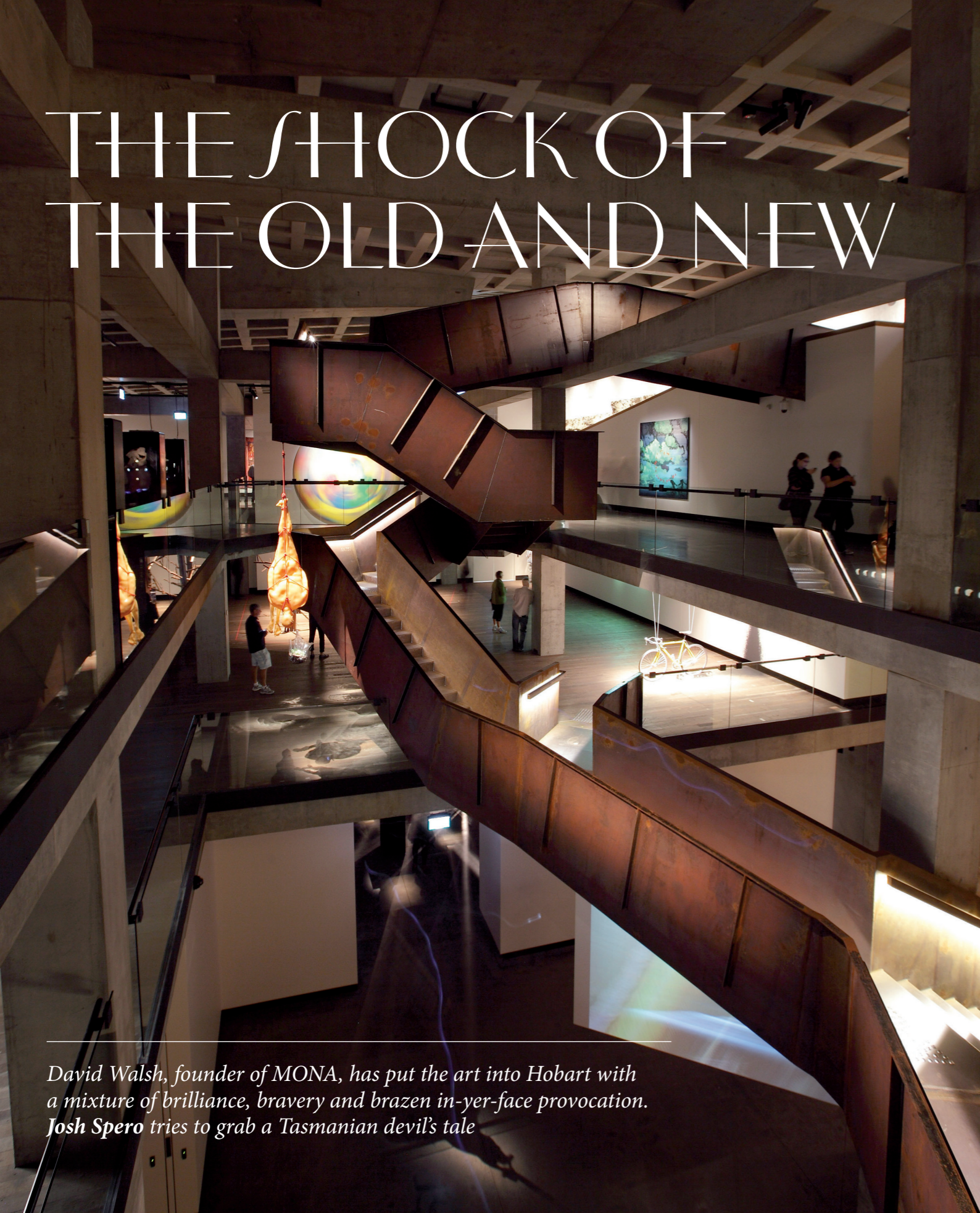


THE SHOCK OF THE OLD AND NEW



David Walsh, founder of MONA, has put the art into Hobart with a mixture of brilliance, bravery and brazen in-yer-face provocation. Josh Spero tries to grab a Tasmanian devil's tale

Opposite: MONA's open-plan layout sees artworks scattered around the Escher-like stairwell. Above right: David Walsh, the man behind MONA

But! What is it you want to know? Let me put it differently: what lies do you want to hear?

Momentary hesitation.

'Which lies do you tell most often?'

