



Look closely and patterns emerge from the chaos

Strange bedfellows make a fascinating exhibition, writes
Louise Schwartzkoff.

At the media preview of a new exhibition at Hobart's Museum of Old and New Art, a journalist gestures to a line of black cushions on the floor between an Egyptian sarcophagus and a spindly sculpture by Alberto Giacometti.

"Are those part of the exhibition?" he asks.

"No, those are for sitting," one of the curators, Jean-Hubert Martin, says.

It is an easy enough mistake; so strange and diverse are the objects on display in *Theatre of the World* that it can be hard to tell where the art ends and the gallery's more mundane furnishings begin.

Alongside work by such artists as Pablo Picasso, Damien Hirst and Max Ernst are pieces of old furniture, mounted beetles, animal skulls and taxidermic owls. Masks and artefacts from ancient cultures sit alongside video art and contemporary sculpture. The objects come from the collection of MONA's owner, the professional gambler David Walsh, and that of the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery.

Look closely and patterns emerge. Hirst's *Cholera, Seed, The Martyrdom of Saint Thomas*, a canvas crusty with hundreds of dead flies mounted in resin, hangs in a room full of coffins.

There is a casket shaped like a Mercedes and yet another Egyptian sarcophagus. As we pass Hirst's revolting yet perturbably beautiful work, Martin mentions "the ephemeral life of beings".

Not that he wants audiences to take his word for it. *Theatre of the World*, he says, is about looking, feeling and discovering, rather than reading gallery notes.

"I really think that looking at each artwork carefully is much richer than reading many books," he says. "We have lost confidence in our own ability to understand and have handed responsibility to the experts."

The journalists gather around the French curator, recording his every word. Abandoning expert opinion is no easy task.

Martin's philosophy fits with the ethos at MONA, where there are no labels or dates on display. If visitors wish to learn more, they consult a hand-held iPhone-like gadget.

Since Walsh founded MONA as a showcase for his private collection, it has drawn interstate and international visitors to Tasmania. According to Tourism Tasmania, it is the state's second most visited attraction, behind the Salamanca Market. Though Walsh is involved in a legal stoush with the Australian Tax Office over a revised assessment of his tax bill, he has said the outcome should have little effect on the museum.

Planning for *Theatre of the World* began years ago, after Walsh saw an exhibition co-curated by Martin in Venice, combining objects from different cultures and periods.

"I think more and more exhibitions will go in this direction," Martin says.

"We can't go on just saying that in a museum an artwork has to be seen according to the story of art and its context... I think if we want to earn a bigger public, with young people coming, we need to work much more with emotions and with sensations."

He scoured Walsh's collection and spent hours "opening cupboards and going through the storage" at the Tasmanian Museum, searching for objects that would combine to make meaning. In one of the more unusual displays, a sculpture by Ernst sits on top of an ancient Syrian altar. Made thousands of years apart, the objects look as though they belong together.

Each gallery space has a theme. A room focusing on violence and conflict holds a pigskin tattooed with a portrait of Osama bin Laden, religious texts whose pages encase bombs and trench art made by World War I soldiers. In another space, the walls glow with woven bark cloths from across the South Pacific. These are Martin's favourite Tasmanian Museum objects and he has dubbed their display room "majesty".

"The world is a sort of puzzle," he says. "We have this enormous amount of knowledge that nobody today can dominate or master. But from a certain angle or point of view, it can be put together again to create a sort of order."

***Theatre of the World* is at MONA, Hobart, until April 8 next year. Read John McDonald's review in Spectrum at the weekend. Louise Schwartzkoff travelled to Hobart courtesy of MONA.**





Disparate ... clockwise from left, *Untitled* by Jannis Kounellis, a pestle shaped into a finger and Sandra Vasquez de la Horra's *El Disparo*. Photo: MONA



Working together ... *Limbecile* by Max Ernst, from 1961, sits on top of an ancient Syrian altar as part of the *Theatre of the World* exhibition, a show in which curator Jean-Hubert Martin has combined many different pieces. Photo: MONA