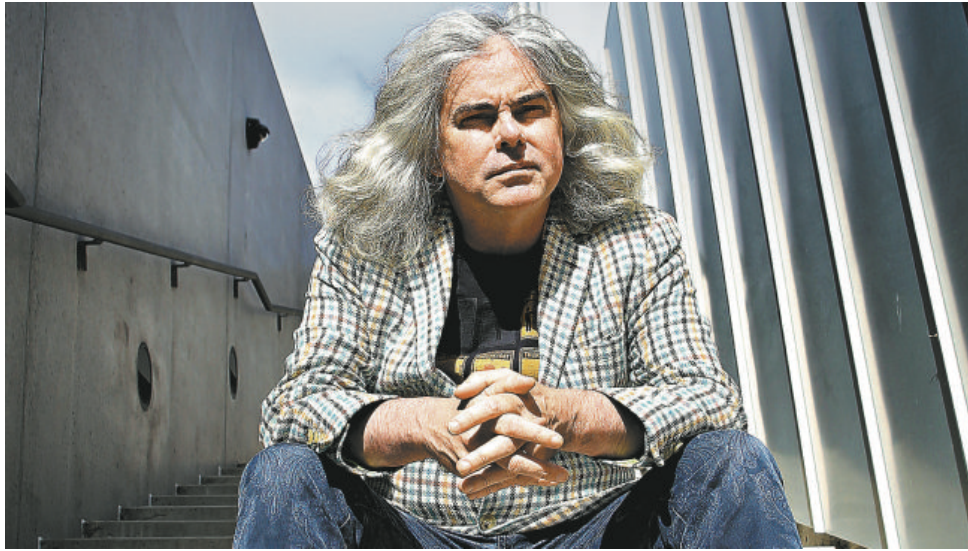


David Walsh focuses on the origin of the creative species

TIM DOUGLAS
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If you want to know the true meaning of art, ask a scientist.

That’s the message from Museum of Old and New Art founder David Walsh, who is throwing open the doors of his Hobart institution to four of the world’s great scientific-cultural thinkers in pursuit of that great philosophical question: why do we make art?

Renowned Canadian linguist and psychologist Steven Pinker, New Zealand-based literature and evolution expert Brian Boyd, and Americans theoretical neurobiologist Mark Changizi and evolutionary psychologist Geoffrey Miller will be guest curators at MONA for *On The Origin of Art*, a six-month exhibition from November 5.

Walsh announced the exhibition yesterday in Melbourne, saying the idea was based on the idea of abandoning society’s “cultural filter” to understand the human urge to make and appreciate art.

“There are some people who know the meaning of art but they aren’t artists,” Walsh says.

“Artists work in a narrow band of creativity. Though they make great things, they make specific things. They also make them without reference to their motives. They may say things like ‘I want to create beauty’ or ‘I want to know what love is’.

“But they never say ‘I’m compelled by my biological history to seek mates, and painting pretty pictures helps.’ ”

Each of the international curators — biocultural scientist philosophers, as Walsh refers to them — will have his own space across the museum, and will select and display artworks that reflect their areas of scientific expertise and philosophical

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thought. The exhibition will include artworks sourced from local and international collections, including antiquities, ceramics, textiles and contemporary installations.

Pinker will attest the only way to understand art is within the framework of Darwinism: is art a heritable trait “that enhanced the reproductive rate of our ancestors?” Boyd’s exhibit will focus on the idea art should be viewed in the framework of cognitive play and development.

Miller will argue art existed long before humans as a mechanism for attracting mates; while Changizi will assert art is a wholly human construct that exists only in the context of human relationships.

For Walsh, *On The Origin of Art* is his most personal exhibition since opening his self-proclaimed subversive adult Disneyland on the banks of the Derwent in 2011.

The 54-year-old, in addition to his well-documented interest in statistics, mathematics and art, has a longstanding fascination with biology and evolutionary theory. Last year he purchased for \$90,000 at auction Charles Darwin’s final edition of *On the Origin of the Species* (1872).

He says art academics have been fruitlessly debating the topic of art’s power for centuries, and an outsider’s perspective is imperative in any philosophical understanding.

“Curators, typically, weave a cultural web. But the web of art, like the web of life, has evolution at its genesis,” he says.

“Let’s see if those who have insights into evolution can tease out something about the nature of art.”

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