'The one about how much fun it is talking to journalists.'

If David Walsh is vaunting Australian bluffness, his opening words in our conversation have doomed any chance of a decent interview. And then he grinds out a chuckle. 'Sometimes I enjoy it, and it's profound then, because you've got to crystallise your thinking, and occasionally you do crystallise what you're thinking.' This is an oblique invitation to a dialogue about the Museum of Old and New Art (MONA) in Hobart, Tasmania, whose underground cliffside premises Walsh excavated and whose collection — ranging from outstanding Greek coins of the third century BC to a not entirely distinguished spin painting by Damien Hirst — he furnished.

Most things about David Walsh are oblique. The international gambling syndicates, for example, run along complex mathematical systems he devised, which have created his fortune and enabled his art-buying. His approach to that art-buying, too: now assisted by two senior curators, Olivier Varenne and Nicole Durling, he says that he was often fooled by 'one-liners', art with a punchline but nothing else, when he first started out; for a long time he wondered whether he had wasted a quarter of a million Australian dollars on his Hirst. Indeed, he is not sure Conceptual art even exists: 'The unfortunate terminological inexactitude of using "Conceptual art" makes people see it in the same domain as art when really it's reified philosophy.'

His approach to conversation is most oblique of all: a question about his intentions in starting MONA is met with a long discourse on the difference between having a plan and a philosophy ('The philosophy doesn't concern the gallery — it concerns the nature of my perceived reality,' he says seriously), what he thought his intentions were then and are now, how he'll give a different answer this week and next. That is not to say he doesn't answer the question — in time — or that his answers are anything less than fascinating and thoughtful, just that your route to an answer is never linear.

My visit to MONA was timed to coincide with the opening of its latest exhibition, a retrospective of Wim Delvoye, the Belgian Contemporary artist who makes everything bad that people say about modern art true. Perhaps my punch-drunk post-flight state accounted for some of the whirling sense of incredulity which grew room by room, but I'd like to think it was a reaction to the tasteless excesses and desecrations, artistic as well as religious, of his work. *Via Crucis* is x-rays of rats in the Stations of the Cross. *Art Farm* features the flayed skins of pigs with Louis Vuitton logos or Disney characters tattooed on them. The *Cloaca* machines are admittedly clever, if foul: various mechanical reproductions of the human digestive system are fed with real food and produce faeces — not imitation but actual, in look, texture and odour. (Walsh said he paid AU\$1 million for one of the machines and doesn't expect a similar resale value.)



Walsh, who gruffly professes an admiration for Delvoye's work, is as clear-eyed about why the show has happened as he is about everything, stripping pretension back to pragmatism: '[Delvoye] is doing it for a whole different set of purposes and meanings than I intend, but so what? He's subverting my museum to his purpose — let's face it, his purpose is to become known in Australia, to sell some art, to make a statement with someone that he sees as a bit of a maverick... Wim and I have slightly dovetailing realities, but we also have a bunch of motives that exploit each other's particular propensities.'

Walsh will make a further splash with Delvoye, while Delvoye can certainly claim a success from the show: Roslyn Oxley, who is one of Australia's leading Contemporary gallerists and who attended the lavish private view for Delvoye, complete with massive gingerbread house in an enticing garden of sweetsies, is giving him his first commercial show this spring. Whether Australia outside of MONA is ready for Delvoye is yet to be seen.

The rest of Tasmania has certainly proved ready for MONA since it opened in January 2011. It might at first seem like a rather flamboyant beacon of Contemporary art in what has long been regarded as a backwater state — being an island, it is often half-joked that it is 30 years behind the mainland — but a modern artistic culture runs deep in Hobart, integrated into and welcomed by the city as a healthy stratum of urban life rather than a delicate milieu for deviants.

Photographs by Leigh Carmichael, courtesy of MONA

On my first day in Hobart, Noel Frankham, head of the Tasmanian School of Art, gave me a tour of the school, which is housed in a former factory on the wharf-front. It has every charmingly ramshackle and industrial quality you want from an art school: a large atrium pierced with wooden beams, surrounded by a painting floor, a photography floor, whose glass roof was being pounded by a thunderstorm when I arrived; a spacious print studio with heavy-duty Victorian-looking machines; doors that went nowhere; an entrance that looked like it was made of massive wooden bricks, the sort that children play with, in red and pink; and graduate students working on abstract projects involving Post-it notes and clear plastic sheeting.

