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FIONA CONNOR SARAH CONTOS HUBERT DUPRAT G-STAR LITTLEWHITEHEAD MELBOURNE'S ART FAIRS



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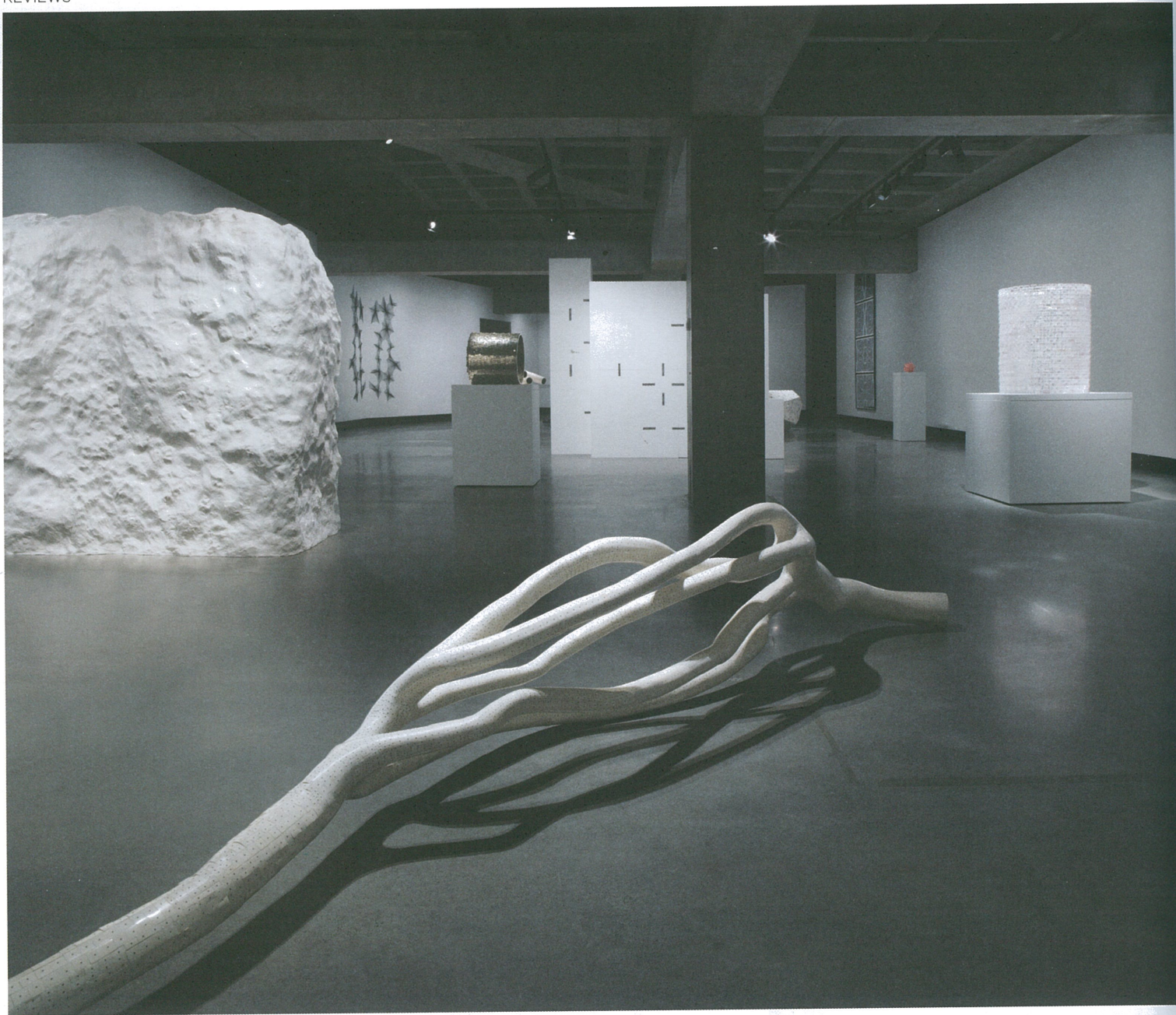
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Installation view:
HUBERT DUPRAT
Hubert Duprat, 2013
MONA, Hobart

Photo: MONA/Rémi Chauvin
Courtesy the artist
and MONA Museum of Old
and New Art, Hobart

HUBERT DUPRAT

Museum of Old and New Art, Hobart.

By Peter Hill

Hubert Duprat is a French artist who makes astonishing works. Right at the top of his jaw-dropping array of working methods is his collaboration with the small, moth-like caddisfly. Working with entomologists, he locates these hard-working homebuilders and places them in designer fish tanks within an art gallery environment. He removes any dirt, gravel, or twigs that caddisflies normally use to construct their protective sheaths and replaces them with – and I can't wait to tell you this – tiny fragments of gold, lapis lazuli, rubies, opals and diamonds.

And so a very precious and completely individual 'sculpture' is built. Duprat videos the whole process and gallery visitors can view the tiny creatures, magnified to the appetising size of a crayfish, building their new homes with all the care and precision of a Swiss watchmaker. Displayed alongside the projected videos are thin Perspex tanks where individual caddisflies can be seen doing their Rumpelstiltskin-esque thing.

