

The collector

David Walsh is on a mission: to change the way Australians view contemporary art with a planned \$55 million private museum, writes Gabriella Coslovich.

DAVID WALSH ARRIVES at Hobart airport in his silver convertible Mercedes. He squeezes my luggage into the back seat and heads for the Tasman Highway, roof down on this gloriously warm and sunny autumn day. Out on the open road, Walsh hits the accelerator and gives a supercharged demonstration of his sleek machine. Wind buffets against my face and makes a Medusa-tangle of my hair.

"This is how you should start the story," he says, "David Walsh is a rich wanker."

Later, he will have another crack at how I should begin - with an anecdote about the first words he spoke to me. "You're not getting a story out of me," he vowed, before abruptly ending the call. He offers, too, an idea for a headline: "Revenge of the Nerds".

There are many words to describe David Walsh. "Rich" is appropriate, "wanker" not quite, "super-nerd", perhaps. Herewith some others: infuriating, exhausting, relentless, challenging, eccentric, odd, candid, complex, pedantic, hyper-critical and highly entertaining.

Despite his desire to remain anonymous, Walsh has been revealed as the mystery man who snapped up John Brack's *The Bar* at a Sotheby's auction last April, paying a record \$3.17 million for the highly sought work. In what has become art world folklore, Walsh scooped *The Bar* from the grasp of the National Gallery of Victoria, which had desperately wanted to buy the painting, to hang alongside its companion piece, *Collins St*, 5pm.

Walsh put an end to the NGV's dream - he had an exceptional one of his own.

The Bar was not a vanity buy, not a status symbol to stash away in one of his blue-chip residences. Walsh's motives run deeper than the need to impress establishment types. In fact, it's fair to say they run counter to that impulse.

Walsh bought *The Bar* with the clear intention of hanging it in the \$55 million, three-level, cliff-face museum he is building near his Moorilla Estate winery, in Berriedale, on the banks of the Derwent River. Dubbed the Museum of Old and New Art (MONA), it was designed by leading Melbourne architecture firm Fender Katsalidis, will open in 2009, house a collection worth more than \$100 million, and become Australia's biggest private museum.

Not that Walsh has much competition - in Australia, it is rare for private collectors to build not-for-profit galleries to show their collections to the public, especially a collection as daring as his own.

What Walsh has in mind for MONA will easily upstage his coup at Sotheby's last year. For a start, the museum's overarching themes will be sex and death. The pursuit of sex and the avoidance of death are, according to Walsh, the two most fundamental human motives. All ancient art expresses the need for one or fear of the other, he says, and these themes remain common in contemporary Western art. Walsh's collection, which spans from antiquities to the present, contains some potent examples, among them some of the most provocative contemporary art of recent years, including pieces by Young British Artists such as Damien Hirst, Jake and Dinos Chapman, Jenny Saville and Chris Ofili.



David Walsh in front of Fernando Botero's *Leda and the Swan*. Photo: Peter Mathew

Walsh doesn't have any old Ofili, he has the Ofili - *Holy Virgin Mary* - which sent former New York mayor (now presidential candidate) Rudy Giuliani into a righteous lather. Giuliani threatened to withhold funding to the Brooklyn Museum of Art, which showed the work seven years ago, as part of the *Sensation* exhibition, comprising the collection of advertising giant Charles Saatchi.

The *Sensation* show was infamously rejected by former National Gallery of Australian director Brian Kennedy at the 11th hour (amid murmurs of Federal Government intervention) so audiences here never got to see Ofili's work - a painting of a black Madonna, with a clump of elephant dung on one breast and magazine cut-outs of genitalia in the background.

When MONA opens, they will, and if people don't picket and protest, Walsh will be hugely disappointed. He wants, above all, to stimulate debate in a society that he believes has been dumbed down to the point that the democratic process has become a sham.

"I want people to write letters to the paper," he says. "I want people to decry the loss of the moral fabric of our community, I want people to rail against the loss of our Christian beliefs . . . I'm a rabid atheist and I think that religion is given too much leeway. Belief systems should be explored in exactly the same way that everything else is explored."

Some of Walsh's other more disturbing or compelling pieces (depending on your point of view) include a full-frontal nude of an intersex person, by painter Jenny Saville, and a Damien Hirst work from *The Cancer Chronicles* series - a canvas covered in hundreds of thousands of flies trapped in resin and framed under glass.