As we talked about MONA, he said it had wrought some 'refreshing' changes and encouraged Contemporary art culture in Hobart even more by making it a destination.

Along the row from the TSA is the Henry Jones Art Hotel, another former factory (Henry Jones was a jam magnate), which opened in 2004 after 30-plus years of sugary desuetude. The hotel, which is sandwiched between an Aboriginal design shop and its own art gallery, has original Tasmanian Contemporary art in every nook and cranny, from Lindsay Broughton's grand drawings of symbolic objects — a three-metre jam pot, an Aboriginal basket — to prints from students at the TSA to Skye Targett's Gerhard Richter-like pixelated paintings. All the art is for sale, a prominent and seductive proposition, and if none of it is at the cutting edge of Contemporary art — saleability is important — it reflects a culture which has wholly assimilated the form.

This is true across the wharf along Salamanca Place. The morning after I arrived, I took myself past the small bobbing yachts and the ferry terminal, painted charcoal gray, from where the boat to MONA leaves. Salamanca Place has a fine Saturday market, with artisans selling bread, chocolates, jams and crafts and farmers local fruit and vegetables. Off the street, between plentiful local craft stores, is the Salamanca Arts Centre, where woodcarvers and antiquarians and artists have shops, with some studios for artists, too. Again, the

work is at the more conservative end of the Contemporary field, but there is plenty of beauty. Here Betty Nolan runs a school and a shop, where she sells her own surreal work and the work of other local artists. To her, visiting MONA is 'a series of slaps in the face' — but in the best possible way, shocking and engaging rather than offending or enervating. It has brought a better class of tourist to Hobart, she declares. For a museum whose contents include a shitting machine and two-thousand-year-old coins, this is a surprisingly proud reaction — and it is one most locals share.

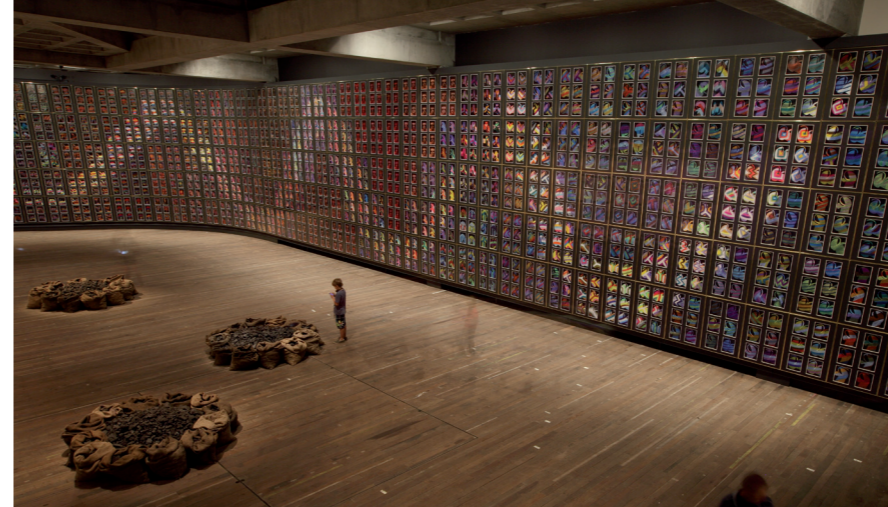
Most of MONA is about vistas, whether natural or the ones created inside by the winding, open, irregular galleries

The boat to MONA from the wharf is important. It is not just a whimsical whizz, although you wouldn't put it past Walsh to have the most esoteric mode of transport to MONA possible: it is part of the design of the place. For, once you have approached the sandstone cliff which contains the galleries, you disembark and walk up a narrow Piranesian path, the sort of thing a Roman emperor would have as the approach to their cliff-top villa on Ischia, past a rust-red complex where Walsh lives.

The view from the summit, across Hobart, in the shadow of low-rising mountains and low-hanging clouds, heightens your anticipation, but it becomes bathetic when you look beneath your feet at the tennis court.

