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DAVID WALSH



Portrait of David Walsh. Photo by Rémi Chauvin. Courtesy: Museum of Old and New Art, Hobart.

MATTHEW BARNEY, *Sharduf*, 2014, cast brass, 365.8 x 304.8 x 457.2 cm. Courtesy the artist, Museum of Old and New Art, Hobart, and Gladstone Gallery, New York/Brussels.

Outside Chance

BY MICHAEL YOUNG

Australian David Walsh is a professional gambler, art collector, iconoclast and autodidact with an acute grasp of philosophy. He is also an eccentric who, in 2011, opened the AUD 171 million Museum of Old and New Art (MONA) in Hobart, capital city of Australia's southern island state, Tasmania, and home to Walsh's idiosyncratic collection of antiquities, Australian modern art and international contemporary art.

Charming yet enigmatic, Walsh has an aging-hippy persona and a look to match: red shoes, jeans, paisley-print jacket and wiry gray hair that reaches his shoulders. Our meeting takes place 43 stories high in his Sydney penthouse with 360-degree views over the city and harbor, one of the fruits of many years of successful gambling.

MONA is either a rich man's toy or a rich man's folly—it is hard to say which. What is clear is that the museum spends more than it earns, costing its owner AUD 8 million annually, yet benefits the Tasmanian economy somewhere in the region of AUD 65–79 million in tourism and other ancillary revenues each year. Walsh maintains that he is not a philanthropist; MONA is not a charity and receives no state sponsorship, nor does it have a board. Its owner is free to acquire and deaccession art as he chooses, and his imprimatur is evident throughout the museum in various challenges to conventional wisdom. Printed guides, for instance, were eschewed in favor of a high-tech "O" iPod device (developed by one of Walsh's companies) that tracks visitors and supplies information as desired—including commentary from the founder himself.

With input from Walsh, Greek-Australian architect Nonda Katsalidis designed MONA around a major 2005 acquisition: Australian artist Sidney Nolan's huge creation-myth mural, *Snake* (1970–72). Carved from a sandstone cliff face jutting into the Derwent River, the subterranean building evolved from one long, curving gallery housing Nolan's 40-plus-meter-long composition comprised of 1,620 small paintings of flowers, faces, birds and animals. Walsh so loves this monumental work that he had a glass floor installed in his personal apartment above the gallery—where he lives with his wife, the artist Kirsha Kaechele—so that he could admire *Snake* at any time.

MONA's—and by extension Walsh's—collection began by chance in 1992 in South Africa at a small club that was once a casino. He bankrolled a friend's fruitful blackjack game, the winnings from which exceeded the

legal limit for export. At Walsh's suggestion, the surplus takings were put toward the purchase of a carved wooden Yoruba door from northern Nigeria that he spotted during the trip. A practical answer to a customs conundrum soon became an obsession; over the ensuing decade, more acquisitions followed, including coins, Egyptian artifacts and Australian modernist art by the likes of Arthur Boyd, Brett Whitely and Sidney Nolan. Finally, in 2003, the collector arrived at contemporary art when he acquired American painter Susan Rothenberg's *Head with Arm (Yellow)* (1996–97).

Walsh's views on conceptual art are divisive. "I would argue, and have argued, that conceptual art isn't really art," he contends, noting that it is nearer to philosophy than art. "MONA is on the brink of becoming a museum of philosophy," he quips. The collector favors a direct approach, buying straight from the studios of artists he appreciates, but stresses that he does so "without strategy," in a process "dictated by interest and whim."

Today, the collection—valued at close to AUD 100 million—is made up of thousands of pieces, including an extensive hoard of ancient coins along with roughly 700 works of art. Walsh tells me that a commission by American artist James Turrell (whom the collector says he'd give a green light to create anything) is currently underway.

One of Walsh's favorite pieces is the installation *Cloaca Professional* (2010), Belgian conceptual artist Wim Delvoye's feces manufacturing machine that evacuates its noxious contents daily. "*Cloaca* is perfect art for me, with its visceral impact; it is sensory overload and an extracted aesthetic for the 21st century." Then there is Chris Ofili's *Holy Virgin Mary* (1996) with elephant dung and controversial imagery, and *Locus Focus* (2004) by the Austrian collective Gelitin, who employ cleverly placed mirrors that allow visitors to see themselves defecating. "It started to look like a strategy, I admit," Walsh says, regarding the theme. A showman, he believes that there is much to be gained from shock value.

Which brings us to MONA's most ambitious exhibition to date, "River of Fundament." The show features American artist Matthew Barney's five-plus-hour 2014 symphonic film—inspired by American author Norman Mailer's opaque, Egypt-based 1983 novel, *Ancient Evenings*—in which a full range of bodily functions are on display: rivers of excrement wrapped in gold leaf, flowing bodily fluids and acrobatic women urinating, to name a few. In conjunction with screenings

of the film, MONA has mounted a display of more than 50 props and artworks interspersed with ancient Egyptian artifacts from Walsh's collection. Sarcophagi, mummies and cartouches sit alongside Barney's often-monumental pieces, such as the five-ton cast copper and iron sculpture *Rouge Battery* (2014), which incorporates the underside of a 1967 Chrysler Crown Imperial dismembered in an earlier performance. Walsh calls it "one of the most aesthetically compelling things I have ever seen on earth."

What in the collection could its owner live without? "I could live without anything," he says. "But, let me answer this way: when a cash crisis occurs, there are some things that I never contemplate selling. Not because they are the best art, but because they most represent the way I see the world." As examples, Walsh cites *Hiroshima in Tasmania – The Archive of the Future* (2011–), Masao Okabe and Chihiro Minato's mixed-media installation incorporating stone remains from the site of the atom bombing, which is housed in the gallery's library and viewed by only 14 people at any one time; *Untitled (White Library)* (2004–6) by Cuban artist Wilfredo Prieto, a library of blank white books that for Walsh is "conceptually whole, physically elegant, emotionally pure"; and, of course, there is Delvoye's *Cloaca*.

MONA is the ultimate *wunderkammer*, a cabinet of curiosities writ large. "When I built it I didn't know what I was doing," Walsh says. This is not quite true. He had previously built a conventional museum housing antiquities on the same site; it failed to attract visitors. "I was trying to understand why my little antiquities museum looked like every other one." In 2007, he closed it and began work on MONA.

"It is fair to say when I came to art I lacked expertise," he notes, adding that he probably built MONA to "absolve [him]self of feeling guilty about making money without making a mark." But what Walsh lacked in expertise he more than compensated for in passion and curiosity. And luck.

He compares collecting art to an expedition exposed to elements beyond one's control. "We are floating on a sea of chance and that sea is bearing us somewhere," he tells me. "The idea that we know where the journey is taking us is a load of crap . . . reality has taught me that chance is a crucial component of the voyage."

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