



IN THE FRAME: Olivier Varenne and Nicole Durling, who spend their days searching out and exhibiting artwork. Pictures: KIM EISZELE.



It isn't a job for the easily offended but for these two art gurus, curating at MONA is a dream job. TIM MARTAIN reports.

Art quest remains work in progress

CURATORS Olivier Varenne and Nicole Durling speak with an air of fan-like admiration when they talk about working with their boss.

Varenne and Durling spend their days searching out, acquiring and exhibiting some of the most controversial artwork ever to land in Tasmania.

And they love their work.

They are advisors to millionaire art collector David Walsh, who built the enormous Museum of Old and New Art (MONA) at Berriedale in Hobart to house his vast private collection of arts and antiquities.

And with Walsh's confrontational taste in art, Varenne and Durling are part of a kind of creative laboratory that sees them surrounded by artworks ranging from sexually explicit photography to a giant machine that turns food into realistic excrement.

"I like art, for me it's a way of understanding myself and it's a way of communicating," Varenne said.

"For me, a good work of art has to be visually attractive and conceptually strong—the ones that are only conceptual and not visually interesting, I don't like them as much.

"I like something that will really speak to me visually that will catch someone's eye, and the concept is there to give more depth to the work."

Born in France and raised in Switzerland, Varenne is MONA's international art buyer and curator and is based in London, from where he hunts for up-and-coming contemporary artists and other artworks he suspects might tickle Walsh's fancy.

His grandfather collected impressionist art and his father was an art dealer, so Varenne was practically fated to eventually work in the art world as well.

"Oh, it's in my blood," he said with a laugh.

"I decided to work for the Pace Wildenstein Gallery in New York. It is the leading gallery for impressionist art.

"Then I moved to the Gagosian Gallery in London. I was there for three and a half years and it was starting to be an interesting living for me. I started collecting contemporary works of younger British artists.

"I had a big loft and put together a 10m by 12m installation where you could walk in and that was where I met an advisor of antiquities for David Walsh.

"He only had a few contemporary artworks at that stage and I introduced him to that younger British artist scene.

"We became friends and when he bought younger artists I advised him, and he thought that to have a better deal for me and for him that we should work together, so he made me a proposition and I accepted."

Varenne has been working for Walsh for nearly six years and still finds every day to be surprising and rewarding when he uncovers a new artist to showcase in MONA.

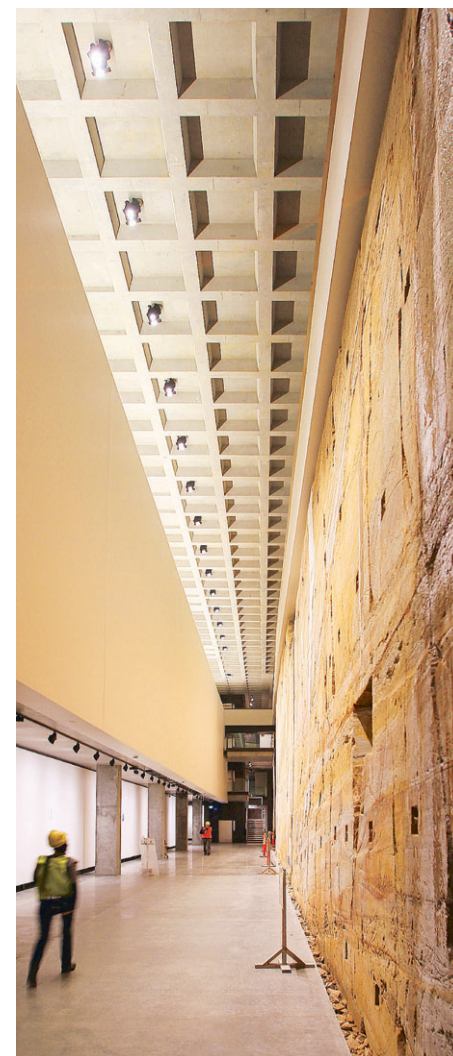
"I am based in London and I am paid to explore. I travel a lot looking for new works of art," he said.

"I find a lot of very young artists that are either in very small galleries or artspaces, or just do so little work that they're not really a part of the market yet because they have small production.

"One artist I found through friend-to-friend-to-friend and we employed him for three years, commissioned one work and now we've commissioned another, so he can't really be in the market because all his work is already sold."

