

Making a Museum

David Walsh's collection ranges from antiquities to Anselm Kiefer, and he's recently completed a three-storey museum to house it. The Museum of Old and New Art opens in January 2011 – but will its Tasmanian location attract the global audience the museum deserves?

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PHOTOGRAPHS JAY HARRISON

Australian artists, not to mention Australian collections and collectors, have never enjoyed much international acclaim.

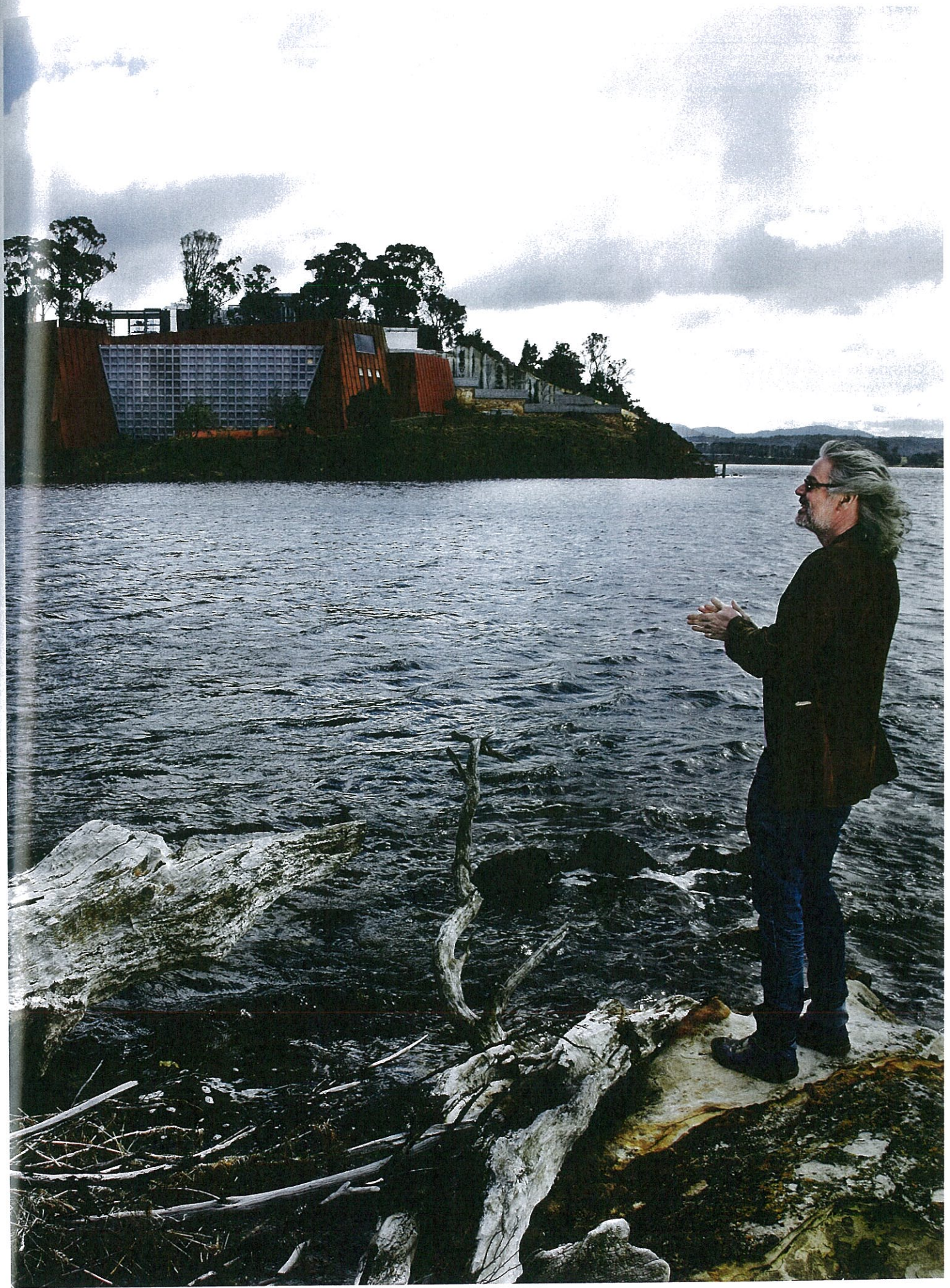
Artists like Sydney Nolan, Fred Williams and Arthur Boyd may have been shown in the UK and known elsewhere, but abroad they have nothing like the profile that they do 'back home', where, along with Brett Whiteley, they remain central figures in the Australian modernist movement. Likewise, Australian contemporary artists are underrepresented internationally and at the best contemporary art fairs. This relative obscurity is attributable not so much – if at all – to a dearth of talent as to the sheer geographical distance separating the Australian art capitals of Sydney and Melbourne from their intellectual and aesthetic partners in 'Western' art. Lying

roughly 24 hours away from Europe and 16 hours from the West Coast of America, these are cities that are isolated in a very practical sense.

