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Interview: maverick museum-owner David Walsh

Gareth Harris

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The offbeat owner of Mona, the Tasmanian art museum, discusses its legacy and plans for expansion

The Tasmanian collector and professional gambler David Walsh is discussing the chances of his private museum outside Hobart, the state's capital, being washed away by the adjacent River Derwent. Walsh's Museum of Old and New Art (Mona), a 6,000 sq-metre subterranean museum hewn from a sandstone cliff, is located on the six-acre, riverside Moorilla estate which he bought for A\$2.5m in 1995. The gallery, the largest privately run space in Australia, opened early in 2011.

On its opening, I visited the awesome three-storey underground gallery and interviewed Walsh about his plans and ideas. Four years later, I was curious to see how things had changed, and whether his own views on collecting had been altered by his experience as a museum-owner.

To start with, he hopes to develop the estate further, with grand plans to build an annexe over the river, connecting the main museum building to the on-site library. "I've got four or five works by James Turrell which will go in the new wing along with a few Jean Tinguely pieces. I like kinetic stuff, I like weirdness. The budget for the new extension is about A\$8m [£4m], the art will cost another A\$2m to A\$3m."

To raise funds, Walsh is selling four key works by former Young British Artists at Christie's London postwar and contemporary evening sale on June 30. These include Chris Ofili's 1996 painting, "The Holy Virgin Mary", which was shown in the epochal *Sensation* show in London in 1997. The exhibition travelled to the Brooklyn Museum in 1999, when Mayor Rudolph Giuliani called the Ofili canvas — which incorporates elephant dung and images of bare bottoms — "sick" and threatened to withhold public funding. The work has an estimate of £1.4m-£1.8m, and since a third party has guaranteed a minimum price, industry insiders expect a record price. "When we hung it in the gallery, I put a throne in front of it. A painting fit for a king. Or queen. Or something in between," Walsh says.



David Walsh photographed outside Mona, Tasmania

He has also consigned one of the first examples of Damien Hirst's spin paintings, "Beautiful misshapen purity clashing excitedly outwards painting", from 1995 (estimate £500,000-£700,000), along with "Matrix", Jenny Saville's portrait of the transgender photographer Del LaGrace Volcano from 1999 (estimate £650,000-£850,000). And the sculpture "Great Deeds Against the Dead" (1994) by Jake and Dinos Chapman is estimated to fetch between £400,000 and £600,000.

"I'll miss those works but I enjoy the benefits of being able to buy and sell unlike most museums. I need the money, and these paintings have a public profile. The more money I make, the better," says Walsh.

Are there plans to offload any more key pieces? "I don't have many works that I'll hold on to forever. It would be obtuse to assume I'll know what'll be in the collection in 10 years' time."

Walsh's influence in Tasmania, where he grew up and attended university before dropping out to develop a lucrative gambling system, has been considerable. More than 331,000 people flocked to the unorthodox gallery last year, according to Mona; its new wing should draw even more visitors to the island once considered a cultural backwater. According to the state government's tourism agency, the museum has had a significant effect on the local economy. "In 2014, an estimated 48,000 visitors who went to Mona said they came to Tasmania because of Mona," says a Tourism Tasmania spokesman.

As a result, Walsh has become a regional, and national, kingpin. The offbeat patron has been linked to ambitious culture schemes proposed for Hobart (although claims that he is backing a monumental, 117-metre art tower for the city are "bullshit", he says).

"Mona has shown that if you speak louder, do [things] bigger and throw the best parties, there are massive returns, and really, who can criticise David Walsh for his ambition, a personal love for artists and a passionate loyalty for his own home town? May we all care this much," says Lisa Havilah, the director of the Carriageworks arts complex in Sydney.

This kind of praise is the last thing Walsh

expected. Acres of media coverage have focused on the maverick's unconventional taste. Egyptian mummies, Modernist Australian pieces, and provocative art of the 21st century, including a faeces-making machine by Belgian artist Wim Delvoye, fill his gallery. Walsh often refers to his Mona *Kunstkammer* as a “subversive adult Disneyland”.

The entrepreneur, who once described himself as “a mess of little boys fighting in a sack”, has made much of his obsession with sex, death and defecation. But this outlook has also been refined. “I was trying to explain what motivates artists [on the subject of sex and death]. Whether you work for an ancient pharaoh or a 1960s Abstractionist, you think you have a right to create something pure. I was trying to get this across, how artists communicate, rather than just discuss the basic imagery.”



Chris Ofili's 'The Holy Virgin Mary' (1996)

Over the phone, he is characteristically engaging and waggish, though he seems more reflective since our first encounter in 2011. He even appears a little daunted about his newly anointed role, since Mona launched, of community beacon and upright citizen.

“It’s weird but I do feel some sense of responsibility, which has come as a surprise to me as much as anyone. When I opened Mona, I said I’d sit in a chair, turn the air conditioning off and let the art rot if nobody came. But there is this need now to sustain, embellish, improve,” he says.

He acknowledges that once Mona opened, he started to collect for the public. “Mona’s strange left-field success and adoption by the community means it’s part of the establishment I wanted to needle. But it’s still mine, it’s still privately owned, I still project things I want to project.”

There have been sporadic troughs, though, as well as peaks. He still needs to balance the books. “The exhibition costs are substantial. I think we probably lost more than A\$10m last year and raised more than A\$4m income,” Walsh says. There is a general fee of A\$20 for any non-Tasmanian over the age of 18, and no special exhibition charges. “We’re not driven by the ‘bums on seats’ criteria,” he argues.

Mona has drawn big-name curators including Jean Hubert-Martin, and headline-hitting artists such as Matthew Barney and Marina Abramović, who currently has a survey of photography, video and audio works, *Private Archaeology*, at the museum.

The collector has his sights on the future, both long and short-term. Discussing how to attract Chinese visitors, Walsh's unique reasoning is evident. "A small percentage of people worldwide may be interested in the idea of Mona as a 'secular temple'. So think about it in terms of the Chinese population: a small percentage there would be a very large market," he explains.

Walsh, who is 53, has two daughters, with another due mid-July. "I'm thinking about how Mona survives me. So I'm setting up a 160-room hotel, and looking to package the 'O' [the museum's trailblazing, handheld touchscreen device]," he says. A new commission by UK artist Conrad Shawcross will go on display in the new hotel.

Establishing a foundation is an option for the Tasmanian visionary. "But this would require an independent board of directors, which means I'd lose any capacity to control the museum. So I'm not speeding towards that. I'll do it when I'm not compos mentis."

'Marina Abramović: Private Archaeology', Mona, Tasmania, until October 5 mona.net.au

Photographs: Julian Kingma; Christie's

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