

The Pioneering Visionary Behind The Museum of Everything

BY NICHOLAS FORREST | AUGUST 15, 2017



David Walsh's Museum of Old and New Art (MONA) in Hobart, Tasmania is continuing its long history of presenting challenging and thought-provoking exhibitions with the conversion of its temporary exhibition space into The Museum of Everything – the world's first travelling museum dedicated to the work of non-academic artists and private art makers.

The Museum of Everything was founded in 2009 by British filmmaker James Brett with a mission to promote and showcase the work of artists working outside the boundaries of the cultural mainstream – “the untrained, unintentional, undiscovered, and unclassifiable artists” of the world who would otherwise be ignored or sidelined by the arbiters of artistic achievement.

On show until April 2, 2018, “The Museum of Everything” at MONA showcases close to 2000 works by almost 200 artists across 30 individualized spaces. Ranging from 1800 to the present day and spanning the genres of drawing, painting, sculpture, photography, environments, and assemblages, the exhibition takes visitors on an unexpected journey through an alternative art history.

“On this journey, you'll meet over 100 of the most astonishing art-makers you'll ever encounter : people who make not for us, but for themselves,” says Brett. “It is the private life of art, and it is rarely seen in museums and galleries. So forget all you've heard about insiders and outsiders ... if nothing else, this exhibition proves once and for all that art is not from the outer reaches, but from within.”

To find out more about The Museum of Everything, BLOUIN ARTINFO's Nicholas Forrest spoke with Brett and asked him a few questions.

What differentiates and characterises the works of the artists who are chosen for inclusion in The Museum of Everything?

How we see what we see is subjective. I tend towards graphic and detailed work, which comes from a lifetime of reading comic books. So I subvert that tendency by paying more attention to material which doesn't conform to this sort of visual. Some of that work then confuses me, which is helpful in terms of disrupting my own boundaries.

In the end though, instinct is the main criterion at The Museum of Everything. That applies both to the artists we favour and the work we curate. There are patterns and behaviours we respond to more, such as an involuntary need to make, a private ritualised practice or a non-academic cultural background. We do have some educated and professional artists in our shows, if they fit into our alternative canon. That's where it all gets increasingly grey and complex to articulate. Much depends on the basics, namely if we like the work, how it looks, how it feels, how it moves us. We gravitate towards more unusual forms of materiality, be they styles, techniques or even behaviours we haven't come across. Then there are certain keys. The modesty of the making is one. Or sometimes, the immodesty. The personal nature of a studio: a back yard, a hospital room, a jail cell, a kitchen table. There may be a spiritual dimension. Or a search for meaning. Or a new language, be it verbal or visual. Sometimes the art is closer to a system or talisman. Sometime it's made in isolation, as with Henry Darger, at other times it's been enabled in an assisted studio, as with Judith Scott.

In the end, every artist we choose confirms our belief in a wider, more radical concept of art-making, one which stretches beyond accepted destinations and norms and into the transcendent. I don't care much for the limitations of art brut and outsider art, although we of course exhibit and celebrate many of those historic authors. That's why few are ever actively excluded from The Museum of Everything, even those with a firm career path. Rather there are levels of inclusion and engagement, such as when we travel and search for artists. Only a handful make it into a show, but many more make it into our growing international archive. In this way, we aim to document and respect every maker, no matter who, where, what or why.

Why is it important to highlight and showcase the work of untrained non-academic artists?

This field - if it even can be called a field - has been actively excluded by mainstream art museums and marginalised by art history. It threatens the status quo, because of its non-canonical nature, because it shows that art-making has few real rules and because as a genre it's always been so difficult to define.

That's not to say it hasn't had its champions among artists and taste-makers. It has - and it's thanks to them that we have collections and legacies today. Yet the classifications, like naive, primitive and folk art are ultimately dismissals. They celebrate the work by (inadvertently) diminishing the makers, or by tagging them with a sort of shabby chic-ism.

A lot of this is about language, and there's bigotry in there too. At The Museum of Everything we don't want to get caught up in these semantics. So our simple answer might be: there aren't enough visible archives of the historic material, and there isn't enough active engagement with the contemporary material.

That's why we, like so many of our makers, are on a mission: we aim to show people how life-affirming this stuff is, how it opens up conversations about art and behaviour, and reveals to the art and general public alike a little more about the reasons we make things. For what once might have been conceived of simply as otherness can today be repositioned as testament to our universal creative nature.

What do the artists in The Museum of Everything exhibition contribute to the global fabric of contemporary and modern art that is unique and different to that of trained academic artists?

There is such intense flavour in this work, such brilliant awkwardness and truth-telling. There are also jokes, loads of them, quite unlike the in-jokes and ironies which seems to pervade so much of the contemporary landscape.

There is also tragedy, silence, invention - and sometimes an invisible line between the maker and what he or she makes. That lack of self-absorption, that fusion of the "them" and the "it," side-steps the jargon of art. It shows us how conceptual and individuated practices can happen in the most unlikely of places - and often without any formality whatsoever.

That's inspiring, it's liberating, for artists and curators too. It demands we work harder for context, and it stops boring conversations about money. Perhaps that's why this material currently connects to audiences in a way that contemporary art has not. It is too real.

CALLING PRIVATE ARTISTS OF AUSTRALIA

Are you a non-professional or private art-maker? Do you draw your visions and dreams? Have you invented a visual language? Is your home your personal gallery?

IF THIS SOUNDS LIKE YOU OR SOMEONE YOU KNOW PLEASE BRING YOUR ART TO THE MUSEUM OF EVERYTHING

The Museum of Everything is coming to Australia to look for non-traditional Australian artists. In every city they visit, they will curate exhibitions of art by the local artists we meet. Some may even be included in a book and considered for their final show at the Museum of Old and New Art (MONA) in 2017

The Museum of Everything invites EVERYONE to submit art to this unique and democratic project. Dates will be announced soon!