

A “subversive Disneyland”

The gambling millionaire David Walsh is opening a museum in Tasmania which will be unlike anything you've ever seen before

By Cristina Ruiz

Imagine a museum which assaults every sense as you walk through its rooms. A museum where the rotting flesh from one work of art is fed to the mechanical digestive system of another so it can be processed and turned into excrement; where the mutilated bodies of suicide bombers are sculpted in chocolate and the Bible and Torah are displayed with bombs inside them.

Imagine a museum which overturns virtually every accepted notion of institutional practice: an underground museum with no natural light, with a deliberately confusing design so visitors get lost as they wander through its halls, and a museum which, in places, is incredibly noisy and very, very smelly.

This is the vision of David Walsh, mathematician, professional gambler, vineyard and brewery owner, who describes his Museum of Old and New Art (Mona) currently nearing completion outside the Tasmanian capital Hobart, as both an “unmuseum” and a “subversive Disneyland”.

Mona has been under construction for the past three and a half years and, if all goes according to plan, it will open to the public in January free of charge. We recently visited Walsh and were given a rare interview as well as a first look at his new building and the art he has collected to go inside it.

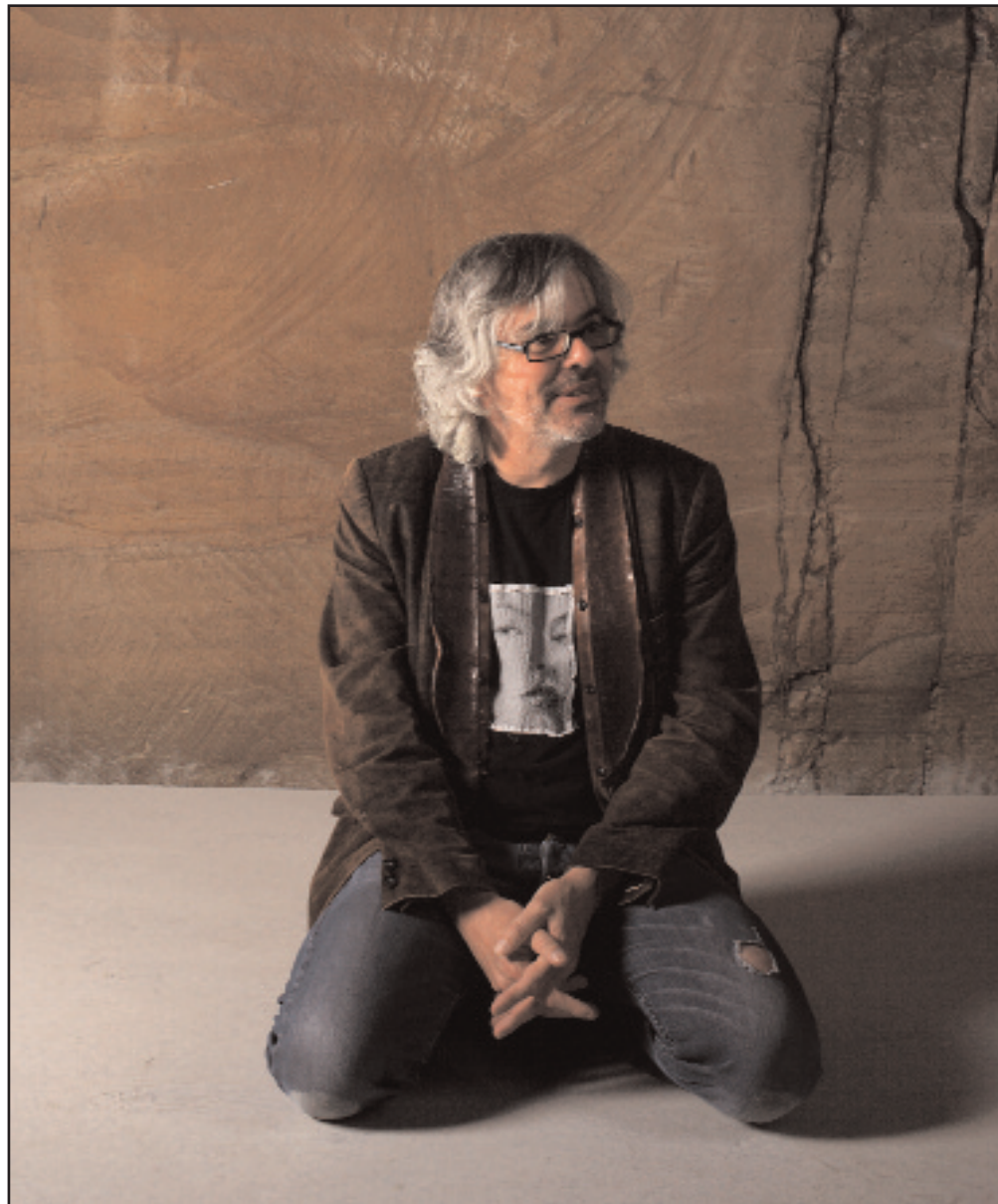
Confounding expectations

David Walsh is not like most collectors. For starters he does not seem to care what people think of him or his museum. Here are his views on the potential benefits Mona will have to local business: “We don't know whether I'm going to make any difference to the economy and I must say I don't particularly care. If it happens, great. If it doesn't happen, I don't give a shit.”