Durling is, in many ways, Varenne's opposite. Raised in rural Victoria, she does not come from a particularly artistic family, and while Varenne prefers to leave the creation of art to others, Durling majored in ceramics during her Bachelor of Arts degree.

And while she admits she doesn't get to spend as much time on her own art these days, her hands-on appreciation for art is invaluable for her job at MONA.



STUNNING: Part of the exposed sandstone wall in the art gallery and museum.

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"There was no real reason for ceramics, I just enjoyed it, and there's a magical quality to clay, it certainly has a historical basis as well, a long history and culturally very rich," she said.

"I was always interested in history; for a period of time I wanted to be an archaeologist. I was really interested in Egypt, as a lot of teenagers are.

"I distinctly remember going to a talk about the Dead Sea Scrolls when I was 14 or younger, I was very interested in that but I was not very academically disciplined."

After spending a few years traveling and working from her home studio, Durling returned to university to do some postgraduate study and then started working in Melbourne for art auction house Sotheby's as a contemporary art specialist in their painting department.

And it was there that she first encountered Walsh as he was branching out into the more confronting end of the contemporary art spectrum.

"He'd started acquiring some really interesting, really tough paintings and I wanted to track him down. He was a bit of an enigma," Durling said.

"His sister had been working for the museum, she contacted me about some acquisitions he'd made in New York, asked me about some shipping things. I had a couple of different discussions with her, and decided one day to head down to Hobart to find out, what is this Moorilla museum and who is David Walsh?"

After meeting Walsh in Hobart and hitting it off, their working relationship grew rapidly.

"I was his point of contact at Sotheby's and two years later the idea of the new museum was evolving in his head. He realised I was spending pretty much 90 per cent of my time on him anyway and he didn't want to share me with other clients any more, so he offered me a job.

"He didn't know what the job was at the beginning, I don't think. It just sort of evolved."

Varenne and Durling described working for MONA as a sort of arts collaborative where the normal rules did not apply, limits were virtually unheard of and they were encouraged to challenge themselves and their own concepts of art on a daily basis.

"There's a lot of works that I dislike, I suppose," Durling said after giving it some thought.

"And there's a lot that I would not have looked twice at before, but now just through pure exposure to them in the collection, I've thought them through and the job has certainly challenged me in that way.

"David does encourage very extreme thinking and encourages you to push your boundaries and push yourself so we all kind



PLANNING: Olivier Varenne and Nicole Durling with installer Sharyn Woods, left.



HANDS-ON: Olivier Varenne surveys progress.

of push each other in that way.

"We put things in front of him that we've seen and show him purely because we think they might be interesting and we have an incredible amount of autonomy and freedom.

"It can sometimes be a little scary to be able to do anything you want but I've certainly been able to consider projects that aren't necessarily something that a normal collector would consider."

Said Varenne: "It's a hard job, in a way.

"To look at a painting by Picasso or [Anselm] Kiefer, it's easier to say if it is a good work or a bad work because they've got a full life of production, a body of work, so you can judge it.

"But when you have a young artist with only one or two years of production, you don't know what's going on in five years, you don't know what he will do, so you're taking a bit of a risk.

"But when you look at an artist you discovered five years ago and see that five years later their art has progressed, it is very rewarding."

As MONA's opening later this month gets closer, Varenne and Durling get busier and busier but they said the experience of watching the astonishing gallery and museum take shape around them has been an amazing experience in its own right.

"Someone recently described it as looking like Dr No's lair," Durling said.

"You occasionally pinch yourself when you realise that after so many years we're at this point and I do walk around it every now and then and marvel at it: it's my workplace now.

"MONA is already building a reputation overseas and people think of this private gallery in Hobart, and they wonder 'Where the hell is that?'"

"But a museum and gallery this big would bring a lot of people in regardless of where it was, so I think the actual location is incidental."

When asked to name his favourite piece in the MONA collection, Varenne named the works by German painter and sculptor Anselm Kiefer and *Cloaca* by Belgian artist Wim Delvoye, whose digesting machine demonstrates the complexity of the human body while also reminding us that we too are essentially nothing but excrement-making machines.

"It's a fascinating job and you're always learning," Varenne said.

"The moment you stop learning, you're either not very good at your job or you're doing something wrong."

■ MONA opens to the public on January 22 at 10am

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— NICOLE DURLING