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Duprat & Duchamp in Hobart

by Delia Nicholls

MONA's research curator Delia Nicholls describes her encounter with French artist Hubert Duprat as he prepared for his first Australian exhibition at the Museum of Old and New Art (MONA) in Hobart.

In the early mornings I take my daily constitution climbing paved hills as the sun's first beams slide across the River Derwent on their journey west. Often I try to imagine what my ancestors of 40,000 years past thought as they watched the sky lighten to red or orange and then soft grey or clear blue. It must have appeared magical and numinous – incomprehensibly more so than it does to my 21st century eyes. I know my intent to 'see' through the lens of my ancestor, who thanked the gods each morning for the sun's safe return, is futile because knowledge of our planetary journey means I cannot stand in the mind of that unknowing ancestor.

Before traffic sounds, chatter and digital static cover my senses in the banality of the everyday I try to observe the smallest wonders our universe reveals at every moment, if we stop doing and be still – to feel the soft quiet air, to hear the bird chorus, watch a spider working a web, and smell the eucalypt.

Then a few weeks ago I stumbled into wonder: I met French artist Hubert Duprat. He stood stocky, rumped and weary in the MONA gallery where he was working on his first Australian exhibition. I was drawn to a projected film of an insect building a bejewelled cocoon. He shrugged indifferently and his soft brown eyes looked around the gallery. 'That work is more than 30 years old, and there is much more.' He guided me to a clear crystal circle [Untitled (*Sans titre*), 2008] that was about the diameter of an ancient Greek column (I had just returned from western Turkey so I was still preoccupied with such comparisons). An installer was building the sides by gluing rhomboidal shaped calcite, or Icelandic spar, with diligent concentration and a spirit level. Hubert picked up a cube (30mm by 20mm) 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.

I have since learned that such dividing facility is not unusual, but for me the memory of that flush of wonder is precious. Hubert told me calcite has other skills: double refraction (when light enters, it divides into two rays moving at two different speeds, and when placed over an image there is a natural doubling) and that calcite becomes marble under extreme pressure over millions of years. Ah, the column of calcite.

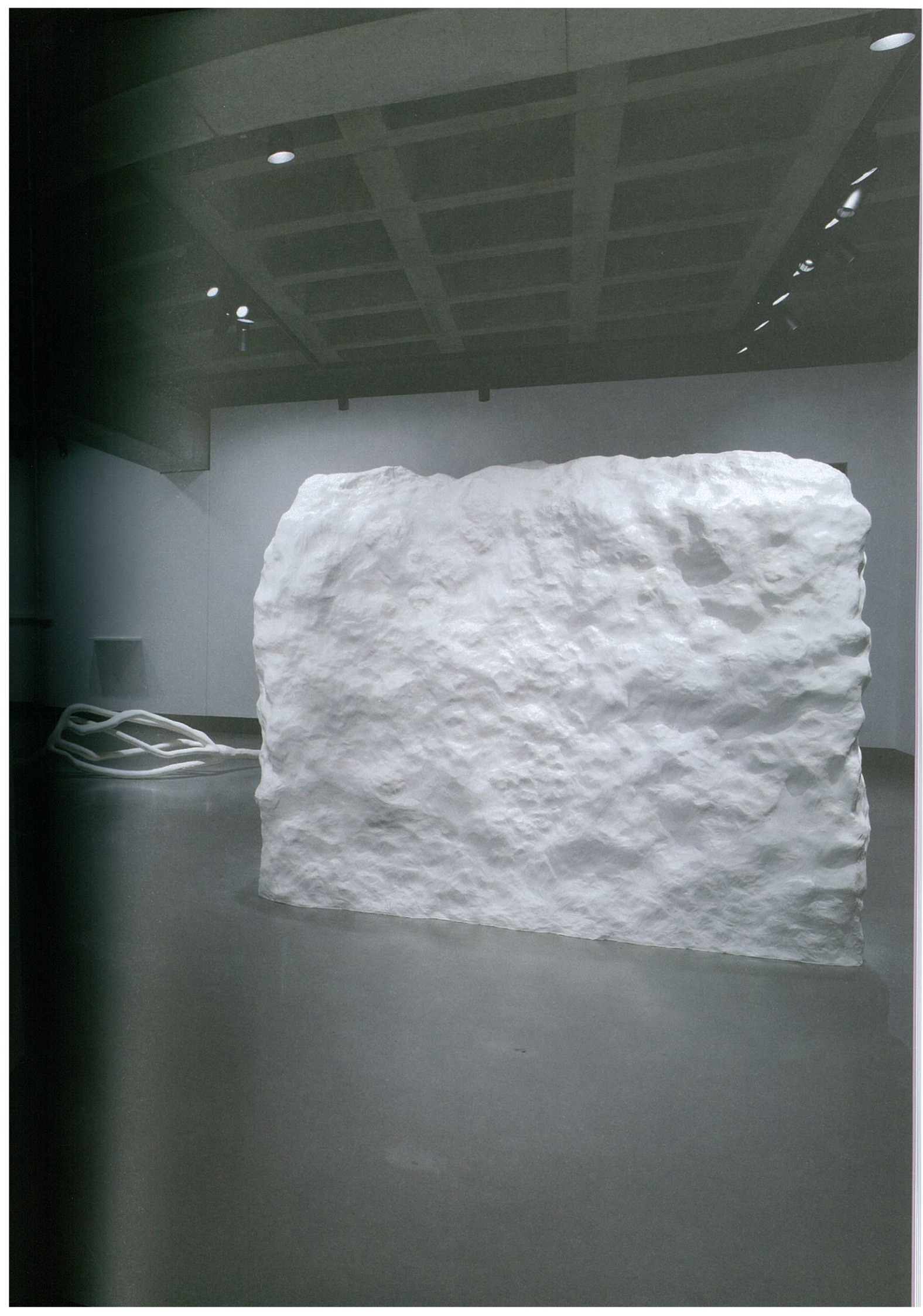
Nearby was a table piled with five two-metre-long curved white pipes about the diameter of a standard drainage pipe [Like a Glove (*Comme un Gant*), 2003–5]. Each was lined with small, glistening gunmetal-grey lozenge-shaped stones – all the way through. At certain angles light caught the deep insides.