The 48-year old Tasmanian who made his money by developing complex gaming systems describes himself as a “full-on secularist”. “Mona is my temple to secularism,” he says, explaining that he is interested in “talking about what we are”, in other words what makes humans human. “People fucking, people dying, the sorts of things that are the most fun to talk about.”

The first of many surprises for visitors will be the building itself. When you approach Mona from the ground, it is nowhere to be seen. Visitors to Moorilla, Walsh's six-acre estate overlooking the river Derwent, will see a glass-fronted restaurant perched on the edge of a cliff, eight pavilions offering luxury accommodation, a vineyard and a brewery but no sign of a major museum building. The entrance is a small pod-like structure leading to an elevator and a staircase which winds its way underground.

What awaits you inside is both spectacular and completely unexpected. Mona is huge, with around 6,000 sq. m of display space over three floors. Because it has been excavated out of a cliff, the architect Nonda Katsalidis of the



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Going underground: David Walsh, above; an external view of Mona, left. The building has been carved out of a cliff and will be invisible to visitors approaching it from ground level (the trees at the top)

Melbourne firm Fender Katsalidis had to remove around 60,000 tonnes of earth and sandstone, before building could begin. The result is breathtaking. One wall of the museum is the sandstone cliff. From there the architect has built out towards the river using steel and concrete.

While most galleries greet the public with a ticket or information desk, the first thing visitors to Mona will encounter is a bar in the foyer. Drinks will not be allowed inside the galleries but Walsh says he likes the idea of “visitors revisiting the art with an accumulating alcoholic insight”.

From the bar one enters a labyrinth of rooms in every shape and size. Some have low ceilings because of the physical constraints of the site and are too small to contain more than one installation, others are vast and offer long vistas towards distant works of art. No room is the same as any other. It is easy to get lost. “Mona is very difficult to navigate, that's the point,” says Walsh, suggesting he wants visitors to surrender to the experience.

The art on show will cover three main areas. There will be the antiquities Walsh first started buying 20 years ago—his collection includes seven Egyptian mummies, ten Roman mosaics, Mesopotamian cuneiform tablets and thousands of Greek coins.

Then there are the Australian modernists: Sidney Nolan, Charles Blackman, Arthur Boyd and John Perceval. His collection in this field is “extraordinary” says Mark Fraser, former head of Sotheby's Australia who has worked for Walsh

since 2007 as director of his art operations. It includes Nolan's monumental work *Snake*, 1970-72, which is made up of 1,620 individual panels and will cover a 45-metre curving wall in Mona which has been designed specially for the work.

Finally there is the international contemporary art which Walsh has been buying for around 10 years. He now owns some 300 works, many of them large-scale. More have been commissioned for the opening of Mona. These include a new version of Wim Delvoeye's *Cloaca*. The machine, which simulates the human digestive process, creates excrement which is apparently indistinguishable from the real thing. It will be the first version of the work which Delvoeye has sold to a museum.

“Originally I was adamant never to sell any *Cloaca* machine,” says Delvoeye, explaining that he did not trust institutions to look after it properly. “It's not a commercial piece but David is special. He's not just acquiring pieces. He goes for [art] that requires a lot of engagement from the collector. He loves that.”

Delvoeye says he has been in talks with Walsh for the past two years and “once we decided where *Cloaca* would be placed permanently, we started a dialogue with the architects so the space would be completely adapted to the piece...the pipes, the electricity, the air, the water, we were very interested in that because we want to connect *Cloaca* with that.” Unlike previous versions of the machine, the new *Cloaca* will be suspended from the ceiling, like a “hanging toilet” says Delvoeye.

Walsh says he intends to feed the machine with the rotting meat from another work of art, a 1998 *Untitled* installation by Jannis Kounellis which incorporates seven carcasses of beef. These will be left hanging in the museum for three days before they are used in Delvoeye's installation.

The smell of the rotting beef and the excrement from *Cloaca* may be too much for some visitors but to Walsh they are important. “Aren't we just machines for manufacturing shit?” he asks. “Real people try to conceal the various modalities that they operate in,” he says.