Calling the official entrance to MONA flashy is not an insult: Walsh added a mirrored façade to the heritage-protected mid-Fifties Roy Grounds building which forms the atrium. Once inside, spiral steps carved into the sandstone take you down to the first gallery level and then to the second. If you go all the way, to the Delvoye show, you come out by a soaring sandstone wall inside the building; instead of white-walling the place, Walsh has created another dramatic vista. Indeed, most of MONA is about vistas, whether natural or the ones created inside by the winding, open, irregular galleries which allow you to look across into other spaces and set up tensions between works of art at a distance. The gallery hosting Sidney Nolan's *Snake* (1948), the most breathtaking gallery, was the whole spur for MONA: the work, composed

Below: MONA as seen from Little Frying Pan Island. Opposite: Sidney Nolan's 1948 classic, *Snake*. Below right: Wim Delvoye at work



of 1,620 separate paintings, is 9 metres high and 46 metres long, and Walsh had to build a massive space just to show it. He rescued it from oblivion since no one else could show it, and it succeeds as a symbol for so much of what MONA is meant to achieve: an impact in the landscape, a tribute to Australian art, an acknowledgement of Aboriginal culture by which Nolan was influenced, something that only Walsh would be bold enough to do.

There is a bold use of technology, too. There are no panels with artists or titles or long interpretations next to artworks; instead, you are given an iPod with a special MONA app. If you refresh the app at any place in the gallery, it tells you the works which are close by, and for most of them there are two types of short-form essay: the objective art-historical one, called 'Art Wank', and the subjective one written by Walsh, called 'Gonzo'. Some even have music inspired by the artwork. Aren't the ribald titles just an affectation?

'It's a conscious affectation,' Walsh says. 'I think it would be a characteristically Australian thing that might not translate into other versions of English. Calling it "Art Wank" is basically saying we are conscious of the level of self-reference here, and "Gonzo" is our reference to this American thing, where you have these people putting themselves in the experience of reality. De-objectifying. One of the great things about building your own gallery is that you can engage in salacious humour.'

Another 'great thing' from Walsh's perspective is that he can make MONA a corrective to museums which are 'the repositories of the received wisdom.' A 'normal' museum, he argues, positions itself as a straight line because it embodies the broad standard beliefs and philosophies of society: they are not there to subvert the order but endorse it. Walsh says, however, that this is the exception, the one straight line among an infinity of possible curved lines which represent everything but the received wisdom; MONA is a curved line in his view. He bristles at the idea that what has happened is the same as what must have happened: we are too complacently deterministic. He says he was as likely to have opened a museum of scientific instruments or blow his money on a red Ferrari as found MONA.

All this, typically expressed in mathematical and theoretical terms and Walsh's asthmatically voice, comes in answer to

a question about whether he's an outsider with MONA's unusual structure and frank focus on sex and death. Walsh runs with the idea: 'I'm not an outsider, I'm just mutating the argot of the system. But there have been times where I thought I was an outsider but I hadn't really thought it through. Now I realise it's the museum system that is the special case.' He wants to entertain: 'More than a modern museum, I'm a medieval Disneyland.' Given that Delvoye's logo is Disney's castle with his own name in its font, it all seems to tie up nicely.

So are private museums more likely to be idiosyncratic than state ones? Vehemently: 'I just went to Carlos Slim's museum in Mexico, and his museum is crap. It explored a lot of fields, but in almost every area except for 17th-century portraiture it's just complete rubbish.' (This about the wealthiest man in the world.) Even if Walsh is wobbly on what his motivations for MONA were, it is clear that he at least believes he had some.

If he wanted to shock with MONA, though, he failed. Hobart has received MONA as a positive force. 'This is a wonderful thing.' He hesitates. 'I didn't expect to care about it, and I do. Tasmania basically only has two cities — it seems that in Launceston they're calling Hobart and MONA "our little thing", and I love it! I expected to be a little bit out on the edge; apparently I'm not. *The Mercury*, the Tasmanian newspaper which is a right-wing rag, wrote an editorial just after we opened that said, "You've entertained us, you've informed us, you've created a new reality for us, but if you want to



shock us you'll have to try harder." I'm reading this and I'm thinking, "Shit!" Even for someone who can seem disinterested in the reception of his actions, an engagement with the world can still pierce.

At the start of our conversation, after he had talked about crystallisation, Walsh prefigured his theme of straight and curved lines: 'The myth of journalism and the myth of history in general is that because we're here, because this is the world we inhabit, it was inevitable and there was a straight line from Alexander the Great or bloody Australopithecus [an early hominid] in Africa to us. Almost anything could have happened, and in a sense almost anything did happen.' That seems a fair summary of MONA, a project no one could have projected. *f*

