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Survival tactics: The Red Queen and Dark MOFO

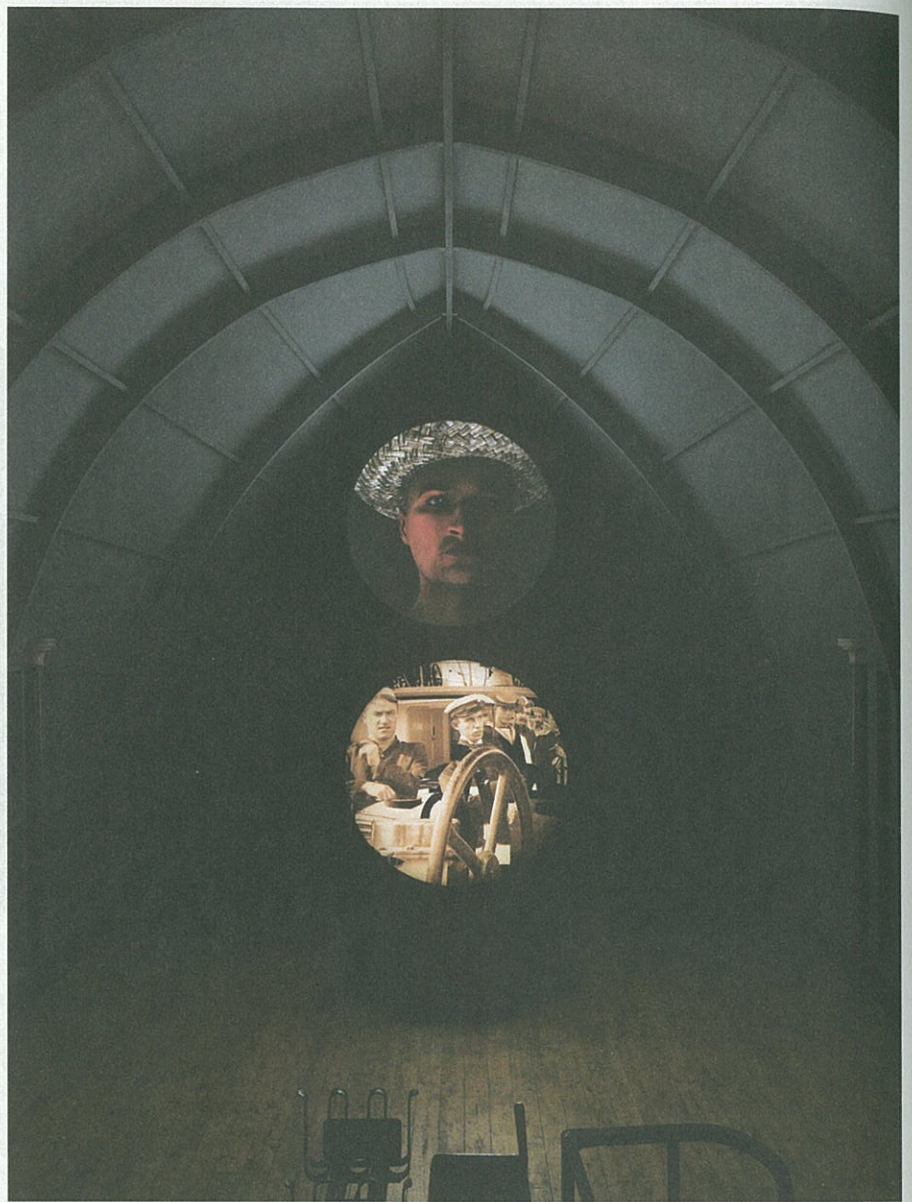
What is the purpose of art? Is it anything more than an evolutionary side effect? A new exhibition at MONA aims to find out. By Tracey Clement.