What we try to hide, Walsh is determined to investigate. Another commission for Mona is a toilet customised by the Austrian artists' collective Gelitin which will be placed unmarked in a row of cubicles. Unsuspecting visitors who enter will find themselves inside *Locus Focus*, a work which uses an integrated four-mirror system and a binocular to give you a personal encounter with your own bodily functions you are unlikely to forget. By looking through the binocular you can see “your ass like you never did before”, explains Wolfgang Gantner of Gelitin. “The drama happens by watching your sphincter slowly opening and releasing the digestive byproducts. It's a very weird feeling seeing and experiencing your body in that way, hypnotic.”

Walsh believes the toilet is a metaphor. “A big theme of mine is compartmentalisation and sanitisation,” he says. “All the things we fuck up are because we defer responsibility. So this is a rather unobvious metaphor for saying ‘Let's just see what it is that we do exactly.’”

Some visitors may find these displays shocking, even disgusting, a reaction Walsh welcomes. “There's a lot of controversial stuff [which will go on display]. And, hopefully, it will cause a backlash because that's how you attract visitors and also I want to get some discussion going.”

In addition to the scatological, there will be plenty of other works likely to produce strong responses. They include Stephen J. Shanabrook's *On the Road to Heaven The Highway to Hell*, 2008, a sculpture cast in chocolate depicting the mutilated body of a suicide bomber and Gregory Green's *Bible Bomb #1854 (Russian style)*, 2005, a mixed media “bomb” in a Bible and similar works which use the Torah and Koran.

To suggest, however, that Walsh is only interested in the controversial is to miss the point says Olivier Varenne, a London-based curator who has worked for him for five years scouting out potential purchases. “David has a very big sensibility. Every time there is poetry or humour

at the end of the world



Bodies of work... Mona's collection includes, among many visceral and provocative pieces, the Chapman Brothers' *Great Deeds Against The Dead*, 1994, left and Jenny Saville's *Matrix*, 1999, right

or derision in art, I enjoy showing David these works," says Varenne.

There is indeed poetry and delicacy in many of Walsh's acquisitions such as *Tracing Time* by British artist Clare Morgan, an installation of hundreds of four-metre-long threads which run from the ceiling to the floor. On these Morgan will place between 3,000 and 4,000 dandelion seeds, each one glued on individually by hand.

Anselm Kiefer's monumental *Sternenfall/Shevirath ha Kelim*, 2007, a haunting installation of lead books on steel shelves with broken glass, which was first shown at the Grand Palais in Paris, will get its own building. "We're building a separate pavilion to display [it] because Kiefer demands pavilions so he's going to get his fucking pavilion," says Walsh.

Another beautiful installation will be Cuban artist Wilfredo Prieto's *Untitled*, 2004, which consists of 6,000 white books and newspapers in a library which fills an entire room. Every single publication is blank says Walsh who adds that the work is "one of my favourites".

Mona will also have a real library on site housed in a building by the Australian architect Roy Grounds who designed the first buildings at Moorilla. These were the homes of the Italian family that first developed the estate and eventually sold it to Walsh (the entrance to the museum also incorporates a Grounds building).

New YBA sensations

When Mona opens it will include four signature pieces from Charles Saatchi's 1997 "Sensation" show of work by the so-called YBAs. These are Mat Collishaw's photographic installation *Bullet Hole*, Jake and Dinos Champan's Goya-inspired sculpture *Great Deeds Against The Dead*, 1994 (above), Marc Quinn's latex sculpture *No Visible Means of Escape*, 1996, and Chris Ofili's *Holy Virgin Mary*, 1996, the painting decorated with elephant dung which caused a political storm when it was shown at the Brooklyn Museum of Art. The controversy led to the cancellation of Sensation's stop in Australia at the National Gallery in Canberra. "Australia has never had a YBA show," says Mark Fraser. "It's interesting that 15 years later Australia is getting access to this material where it will be tested in a fresh place, in an Anglo-Saxon context but one that didn't see the work when the artists were young". Walsh also owns Jenny Saville's *Matrix*, 1999 (above), which he describes as "one of the pieces I like most."

The library will house Walsh's collection of several thousand art and science books and will be connected to Mona via a 40-ft tunnel. It will be one of the few quiet places in the complex. "Throughout the Mona galleries, there will be soundspill from installations," explains Fraser.

Making money

Walsh is spending A\$100m (£58.5m) developing his Moorilla estate. Around A\$76m (£44.5m) of this is going on Mona. The art collection has cost another A\$100m. So where does the money come from?

In the late 1970s Walsh dropped out of university where he was studying maths so that he could gamble. He started by counting cards at blackjack which he says "anybody can do" by mastering certain techniques. "That stuff is easy." It was so easy for Walsh that casinos now restrict his betting. A spokesman for Federal Group which runs two casinos in Tasmania said that Walsh "is permitted to play blackjack at both properties however with bet limits in place".

