

Postcard from Hobart: South for the winter

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See the video 'Beam in Thine Own Eye', part of Dark Mofo 2013.

Perhaps it's no surprise that the cultural landscape of Australia's southernmost city has been reshaped by a pair of outsiders - one a local who never quite fitted in and the other a foreigner who surprised everyone by deciding to stay. David Walsh grew up in Hobart's working-class suburb of Glenorchy but might just as well have come from a galaxy far, far away. Brian Ritchie, founder of Milwaukee's legendary alternative rockers Violent Femmes, turned his back on the world's centres of music to move to Hobart with his wife in 2008.

In this place where the ocean stretches all the way to Antarctica - this "teardrop" at the end of the world - the pair have seeded their own particular passions and watched them flourish into something unique and compelling. Walsh's idiosyncratic Museum of Old and New Art (MONA) and Ritchie's eclectic program for the summer Festival of Music and Art (FOMA), have combined to redefine Hobart as a hipster hot spot. And having made Lonely Planet's top-10 list for 2013, the city is holding its head high.

Central to its cultural renaissance is the marvellous MONA, a world-class museum that surprises even those who arrive expecting great things. In a recent edition of the *Griffith Review* dedicated to Tasmania, Walsh wrote that, when he was looking for a place to house his extraordinary private collection, he chose his home town because "I wanted to build a megaphone" - and no one would hear him shouting in New York or Sydney. "I also had another rationale," he wrote. "People who travel to see something pay it serious attention. It's just a matter of getting them to travel."



A visitor peers inside a small exhibition display window at MONA. Photo: Lindsay Cobb

In June, the acronym-loving locals up the incentive levels with the inaugural Dark Mofo festival, a counter-intuitive bid to lure visitors south during the coldest season. From June 13-23, Dark Mofo will embrace the bacchanalian spirit of the winter solstice, with shenanigans including a nude swim in the Derwent River and conversations held in the dark. Like its summer cousin, the festival boasts a diverse line-up: Ryoji Ikeda, Martha Wainwright and the Presets will be among those embracing the darkness.

A highlight of the festival will be the opening of MONA's latest exhibition, *The Red Queen*, which explores the question of why humans make art. The evolutionary advantages of artistic endeavour will be probed via new commissions and works drawn from MONA's collection and others, including our own NGV.

Walsh acknowledges that Hobart might not top most people's list of winter getaways. "It took me some time to realise that I like our winters," he said during last month's program launch. "I used to leave for at least a month in the middle of the year. So I don't know if Dark Mofo is an excuse for me to stay [that I don't need any more] or a reason others should come. If they come - when they come - they might well decide that Tasmanian winters are worthwhile also."

Judging by the number of black-clad hipsters filling flights out of Melbourne during January's MONA FOMA, Hobart has indeed taken on a cool allure. At the festival's performance hub - a sprawling wharf building near Salamanca markets - monotoned Melburnians mingled with tie-dyed locals during a refreshingly laid-back festival where a \$90 pass covered most events.

While multi-coloured food vans covered the culinary gamut, Ritchie's sonic menu ranged from hillbilly rock and Ethiojazz to meditative instrumentals and shouty poetry readings. One visiting musician summed up the mood when he enthused: "there's a philosophy of not giving a f---".

Somewhere along the way, not giving a f--- has drawn global interest in Hobart's off-kilter cultural awakening and its central player, Walsh. In January, *The New Yorker* was the latest overseas publication to feature the millionaire gambler, with a lengthy profile of the man they dubbed the "Tasmanian Devil".

Devilish he may be, but Walsh's high-wire approach has the crowds gasping in wonder, while gallery directors around the world peer nervously over his shoulder, wondering if he's even sitting the same test. Central to Walsh's rule-breaking approach was his decision to banish traditional gallery labels, instead equipping each visitor with an iPod Touch - rebranded the "O" - that tracks their journey through MONA. Information on nearby artworks can be called up via categories headed "art wank" and "Gonzo". The "O" allows a level of interactivity unknown in other galleries, as viewers register their reactions to exhibits such as Wim Delvoye's famed "pooing machine" and an installation recreating Philip Nitschke's controversial euthanasia device.

Not every work is a masterpiece, as Walsh is the first to admit. In one of his "art wank" insights, he owns up to a slight unease about one commission his girlfriend dislikes. But that's the essence of his success. The collection has been shaped not by a committee of learned academics, but by Walsh's instinctive, bungy-jump approach.

As he straps himself in for next month's leap into a wintry unknown, Walsh is again taking a gamble, this time hoping tourists will embrace a darker vision of southern hospitality. In 2012, when plans for Dark Mofo came to light, Walsh invoked the spirit of his dead father, a greyhound racer whose ashes are now part of the MONA collection.

"My dad once said, 'I'll back the winter to beat any tourist business in Hobart,'" he said. "He was a bit of a punter, but I've been known to have a bet myself, and I'm going to take his wager. I think he would understand why we think this is a race worth rigging."

I, for one, am willing to bet the odds are in his favour.

■ **Dark Mofo, June 13-23.** darkmofo.net.au. ***The Red Queen*, June 18-April 21, 2014.** mona.net.au.

Lindy Percival travelled to Hobart courtesy of MONA and Tourism Tasmania.

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