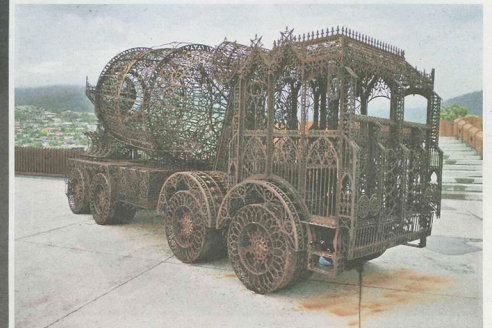
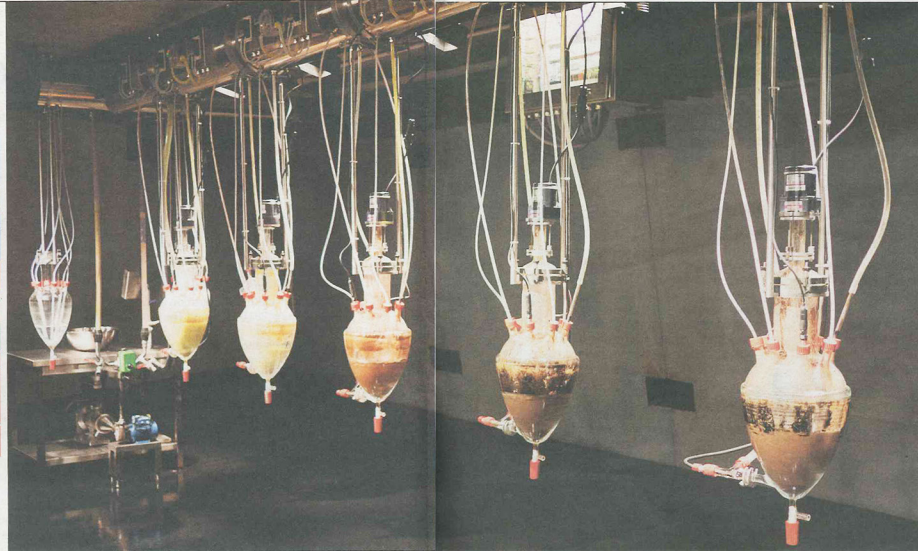


ART PILGRIMAGE

So far, an estimated 300,000 visitors have been to The Museum of Old and New Art (below). The 7,500-sq-m museum space is almost entirely underground, built three storeys and 17 metres deep within a sandstone cliff. The above-ground entrance is through a small mirrored building that is fronted by a tennis court. The current exhibition by Belgian conceptual artist Wim Delvoye includes a work commissioned by MONA called Cloaca Professional (right) and a gothic metal sculpture (far right)

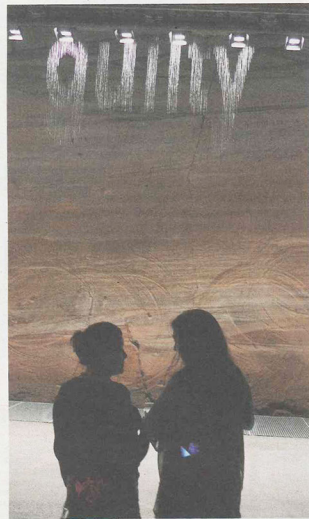


'If it is successful MONA should be irreverent, challenging and just plain cheeky. While not exactly anti-academia to show that art can be comprehensible, entertaining, pointed or pointless but fun.'

David Walsh (below left)

MAGNET MONA

Since the beginning of the year, hordes of art lovers have flocked to the island of Tasmania, irresistibly drawn to a unique museum that is the vision of just one man. **By Geoffrey Eu**



INTRIGUING
Visitors admiring Bit.Fall by Julius Popp, an art installation that features a 'word waterfall'

TASMANIA isn't really on the way to anywhere – unless you're a humpback whale on vacation heading for a long, long weekend in Antarctica. As a result, Australia's largest island and smallest state, located about 600 kilometres south of Melbourne, is the equivalent of a sleepy one-horse town, receiving well under one million visitors per year – still significantly more than its resident population of 500,000.

Since the beginning of 2011 however, a cultural attraction on the banks of the Derwent River outside the capital city of Hobart has been a major new destination for art lovers and the subject of much scrutiny from the international media, unsuspecting tourists and bemused locals. The Museum of Old and New Art (MONA) has made a big splash in a small town – and Tasmania may never be the same again.

MONA (www.mona.net.au) is the sort of cutting edge institution one might expect to find in cities like New York or London, but it wasn't created by any tourism authority or far-sighted government official in search of greater visitor numbers. Instead, it is entirely the vision of one man, an irreverent Tasmanian by the name of David Walsh, who until a few years ago was virtually unknown in his own state, much less the international art community. His is now the largest private art collection in the southern hemisphere.

Walsh, a mathematical genius who made his fortune by devising a method of betting which puts the odds in his favour, is now persona non grata at racetracks and casinos around the world. He continues to fund his passion for art collecting by playing the numbers through a close-knit betting syndicate and as a result, MONA is on every list of must-see art galleries around the world.

This is partly because the museum has turned convention on its head by combining old art – important antiquar-

ities such as Egyptian mummies, Greek coins and Roman mosaics – with avant garde works from the contemporary art world, including controversial pieces that were once prevented from entering the country.

