



Dark Mofo and the affective power of a creative storm

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Visitors take in Cameron Robbins' Field Lines at the Museum of Old and New Art. Mona/Remi Chauvin

In the week leading up to Hobart's Dark Mofo winter festival, I picture myself exploring events in a layered pupae of thermals, scarf, coat and gloves, still shivering, but awed by a spectacle of fire, light and unimaginable, dark, sensory wonder.

As a result, my start to the festival – a trip to Willow Court (a former mental institution) at New Norfolk to see Mike Parr's Asylum and Entry by Mirror Only with a friend – is punctuated by a series of disappointments. It's not cold enough; I barely need gloves. The MONA ferry is cancelled, due to debris from the torrential rain a week before, and the replacement bus smells slightly musty – like dank carpet. This would be somewhat in the spirit of Dark Mofo if the bus fabric was black and not a hideous swirl of primary colours, complete with bright blue window curtains. We laugh. We don't feel "dark".

When we arrive on site, we stand near some fire pits and receive instructions. We are confused, but follow the crowd. Strange pale faces peer from some of the windows in the building above. Linger. And are gone.

Eventually, we break away and start exploring the site. We stand at an entrance to one of the buildings, the threshold marked by a the intense scent of possum urine and faeces. The abandoned interior is decrepit and damp. A few small mirrors sit on narrow ledges and in odd corners. We see videos of Parr's intense body mutilation and endurance performances through windows and projected onto walls.

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Mike Parr, Asylum. Mona/Rémi Chauvin, CC BY

In another building, there is a sea of pale green broken glass. We move on – a possum runs, terrified, through an empty hallway framed by the heavy doors to the old patient cells. There's a sense of unease, but it's somehow all too familiar, almost expected. Indeed, the experience reminds me of Parr's work installed at Cockatoo Island for the 2008 Sydney Biennale. At the time, it was a standout, resonating with me for days after the encounter. This time, the similarity almost bores me.

More buildings, more rooms. The smell of human and animal waste seems ever present. As we walk, I become increasingly captivated by different arrangements, from piles of archived objects to a more formal display of one of Parr's prints. They conjure feelings of desperation and a struggle for control. There are various colourful plastic hand held mirrors, which conjure a nostalgia to childhood, loss of innocence and the traumas of youth. There are vintage bathroom mirrors, broken car mirrors, travel and vanity mirrors and an abundance of shards.



Mike Parr, Aslyum. Mona/Rémi Chauvin, CC BY

These mirrors register visitors in the present, but they are also conduits to another time, standing in for the people that once occupied this space: the damaged and discarded. –The space feels increasingly haunted through these objects that amplify the surrounds, capturing glimpses of feet and bodies. It is the sound of vomit accompanying one of Parr's video works that breaks through my final resistance. I am overcome with the involuntary sensations of disgust, horror, sadness, grief and profound compassion for the voiceless and forgotten patients at Willow Court.

We complete our encounter with Parr's 72 hour endurance performance *Entry by Mirror Only*. A single room is well lit and inside we see Parr seated at a table, drawing. His hand moves gracefully, repetitively across the page. The rest of his body is still, even his eyes seem to remain motionless. In the cell there is a mattress with a neatly folded blanket. A crowd stand around watching him.

Dressed in striped pyjamas, drawing fixedly, he becomes the patient. Further within the building, a large room is lit to reveal a series of disturbing self-portraits composed of heavy black lines. The image of Parr, as patient, is complete and the performance, becomes a moving homage to the artist's late brother who suffered from mental health issues for much of his life. I am moved, I feel the complexity of this site within me. We leave, my early disappointments forgotten, looking forward to the next Dark Mofo encounter.

Storms and Shakespeare

The following evening, another friend in tow, we visit *Tempest* at The Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery. The show, curated by Juliana Engberg, references violent storms and the Shakespearean play of the same name. This time, I am open and no longer mapping disappointments.

As we move into the exhibition, I start to note how expertly the journey has been crafted. The collections of artwork, objects and natural history specimens create a rich narrative linked to the perils and wonder of discovery and the story of *The Tempest*. We are about to set sail and the start to the journey is marked by Tacida Dean's video *How to Put a Boat in a Bottle*.



Ship Model, 1800s. Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery., CC BY

In the next room, a central table displays an abundance of intricate model boats. Many are composed of the familiar wood, thread and fabric. However, others are more magical and strange, composed of shell and bone. In the rear projection space, Fiona Tan's *Nellie* depicts a young girl dressed in 17th century garb. The print of the wallpaper and her dress are the same – white and blue, reminiscent of Delft Blue china, but composed of tropical imagery including exotic birds, monkeys and palms.

