



This Year's Dark Mofo Will Make You Feel Inconsequential in a Good Way

Wendy Syfret — Jun 16 2016



Neon effects from Field Lines by Cameron Robbins

When people write about [Dark Mofo \(https://darkmofo.net.au/#week1\)](https://darkmofo.net.au/#week1), they're always quick to mention the sense of gothica that hangs around the festival. It's as though when [Mona \(http://www.mona.net.au/\)](http://www.mona.net.au/), David Walsh's museum of strange wonders, arrived in Hobart, it introduced the city's creepiness. But as any local can tell you, it's always been a dark place. Huddled around the harbour and retaining a distinctly colonial footprint Tasmania's black winter nights only add to the feeling you're in a Mary Shelley story.

Last year the festival took advantage of this sense of unease. Under the cloak of Marina Abramovic it felt notably occultish. There were echoes of witches and you always felt there was barely a silk veil separating you from another world. But in 2016 the organisers and artists brought us back to reality to examine our past, present and future.

Arriving on Thursday night, the city was still feeling the impact of recent floods. Joining the media throng I crowded with other writers onto a bus to Willow Court Asylum (<https://darkmofo.net.au/asylum>), the sight of Mike Parr's much talked about performance piece. Originally we were told we were supposed to make the journey by ferry, assumably laughing and drinking the whole way there. But staring out of a window, the fog of my own breath obscuring the city as it dropped away, this felt more appropriate for what was to come.



Willow Court asylum

Willow Court was a working mental health hospital for over 180 years before it was closed in the early 2000s. It provided not only the base of the local area's ghost stories, but also much of its employment. For his performance Parr shut up himself in a room reserved for the most

disturbed patients. For 72 hours he would draw until exhausted, sleep on a thin mattress, and consume only thin watery soup in this cold brutal place.

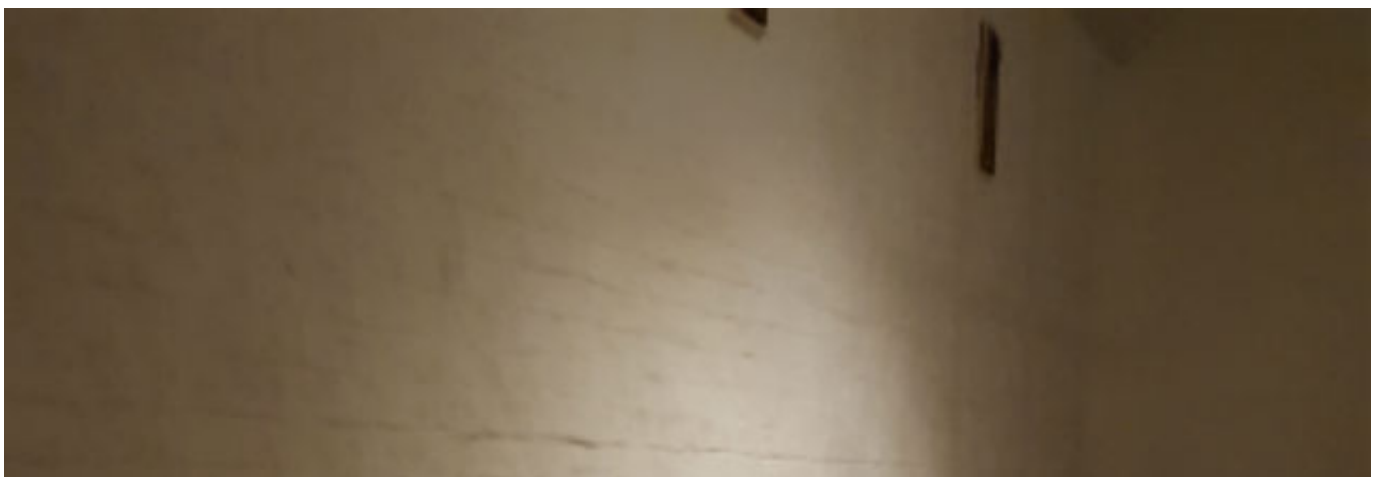
The performance was a response his the death of his brother Tim several years earlier from complications around alcoholism. It was hard to not wonder if this act of pushing himself to his limits was an atonement for feelings over his role in his brother's life in death. Performed in this place where so many had come to in desperation it felt like a meditation on the pain of many pasts.

