

# Dark Mofo review: Tasmania's winter arts festival breaks all the rules

June 13 2016

- [Dark Mofo stirs up an artistic storm as tempest rages in Tasmania](#)
- [Artist Mike Parr's 72-hour Willow Court asylum ordeal a tribute to dead brother](#)
- [A storm gathers in Hobart following Juliana Engberg's tempestuous moments](#)

## **DARK MOFO**

**Hobart, until June 21**



The disorienting House of Mirrors at Dark Mofo 2016. *Photo: Remi Chauvin/Mona*

A derelict asylum littered with graffiti, broken glass and animal excrement, half an hour out of Hobart, does not sound like a promising venue to open a taxpayer-subsidised arts festival.

Yet it is one of the rules trashed by Tasmania's adventurous [Dark Mofo festival](#) initiated by the Museum of Old and New Art.



A cheery welcome to Hobart's Dark Park: Fear eats the soul by Michaela Gleave. *Photo: Remi Chauvin/Mona*

Now in its fourth year, the festival seeks to make a virtue of Hobart's wintry weather although its storm theme had to be dialled down as last week's floods caused havoc in the island state.

But they are a hardy lot in Tasmania. No amount of rain, snow and gale-force winds seemed to dissuade locals, some dressed in micro-minis and singlet tops, from enduring lengthy queues to events such as the ZHU and Blacklist opening weekend parties.

With fans like this, plus increasing numbers of interstate visitors, it is little wonder that creative director Leigh Carmichael can draw up a provocative program of art, music and revelry that would surely be shunned by risk-averse festivals on the mainland.

Carmichael offered a cold welcome to the opening night at the historic asylum in rural New Norfolk where artist Mike Parr, [last seen burning his art at the Biennale of Sydney](#), was undertaking a 72-hour drawing marathon in a former ward for female inmates.



Intrepid visitors explore Mike Parr's Asylum. *Photo: Remi Chauvin/Mona*

"The artist has requested there be no celebration in the grounds of Willow Court during the performance," he told the assembled throng led by Tasmania's premier Will Hodgman.

Yet the mood seemed far from solemn as visitors explored the dimly lit asylum grounds, scattered with Parr's past work – including the rather gruesome face-sewing videos – before queuing to see the artist "perform" a tribute to his brother Tim, who died in 2009 after a life plagued with mental illness.

Parr's art is an acquired taste yet queues were long and no one seemed to mind the night chill or tripping hazards, let alone challenging nature of Parr's work.

Nearby, Derwent Valley locals dished up free sausages to guests including MONA's founder David Walsh, clad in what looked like a quilted dressing gown.

The next evening, the father figure of Tasmania's cultural renaissance could be seen pushing a pram through Dark Park.

Tasmania's OH&S inspectors must be easy-going given the cauldrons of

wood fires around Hobart, dimly lit spaces and edgy shows at Dark Mofo, which received \$2.1 million from the Tasmanian government this year.

Carmichael says the festival has not yet earned the wrath of its political paymasters but adds: "Every time we push boundaries, we're asking to be challenged. We're asking for pushback."

Sex and death might not bother Tasmania's politicians, but Carmichael's plans might worry festival sponsor Qantas.



Hobart's Dark Park at Dark Mofo 2016. Photo: Remi Chauvin/Mona

Carmichael harbours plans to redecorate one of the airline's planes.

"They're very hard to get hold of especially trying to turn it into a giant dildo," he says. "We want to but I don't think it's going to happen. I think it would be good marketing for them, everyone would want to fly it."

But he adds: "I don't think that's going to get up."

Billed as an industrial public art playground, Dark Park is the antithesis of cheery festival gardens with its eclectic mix of art installations, crowded bars and spookily lit choir greeting visitors.

Surgical masks were handed to those who dared to intrude on Grupo EmpreZa's *Bodystorm* performance, which consisted of artists writhing around, clothed and naked, in dust created by smashing bricks.

Elsewhere, the United Visual Artists' *Our Time* created a mesmerising play of sound and shadow created by pendulums hanging in a warehouse space, while drummer Tina Havelock Stevens performed to a large video of a storm in *Thunderhead*.

Visitors were warned to tread carefully as they entered *House of Mirrors*, a maze of kaleidoscopic reflections that was joyously fun as people stumbled into mirrors and happily got lost.

*The Labyrinth* by street artists Mayonaize and Richmond Maze, was just as disorienting but less engaging, and a relief to escape.

Dark Mofo is an art-led, rather than stagebound festival, with a healthy dose of electronic music that is perhaps not fully appreciated in a sober state.

The ZHU party featured a maelstrom of electronica and projections that did not appear to prompt a great deal of enthusiasm from the audience. Blacklist, in contrast, was a more free-wheeling display of fancy dress, bizarre stage acts and at least two fire alarms.

For Dark Mofo, MONA hosted *Field Lines*, an enthralling exhibition of drawings, photography and wind and weather-powered machines by Melbourne artist Cameron Robbins.

Robbins' art practice stems from the deceptively simple idea of drawing without paper, yet his art harnesses the wind, rain and tides while documenting the inexorable march of climate change.

He provided a stark contrast to Walsh's collection of poo machines, ancient Egyptian artefacts and living sculpture Tattoo Tim, who will be skinned after death and exhibited.

Ryoji Ikeda's supersymmetry engulfed a darkened room with digital noise, blinking screens and endless data both mesmeric and disorientating.

It is hard to see how a publicly funded institution could compete with Walsh's showmanship. The Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery gamely takes up the challenge with *The Tempest*, an exhibition of shipwrecks and stormy weather curated by Juliana Engberg.

It is a diverting concept with some interesting historical works and

disconcerting stuffed birds as well as impressive new works by Tacita Dean and Valerie Sparks.

But it is a mere storm in teacup compared to MONA's maelstrom of art.

**The writer travelled with assistance from the Museum of Old and New Art.**