

THE RED QUEEN EXHIBITION JUNE 19, 2013 – APRIL 21, 2014

Mona is evolving as all creations must and with our upcoming exhibition **The Red Queen*** we have taken David Walsh's interests in the forces that drive creativity further – before recorded time, across scientific and literary disciplines – and, more modestly, throughout the whole museum.

While our research followed a scientific path, the works and artists our two senior curators Olivier Varenne and Nicole Durling chose to include reflect instinctual responses. (More explanation from them later.) Together with colleagues Jane Clark and Elizabeth Mead, with occasional asides – such as the original exhibition idea - from David, they set out to find works they believe show why art is made.

We acknowledge it's a hubristic and challenging goal, and one that may not work. But we are more interested in learning and exploring than following a secure path.

Has art made us who we are today?

Science tells us we did our most important evolving during the Pleistocene (1.6 million to 10,000 years ago) and by then we were genetically endowed to imitate, to learn a language and to nurture (because those who did so procreated more than those who didn't). A lot of luck along with cognition, or the ability to understand through thought, and our ability to adapt to all climates – except Antarctica – enabled us to compete most successfully in the **Red Queen race**.*

It's only recently that we have lived the way we do today. For a million years we were hunter-gatherers or foragers with bodies designed to look after our brains foremost (they use around 20% of our energy). Around 120,000 years ago we walked off the African savannahs and headed out across the world. We've been farmers for 10,000 years, and city dwellers for 1,000 (that's only 40 generations when a generation is calculated at 25 years).

Anthropologists have discovered rocks we carved, bones and tools we honoured and marked, caves we painted along with rituals and ceremonies we enacted, but until around 30 years ago no one thought about examining whether art gave us evolutionary advantages. Although Charles Darwin (1809 – 1882) did question the role art and ornamentation played in the evolution of our species. If evolution is the survival of the fittest and a constant battle to ensure your genes continue, why would we have continued to carry out tasks that were time and resource wasting? There was a reason some evolutionary scientists now submit: such practices made us who we are today.

Some scientific scenarios on the role of art

During the last three decades a number of thinkers have written on this unexplored subject:

Geoffrey Miller, Steven Pinker, Leda Cosmides and co-worker John Tooby, and Brian Boyd are those we have considered.

The psychologist Geoffrey Miller argues it's about sexual selection and that art emerged as an extravagant ornament that advertised excess capacity – the ability to waste energy, resources and time – and still survive. To sensationalise and simplify his much more subtle arguments: the artistic bloke got the girls and spread his genes more generously than his less creative competitors.

Steven Pinker, a cognitive scientist, challenges the idea of art as human adaptation. He sees it as a consequence of a mind that constantly computes and refines information, so that we developed an eye for beauty to identify the healthiest and fittest potential partners - one seemingly simple example.

Leda Cosmides a psychologist and John Tooby an anthropologist agree with much of Pinker's art-as-a-by-product explanation but insist there are additional reasons: we prefer to gain information from fiction rather than fact even though our ability to survive in this world requires intuition. So we have evolved to be artists (to think creatively and with discernment) to drive our self-development. Their work segues neatly, here, into the writings of a professor of English and expert on Vladimir Nabokov, Brian Boyd.

Ironically, at the very time in our history when we are beginning to understand the importance of art in our evolutionary journey – we are in many ways more disconnected from it and each other. In generations past art was a mysterious and divine visitation from a god or muse, today it's a cultural product.

Boyd offers what he calls 'the bio-cultural model' of how we evolved. He denies a nature versus nurture model and argues that his approach offers a way to demonstrate that both are causal factors. While art and aesthetics have been studied and appreciated for reflecting human nature, he says, 'there has been a rejection of human nature as a given and a stress on human nature as the product only of culture and convention'. A bio-cultural approach does not imply biological determinism, because genes 'do not constrain; they enable'. So they make us flexible to conditions and without them cultural and learning and behavioural adaptation would be impossible.

In *On The Origin of Stories* (2009), Boyd speculates that storytelling, the creation of narrative fiction, allows us to learn to construct possible futures and to react to them: to plan. He looks at instincts we each have: play - the precursor to an adaptive mind; imitative behaviour and how much we rely on learning by observing others; making order out of chaos and finding patterns and how we break those patterns in satisfying ways; a love of telling and listening to stories and using this facility to learn, to teach and to create moral cohesion.

For **The Red Queen** we have pondered all of these writers, and we are planning future exhibitions/chapters in the next few years with those who choose to join us.

As David summarises in his introduction to **The Red Queen** exhibition catalogue (available in September, we intend), '*The Red Queen* has, as its genesis, the evolutionary background of creativity. It's a lighthearted look, and will not be burdened by excessive narrative... That the evolution of cognition and creativity may be part of a closed loop that caused some hominids to become human is astonishing and,

will potentially become the subject for further exploration at Mona.'

Quotes from the Curators:

Olivier Varenne: 'We are trying to show that there is really no difference between the people who drew on the caves of Lascaux more than 17,000 years ago and the artists taking part in this exhibition today.'