She sits alone in a large house and the matching patterns make her body, at times, disappear into the walls. While Tan's work originally referenced the story of Corneila van Rijn (Rembrandt's illegitimate daughter) and Tan's own experience of displacement from Indonesia to Amsterdam, in the context of the show, the connections are extended and link to the character Miranda in *The Tempest*: a young girl, controlled and trapped on an island between two worlds.



Fiona Tan, *A Lapse of Memory*. Courtesy the artist and Frith St Gallery, London

From the still ships in harbour, we move into the storm. David Stephenson's *Star Drawings* conjure connections to navigation and destiny while on the opposite wall, a massive drawing of lightning, by Tacida Dean – *When First I Raised the Tempest, No.17599* – extends the full length of the gallery. A series of paintings of ships, a love letter and a room-size painting of Prospero's Island extend the narrative.

The exhibition creates a space that speaks about much more than the story of *The Tempest*. It explores issues of power and colonialism and the relationship between humans and the natural world.

Indeed, this exhibition, like Mike Parr's installation and performance, must be experienced. Through the richness of the curatorial layering, it invites each viewer to draw on their own unique background and experiences to inform the overall reading. This is a show that requires time, and should ideally be experienced twice.

The flow of the wind

By Saturday, I feel a little overwhelmed, but we are determined to see the opening of Cameron Robbins and Ryoji Ikeda's work at MONA. On entry to Cameron Robbins' *Field Lines* (main image), we are confronted by an impressive sculptural machine, tall and skeletal with odd horizontal funnels. It reminds me of Jean Tinguely's kinetic drawing sculptures, but the context is yet to emerge.

In the next room, I see a series of long exposure photographs capturing the movement of light in bright red-orange bleeding lines, and I begin to make the connection between these images and the strange machine.



Cameron Robbins, Field Lines. Mona/Rémi Chauvin, CC BY

My initial instinct to link Robbins' machines to the work of Tingley was indeed appropriate. His sculptures are not simply strange aesthetic objects, but carefully crafted and honed to capture the immaterial flows and subtle invisible forces around us. Indeed, the light drawings create shapes that speak of the flow of the wind.

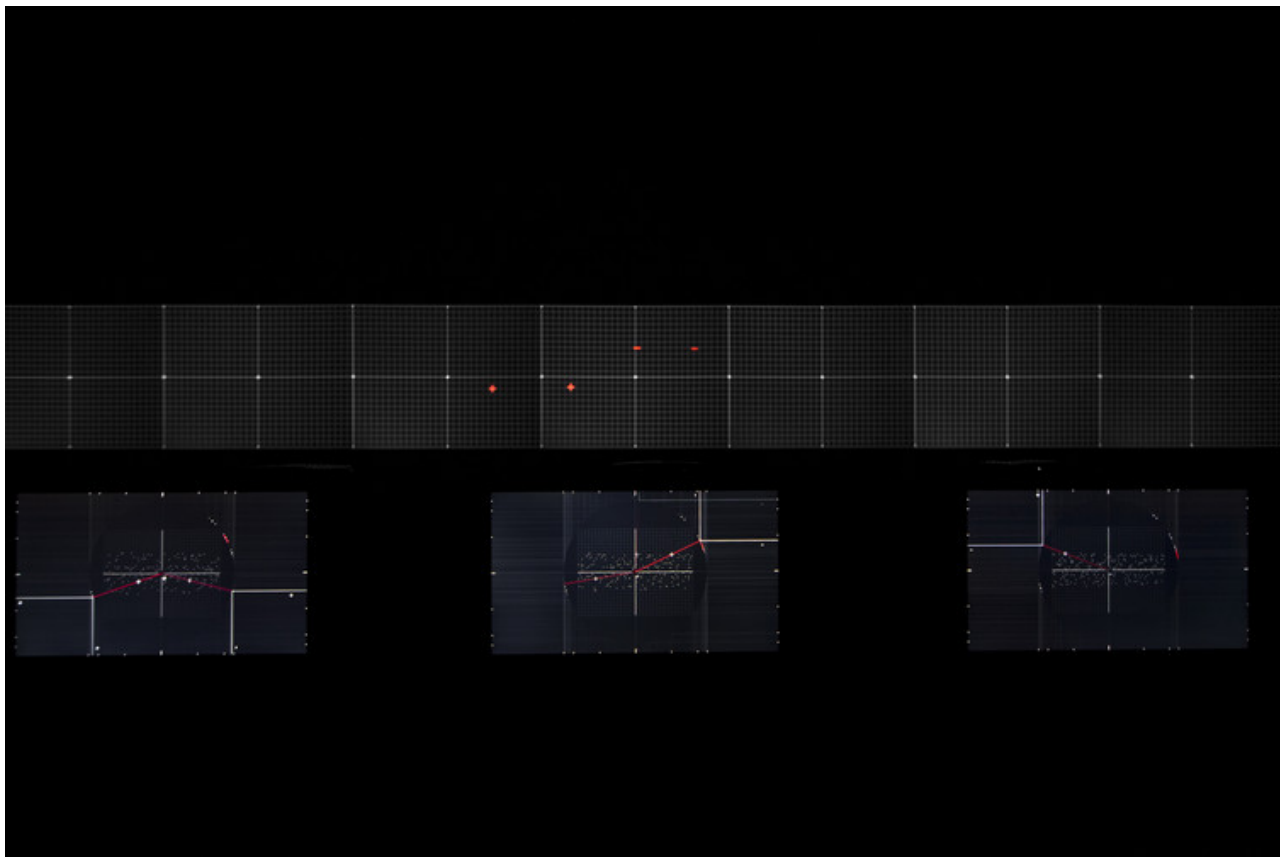
In the rooms that follow, this dialogue is extended through the presentation of many more machines and the intricate drawings, patterns and movement created by wind, tide, energy and magnetic force. While the images and machines are spectacular, it is the subtlety of each individual line and impeccable balance presented in the construction of the sculptures that ultimately draws me in.