Hubert explained it mostly required patience – he or an assistant, using a thin layer of polystyrene, created a small tube and covered it with polyester cement into which they pushed hematite in perfectly aligned rows, then another layer of cement was smoothed over the minerals and later polished to form the outer pipe. Then the inner polystyrene was painstakingly scraped and flushed away and the hematite revealed. Everyday pipes – until you looked inside.

It was difficult not to touch the more than two-metre square, 2.5 tonne cube of white modelling clay looming nearby [Untitled (*Sans titre*), 2008–9/2013]. MONA installers Scot Cotterell, Kat Peric, Mike Singe and Ben Booth spent days pounding this under Hubert's fastidious direction – more beating, smoother there, more clay here. Here was a pile of modelling clay waiting for its inner statue to be revealed and my inner child itched instinctively to smooth and shape the pliable, marble-like surface.

Hubert insists he is not an artist. But these works are your ideas, I counter, even if not physically built by you. 'I have no studio, only a library, and I make very little,' he says. His two major sources of inspiration are Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges (1899–1986) and French aesthetic philosopher and science historian Roger Caillois (1913–78).¹





It is a sense of wonder we have lost by insisting that art and science must be separated to ensure the purity of each.

Is he using his art to encourage awareness of the amazing materials and animals that have occupied our world for millions of years before our arrival, and the need to protect them? No, he says, he's not using his art to encourage environmental activism. He is passionate about geology and archaeology, and he is concerned for the planet's future for the sake of those who come after us.

For me, Duprat's exhibition offers the spectacle of a cabinet of curiosities. Imagine the fascination an eighteenth- or nineteenth-century collector or viewer must have experienced as they gazed upon mysterious objects from beneath the earth or from distant places. It is a sense of wonder we have lost by insisting that art and science must be separated to ensure the purity of each.

I returned daily during the installation to watch MONA staff at work under Hubert's direction. One day, watching him insert slices of flint into florists' foam, forming a type of topography, I told him of a long wooden sled-like object I saw at a Greek site near Troy – where, I cannot exactly remember. Embedded on the underside were rows of small, serrated flints. 'Yes, yes, I know it,' he cried, and pulled out his camera to dial through his own trip to Turkey last year, and explaining it is a *tribulum* used as early as 3000 BCE in Mesopotamia for threshing grain. We were pleased at the serendipity of our mutual observation.

Then in early December, I was wandering Elizabeth Street and dropped into a small antique shop to find Hubert already there buying presents for his family. He hurried me out of the shop, up the hill to the Royal Guide Dogs office. There in the window were a number of life-size plaster dogs, used by the Society for fundraising. Each was 'coupled' to a Christmas sled bearing presents, and each dog had a nametag: Charlie, Daisy, Happy, Prof, Harry, Stay and R. Mutt. 'Look, do you think they know?' he said, pointing. 'R. Mutt,' I laughed. 'Duchamp's *Fountain*. It's hard to know, but someone must, unless it's a reference to a mutt or mongrel,' I replied. 'Incredible, incredible!' he cried, 'I must find out.'² ▼



Delia Nicholls is a research curator at the Museum of Old and New Art in Hobart. In 2006 she returned to a childhood passion and studied for a Masters of Fine Art degree, which led to a multi-faceted role at MONA.

1 Roger Caillois worked with major artists such as Georges Bataille, looking at the power of ritual in everyday life. A staunch anti-Fascist, he moved to Argentina in 1939 and founded and edited *Diogenes*, and introduced authors such as Jorge Luis Borges, Alejo Carpentier and Victoria Ocampo to French readers.

2 The staff at the Royal Guide Dogs office say they held a window competition asking people to suggest names for the dogs – and R. Mutt was among those chosen. Duchamp's memory is wandering the streets of Hobart.

IMAGE CREDITS

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Hubert Duprat
Sans titre (Untitled), 2013
polyurethane foam and flints

Pages 54–55
Foreground:
Sans titre (Untitled), 2007–12
pyrite crystal, glue
Courtesy Art : Concept, Paris

Right: *Sans titre* (Untitled), 2008–9/2013
modelling clay
Collection of the artist

Left: *Sans titre* (Untitled), 2008
Iceland spar (calcite crystals), glue
Collection of the artist

Background – centre:
Both root and fruit, 1997–98
wood, bone, nails
Courtesy Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain, Paris

'R. Mutt' photograph by Hubert Duprat

Exhibition images courtesy MONA Museum of Old and New Art in Tasmania, and the artist.