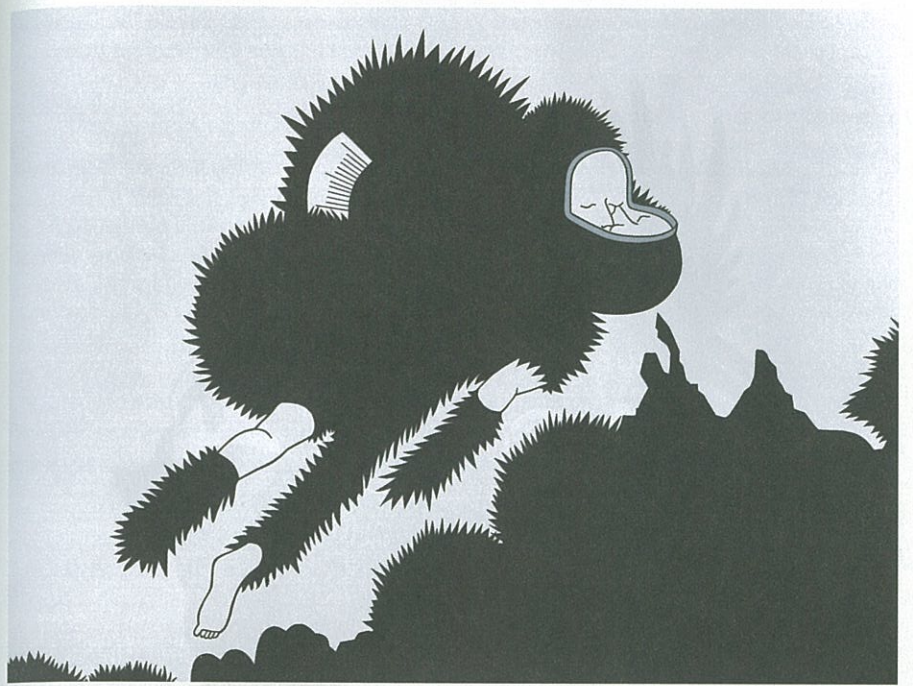
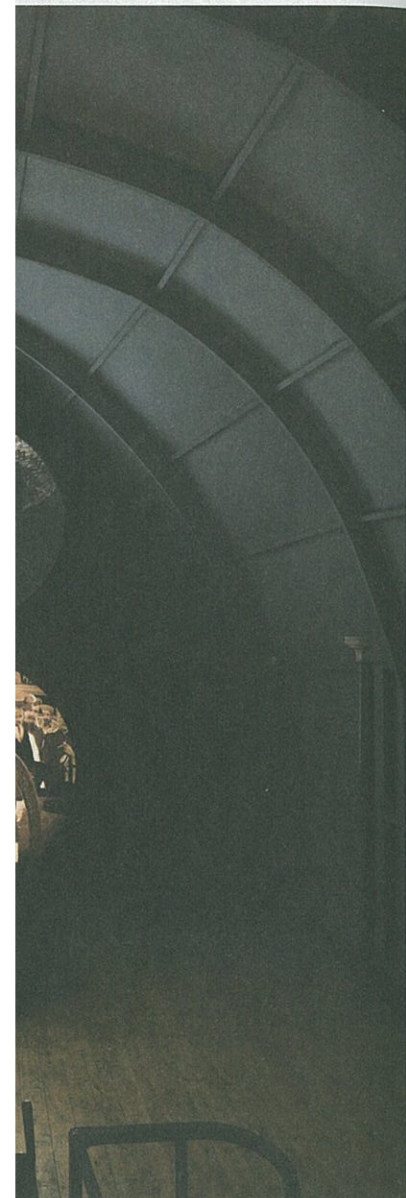
Institutional iconoclasm may sound like an oxymoron, but the Museum of Old and New Art, better known as MONA, has made a badass attitude part of its brand personality. Not content with using four letter words on the corporate website and slaughtering the sacred cow of the white cube, it has taken on what may be its biggest challenge yet. MONA is trying to make winter in Tasmania appealing. It's a big ask, but if anyone can do it MONA can. After the opening of the grand new building in 2011, MONA, led by millionaire,

gambler and art-collecting impresario David Walsh, seems to have single-handedly made Hobart a happening destination for flocks of culture vultures. Two years earlier, they had already made the city if not the hottest at least the hippest destination on the summer music festival circuit by creating a Festival of Music and Art, or MONA FOMA, usually shortened to the catchy, streetwise MOFO. And now there is Dark MOFO. As Nicole Durling, senior curator at MONA explains, "We've taken on winter."

Above: Lindsay Seers (born 1966, Mauritius; lives and works in London, England), *Nowhere Less Now*, 2012–2013. Commissioned by Artangel/MONA/Sharjah Art Foundation.



