

# COLLECTING PROBLEMS: THE OLD AND THE NEW AT MONA

**Nicole Durling**

Museum of Old and New Art

## INTRODUCTION

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Australia's largest private museum MONA was opened to the public on 22 January 2011. Owned by one individual, David Walsh, the museum is located 15 minutes drive from Hobart centre. The collection covers a vast sweep of time and cultures. The oldest collection item dates from 5200 BCE through to works being created here and now – objects recovered from archaeological excavations to contemporary works being crated in pristine studios on the latest computers. David Walsh is a true connoisseur and bravely collects objects and art works that would often not find a place in many public collections. How to handle, house, conserve and exhibit the collection has been, and continues to be, an ongoing concern and challenge to all at MONA. We are able to consider these risky acquisitions and take on the challenge to consider innovative exhibition displays.

David Walsh, like many of us, spent his childhood collecting stamps, coins and other accessible items, and acquired his first work of art/antiquity in 1992. Over the years he kept buying and adding to his collection, although the idea of being a collector or custodian never really entered his mind as a motivation for acquiring these objects. A few years later, a friend told him that he should really take better care of his collection – the germ of an idea that became MONA was created at this time. In 1999 Walsh moved his collection from his home into a modest gallery space in a 1955 Roy Grounds-designed building on the grounds of Moorilla Estate. Here the Moorilla Museum of Antiquities housed Walsh's collection of ancient coins, Egyptian, South American and African artefacts and was opened to the public.

Around 2000, his interest in modernist and contemporary art was growing. It was at this time that Walsh realised his collection required a larger space, with paintings and sculptures taking up every last inch of his house and cupboards in the museum, and spilling into self-store facilities. Walsh also said that “no one was coming to his little museum, so it seemed like a good idea to build a bigger one”. In early 2006 the Moorilla Museum of Antiquities closed to the public and construction began on MONA. Working closely with Melbourne architect Nonda Katsalidis, Walsh wanted his museum to be a little more discrete than the overpowering museums he had visited around the world. He wanted the gallery spaces and the collection it housed to be discovered. That curiosity was the primary driving force for the visitor navigating the space – the very same motivating factor that drove his collecting.

The idiosyncratic nature of MONA's collection is closely related to the idea of the *Wunderkammer*<sup>1</sup> of the sixteenth century. Random gatherings from Walsh's travels; what he was reading at the time; conversations with his mates or notable moments in his life ... everything that found its way into the collection found its way there through the experiences of his life, not because they were particularly fine examples, in the best condition or even authentic. If Walsh happened to like it, the item was acquired. This has set the scene for the nature of the collection and how we approach its care and display.

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<sup>1</sup> Literally “wonder-room”; usually known in English as a “cabinet of curiosities” (Ed.)

The collection currently comprises of over 2,200 objects, with approximately 600 items on display at any one time. The museum has 6,000 square meters of gallery and exhibition space, 1,200 of which is AAA rated. During planning stages, thorough research was taken into all the newest and most efficient ways to run all aspects of the museum, from air delivery and environmental control to building security and gallery control systems. However, saying this, the museum is built only two metres above the waterline of the Derwent River, which is tidal, so no technology in the world will save it if sea levels rise. The museum will be flooded – a fact that Walsh is more than aware of.

That said, Walsh understood that what he was collecting was of significance and should be given an appropriate home and somewhere a little further above the water level. Just before construction begun for MONA, an off-site storage facility was established, where the collection could be held in a controlled climate alongside a fully-equipped conservation lab. Well before this time, recordkeeping and a research library was established. As the collection grew, so too did the staff responsible for it, though we are still a small team.

The collection spans approximately 7,000 years with objects made from materials of the hardest stone, to works that are designed to grow mould and decay. For Walsh, the cultural significance of the individual object can only be understood through the passage of time. He often uses the term ‘survivor bias’ (or we could say luck): antiquities have endured through centuries and have given us an understanding of the ancient cultures that created them. How these people lived their daily lives, through to their belief systems, is understood via these survivors. Contemporary objects are yet to endure this bottleneck of time. Which of them will survive and what will they say about our times?

## EXHIBITS

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With close to 300,000 visitors since MONA opened, we have seen a diverse demographic, from cultural tourists who travel the world seeking out the newest and most obscure, to visitors who have never set foot inside a museum or art gallery. I have chosen a few examples from our collection to discuss how we seek to engage all these visitors on an equal level, to intrigue and sometimes to entertain. I will also address a couple of examples of problematic works that remain ongoing concerns.

### Andres Serrano/Pausiris

What do a late-Roman-period sarcophagus with intact mummy from the Oxyrhynchus region and a contemporary photograph have in common?

Both are examples of death, in this case the sarcophagus and mummy of Pausiris and a photographic work of a deceased person from the *Morgue* series by Andres Serrano.

