

Odd happenings are big attraction to dark Hobart

TIM DOUGLAS THE AUSTRALIAN 12:00AM June 15, 2016

He is everywhere and nowhere all at once. At Willow Court, a derelict former mental institution in the Hobart suburb of New Norfolk, veteran performance artist Mike Parr has taken silent residency in a tiny, cold room on the site's sprawling premises. Photographs and videos of the artist can be found in various rooms around the precinct but just where the 70-year-old Australian is situated remains something of a mystery. He is here. Somewhere.

The neatly manicured gardens and well-appointed art deco facade of this site betray a darker reality. From 1827 to 2000, Willow Court housed, in sometimes shocking circumstances, Tasmania's mentally ill, from "lunatic" convicts at the early New Norfolk Insane Asylum through to inpatients at the Royal Derwent Hospital's Milton Rise facility. The site, the latter iteration of which was decommissioned in 2000, still haunts many Tasmanians. And tonight, Parr is doing the haunting.

Crowds, admitted on presentation of a mirror, peek in abandoned rooms, traipsing over broken glass, ducking beneath exposed ceilings and negotiating the acres and acres of possum faeces and urine that blanket almost every corner of this ghost town in search of one man and the story of so many others. At the end of a darkened, graffiti-scrawled alleyway — all smashed windows and General Electric appliances paused in time — we find Parr. - Pyjama-clad and kneeling next to a bucket of human waste in front of a table full of pencils and paper, Parr's eyes are closed in silent vigil. He has just entered the first of 72 hours that comprise *Asylum*, the live performance and drawing centrepiece for Dark Mofo, the Museum of Old and New Art's annual winter festival.

"Mike Parr," intoned Dark Mofo's creative director Leigh Carmichael earlier by way of introduction, "is sitting in the women's maximum security wing for the criminally insane, just behind us. He is in a mind-altered state. This work is incredibly disturbing. It is the most powerful Dark Mofo has ever produced."

Parr's work, the performance aspect of which will conclude tonight, is a tribute to his brother, Tim, who was a patient at a mental institution and who died in 2009. *Asylum* also features famous video works of the artist sewing together his lips, and face, and bespoke works he has created in response to the New Norfolk site.

"This is not cheap entertainment," curator Jarrod Rawlins warned of the show, which on opening night saw long queues for entry. "It is not cheap. And it's not entertainment."

Parr's work is the most ambitious — might it be the darkest? — undertaken as part of David Walsh's annual artistic celebration of the winter solstice. More than 400 artists at 25 venues across the Tasmanian capital — including seven festival precincts, a cathedral and a funeral parlour — have been brought together for the festival, which began in 2013.

Almost 24,000 people attended opening weekend, and Carmichael expects visitor numbers to climb beyond the 280,000 recorded at last year's event, which featured world acclaimed performance artist Marina Abramovic. "We are sitting at close to 90 per cent of our box office now, which is huge," he says, adding that interstate visitor numbers are up 40 per cent from last year.

Early last week there were fears the festival, which adds a reported \$46 million annually to the state economy and which has an operating budget of \$8m, might not happen at all. The event, which is this year funded by the Tasmanian government to the tune of \$2.1m, coincided with the worst floods seen in more than 100 years in the state. The worst damage was in Launceston, where three people remain missing as parts of the city were devastated and the city's Cataract Gorge resembled a raging torrent. In Hobart, some ferry services were cancelled as the state remained on high alert over the festival's opening weekend.

And so it was with polite nomenclature understatement that the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery opened major exhibition, *Tempest*, under stormy skies. Curated by former Sydney Biennale director Juliana Engberg, TMAG's show — which has its roots in Shakespeare's play — brings together storm-related works by artists as varied as William Kentridge, - Valerie Sparks and Ricky Swallow. Anchoring the exhibition at the 170-year-old institution on the Hobart docks is *No 17599 (2016)*, a dramatic 2.4m x 9.8m blackboard drawing of a storm by British artist Tacita Dean.

Back at MONA, Walsh's self-proclaimed subversive adult Disneyland on the banks of the Derwent, another celebration of nature's dark power is occurring.