And yet much of what has been written internationally about the Australian art scene of late – excepting this year's Sydney Biennale – has been focused on an even more remote locale: Tasmania, the 'island-off-an-island' to the continent's southeast. There, on a peninsula in the state capital, Hobart, the Museum of Old and New Art (MONA) is due to open – after some delays – next month. It is an unlikely place to find Australia's highest-profile collector, whose private museum is fast becoming, almost by default, a global manifestation of what is happening locally. Already both *The Art Newspaper* and *Wallpaper* magazine have featured MONA, marking the

first time that such publications have really paid attention to what is going on in this very distant location.

MONA has its origins in the Moorilla Museum of Antiquities, which until 2006 housed the collection of ancient art and artefacts belonging to David Walsh, a Tasmanian-born mathematician, professional gambler, winemaker and brewer. The museum occupied a house – designed by the architect Roy Grounds (1905–81), a hero of Australian modernist architecture – on the grounds of Moorilla Estate, a long-established Tasmanian winery Mr Walsh had acquired during the 1990s. But even as he opened this first incarnation of what is now, or will soon be, MONA, he envisaged something far more ambitious. In 2002, Mr Walsh commissioned architect Nonda Katsalidis, of the Melbourne



1 **David Walsh**

Photographed in October surveying his new museum, MONA, which opens in January 2011

2 **Sternenfall / Shevirath ha Kelim, 2007**

Anselm Kiefer (b. 1945)
Bookcase comprising two iron elements with lead books (190–200 volumes) and glass
500×360×300cm
Museum of New and Old Art, Tasmania
© Anselm Kiefer

firm Fender Katsalidis, to design a new museum. (Katsalidis had previously created a beach house in Tasmania for Mr Walsh.) Construction work began in 2005, and the results certainly attest to an impressive ambition. Cut into a hillside, the three-storey MONA building contains over 6,000 square metres of exhibition space, a cinema – for video art and other screenings – and venues for live music performances, along with a research library, café, bar and a museum shop.

'I am a changeable animal and my motives are fluid,' says Mr Walsh. 'I built a little museum and then I bought more art, so I built a bigger museum.' This somewhat simplistic explanation downplays at once the scope of the project, its importance to the region and how dramatically Mr Walsh's taste has evolved – and, he anticipates, will continue to evolve. 'Not only do I not understand my own motives now – I don't think I ever understood them. I know that what I'll think in 10 years is unlikely to be strongly consistent with what I'm thinking now.'

In other words, change is the order of the day at MONA. While antiquities continue to form an important part of the collection, there are growing emphases on major installations, sculpture, paintings and video works by international contemporary artists, and important examples of 20th-century Australian art and works by living local artists. Thus the collection is not only both contemporary and ancient but also encyclopedic in breadth – all united by the uncommon, mercurial and slightly subversive taste of Mr Walsh himself.

If anything is more unlikely than an antiquities museum in Tasmania, then surely it is this museum of 'old and new' art. And just as his collecting confounds the conventional charter, Mr Walsh is keen to play with people's perceptions of what a museum should look like. Extraordinarily, MONA has the proportions and atmosphere of a major international museum, yet most of its exhibition space is subterranean. 'Normally a museum has steps, it has bulk, it tries to queue you in,' Mr Walsh notes. MONA's bulk, by contrast, is largely invisible to approaching



'I built a little museum, then I bought more art, so I built a bigger museum'

visitors, who enter via an understated screen of reflective aluminium to behold a honeycomb roof made of concrete and huge walls of unadorned, unclad sandstone (Fig. 5). This is a beautiful building, cavernous and intimate all at once.

