

## THE AUSTRALIAN

# David Walsh's MONA success is the ultimate revenge of the nerd

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David Walsh, owner of MONA (Museum of Old and New Art), with the installation Kuba (2004) by Turkish artist Kutlug Ataman. Picture: Peter Mathew Source: The Australian

**DAVID Walsh was a nerd before the term was invented. As a teenager growing up in public housing in Hobart in the 1970s, he had Asperger's-like tendencies, one friend and a gift for maths - he wrote computer programs even though he didn't own a computer.**

When he was 16, Walsh was falsely accused of murder. This unworldly, socially inept boy wasn't as shocked as he should have been. "I was somewhat dissociated from it. If it happened to me now, I'd understand the gravity of the accusations, but I didn't then," he tells Review, his eyes small and inscrutable behind square-framed, tinted glasses.

Walsh, the multi-millionaire gambler and founder of the country's edgiest gallery, Tasmania's Museum of Old and New Art, writes about this disturbing incident for the first time in an essay inspired by MONA's latest exhibition, *The Red Queen*, to be published in the exhibition catalogue in September. His accuser, he alleges, was a teenage girl whose romantic overtures he had unwittingly rejected. The spurned girl exacted her revenge in chilling fashion: she implicated him in the killing of an elderly woman who had lived in the same housing commission block he did. He writes: "It seems reasonable to assume she described me to the police out of malice." He adds with his self-

deprecating yet twisted sense of humour: "(Thin. Pale. Black hair, looks, and acts, like a weasel. Anything else that might help us identify him? He has a limp dick and, oh yes, he lives in flat 49.)"

The killer turned out to be the victim's nephew and the case was quickly solved. "It ran its course in a week," Walsh says. Still, he remembers vividly the police telling him that the girl "deliberately described me as a component of her vendetta".

For this exclusive interview, I am talking to the gambler and art collector deep underground at MONA. We sit in an echoing conference room that overlooks neatly stacked oak barrels from his Moorilla winery, which adjoins the riverside "secular temple" of art into which he pours millions of dollars every year. He wears a pinstriped jacket, T-shirt and patina of stubble. His voice is ragged - imagine Tom Waits reciting a soliloquy - and he speaks in flash floods of words that periodically catch in his throat. As he sits down, he starts scoffing a pastry before an assistant can push a plate at him. It's noon and it's Walsh's breakfast time. Very rock 'n' roll.

Asked why he is going public about the false murder claim, he replies off-handedly: "Because it came to me while I was writing and I'd never written it down before. It was associated with my inability to read motives."

Motives have been on Walsh's mind a lot lately. Artists' motives - from the perverse to the spiritual - are the starting point for *The Red Queen*, an exuberantly eclectic exhibition that includes an oversized trampoline, ancient Bactrian coins, voodoo dolls and watercolours featuring small, mutant girls with penises.

In his essay, Walsh reflects on how his teenage self's "extreme inability to read people", coupled with the fabricated murder allegation, might have seen him go "down for a murder I didn't commit". A reputation as a murderer, he jokes, could have been good for business. If he had founded MONA as a convicted killer, "a museum that has been labelled (even by me) as a museum of sex and death would have taken on a more morbid sheen. And attracted more visitors."

Clearly, Walsh's sense of humour, like his museum itself, can be wildly transgressive. Yet the 51-year-old, who posed naked in a MONA catalogue last year, feels it is time people looked beyond his gallery's sex and death notoriety - a notoriety he admits he cultivated initially. "I think we have earned respect to do things that are still perhaps more accessible than things most galleries do but which require a deeper appreciation," he says.

Underpinned by complex scientific and cultural theories about the factors that drive creativity, *The Red Queen*, he hopes, will demonstrate how MONA has matured since it opened 2 1/2 years ago. The sex and death label, he says, is "a load of bullshit", but it's bullshit that "I unfortunately said. When it got a response, I used the phrase a few more times, then started to regret ever having said it." In his own defence, he says, "my context was very different than has universally been applied".

He says he was talking about the reasons people produce art, rather than the content of his \$100 million art collection. He asks: "Do I collect art about sex and death? I don't think I do." This, surely, is debatable.

