

Red Line (2013) by  
Chiharu Shiota.

# Unweaving the RAINBOW

A new EXHIBITION at Hobart's Museum of Old and New Art looks at WHY we make art.

WORDS: ALEXANDRA SPRING

*Do not all charms fly  
At the mere touch of cold philosophy?  
There was an awful rainbow once in heaven:  
We know her woof, her texture; she is given  
In the dull catalogue of common things.  
Philosophy will clip an Angel's wings,  
Conquer all mysteries by rule and line,  
Empty the haunted air, and gnomed mine –  
Unweave a rainbow, as it erewhile made  
The tender-person'd Lamia melt into a shade.*  
– John Keats, *Lamia*

David Walsh disagrees with John Keats. Respectfully, of course. In Keats's epic 1819 poem *Lamia*, the English poet rebuked Sir Isaac Newton for dismantling the beauty of the rainbow by reducing it down to prismatic colours. Walsh begs to differ. "I think Keats is wrong that trying to understand something undermines its innate beauty," he says. "I think it actually adds to it."

Walsh has been collecting art since the early 80s and opened Tasmania's Museum

of Old and New Art (MONA) in 2011 to share his extraordinary collection. Yet for as long as he has collected art, he has tried to understand it. In Sydney recently, he commented wryly: "Why is this interesting? Why do I want this? Is this just a coincidence? Am I just showing off? Is this an example of 'come upstairs and see my etchings'? Or is it built into me like it's built into everyone else but I've had more opportunity to express it?"

Part of that is wondering why humans are compelled to make art, and why they have done so for thousands of years? "Art's clearly built into us [so] what does it mean? It wouldn't be built into us if it was a waste of energy, so it's got to have some purpose," says Walsh. "More interesting perhaps is whether art itself and the need for art is so important that it contributed to our capacity for cognition itself?"

He's not alone. Various thinkers are currently debating why art exists in an

evolutionary sense. Drawing on Charles Darwin's theory of the survival of the fittest, American evolutionary psychologist Geoffrey Miller believes art is a way of advertising creativity, intelligence and moral character when it comes to attracting a mate. Canadian cognitive scientist Steven Pinker suggested it comes down to art stimulating our pleasure centres, famously saying: "Music is auditory cheesecake, an exquisite confection crafted to tickle the sensitive spots of at least six of our mental faculties."

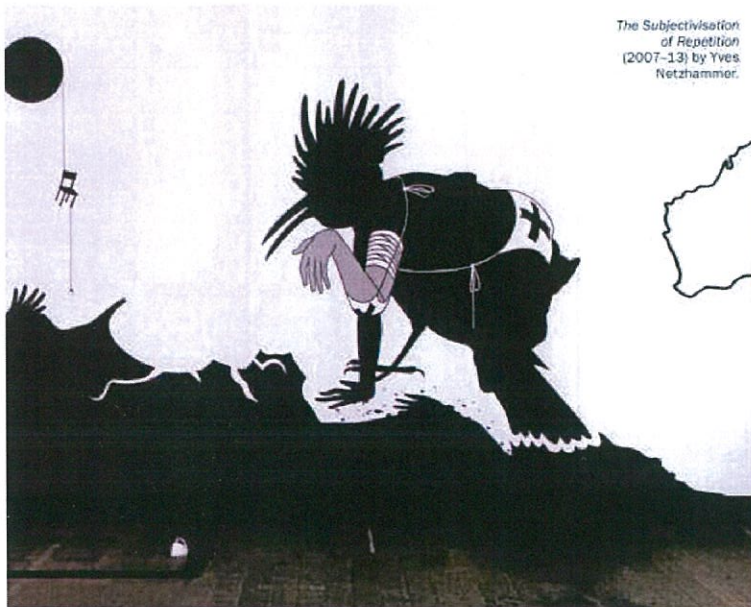
In a 2009 ABC Radio interview, English professor Brian Boyd explained his theory that art develops our ability to process information. Terming it "cognitive play", he believes that sound in music, visuals in fine art and the story in social information compels us to engage with a high intensity of information that we would otherwise not engage with. Meaning, we're able to manage information in a more flexible way.