The MONA complex is built on a peninsula and includes luxury accommodation, a microbrewery and fine-dining restaurant – and a 7,500-square-metre museum space that is almost entirely underground, built three storeys and 17 metres deep within a sandstone cliff. The above-ground entrance is through a small mirrored building that is fronted by a tennis court – in stark contrast to traditional museum entrances and evidence of Walsh's alternative approach and money-no-object attitude.

Walsh has described MONA as a subversive adult Disneyland. "If it is successful MONA should be irreverent, challenging and just plain cheeky," he writes in his museum's permanent collection catalogue, cheekily titled *Monanisms*. "While not exactly anti-academic we are sidestepping academia to show that art can be comprehensible, entertaining, pointed or pointless but fun." Walsh is also the only art patron around who is pictured – nude – in his own museum catalogue. Naturally, the photo was taken by photographic artist Andres Serrano. "I wanted to achieve a light-hearted centre for worshipping the cynic in all of us," writes Walsh.

If the objective is to amuse and even to offend in order to elicit a reaction of some kind, positive or otherwise, then he has surely succeeded – in spades. His detractors object to some of the controversial content – sex, death and religion figure prominently throughout the collection – but there are also many universally admired pieces on view.

Everything is high quality and impeccably displayed, although MONA's hip and high-tech curatorial style has little in common with traditional museums – which makes a visit here unlike any other art gallery experience. For instance, none of the displays is marked – visitors gain information through handheld devices that allow



them to rate the exhibits – and there is a well-stocked whisky bar in the bowels of the museum, partly because Walsh claims that there is something to be said for viewing art while under the influence of alcohol.

"For me, David Walsh is a genius of his type who has something to say, not provoke for the sake of provoking," says Olivier Varenne, a curator who has helped to acquire a few hundred works over the past several years. "Art is, in a way, a new religion, and MONA is a museum on the other side of the world where people make a pilgrimage to – and you get something out of it."

Varenne says the entire MONA collection is worth in the region of US\$150 million and describes a visit there as "a journey where you don't know what to expect". His brief, he says, is simply to find good art. "We're doing something we believe in – there's no right or wrong."

It was among the guests at the recent opening of a solo exhibition by Belgian conceptual artist Wim Delvoye, whose most controversial works – including one commissioned by MONA called *Cloaca Professional* – have literally caused a stink in the art world. These are contraptions that imitate the human digestive system, where food is fed in at one end and after "digestion", a load of simulated you-know-what emerges from the other. Delvoye's current exhibition runs until April 2, 2012 and includes several versions of the machine, including a portable one.

"This is the best museum experience I've had anywhere," says Jonathan Brand, a Singapore-based collec-

tor and Delvoye devotee. "Everything Walsh does is of the utmost quality – it really is something he's doing from the heart and he has a strong philosophy that things can be done properly." He adds: "This is living proof and the answer to the question, 'Who comes to Tasmania for art?' So far, an estimated 300,000 visitors have made it to MONA, which provides free entry to Tasmanians. Any-one else will have to pay A\$20 (S\$26).

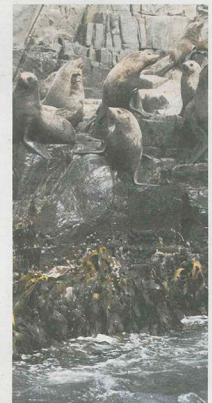
More Than MONA

Having made the trek to Tasmania, art-inclined visitors will no doubt also include some traditional tourist activity along with an excursion to MONA. Nature lovers will be happy to learn that Tasmania has some of the most pristine and unspoiled landscapes in the world, with wilderness areas and national parks in abundance. The air is notably clean, the roads are blissfully free from traffic and along with several historic sites there are natural attractions that rate among the best in Australia.

One of these is Bruny Island just off Tasmania's south-eastern coast, which is an area that is even less travelled and more undiscovered than many on the main island. Tourist brochures tout the fact that Bruny is the same size as Singapore – with a population of just 650 people. Most visitors come to the island by car ferry to go bushwalking, visit the beach or take eco-cruises to the seal colonies on Bruny's rugged southern coast. Those that stay overnight in one of the B & B-style places scattered around the island can watch fairy penguins come ashore in droves to nest.

Halfway up Tasmania's eastern coast is the more well-known Freycinet Coast, a 120-kilometre strip that includes a dramatic coastline and various national parks. Here, visitors can hike to their heart's content, go on fishing expeditions or simply explore the many beaches and bays that line the coast, secure in the knowledge that there is plenty of fresh local produce and quality Tasmanian wine waiting to be sampled in the many nearby eateries.

Inland from Freycinet, the landscape is dramatically different but equally stunning, with scenic forests and mountains, heritage towns and fertile green valleys that somehow bring the English countryside to mind. Here in the early southern hemisphere summer, the temperature is cool, the pace is slow and the living is definitely easy. btnews@sph.com.sg



FOR NATURE LOVERS
Tasmania has some of the most pristine and unspoiled landscapes in the world. One of them is Bruny Island, where visitors can take eco-cruises to watch seal colonies (left). Halfway up Tasmania's eastern coast is the more well-known Freycinet Coast (below), a 120-km strip that has many beaches and bays and various national parks