At the opening address of the show, the curators stressed that they wished to honour what happened over Willow Court's century and a half history. They said this wasn't about gawking at history's, but rather a way to remember those who had been forgotten to it.

Walking through the rest of the show—several derelict rooms, some holding rubble, other's violent video art, and one buckets of piss—you realise this is a piece designed to not only evoke discomfort but also envelope you in the artist's grief.

Entry was ticketed by mirror, it was free but the artists asked you leave your reflective token behind in an area of the space that spoke to you. It was a small call, but engaging personally was surprisingly confronting. Leaving mine in one of the last rooms full of rubble I felt for a moment that I slipped to another time, when perhaps my fate could have been contained in these thick stone walls. With the smell of piss stinging my nose I felt sick and sad and sodden with the history of the building.

On my way out I was stopped by a tipsy woman in line who asked me how it was. I responded that it was sad and disturbing, she looked delighted. I knew the feeling, I came there for a horror show too.





The aforementioned buckets of piss

While Mike Parr's demonstration was almost painfully intimate, the other two major shows at Dark Mofo disregard the human experience all together. Rather, Cameron Robbins and Ryoji Ikeda's very different displays suggest how inconsequential we are.

[Cameron Robbins' *Field Lines*](https://darkmofo.net.au/field-lines-cameron-robbins) (<https://darkmofo.net.au/field-lines-cameron-robbins>) looks at the way we take art from nature, approaching that relationship in the most literal way possible. His art isn't responses to the world, it removes the human intermediate to allow the elements to speak for themselves. Robbins builds machines that use wind, magnetic fields, sun and sea levels to control constantly moving pens and lights that are picked up in long exposure photos.

Highlights include a neon installation that marked out magnetic disturbances and a huge drum-like wheel that slowly rotated over a month while a shifting pen tracking the ebbing river levels outside. Looking closely at the pen's recent markings one could observe the area's recent flooding through lines and motion. Viewing these erratic brushstroke pieces in the deep belly of Mona evoked an overwhelming feeling of closeness with the earth. While Robbins looks up and out to nature, Ryoji Ikeda's [*Supersymmetry*](https://darkmofo.net.au/supercodex) (<https://darkmofo.net.au/supercodex>) takes things to a much, much smaller place. His violent mix of digital art and sound was created after taking part in the CERN artist in residence program. His time in Geneva, the only artist among thousands of scientists, lead him to create a piece that was an artistic impression of the science behind the CERN proton collider. In it the movements of ball bearings in several trays are tracked with the digital information played back over dozens of flashing screens.

While Robbins was chatty and open when speaking about his work, Ikeda was more illusive during his brief media press call. He politely declines to expand on the method or meaning behind the piece. Rather he casually repeated that it was like music, it had no meaning and was whatever you found in it. This isn't a piece about connection. Disinterested in even going into how he created it, or the details of his time at CERN Ikeda just mused that this kind of physics was too large to really try and unpack.

Whether or not it was on purpose, his coyness played into the sense of helplessness one felt while in the installation. Its seemingly random nature reminding you of how much and little the world around us means.



Ryoji Ikeda's Supercodex

Adding to the sense of nothingness when facing the forces of the universe was his *Supercodex* live set the next night. Described as “a battle of digital noise, blips, and bass drones created from raw data and mathematical models”, it made sure you felt every atom in your being quake. After both shows I was struck by how connected I felt to the world around me, and how totally paltry I was to it.

Since it opened Mona has been heralded as a bright, shining light, in Australian arts and culture. It comforts us, amid all our failings it's a reminder that we are still a civilised group that deserve nice things. But this year the festival made sure that it wasn't just a bandaid to

soothe our frayed nerves, it was an open wound to our past that called us to examine our future. Good art makes you feel something, great art reminds you that your feelings don't matter. We're all just dust anyway.

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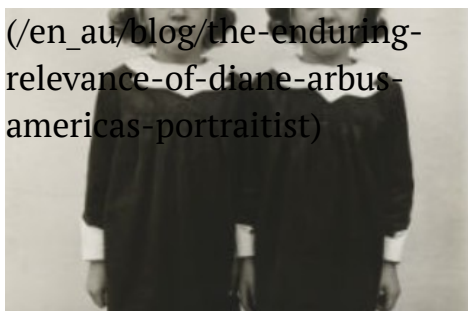


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