Walsh's real interest, however, was the development of a mathematical system that allows him and his partners to bet on horses and win. The process took time. "I spent over 100 hours a week working on it for most of the 80s and early 90s," says Walsh. Around 15 or 20 years ago, Walsh and his partners cracked it. "It's been working consistently since then," says Fraser.

Although Walsh is regularly referred to as Tasmania's richest man, there are no published estimates of what he's worth. He says he is currently short of cash and has had to borrow money to pay for Mona. "Since the museum asset would probably be valued at zero at this precise point I have negative wealth. The cash flows in pretty readily however and this situation will remedy itself (or not)."

Today Walsh says he spends about "two days a week" on his gambling interests. Although these have made him a fortune, he denies that he is particularly clever. "I'm ballsy. I have a different attitude to risk to most people. And because I got lucky it looks like I know what I'm doing. It's an example of Darwinian survivor bias. If I was one of the million people who tried to gamble and didn't succeed at it, you wouldn't be interviewing me."

So does Walsh gamble with the value of the art he buys? "A number of the works I buy are without any resale value at all—site specific works or works that are so obnoxious nobody would want them. I also don't think the art market (like all financial markets) is particularly forecastable so whether work appreciates in value

is unknown to me. That being said I don't mind making money. I do sell work, particularly at the moment when I am short of cash, but what works to sell is about how my tastes have changed more than value."

Walsh's changing tastes will of course dictate what goes on show at Mona. He is keen to stress there will be no formal curatorship. "I believe most curation is bullshit...curators tie together a bunch of stuff they can get their hands on then create the most abstruse and obtuse reality and, in the end, fill an exhibition up with a few things that are slightly connected and the upshot is that about 30% of the art is just there to fill space."

Mona will do things differently. Works from every period and style will be juxtaposed in ways you are unlikely to see elsewhere. A Roman-period mummy will be displayed alongside "a fairly dynamic video work which hopefully will

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recontextualise it," says Fraser. The underlying theme, will be artistic motivation. "No one makes art for art's sake," says Walsh. "There are only two reasons to create art: to get laid or defy death."

"The point is we're looking at all art as being contemporary," says Fraser. "It's all survived to this day. It was all made for some interesting reason. We'd like to talk about why people are creative and why they make art. Is it as Darwin might have argued that art was a fitness marker, it basically made us sexy? I think David would argue that artists get more sex than the rest of the population."

So is Walsh building a museum to get laid? "Absolutely, it's a blatant case of 'come upstairs and look at my etchings' or in my case, downstairs," he says.

Fraser cites the John Soane museum in London as an inspiration. "Here was someone who didn't come from a privileged background but found money and built something that he liked, that he wanted, and displayed the things that meant something to him. So, in a way, we're looking back to that late Enlightenment period again and we want to re-explore that Enlightenment idea of a Cabinet of Curiosities."

An exhibition at Mona, to be organised by renowned French curator and museum director

Jean-Hubert Martin, who organised the influential exhibition "Magiciens de la terre" in 1989, seems particularly appropriate in this context. Martin will be given access to the millions of objects in storage at the Tasmanian Art Gallery in Hobart and, from there, select works for his show at Mona. It will be the second exhibition at the museum. The first, opening in 2012, will be a Wim Delvoye retrospective. "I am David's first one-man show and I am very flattered. I will not disappoint him," says the artist.

As well as the exhibitions, the displays from Walsh's collection will rotate regularly. And Walsh will have sophisticated technology to help him decide what to put on show. Each visitor to Mona will be given a device which will help them navigate the galleries and will give them information about the works of art (no wall labels). It will also track the time visitors spend in front of each work so Walsh will have very precise information about what people like and what they don't.

Walsh will also be observing visitors in another way. Mona will include an apartment for Walsh and his two daughters which will be accessible via a concealed doorway in one of the galleries. A small window is being built in the floor so Walsh can peer down on the public below.

What Walsh still doesn't know is how many members of the public he will have to peer down upon. How many will come to Mona? His estimate is around 1,000 a day. "Tasmania gets 800,000 visitors a year and most of them come to Hobart. If they know about Mona, they'll come to see it." If Walsh is right and visitor numbers are high, he says he will build a new hotel at Moorilla to accommodate them. Meanwhile he says a permanent and frequent ferry service is being set up to shuttle visitors back and forth from Hobart to Mona.

The legacy

Many collectors want their names permanently inscribed on museum buildings or forever associated with endowments and bequests. Walsh is not one of them. "I don't believe that I am anything other than organised matter and I am quite sure that whatever is the essence of me will cease to be [after I die]. I find projecting myself into the future beyond the point where I am organised matter is of no interest to me at all."

He's not kidding. Because of the way it is built Mona is programmed to self-destruct. "If I cared about longevity, I wouldn't have built a museum a couple of metres above the sea level. The Derwent is a tidal river. In 50 years, there's going to have to be a lot of money spent on Mona or it's going to be underwater." ■