The work is not simply about visualising wind or the in-out flow of tides. No. This work is about revealing some of the scientific magic that exists all around us, the complexity of interconnection between systems, chaos and order. It provides a glimpse at an understanding that extends beyond words, and must simply be felt as an immaterial, almost spiritual force.

While the bulk of the exhibition consists of various sculpture-machines and drawings, the experience is complemented by the addition of video and a large installation. It creates a range of sensory engagements that further the connections and speak of the value of curiosity, observation and exploration.

Entering the control centre of the universe

The work of Robbins is superbly complemented by a visit to Ryoji Ikeda's Supersymmetry. At the entrance, we are told that there will be darkness and strobe effects. This announcement creates expectations that are then immediately exceeded.



Ryoji Ikeda's Supersymmetry Mona/Rémi Chauvin, CC BY

Ryoji's work is spectacular. Conceived while on residency at the Centre for Nuclear Research in Geneva, a research centre renowned for experimental particle physics, Supersymmetry immediately creates links to the movement of particles.

The space is black, lit initially by the light emitted from three low, square structures containing a glowing white screen. Ball bearings move in patterns across the intensely lit surface. They form pooling and flocking patterns as they travel. A low whirring sound accompanies their movement. Incredibly, the smooth, glowing surface appears immobile. After a few minutes, what seems like a scanning layer appears and moves across the surface of the structure.

The first appears to record the location of the ball bearings, the second seems to map time, while the third records arrangements. The use of strobe effects enhances the sense of scanning. At one point, all movement ceases and the bearings form different shapes near the centre of the screen. While the full function and details remain unclear, there is a definite sense of rigid and precise data collection. The matched timing of each structure is impeccable.

The second component of the installation only enhances the experience. A long row of projections and screens appears to be gathering real-time data from the three "experiment" structures. We see the ball bearings move, then images of clusters of particles, like an expanding universe – I get associations of cosmic forces, light speed, time travel and intricate connections between matter and the invisible forces that control its movement and trajectory.

I feel like I have entered into the control centre of the universe.



Ryoji Ikeda, *Supersymmetry*. Mona/Rémi Chauvin, CC BY

As though there is no god, just a series of computers, mapping and controlling the fate of every particle, creating patterns and systems that appear open, but follow distinct rules.

I stand for a while and try to take it all in. After watching the spectacle cycle through, I decide, this space is perhaps not the control centre, but an obsessive, never ending experiment to find this elusive space and finally understand the meaning of life and nature of the universe.

As I stand there, I realise that I cannot do this work justice. In the curatorial notes, the work is described as “a total visual and aural immersion into nature’s innermost reality”. A big call, that one. But, you know, I have to agree. This is not to be missed.

After just a few days of engaging with some of the headlining artworks at this year’s Dark MOFO, I understand that this festival is not about darkness or horror.

Rather, it is about engaging in new experiences that capitalise on the power of art to expand horizons and take us into new worlds of understanding and possibility.

While some work, like Mike Parr’s haunting *Asylum*, will require the viewer confront the darker terrains of human experience and the troubling institutional policies of the past (and present), the curatorial teams have delivered an astounding and deeply affecting program that moves seamlessly between science, spirituality and magic and captures the beauty and danger of a raging storm.

The only thing I can say for sure, is that Dark Mofo is best experienced in person and, preferably, without the baggage of expectation.

Tempest is at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery until November 20.

Cameron Robbins’ Field Lines is at MONA until August 29.

Supersymmetry is part of MONA’s permanent, evolving collection and will be on display for at least 12 months. <https://darkmofo.net.au/lineup/supersymmetry-ryoji-ikeda/>

