chauvin


rather than a direct reflection of good and bad things in the world."

Hatry's is the kind of work MONA has always specialised in – disquieting, compelling, even disgusting. But visitors to *Origin* may find their minds turned from the cliched "is it art?" to a more challenging question: "Is it evolution?" Stepping back, there's a case to be made that constructing a quarter of a billion-dollar bower of provocative art is the kind of animal display that makes the exhibition's point for it. Still, as Walsh defended himself upon MONA's opening: "It's not my fault. It's Darwin's."

***On the Origin of Art* is at MONA, Hobart, until April 2017.**

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