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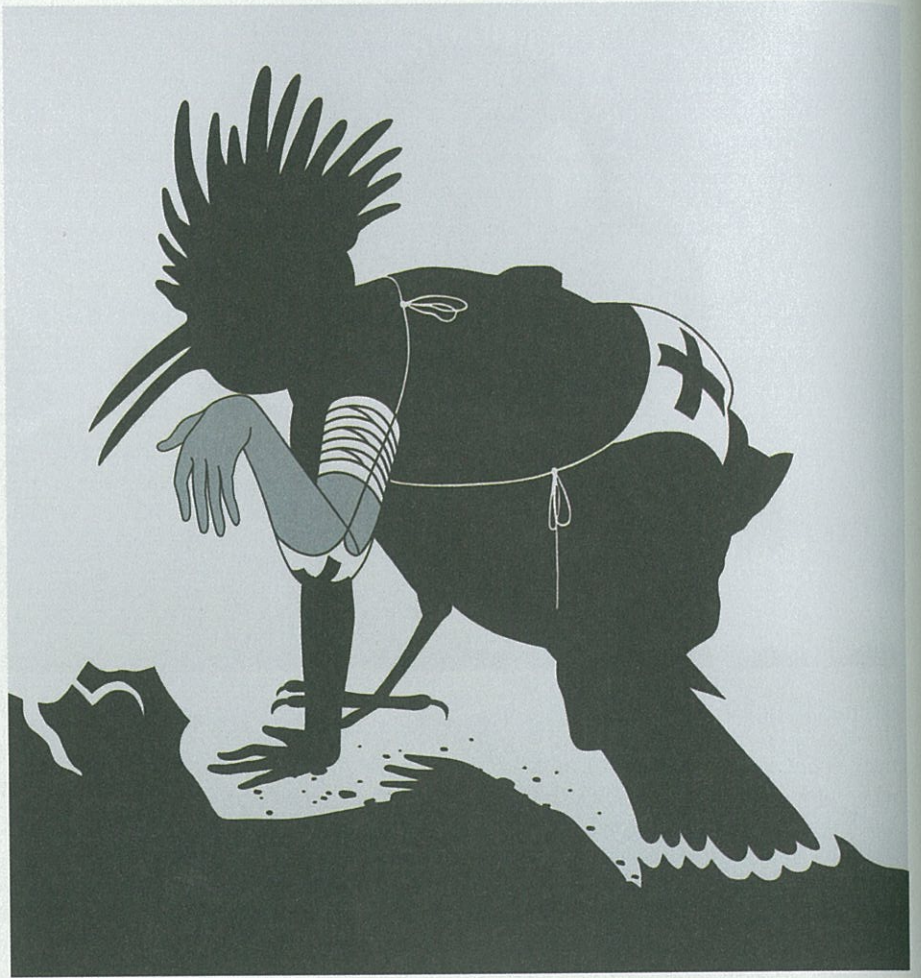
Dark MOFO will literally light up the longest nights of the year with *Beam in Thine Own Eye*, an exhibition that features light-based works including *Spectra*, by Paris-based Japanese artist Ryoji Ikeda. This monumental outdoor sculpture projects a beam of light into the night sky that can be seen from kilometres away. Running from 13 June to 23 June, Dark MOFO is an extended Winter Solstice party designed to help visitors survive and thrive in the big chill with food, music, performance and art. And the beating heart of the festival is the museum's major new exhibition, *The Red Queen*.

The Red Queen takes its name from two interlinked sources, one from literature, the other science. In Lewis Carol's second masterpiece, *Through the Looking Glass*, the Red Queen and Alice run a race in which

they keep running and running, only to stay in the same spot. In the 1980s, evolutionary biologist Leigh Van Valen of the University of Chicago took poetic licence with this notion and co-opted the phrase for his Red Queen hypothesis, which sought to explain the probability of extinction. The Red Queen hypothesis has become shorthand for the idea that constant change is necessary for survival. The theory has been used to explain reproductive sex as a strategy to avoid disease, and now, by MONA, to place under the microscope that perennial question, "Why do humans make art?"

Durling, who co-curated the exhibition with David Walsh and Olivier Varenne, explains that using a theory extrapolated from science makes perfect sense for MONA. "What we've done, right from our inception,

Above: Yves Netzhammer (born 1970 Switzerland; lives and works in Zurich, Switzerland), *The Subjectivisation of Repetition*, 2007–2013, site-specific installation commissioned by MONA, using video on DVD (2007); duration 00:42:24. Courtesy of the artist and Christinger de Mayo Gallery, Zurich.



Yves Netzhammer (born 1970 Switzerland; lives and works in Zurich, Switzerland), *The Subjectivisation of Repetition*, 2007–2013, site-specific installation commissioned by MONA, using video on DVD (2007); duration 00:42:24. Courtesy of the artist and Christinger de Mayo Gallery, Zurich.

is influenced by a scientific approach: a process of posing hypotheses and testing.” But unlike scientists, they aren’t necessarily looking for a quantifiable result. As she is quick to point out, “*The Red Queen* poses more questions than answers.”

