



MONA's enchanted mix

ANDREW STEPHENS IN HOBART, there is a painting in one of the Museum of Old and New Art's touring galleries that hints at how we might approach the rest of the art being unveiled around it today. The Robert Scott Lauder painting, circa 1847, shows a man looking through a rolled-up paper document at a painting on the wall.

His gaze collates information and makes appraisals, but all through the filter of his own history, emotions and intellect. Like all of us, he can only see things — art, objects, culture — with his own eyes and experience. How else to see the world?

It was the same for Jean-Hubert Martin when he was invited by MONA's owner, David Walsh, to be curator for the museum's new show, *Theatre of the World*, which encompasses 4000 years of human history and culture.

Martin, a former director of the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris and the Kunsthalle Bern, has spent three years, with at least 10 visits to Hobart, bringing the show together. He has roved through Walsh's \$100 million private art collection as well as the vast array of works that have been collected by the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, which was founded in 1843.

The result of Martin's encounters is an adventure, even an enchantment. Like the man in that Lauder painting, he brings his wealth of experience, personal interests and intellectual grappling

hooks to bear. Picking among those works, he has assembled them into a challenging, thematic sequence. As he writes in an essay for the show: "We are offering a voyage of initiation that moves from the symbolic to the rational and from the factual to the poetic. It leads us through the labyrinthine fears and sufferings of humanity and examines its pleasures, too — the pleasures of beauty — but is not confined to the artistic since art does not offer an exhaustive account of our sensations." This approach brings great rewards to those willing to abandon themselves to their intuition and senses, as well as their intellectual curiosity.

MONA has been a cultural and economic boon for Hobart, and the visitors who form long queues to get in will be back for this latest grab-bag of surprises, which includes works as disparate as a haunting Andres Serrano photo, a Fernand Leger painting, Berlinde de Bruyckere sculptures, Egyptian sarcophagi, unidentified snake vertebrae and a vast collection of traditional barkcloths.

As we tour these treasure-filled galleries — a Cretan coffin from antiquity here, a Papua New Guinean spirit board there, a Marina Abramovic video work just over there — Martin says the world is a puzzle and very difficult to understand. He talks about the artificial distinctions between art and craft, and questions the hierarchy of classification that has been imposed on Western museums and academic institutions, where artists are privileged over subject matter; where



there are, as he writes, “no museums devoted just to landscape painting or still life”.

Martin leads the way through rooms that are dramatic and provocative, with diverse but connected themes. In one chamber, for instance, he has configured what he describes as an “eye gallery” with works such as Pablo Picasso’s *Weeping Woman* (1937), on loan from the National Gallery of Victoria, alongside a beaded bag from the Yoruba people of west Africa, the eyes upon it haunting us. Or there is a magnificent room where many works refer to the human body as landscape. There is a Julie Rrap photo (*Horse’s Tail*, 1999) and a piece of Japanese erotica, serenaded by a Brent Harris painting or a four-poster bed with a Micronesian tongue coral lying on it. Underneath the bed plays a video of Andy Warhol’s real-time film *Sleep* (1963).

They echo each other, and objects from other rooms, in beguiling ways that might prompt us to think about the different routes, like song lines, that we might take through this exhibition: creation stories, death stories and living-our-lives stories. Shamanism, splitting the world, relations with animals, terror, war, soul, eros — and generous dollops of humour, lest gravity waylay us.

Martin says what most interested him was not to start his explorations with a concept, but to see what themes emerged as he fossicked through the MONA and TMAG collections, which form the bulk of the exhibition.

“What you see here, these

themes in these different rooms, they emerge from the works. I have my history, my background, my experience — so there are some topics more [in evidence] than others. It is built in a sort of balance.

“I needed first of all to see many works ... then you knit things together in a way they make sense — or not.”

Martin says his approach was difficult for it is no longer easy to see all of a museum’s collection, even behind the scenes in gallery warehouses. “The tendency is to put things in boxes and to protect them in cupboards and cabinets which are closed,” he says. “This is totally contrary to the fact of looking at them and seeing them.”

Conservation with the idea of keeping objects “for eternity”, he says, means forgetting they have been made by human beings, to be seen and experienced. “They only live if they are seen.”

Viewers might think about that when in the exhibition’s death-themed rooms. In one, an Egyptian sarcophagus is partially screened behind swaying, tassel-like veils, as is a coffin from Ghana in the shape of a taxi; the deceased ran a taxi company. Or Damien Hirst’s *Cholera Seed* (2003), with thousands of flies in resin on canvas.

While it reminds us that death is neither choosy nor predictable, but always inevitable, it picks up on a theme of the mutability of the human body and mind that runs through the show; we are but memories when dead.

Cultural memory, infused into objects, is evident in one of the first

rooms of the show, in which Martin has arrayed on tiers, inside a dramatic alcove, all sorts of artefacts from many periods and cultures — it’s very MONA — and he associates this display with the memory machine devised in the Renaissance by Guido Camillo. The machine was never built but the idea was that the French king would be able to extract or see all the knowledge accumulated on a certain subject or concept.

“Today the extent of human knowledge is such that nobody can master it; the notion of the ‘renaissance man’ is obsolete,” Martin writes.

“The sciences have become so complex that no one can encompass even a single one. We are reduced to grasping at scraps of knowledge or trusting to the specialists ... Though no one can take in the full extent of knowledge, the internet has modified our habits by giving us instant access to this knowledge. One might hope that, freed of the burden of memorisation, the mind could concentrate on reflection.”

That is what he and Walsh hope for in *Theatre of the World*.

Theatre of the World, at MONA, Hobart, is on until April 8 next year. mona.net.au.

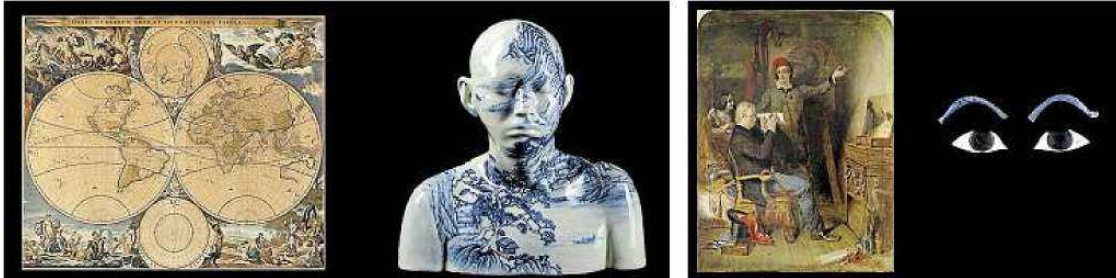
Andrew Stephens was a guest of MONA and Tourism Tasmania.

**“We are offering
a voyage of
initiation.”**





Jean-Hubert Martin explores the puzzle that is the world .



ABOVE: Left: *Orbis Terrarum Nova et Accuratissima Tabula*, 1658, Nicolaes Visscher and Nicolaes Berchem. Right: *China China - Bust 82*, 2004, Ah Xian. RIGHT: Left: *Dick Tinto Showing Peter Pattieson his Sketch of the Bride of Lammermoor*, c. 1847 Robert Scott Lauder. Right: Eyes and brows, inlay fragments Egypt, New Kingdom, c. 1550. Images courtesy of MONA.