MONA exhibition designer Adrian Spinks created a very specific environment to exhibit Pausiris, replicating a tomb-like experience. Pausiris is placed inside a display case on an island floating in a pool of water in the middle of the gallery. Next to Pausiris is an animated projection made from thousands of CRT images taken of the encased mummy – wrappings, jewellery, tendons and bones are slowly revealed. Two visitors at a time are allowed into the gallery space, where water is set up to drip from the ceiling. Visitors have to traverse stepping-stones to make it to the island of Pausiris. Along the way, they pass the Serrano photograph. Confronted with contemporary death and ancient death, the intention is to create a quiet and removed space from the rest of the museum to contemplate our own mortality.

This display is not typically something that would be considered a good option: hundreds of litres of water surrounding a fragile antiquity and a vulnerable photograph. However, research was undertaken to ensure the safety and security of both items; Pausiris sits in a custom designed display case and the Serrano

was reframed with specific measures to ensure moisture cannot get inside the frame and damage it. Both exhibits are also monitored on a regular basis. This display is one of the most popular at MONA, with people often queuing for close to an hour.

### Underwater Wunderkammer

What do you do with a bunch of antiquities that a specialist has advised you are “not quite right”?

Cry because of the vast sums of money you spent on them? Store them away to be researched further in the hope that one day someone will say they are OK? Or submerge them inside a fish tank that doubles as a display case?

Here we have the underwater *Wunderkammer*: fish, video art, and ancient-style South American items of hard-stone and gold. We engaged a geologist to determine that the particular items would not be damaged by long-term submersion, and continue to research them in the hope that one day they might emerge from the water.

### Michel Blazy: Nature Molle or “Soft Life”

Blazy works with the biological. His work grows, decays, moulds and rots – he wants the work to change during its exhibition. For this work we will set a table up with groupings of food: bread, fruit, vegetables. We then apply an agent over the whole work that will encourage the materials to rot. This has proven to be a challenge to us and we are still trying to figure out how to exhibit it, though I think we will have it ready to go next year.

### Candice Brietz: Queen

On the surface, *Queen* seems to be a relatively simple art work, but it took close to three years to solve and remains an ongoing problem. The artist insists on a very fixed way of displaying this work: it must be shown on 4:3-ratio CRT screens. This form of television screen has rapidly become non-existent, particularly to the quality level we required for this work. When it was acquired we didn't enquire after

the additional aspects of the work, such as the technology required. All we got were the digi-tapes and a certificate of authenticity. Only when we were ready to start installing the work did we discover the very specific requirements, with no compromise from the artist we began a long search for suitable screens. After several trips from Berlin, the artist's technician finally approved the installation. The screens we are currently using will eventually burn out and we will be back at square one trying to locate suitable screens, or negotiate with the artist to update to contemporary technology and develop an ongoing mode of display.

### Wim Delvoye: Cloaca Professional

The Belgian artist Wim Delvoye has created seven versions of these mechanical reproductions of the human digestive system. He has never allowed one to be acquired by a public or private collection due to the high level maintenance issues involved in keeping the work functioning 24 hours a day. However, in MONA's case, Walsh was successful at convincing the artist that we could manage this. A permanent gallery was given over to *Cloaca Professional*, with customized air-conditioning, specialised flooring and a dedicated food and chemical preparation room. It must be fed twice a day and it poos once a day. Additionally, daily maintenance is required to ensure its pipes, valves, acid levels and temperature are all functioning correctly, otherwise there are spillages that are far from pleasant.

## SUMMARY

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Contemporary works are the most problematic items we deal with at MONA when it comes to long-term storage and exhibition. Walsh is not one to consider how an art work will be cared for long term or how it will even last long term; it is acquired purely because he likes it, aesthetically or conceptually. How we exhibit, store and maintain it are only considered once it reaches our premises. Like many others who collect contemporary art works, we at MONA are constantly being challenged as to how to deal with them.

What MONA seeks is to exhibit the contemporary art works before they fade, disintegrate, and become technological or culturally redundant; to contextualise them alongside antiquities from ancient cultures and to show that humanity shares the same concerns across the centuries. By bravely collecting problematic works and giving them a place to be exhibited, perhaps MONA is contributing to the survivor bias of these contemporary works, or perhaps they are just lucky to be seen even if only for a short time.

## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

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Nicole Durling (born 1972) is MONA's senior curator and has the enviable task of working with David Walsh's sprawling collection. With a focus on the contemporary Australian and international visual arts, she oversees the curatorial and collection team.

Nicole started her creative life as a ceramic artist after graduating with first class honours from Monash University in 1993. For several years she worked from her studio and travelled extensively, developing her fascination with all areas of the arts. In 2000 Nicole joined Sotheby's Australia, ultimately becoming their contemporary art specialist, and during this time she also earned her MFA graduating from Monash in 2005. That's how she met David Walsh who'd started buying works through Sotheby's, and learned of his idea to create a Museum of Old and New Art. It was a compelling idea and by May 2006 Nicole had joined the MONA team.

Nicole is still a practising artist and still 'tinkers' when she has time.

What does she love about working for MONA? The freedom to have random thoughts. Having not pursued a career as an archaeologist, and become an artist instead, working with the MONA collection seems to have fulfilled a childhood dream.

