



A playful new way of seeing things

Hobart's MONA is extending its innovative vision with a new collaboration with the state museum

MICHAELA BOLAND



JUST hours before David Walsh is due to open the third major exhibition at his Museum of Old and New Art, he sits down to discuss his journey from maverick outsider to museum visionary.

Since MONA opened in January last year, the Tasmanian gambling millionaire has established his sprawling rust-coloured bunker on the banks of Hobart's Derwent River as the nation's most innovative art gallery.

The works exhibited have until now been mostly from Walsh's own collection of ancient artefacts, international contemporary art and Australian art, which is roughly valued at \$100 million.

Of almost greater significance than the artwork is the way in which it is exhibited. It has shaken museum practice in this country.

There are no white walls or labels, nor traditional display sequences. The whole arrangement of the place eschews the norms of traditional curatorial practice.

MONA's innovative smart phone-style navigation device, which provides audio and written information about artworks directly to a handheld device for visitors as they weave through the gallery, appears poised to change museum-going worldwide.

Walsh recently sold the technology to the State Library of NSW, and the Sydney Opera House looks likely to acquire it for its lucrative tours. "I went to the US and we had a lot of interest from the Smith-

sonian, and the Getty is really keen," Walsh says.

This interest from some of the world's leading sites is doubly significant for Walsh and MONA. It marks the start of another revenue stream in addition to MONA's \$20 admission charge levied to non-Tasmanians since last October, and it also signals peer respect for MONA's way of doing things.

On Friday night Walsh threw a party to herald the opening of the gallery's latest show, *Theatre of the World*, a collaboration with Tasmania's Museum and Art Gallery, which will remain on display until next April.

Assembled and arranged by groundbreaking French curator Jean-Hubert Martin, the display over 16 galleries on MONA's ground floor is designed to bring a new way of seeing objects. From TMAG's vast store of antiquities and Walsh's collection, Martin and co-curator Olivier Varenne have uncovered some playful sequences.

Works may seem haphazardly juxtaposed but they are carefully positioned to interact in a way that realises Walsh's original vision for the museum. Yet Walsh admits the exhibition is not what he envisaged.

"If I was a director of a public gallery I would claim we knew this all along and it turned out really well," he says, laughing.

"But I'm not. It's absolutely brilliant but it had nothing to do with my original conception."

He says he initially wanted the

exhibition to juxtapose the vast "all-of-time perspective" of MONA's collection with TMAG's "tight little internal focus". "But when we got into their collection it turned out that they just had shit-hot art and we could do lots of fun stuff," he says. The exhibition includes 300 works from TMAG, 180 from MONA and a few other works from private and public collections, such as National Gallery of Victoria's *Weeping Woman* by Picasso and a Giacometti statue from the Fondation Marguerite et Aime Maeght, Saint Paul, France.

"(Martin) has taken a Renaissance view of art which is visual poetry," Walsh says.

"In the Renaissance the implicit meanings were so well known to everyone that it was all about rendition rather than message. Art shifted from that position dramatically in the last 100 years to a conveyor of a message. Jean-Hubert is slipping back to the Renaissance view, the notion everything in its environment has something to say about that environment."

For all the playfulness in his displays and his personal approach, Martin appears the very model of museum convention in his orderly suit, glasses and short grey hair. Symbolic or not, Walsh had his trademark long locks cut, adopting Martin's hairstyle, on Friday afternoon in the hours between our interview and the party.

TMAG director Bill Bleathman also appears to have a conventional



approach to museum curating. Surveying a huge hall hung with Polynesian Tapa cloths, he says: "I'd like this to be labelled; I like everything labelled because it's just easier."

Bleathman has worked at the island state's most significant public repository of artefacts for 19 years, and been its director since 2002.

Despite being 3½ years in development and fraught with potential culture clashes — Tasmanian and European, public and private approaches — the collaboration has been enjoyable, Bleathman says. He is thrilled a new generation will be able to enjoy anew such a large number of works from his museum.

Theatre of the World also borrowed significant works from the Art Gallery of NSW and others.

Walsh says: "I am totally astonished and mesmerised they were prepared to lend us valuable works like Fontana, Picasso, Max Ernst.

"NGV lent us *Weeping Woman*. Well, they've lost it in the past, so what the hell!" he says, laughing. The picture famously stolen from the gallery only to turn up later in a railway station locker is exhibited in a gallery with its own security guard — where Martin has as-

sembled many different studies of eyes. "I thought 'They haven't asked many questions about security, they've accepted our standards for art handling' and I'm thinking 'why would they do that?' I thought maybe they think it's a bit disingenuous when somebody was able to walk out with it," Walsh says.

MONA's climate and security standards are on par with, if not better than some, public institutions, because the museum was designed more recently. The backdrop to this new show is Walsh's pending battle with the Australian Taxation Office, which is attempting to extract from him tax on his gambling wins for the three years to 2006. Gambling wins are not taxable unless the winner is considered a professional. Walsh expects to settle the retrospective claim before it reaches the NSW Federal Court in August.

He says the issue, which arose late last year, will not affect visitors' experience of MONA but it has impeded his plans to expand the site's accommodation to include a hotel tower.

Given the demands of staging shows, the tax issue and day-to-day operations, he is no longer acquir-

ing or commissioning works, other than two pieces due to be completed soon.

"MONA runs at a loss but we're tightening up little cost structures — for example, realising that no one stays around after dark, we close an hour earlier in winter; we didn't do that last year," he says.

"We started from scratch and virtually nobody had any serious museum experience so we've got a lot to learn."

MONA has asserted itself as Tasmania's biggest attraction, replacing Port Arthur. It has notched 521,000 visitors, 65 per cent of whom are from the mainland.

"I'm still very keen on making this place say the things I want it to say," Walsh says.

"I don't want to dumb down the experience, make it too commercial — it's not a commercial experience. We'll never present exhibitions of the winter blockbuster type. We will never chase revenue but we will try to maximise revenue from what we do."

Theatre of the World runs at MONA until April 8, 2013.



Jean-Hubert Martin, curator of the exhibition *Theatre of the World*, at the Museum of Old and New Art in Hobart

PETER MATTHEW





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DAVID WALSH
FOUNDER, MONA