

# David Walsh puts scientists in the curator's seat for new Mona exhibition

Mona founder chooses four 'biocultural scientist-philosophers' to explore the links between evolutionary biology and art

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When professional gambler, art patron and newly ordained officer in the Order of Australia David Walsh says he'll be exploring the biological basis of art, one could be forgiven for thinking he's talking crap.

After all, any visitor to his Museum of Old and New Art (Mona) in Hobart who has seen (or smelled) Belgian artist Wim Delvoye's Cloaca Professional - colloquially known as the "poop machine" - can attest to Walsh's scatological interests.

But this time he's talking about something else entirely - though it's no less likely to turn noses.

For a new exhibition opening at Mona in November, Walsh has skipped the rank and file of art curators and enlisted four "biocultural scientist-philosophers" to pull together four concurrent exhibitions that look at the links between evolutionary biology and art.

Titled On the Origin of Art, the show will see cognitive scientist and linguist Steven Pinker, professor of literature and evolution Brian Boyd, evolutionary neurobiologist Mark Changizi and evolutionary psychologist Geoffrey Miller use art to explain the scientific reasons we create.

Each has been given the keys to Mona's collection and the option to borrow works from local, state and national galleries; public and private collections from around the world, as well as the opportunity to stage new commissions.

Walsh made the announcement at Melbourne's Athenaeum Theatre on Wednesday night during a loose and discursive in-conversation with journalist and broadcaster Jennifer Byrne.

Holding forth on everything from statistical arbitrage in betting to the stotting behaviour of gazelles, Walsh explained the personal importance of this exhibition, tracing its genesis back to the inception of Mona and even to his childhood.

The museum's main themes of sex and death, he explained, are also fundamental guiding forces of Darwinian evolution, something which the self-described "Catholic atheist" has been obsessed with since childhood.

Regardless of whether an exhibition with scientists in the curator's seat will work, *On the Origin of Art* is at least likely to engender discussion about three of the great mysteries of our time: the nature of art, its relationship with science and David Walsh himself.

Either way, Walsh seems optimistic - for the most part.

"We're far enough down the track that I can tell you it's gonna be a bloody good exhibition, all four bloody good exhibitions," he told the crowd.

"Possibly three bloody good exhibitions and one dud."

*On the Origin of Art is at the Museum of Old and New Art, Tasmania, from 5 November 2016 to 17 April 2017.*

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