Victorian artist Cameron Robbins's *Field Lines*, an expansive show occupying the lower galleries of the museum, features dozens of works — including seven commissioned - installations — focusing on the natural elements. Robbins, whose exhibition has been three decades in the making, is best known for his wind- and ocean-powered mechanical drawing and photographic tools: pseudo-meteorological instruments that harness natural forces to propel a pen around paper to represent time. "I am obsessed with forces in the landscape and I'm really attracted to chaos theory and fractal mathematics," he explains, walking among his ink drawings and mechanical contraptions. "(My work is) really about harnessing the elements to give form to the unseen."

One of the most striking on display is *Wind Funnel*, which features a 15m long tunnel, which generates three wind-powered contraptions that feed into a mechanical counter-weighted arm holding a pen. The result is a striking geometric approximation of the elements, many more dramatic examples of which flank the piece on the gallery's walls. *Tide Line*, commissioned by MONA, is what Robbins calls a "lunar clock". It transfers the tidal motion and pressure from the Derwent, through a pipe that extends beyond the gallery walls, to a pen and 10m-long piece of paper wrapped around a giant drum, which rotates at the same rate as the moon. "There is, here, a physical connection to the river. I'm trying to capture that. I'm trying to bring (nature's) shapes into the world."

The other major commission is Ryoji Ikeda's *Supersymmetry*, an immersive digital-based work conceived during the Japanese artist and composer's time in residence at CERN, the

home of the Large Hadron Collider in Geneva. *Supersymmetry* features three large lightboxes filled with ballbearings on a moving table. The data from the balls is seemingly fed into a NASA-like TV bank, where the information is presented and then interrupted by disorienting flashes of light and sound. While the artist says the work — an artistic take on space-time symmetry — was inspired by his time at the home of subatomic discovery, he dispels any notion it is scientific.

“I spent two months at CERN,” he says. “They gave me a key, and I could go anywhere I wanted. But it takes 15 years to begin to understand quantum physics and I was there only a short time. So I understand only 1 per cent of what they were doing. I just made some art.”

Ryoji was the first artist in residence at the Geneva facility, where the Higgs boson particle was discovered in March 2013.

The festival features an expanded Dark Park, the industrial-art precinct behind the city’s docks. It hosts an inoffensive mixture of worthy art (Brazil performance group Grupo EmpreZa and United Visual Artists’ light installation *Our Time*) and sideshow attractions (hall of mirrors and a grungy labyrinth). Over the coming week, the festival will host its annual nude solstice swim in Sandy Bay, in addition to its burgeoning music program, which suffered a major blow on opening day when headline act British band Savages cancelled their national tour. The band will be replaced by Melbourne’s Eddy Current Suppression Ring in a program that features artists as diverse as American electronic artist ZHU and classical soprano Greta Bradman. The festival also hosts a film component. Its foodie drawcard the Winter Feast begins tomorrow.

There is no doubt Walsh’s winter jamboree is getting stronger as it moves towards Carmichael’s great vision for it as “one of the world's leading international arts festivals”. Its programming, far edgier than majority-publicly funded festivals, is risk-takingly unique. Audiences in this city are engaged like at no other festival around the country. Indeed it is hard to shake the palpable sense that still, five years after MONA was founded by the millionaire gambler Walsh, something big is happening in this city.

Perhaps Tim Steiner, the human artwork known as Tattoo Tim, says it best. Steiner, a British-born Swiss upon whose back Wim Delvoye created a tattoo artwork that was later sold, along with Steiner himself, is halfway through a 12-month shirtless, motionless, plinth-bound residency at MONA. While divulging his life story — which includes being bought (for \$US150,000) and sold and exhibited around the world, including at the Louvre — Steiner says Dark Mofo and the museum itself are changing the face of the arts internationally.

“On the wrong side of the world, in a place it doesn’t belong, MONA and David Walsh have given the city a gift,” he says. “(Dark Mofo) is a celebration of human creativity. It celebrates the beautiful things, the smelly things, the ugly things. All you have to do is just let yourself fall and experience it.”

Dark Mofo runs at various locations until June 21. Tim Douglas travelled to Hobart with the assistance of MONA.