What is art? What is the purpose of art? Is art a language, a way to record memory? Having mutated and evolved with us over millennia, is art necessary for our survival? And, critically, is art part of what makes us human?

The Red Queen presents questions such as these through over fifty artworks ranging from antiquities to freshly commissioned pieces by contemporary Australian artists Cameron Robbins, Brigita Ozolins and Laith McGregor, and international artists Toby Ziegler and Lindsay Seer. This inclusion of works from “a broad period of human creativity” is, as Durling says, essential to MONA’s scientific approach. It also reflects the old and new of Walsh’s extensive collection, which forms the starting point of the exhibition.

Perhaps as a nod to its literary origins, Durling refers to the exhibition in terms of narratives, clustered in chapters, that spill out of gallery spaces and are integrated across the entire museum. She explains that this reflects “the experimental approach to exhibition making that we like to take at MONA. We are not placing rigid boundaries. It’s about opening up dialogues; dialogues that the artworks have with each other and with visitors, and allowing personal connections and personal stories to be woven into the exhibition.”

The ability of art to tell stories, in multi-faceted ways, is one of the hypotheses evident in *The Red Queen*. “There is a lot of discussion around human beings as storytelling creatures and the evolutionary motivations behind storytelling,” Durling says. “Some theories have it that the way we recall memory is about storytelling.” Durling describes a work by Yves Netzhammer (previously unseen from the MONA collection) as

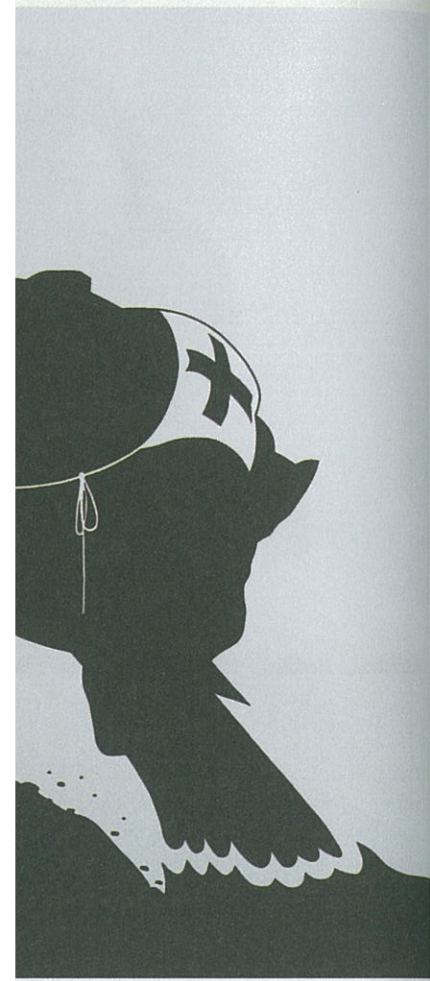
“digital dream sequences”. And dreams of course contain both fact and fiction, memories and stories.

Lindsay Seer’s installation *Nowhere Less Now* (2012) combines photography, performance, video and animation. This work was co-commissioned by MONA and *Art Angel* and was first shown in the UK. Durling says this second iteration of the work “is a beautiful example of quite complex narratives that are like memory recollection and storytelling”.

Elsewhere, the juxtaposition of artworks tell the story. A dual-screen video piece by Mike Parr is exhibited next to an ancient Egyptian sandstone panel from the tomb of Montuhotep (c. 2100BC). In *Silent Majority* (2006) Parr starts with the synonym for the word synonymous. This is followed by the synonym of the synonym and the process is repeated for eighty words. In *Blind Obedience* (2006), the letters are simply replaced by numbers. Parr highlights the way words and numbers form a kind of code or system that can be manipulated. Together, the ancient hieroglyphs and the contemporary videos create a dialogue about the nature of language.

Humans have made art for millennia. The oldest objects in the exhibition are Neolithic arrowheads, which display individual style and aesthetic choices beyond pure utility. Despite knowing that *The Red Queen* isn’t about finding answers, it’s hard not to draw one simple conclusion. As Durling admits, “An important point to make about art making is that it has adapted and evolved. It must be beneficial for our survival; it’s a trait or behaviour that has a function. Otherwise we would have shed it.” Why do we make art? Because we have to.

The Red Queen is at the Museum of Old and New Art (MONA), Hobart from 19 June to 21 April 2014. Dark MOFO takes place across multiple venues from 13 June to 23 June. mona.net.au



Switzerland), *The Subjectivisation of Repetition*, 2007–2013, D (2007); duration 00:42:24. Courtesy of the artist and