Along with an air of mystery, remoteness is central to MONA's allure. Were this museum anywhere else – say, in New York or Paris – it would not be quite the draw that it is in Hobart. Paradoxically, much of the strange beauty of this place (both the building itself and the surrounding landscape; Fig. 6) is somehow made more palatable by the strangeness of its location – or more specifically, by the distance most visitors have to travel to get there. A long flight can skew one's everyday critical compass, rendering the unexpected more welcome. And



3 Mummy and coffin of Pausiris, 150 BC–100 AD

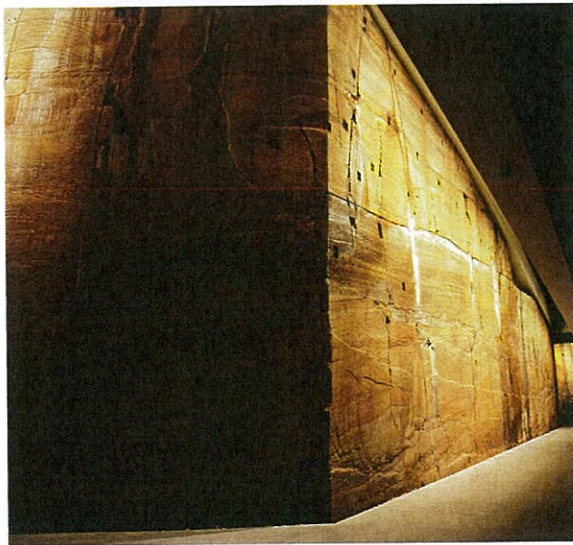
Human remains encased in stucco plaster with glass eyes, incised and painted decoration, 171×46×34cm
© Museum of Old and New Art, Tasmania

4 The self-supporting stairway

is constructed in Corten steel, and connects the three levels of the museum

5 Interior view of the museum

Built into a hill, most of MONA is underground, with walls constructed of unclad sandstone



although Mr Walsh insists that 'there is no grand plan', he also acknowledges that he is 'bypassing academia to make art fun' – in this context, surprise is an end in itself. But if MONA represents Mr Walsh's fantasy about how art may be contextualised, displayed and enjoyed by the public, then his fantasies have not been realised at the expense of connoisseurship or scholarship, as evidenced by some of the important works on display.

One of these works is *Snake* (1970–72), by Sidney Nolan, which has only ever been twice assembled and never in Australia. (Mr Walsh owns many other works by Nolan, including two *Ned Kelly* paintings.) Made up of 270 panels comprising six paintings each, the work is gargantuan and will hang in the largest gallery space in the museum, on a 45-metre-long wall specifically built for it. Not only are the individual paintings works in themselves, but together they also form a single image of a strange, mythic creature. Mr Walsh is clearly interested in the power of myths, and says that he likes Nolan for 'always taking myth apart'. *Snake* will hang near a major work by Anselm Kiefer, *Sternenfall / Shevirath ha Kelim* (2007; Fig 2), and opposite a 1998 untitled installation by Jannis Kounellis – Australians, in particular, will be interested to see how their local icons bear up in the vicinity of major pieces by leading international artists.

6 Exterior view of MONA

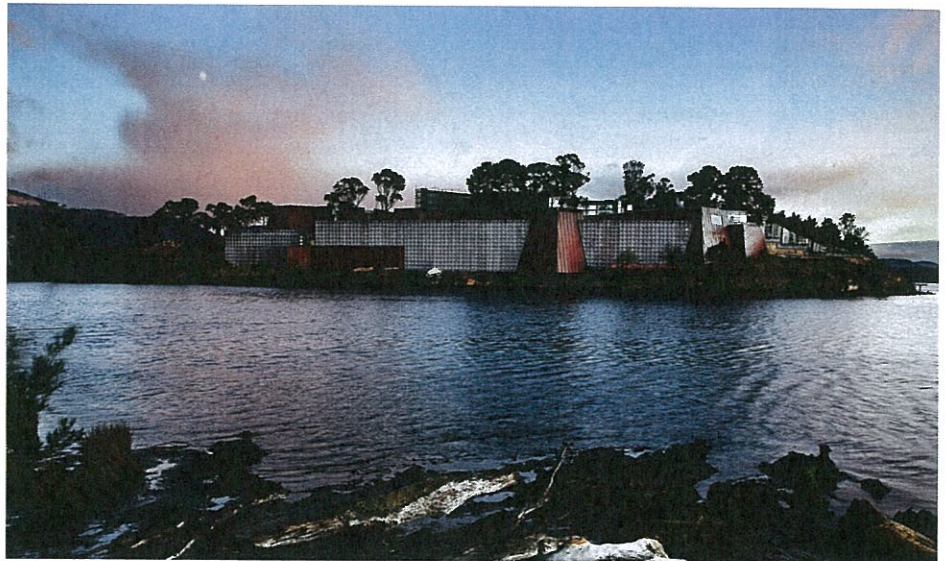
Designed by Nonda Katsalidis (b. 1951), the three-storey museum will have 6,000 square metres of exhibition space, a cinema and venues for live music