HUBERT DUPRAT
Trichoptera larva with case,
1980–2010
gold and pearls
0.5 x 1.9 cm

Photo: Frédéric Delpech
Courtesy the artist
Art:Concept gallery, Paris
and MONA Museum of Old
and New Art



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I've been waiting half a lifetime to experience an artwork like this. Many years ago, as a young art student, I became fascinated by philosopher Karl Popper's concept of Worlds 1, 2 and 3. The first two worlds roughly paralleled Descartes' notions of body and mind. But World 3, objective knowledge, extended Cartesian Dualism into the realm of objects that had been acted upon by living things. A library could be viewed as a sophisticated World 3 object and so could a television set. Popper took his argument beyond the fabrication and ingenuity of humans and into the animal kingdom. Thus, a bird's nest, a beaver's dam and a spider's web could all be viewed as World 3 objects. And so, of course, could a caddisfly's sheath.

My own antennae have been raised, alert in search of artworks that might mirror this phenomenon. Most of what I found was artists imitating nature, or restructuring it, as in the work of Andy Goldsworthy using rocks, timber, and assorted flora to create his own World 3 artworks. England's David Nash and Dutch artist Sjoerd Buisman, have also made exciting work in this field. Walter De Maria famously harnessed some of the most extreme elements of nature in his *The Lightning Field* (1977), when he placed 400 steel poles within a one-mile by one-mile grid in the New Mexico desert. When lightning strikes, the night sky is filled with flashing forks of energy and light. Projects like this and Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (1970) – which formed a 1500-foot black basalt coil looping in to the Great Salt Lake – gave us the term 'land art'.

But it's not until seeing the work of Duprat, currently exhibited in the Museum of Old and New Art (MONA) in Hobart, Tasmania, that I have witnessed an artwork choreographed by a human and built by an insect. Or as David Walsh writes in the catalogue, "Hubert Duprat, like Wim Delvoye, co-opts nature in his art. He uses caddisflies to make his art. But they don't make *his* art, they make *their* art."

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The artist has been making these caddisfly works for almost 30 years. While he claims to have a library rather than a studio and to make very little in the way of art, that "very little" is perhaps false modesty. One of the larger galleries at MONA is filled with the most remarkable sculptures, mostly reflecting his passion for archaeology and geology, influenced by the poetics of writer Jorge Luis Borges and the French aesthetic philosopher Roger Caillois.

The exhibition is the most comprehensive survey of this 57-year-old artist's career.

There is an enormous, irregular white cube of Play-Doh pummelled into shape by long-suffering exhibition installers. There is a vast floor sculpture that looks like a Darth Vader mask, made from 200,000 magnetite spindles. Often, he brings two unlikely materials together in a sums-greater-than-parts statement of quiet beauty, as in a work called *Tribulum* (2012-2013) in which hundreds of pieces of knapped flint have been pressed into a vertical slab of green polyurethane foam, normally used by florists for display purposes; or in *Volos* (2013) where he has simply placed a polished stone axe head on top of a block of plastic-wrapped clay.

Delia Nicholls, MONA's research curator, told me about the installation of *Untitled* (2008-2013), which is made from Icelandic spar. "An installer was building the sides by gluing rhombohedral shaped calcite, with diligent concentration and a spirit level. Hubert picked up a cube, roughly 30 millimetres by 20 millimetres, and smashed it at my feet. The installer and I flinched. The crystal bounced into three pieces of varying size, each retaining the identical rhombohedron shape of the original. A tiny prism of simple joy filled my heart, and I understood that Duprat's art was showing me a natural wonder I would have missed in a museum of natural history."

You may be surprised that you have not heard of such an artist, who works at such high levels of curiosity and inventiveness (and all praise to David Walsh for bringing such world-class shows to Australia). After all, Damien Hirst only needs to announce that he is thinking of making a human skull from diamonds for it to be broadcast globally through all the major news agencies. But a caddisfly building underwater architecture from diamonds and gold? Not a word from Reuters or Associated Press.

Duprat is, of course, his own worst enemy in the self-publicity stakes. According to Adam Thorpe, author of *Ulverton* (Vintage Classics), "Hubert Duprat has never 'worked' the system; he hates the art market and believes there is 'too much art' being made; he avoids interviews; and he is a self-confessed dissident, who deliberately avoided living or working in Paris and embraced the provinces." He became a schoolteacher and lived in what has been described as a "gloomy apartment" in Pau. His *eureka* moment came when, as Thorpe describes in the catalogue, "He discovered, as if for the first time, the familiar *camera obscura* effect noted by Leonardo da Vinci...in Duprat's case, the aperture was a pinhole in the cardboard with which he had blacked out the window. In his slow exploration of this phenomenon of light projection, we see the entire curve of his career to date: a deep curiosity for natural phenomena; a desire to know how something works and to legitimize his practice by revealing those workings; an alchemical mixture of technical primitivism and modern technology."

And just when you think you have climbed the peaks of Duprat's creativity, another cliff face rises before you: his attempts to patent art and nature. As Jane Clark writes in the catalogue, "You can download his original eleven-page application from the European Patent Office (EPO) website. Carefully typed are Duprat's nine detailed claims of unprecedented novelty in the classes of rearing and breeding invertebrates (A01K67/033), producing decorative natural ornaments (B44C5/06), and making jewellery (A44C27/00). He describes 14 families and subfamilies of caddisfly that he has reared, using particular food, water temperature, and oxygenation."

Duprat refers to himself as an "amateur", but it is in the best 19th century tradition of the word. He should be a beacon to all young artists and scientists, showing how curiosity is the best, most honest motivator in life - not academic fame or commercial success. This exhibition is a triumph both for Duprat and his curator Olivier Varenne. His work deserves to be seen more widely around the world. ▽

Hubert Duprat opened at the Museum of Old and New Art, Hobart on December 7, 2013 and shows until July 28, 2014.

mona.net.au

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