And Ellen Dissanayke, who marries evolutionary theory with anthropology and has long been fascinated with the same question, puts making art down to bonding, mastery and the need to make things special. "When humans do things that matter to them, they tend to make ordinary behaviour extraordinary," she said on a recent visit to Sydney.

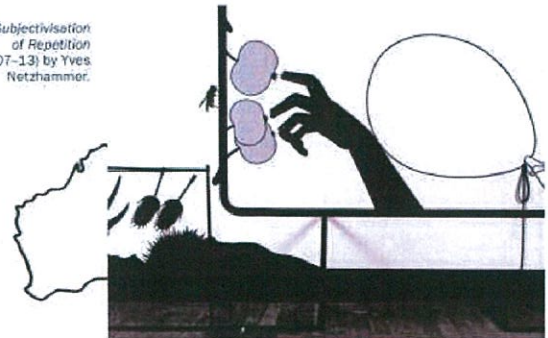
Walsh doesn't agree with all these theories, but he's intrigued by them. So



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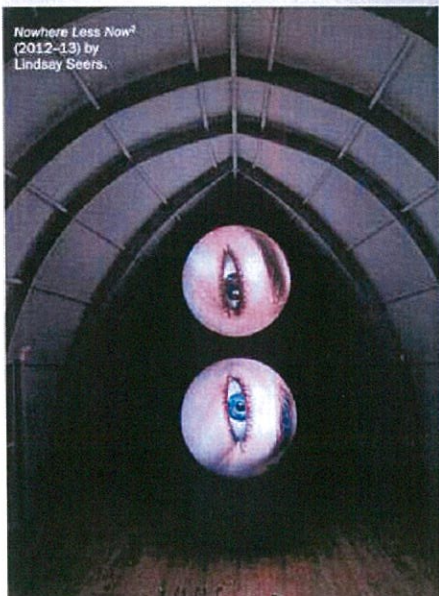
The Subjectivisation of Repetition (2007-13) by Yves Netzhammer.



Panel from the tomb of Montuhotep, 11th Dynasty, 2055-1985 BCE.



Nowhere Less Now<sup>2</sup> (2012-13) by Lindsay Seers.



when MONA curator Olivier Varenne suggested an exhibition of outsider art, Walsh saw it as an opportunity to explore these theories further. Outsider art describes work by self-taught artists, those who are mentally ill, naïve art makers and those outside of the mainstream of art, such as Henry Darger, Achilles Rizzoli and Willem van Genk.

Because these artists are not interested in promoting or gaining from their art, outsider art is often used to disprove theories about why we make art. "I said that's not wide enough, an outside exhibition is like a cultural exhibition - let's look deeper," says Walsh.

And so he and his curatorial team set out to find works that show why art is made. "I don't know why [looking at] the deep structure of art would be interesting," says Walsh, "and I don't know if I will find out anything interesting about it, but I know that it will be good art, because it is always beautiful when you engage a subject deeply."

The result is *The Red Queen* exhibition, opening this month at MONA with more than 100 pieces from international artists including Marina Abramović, Tessa Farmer, Leni Riefenstahl, Rirkrit Tiravanija and Wang Jianwei. There are existing works

and at least 15 new commissions. Walsh is particularly passionate about a work by Swiss artist Yves Netzhammer, who makes surreal video installations and is creating an environment specifically for this exhibition. "Of anyone I've ever met, he exemplifies the purposes of creativity, because without creativity, he would have nothing."

**"ART'S CLEARLY BUILT INTO US [SO] WHAT DOES IT MEAN?"**

He's also excited about Turkish artist Kutlug Ataman's work *Kuba*, which will be exhibited. Walsh describes the Carnegie-prize-winning video installation - 40 old-fashioned televisions playing 40 different stories from residents of a legendary Turkish neighbourhood - as one of the best things he's ever seen.

"It makes you see how our orbits are not just related but they are essentially the same. We're all going through the same set of problems in different ways, whether we're poor or rich."

In putting together the exhibition, Walsh's opinion of why we make art has evolved. "I used to think that sexual selection was a predominant player, and now I think that it's one of a multitude of players, including possibly all the other things other people have suggested and almost certainly a bunch of things that no-one's thought of yet." Something only an exhibition like this can inspire. ■