As soon as it opened, MONA acquired the reputation Walsh is now keen to ditch. He called it a "subversive Disneyland" and it wasn't hard to see why. Its exhibits included a machine that made lifelike human faeces and a suicide bomber cast in chocolate. There was a toilet in which you could

view your anus and an in-house cemetery where, for \$75,000, you could store your ashes. Today, Walsh stresses that the works that focus on death, human waste or slaughter of animals are not merely about shock value; they are designed to make us think about the things we avoid or deny - how we kill the animals we eat, for instance. "I want to make all the things that we do available for perusal," he says.

Also in his collection (and featuring in *The Red Queen*), is the Chris Ofili painting *The Holy Virgin Mary*. This work depicts Mary as a black woman with one breast made from elephant dung, surrounded by pornographic images of female genitalia. In 1999, then New York mayor Rudolph Giuliani took legal action, which he lost, against the Brooklyn museum that showed this work. It was to be displayed in Canberra's National Gallery of Australia the following year, but the exhibition it featured in was cancelled at the eleventh hour. In Hobart, the painting has barely raised an eyebrow - Walsh must be crushed.

Curated by MONA staff members Olivier Varenne and Nicole Durling, *The Red Queen* doesn't eschew sex and death, but neither is it wilfully confronting. The title refers to the Red Queen character from Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass*, who runs constantly but remains in the same spot. The show explores different forces that drive creativity, from evolution - Walsh is very big on evolutionary biology - to technology, a sense of play and sexual competitiveness. MONA's press release says of the latter theory, known as sex selection: "The artistic bloke got the girls and spread his genes more generously than his less creative competitors." Walsh is a willing but difficult interviewee. He gives long looping answers that sheer off in unpredictable directions and often involve scientific abstractions. It can be hard to keep up. "Sexual selection is definitely at play, as is a whole bunch of other cultural phenomena," he concludes on the vexed question. "The jury is out, I think, on whether any mechanism is dominant."

Featuring more than 100 works by 46 artists, *The Red Queen* has involved a radical rehang of three-quarters of MONA's collection. Among the artists represented are Japanese superstar Ryoji Ikeda, whose cloud-piercing column of white light illuminated Hobart's city centre last month; Serbia's Marina Abramovic; Australia's Mike Parr and Rover Thomas; and Turkey's Kutlug Ataman, who has been jailed, in the past, for his political views.

Asked to pick his favourite *Red Queen* work, Walsh nominates Ataman's *Kuba*, an installation of 40 televisions and armchairs that he first saw in Bilbao and considers "profound". These TVs simultaneously broadcast 40 life stories from a Turkish shantytown, capturing the struggling community's frailties and heartbreaks in one room at one time. On one screen, a man crippled by grief talks about his son's murder; on another a housewife speaks with astonishing honesty about her husband's philandering and her battles with his mistress.

Walsh says *The Red Queen* exhibit that "gives me visual delight is [Australian] Cameron Robbins' windmill thing. I don't know what he called it." The gallery founder commissioned this work he cannot name (it's called *Wind Section - Instrumental*). A weather-powered drawing machine, it is, he says, "beautiful public art. That it draws so well is totally astonishing to me."

No MONA exhibition would be complete without some kind of transgression, and there are taboos aplenty (child sexuality, racial profiling) in a series of watercolours by reclusive American Henry Darger who, as Walsh writes, "obsessively paints little girls, often with penises, subjected to violent abuse and fighting back". In one painting, the girls are being strangled, en masse, by men who look

Asian. Walsh explains these images go with a 15,000-page story about a religious war. In his essay, he speculates that Darger (who died in 1973) may have been a pedophile who sublimated his perverse sexual energy into a creative endeavour. "We are interested in Darger because of his paintings, and for no other reason," he insists.

He goes on to say our society's strenuous attempts to avoid sexualising children may inadvertently have the opposite effect: "When we treat every naked photo as a perversion, we are sexualising children, simple as that. The majority of people don't have to think about their response to a naked child ... Certainly you can't say that everything in art is OK; that's ridiculous. Ends justify means arguments have to be very, very subtle."

While the new exhibition showcases the unappreciated depths of Walsh's collection, his museum remains a far from a conventional experience. Its exhibition halls are as dark as a confessional box, its artworks are unlabelled and a pristine, ochre-coloured tennis court still dominates the museum entrance - the last thing Walsh wants is for visitors to feel they are entering an institution that talks down to them. Nearby are reserved car spaces for Walsh and his girlfriend, American artist Kirsha Kaechele, who live onsite in an eyrie overlooking the broad brown expanse of the Derwent River. One parking bay says "Reserved/God", the other "Reserved/God's mistress". A MONA designer came up with this solution after an embarrassed Walsh was told off by a gallery visitor for parking in a disabled spot.