'It's been a huge job because when we talked to the artists and told them what we were trying to achieve and we asked if we could use a particular work, many of them were so interested in the idea they wanted to do a piece specifically for **The Red Queen**. That's why we have such a lot of commissioned works.'

Nicole Durling: 'We didn't want to contain **The Red Queen** in a traditional way in its own series of galleries because if the works and objects we are showing reveal the various theories on the driving forces behind art – then we should also include the rest of the collection. On the other hand, we do want to tell particular stories and to take visitors on a journey, so the O device will direct them to **The Red Queen** works, but they are then free to look around them and make their own links to other works nearby. So we have reconfigured 75% of the museum, which has been challenging and exciting.'

'The act of taking on each project changes you, and so Mona has evolved and will continue to do so – as we all must to survive.'

Curator Profiles

Olivier Varenne is Mona's senior curator for international art, based in London and started working for David Walsh in 2006. Before joining us he worked in New York, and London with Gagosian Gallery's sales team. For Mona, Olivier seeks out potential artists and purchases contemporary works for the collection. He worked on the Moscow Biennale 2009 and co-curated *On and On* at Casa Encendida Museum (2010), Madrid.

Other significant projects include: Céleste Boursier Mougnot's *From Here to Ear* (2009); *The Heart Archive*, Christian Boltanski (2010); *Monanism* (2011 – ongoing); *Wim Delvoye* (2011 – 2012); Chiharu Shiota's *In Silence* (2011) and *Theatre of the World* (2012 – 2013), Yannick Demmerle (2012) and the art component of our Mona Foma and Dark Mofo festivals.

Nicole Durling has been senior curator since 2006. Based in Melbourne, Nicole was Sotheby's contemporary art specialist before joining us. She is a key collaborator in the building, curatorial direction and installation of the collection. She co-curated *Monanism* (2011 – ongoing); *Wim Delvoye* (2011 – 2012); and *Theatre of the World* (2012 – 2013), along with the art component of our Mona Foma and Dark Mofo festivals

The Facts

More than **100 pieces** including works and objects from the Mona collection: from Neolithic arrowheads to Egyptian scarabs, carvings and funerary art, from gold and silver Bactrian and Indo-Greek coins from ancient Afghanistan to commissions made this year; loans from the National Gallery of Victoria; The Museum of Everything (the world's only travelling museum for undiscovered, unintentional and untrained artists from the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries); and The Holmes à Court Collection in Perth

New commissions - 15

Number of artists - 46

List of artists.

Some of the participating artists:

Shachiko Abe (Japan)|Marina Abramović (Serbia/USA)|Francis Alijs (Belgium)|Kutlug Ataman (Turkey)|Pierre Bismuth (France/USA)|Mircea Cantor (Romania)|Chen Zhen (China/France, 1955–2000)|David Claerbout (Belgium)|Henry Joseph Darger Jr (USA, 1892–

1973)| Hubert Duprat (France)|Tessa Farmer (UK)|Michel François (Belgium)|Anna Halprin (USA)|Rafael Lozano-Hemmer (Mexico/Canada)| Ryoji Ikeda (Japan/France) |Ali Kazma (Turkey)|Joseph Kosuth (USA)|Laith McGregor (Australia)|Yves Netzhammer (Switzerland)|Chris Ofili (UK)|Yazid Oulab (Algeria/France)|Brigita Ozolins (Australia)|Mike Parr (Australia)|Julius Popp (Germany)|Sam Porritt (UK)|Alex Rabus, Léopold Rabus, Renate Rabus, Till Rabus (Switzerland)|Cameron Robbins (Australia)|Leni Riefenstahl (Germany, 1902–2003)|Sarkis (Turkish-born Armenian/France)|Lindsay Seers (UK)|Chiharu Shiota (Japan/Germany)|Roman Signer (Switzerland)|Taryn Simon (USA)|Sung Hwan Kim (South Korea/USA)|Tamuna Sirbiladze (Georgia/Austria)|Rirkrit Tiravanija (Argentina/USA) |Rover Thomas (Australia, 1926–1998)| Uta Uta Tjangala (Australia, 1926–1990)| Christopher Townend (Australia)| Wang Jianwei (China)|Erwin Wurm (Austria)|Zang Huan (China/USA)|Toby Ziegler (UK)

***The Red Queen** plays with the **Red Queen Hypothesis** (a term coined by evolutionary biologist Leigh Van Valen [1935 – 2010]) and embodies one of the key concepts of late 20th century evolutionary biology: that organisms must constantly adapt and evolve - not merely to gain a reproductive advantage, but also simply to survive pitted against ever-evolving opposing organisms. So life is a treadmill not a ladder. Of course, we are co-opting the Queen for our own purposes but as you can see she's been corrupted already: the Red Queen's race is an incident that appears in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass* and involves the Red Queen, a representation of a Queen in chess, and Alice constantly running but remaining in the same spot.

'Well, in our country,' said Alice, still panting a little, 'you'd generally get to somewhere else — if you run very fast for a long time, as we've been doing.'

'A slow sort of country!' said the Queen. 'Now, here, you see, it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that!'