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The cultural cringe subverted

Only in Tasmania could Mona exist – an outsider's tilt at the orthodoxies of the art establishment



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I was in a dark, noisy bunker cut into a cliff, recently, on an island off an island on the edge of nowhere. It was a millionaire's plaything, an artistic game, the vulgar answer to a dirty question: imagine you became rich through your own intelligence; you owe other people nothing except the guilt that should go with wealth. What would you do?

Many, I guess, would picture spending the cash pile on good works – transferring it to Africa or paying their full share of taxes. And some really would do that; but not, in the end, everyone. What people tend to do instead with money is buy attention – and that, throughout history, has meant buying art.

Among the tasks of an art critic is to explain how something can be great art without being valuable, or valuable without being great art – that beauty or meaning can be detached from cost, and the fact that someone very rich is prepared to pay a stupid amount for an object whose creation may have involved no particular skill, and was perhaps even outsourced by the artist to others, should not affect its artistic significance. But art is also an industry. It allows the purchase of importance.

In Tasmania last month I met a man who understands this and played the game I described at the start – he was born without much, became rich, and has bought art – but who has somehow also reshaped (though not avoided) the pretension that can surround it.

It was odd, on an island that Australians regard as remote, a place to which my direct ancestors were deported as convicts and whose history is built on human and

environmental destruction, to come across someone who has thrown everything at assembling a collection, built a stunning underground gallery, opened it for free and in doing all this, made modern conceptual art accessible to people who do not wear square glasses and black T-shirts.

But perhaps only at the margins of the planet is it easy to rid art of the hierarchy imposed in any place crawling with experts. In London, David Walsh's Tasmanian gallery would have had the fun kicked out of it.

Walsh is a clever nerd, drawn to maths and technology. He was born in the Hobart suburb where his Museum of Old and New Art (Mona) opened in January, and made his money by calculating schemes to bet on horses. He has a jauntily transparent, attention-seeking flair in a state capital no larger than a big town. Some Tasmanians believe he lives in a lonely estate surrounded by wild animals – and vast numbers are coming to see what he has built.

I was entranced. Mona plays a game but a smart one: a considered challenge to the structure of artistic expertise. Modern art, as much as any predecessor and much more than it pretends, adores order. The Young British Artists were anarchic within a contrived system. Walsh is brash enough to have thrown this out the window. In his gallery everything appears to have been chucked together. It takes thought to see the angrily aesthetic argument behind the seemingly random effect.

Encrusted Chinese Ming coins from a shipwreck sit between two paintings by Australia's greatest artist, Sidney Nolan. There are Egyptian artefacts, Central American carvings, and a giant bacterial machine in glass and steel stomach that changes food into something close to human shit, and smells of it. The place is huge, the exhibits endless and it ought to be a senseless catastrophe.

Instead it busts categories. Labels and white walls are replaced by iPods, noise and darkness, the units programmed to track visitors' movements and offer them the chance to click on visual commentaries that are half what Walsh calls Artwank and half gonzo subversion, offering bits of his homespun wisdom. A dark maze in digital numbers by a Hobart artist contains Mesopotamian cuneiform tablets, examples of the oldest writing to survive. What for me was the best thing in the gallery – Dreams of Migrants, a photomontage by the Chinese artist Wang Quingsong – stood out because it was not drowning among more of the same.

I don't claim to understand art, let alone the writing that surrounds it. Expertise does matter. So do aesthetics. Experts, if they eventually make the long journey – and they

will – may detest Mona. But to me the place seemed more than a gimmick or a modern cabinet of curiosities burping mainstream contempt for intelligent understanding. Once Australia suffered what people called the "cultural cringe" towards Europe. Mona turns that cringe around.

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