Tensions of a different kind erupted on The Red Queen's opening night. While a VIP tour was in full swing, Walsh had a furious, protracted shouting match with the suave Varenne at a ping-pong table installation. Rather than deny or downplay this public spat, Walsh's primary concern is to protect the museum's reputation. "Yes, I was grumpy over something. It was a social thing," he confirms. "It had nothing to do with the gallery at all." He then segues into a tale of how he took up ping-pong as a kid, and played it - in characteristic, obsessive fashion - for five hours at a stretch.

Clearly a mercurial character, he admits the gallery's original marketing plan - its only marketing plan - was to cause outrage. It failed spectacularly: Tasmanians adore MONA. Even the taxi drivers I hail to go there, an Indian immigrant and a refugee from Sierra Leone, are fans of the punter and familiar with his life story: brought up by a single mum in the hardscrabble suburb of Glenorchy, he was a maths whiz who has made millions as part of an international gambling syndicate and has generously "thrown his fortune into the public", as one of the drivers puts it.

It's impossible to imagine other art gallery founders having a taxi driver fan club, but Walsh is not your average cultural aficionado. His father's ashes are on public display at the museum, watched over by a stuffed raven with a jewel in its breast. He juggles meetings with ancient coin dealers with million-dollar bets on horse races, and he reads maths papers that take hours to decode.

A man of searching intelligence, he reveals "my gambling is in no way diminished. I think about it all the time. It's still a major part of my life and I still enjoy it." He compares his punting life to the Red Queen, running yet making no progress. "Gambling is very much the same; it gets harder to win all the time; it's a high-stress activity."

Located just minutes from where Walsh grew up, MONA has had a dramatic effect on Tasmania's economy and culture. It's the state's leading tourist attraction and has drawn almost 850,000 visitors (MONA's figure) since it opened. This year Lonely Planet put Hobart on its global list of top 10

cities to visit, mostly because of Walsh's funky art palace.

The Red Queen opened on a biting cold Tuesday night last month and long queues of visitors stretched the length of a city wharf and spilled on to a pavement as they waited to cram on to the MONA ferry.

This acceptance, embracing, even of his gallery was unanticipated, Walsh says. "I was expecting a certain vocal minority of fringe dwellers to picket the place, to carry on like pork chops, to generate the sort of publicity that usually results from people that think that their beliefs should be believed by everybody." The "upswell of community interest", he says, has "glued over the cracks that were appearing in our marketing plan ... If you told me in advance that was going to happen, I might have been disappointed. But I had no idea how much I'd invested in what people think."

Leading a semi-public life has required social adjustments for this father of two who has been diagnosed as being "on the continuum of autism but not quite there". He says he has learned to communicate more effectively by taking small, constant steps. "If someone had said to me when I was 20 that one day you will be a comfortable public speaker ... that would have been one of the least probable things in my life." Recalling the obsessive reading or ping-pong playing of his youth, he says "most of those behaviours I'm on top of, I'd say. If you study communication a lot you get fairly good at it, but it's probably a lot more artificial for me than it is for you."

Last year, he settled a widely publicised dispute with the Australian Taxation Office over a retrospective \$38m tax bill - at one stage, he had warned the protracted stoush was threatening the museum's future. Years ago, he affected an indifference about whether the museum and his collection would endure: "Long before we opened [I said] that if nobody comes I'll put a big armchair in the Nolan gallery and turn the air-conditioning off and watch the art rot." He points out, as if this qualification were necessary, that this "is an overstatement of my position".

Now, he talks enthusiastically about his plans to make the museum, which runs at a loss, self-sustaining. He plans to build a hotel onsite to help fund the gallery and he predicts visitor numbers will grow. He has sold the O - a GPS device that guides visitors around the gallery - to Melbourne zoo and NSW's Mitchell Library, and is hoping international museums will buy it. He reflects: "When I built it, I didn't really contemplate MONA having a life of its own. I never thought about it living beyond me or outside of me - I do now."

The Red Queen, at the Museum of Old and New Art, Hobart, until April 21 next year.

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