7 David Walsh

Photographed on the stairway at MONA

Mr Walsh first came to prominence in 2006 after purchasing John Brack's *The Bar* (1954) from Sotheby's for \$3.1 million, then a record for an Australian artist. He subsequently sold the painting to the National Gallery of Victoria for the same price. He is candid about his reasons for the sale: he didn't think *The Bar* was quite right for his collection and he wanted the money. For despite spending nearly AU\$70 million on the construction of his new museum, Mr Walsh's budget is not unlimited, making MONA seem less like the folly of a rich man than the grand gesture of a truly passionate and committed collector. He may have made a fortune by applying a mathematician's discipline to gambling, but where art is concerned he cares little for speculation – much of what he has bought would be difficult, if not impossible, to sell again, being either site-specific or too large for most private collectors. 'The only thing mathematics gives me is the ability to buy the art,' he concedes.

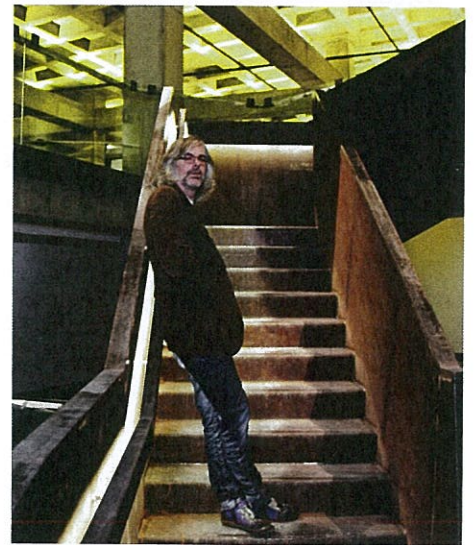
Indeed, unlike some principals behind private museums, Mr Walsh treats spending his own money on collecting and displaying art as something of a personal duty. He is philosophical – evangelical even – about the atypical dynamic of his museum, in which all of the different genres and types of art are given equal footing. Such a democratic approach inevitably creates juxtapositions that are both exciting and controversial – for example, one room, accessed via a corridor with a long water-pool down one side, will house a Roman-period mummy (Fig. 3), a *Morgue* portrait by Andres Serrano and nothing else. By this jarring and macabre combination Mr Walsh wants to remind us that the mummy is more than just an artefact: 'it' was once very much alive. 'If there is virtue in a private gallery [it is that] you can interpret and redefine an artist's work in a different matrix; [whereas] a public space has a different charter,' he explains. Moreover, the works will be frequently changed and rearranged – since only about a fifth of the collection will be on show at any one time, the possibilities are almost limitless.



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Meanwhile, Mr Walsh continues to buy and commission work, these days with the help of a team that includes Olivier Varenne, formerly of London's Gagosian Gallery. The two met five years ago, and it is Varenne who is principally involved with the acquisition of contemporary international art. Varenne's enthusiasm for MONA equals his employer's, and given that he initially joined a 'little antiquities museum' it will be interesting to see how the collection develops under his guidance. For develop it surely will. 'Every month I say I won't buy any more, then I do,' says Mr Walsh, and as if to prove his point I soon discover that my own visit follows hot on the heels of British artist Conrad Shawcross, who travelled to MONA to oversee the installation of one of his kinetic sculptures.

Mark Hughes, the museum's director, says that 'MONA is an experiment, a hypothesis rather than a result.' This museum will undoubtedly transform the cultural landscape of Tasmania. It will certainly become a local destination, and likely an international one too, especially now that visitors have the option of staying in one of eight guest 'pavilions' on the estate. In person, Mr Walsh proves as enigmatic as his museum. At the end of our lunch – cooked by his chef,



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on his peninsula, accompanied by his wine – he quotes John Lennon: 'Life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans.' Thus, he explains, 'these plans [for MONA] were what I did while I was making life.' **A**

The Museum of Old and New Art opens in January 2011. For more information visit www.mona.net.au

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