"I hope husbands and wives come in here and one of them says 'that Damien Hirst is a pile of crap, why would anyone have 300,000 dead flies, what's the point of that?' And someone else says, 'it's very, very interesting, he's got something to say about what art is, he's got something to say about what beauty is, he's got something to say

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about how you can look at it from a distance and you might think it's beautiful and then you find out what it is and it isn't beautiful any more',” Walsh says.

Among this lot, The Bar will be a genteel form of audience-bait, a significant but safe work (by contemporary standards) that will draw visitors in and expose them to a most unconventional museum experience. Clearly, Walsh is not your typical private art collector.

Mark Fraser, former managing director of Sotheby's Australia says, “The day I met him he had a T-shirt on which said ‘F--- terrorist’, he had his purple glasses on and he was spouting stuff about Darwinism.”

So impressed was Fraser that he ran away from the stuffy auction house circuit to join the maverick Walsh team.

“He constantly challenges you intellectually . . . there's constant banter . . . and it could be at two o'clock in the morning or two o'clock in the afternoon . . . You don't often get an opportunity to do something as exciting as this,” says Fraser, who began in his new role as a director of MONA this month.

Fraser's salary has been the subject of prurient speculation. Crikey writer Geoff Maslen suggested the figure could be as high as \$500,000. Fraser has denied being paid that much, but will not reveal his remuneration.

“It's not the money that attracted me,” he says, “It wasn't relevant if Sotheby's made a counter offer, and I didn't ask them to.”

When I meet Walsh at Hobart airport, the “rabid atheist” is wearing his red Damien Hirst T-shirt, with the slogan *La Muerta de Dios* (he also owns a black one with the same phrase in English: the death of God). His neat beard has been shaved off, his grey hair is freshly cropped, and he has ditched his glasses for contact lenses. His look is awkwardly cool; geek-chic

without the put-on Wallpaper* attitude. Walsh's eccentricities are not a fashion statement.

We head to Moorilla to view progress on his museum, which is slowly taking shape on the small and picturesque peninsula that is also home to Walsh's winery, restaurant, chalets and boutique Moo beer brewery. A Komatsu excavator is precariously rambling over the steep sandstone hillside that will house Walsh's subterranean galleries.

MONA is not Walsh's first attempt at a museum - the site formerly housed the much smaller Moorilla Museum of Antiquities, which Walsh hoped would be a cultural bonus for visitors to the winery. But rather than surprise them with his gold and pre-Columbian artefacts, Roman Empire mosaics and African tribal art, he found, instead, that visitors were more interested in Moorilla's wine (they make a fine drop of pinot noir) or Moorilla's proximity to the Cadbury chocolate factory. Walsh's favourite guestbook entry: “I can see Cadbury's from here.”

Even with Cadbury in the vicinity, MONA will be a little harder to ignore - in content and design.

With his radical taste in art, Walsh is setting a precedent for Australia's private collectors, says Tamara Winikoff, the head of the National Association for the Visual Arts. His collection will inevitably influence the Australian public's understanding of contemporary art practice and advance the careers of the living artists who are shown, she says.

“People like (Walsh) are expected to be on the conservative side of taste, so it's quite refreshing,” Winikoff says. “It's a very important and influential thing to do.”

She doesn't expect MONA's off-the-mainland location to be an obstacle to success - rather, she says, the museum has the potential to become a major tourist attraction for Tasmania.

Australia has relatively few not-for-

profit, private galleries.

The country's best-known art patrons are possibly the late John and Sunday Reed, whose property and home is now the state-funded Heide Museum of Modern Art in Bulleen.

Beyond that, there's Marc and Eva Besen's \$10 million TarraWarra Museum of Art, in Victoria's Yarra Valley, which opened in December 2003. Designed by respected architect Allan Powell, TarraWarra, like MONA, has a vineyard setting. In Perth, the Holmes a Court gallery opened in February 2000. More recently, the Sherman family, of Sydney's renowned Sherman Galleries, announced a major shift in focus, with the launch of the Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation. After 21 years in the commercial sector, the Paddington gallery will next year become a not-for-profit public space showing contemporary art from Australia and the Asia-Pacific region, with four curated exhibitions a year.

And that about covers it.

Walsh's plans, though, are Australia's most ambitious so far for a private museum. Ambitious, but not gaudy.

Architect Nonda Katsalidis, who is also designing four more chalets at Moorilla, says Walsh's desires for the museum were laudably humble and refreshingly lateral: “I meet a lot of people who want to build buildings or galleries or something and there is always an element of wanting to make them grand. That's the temptation when you are spending \$50 million. But David has resisted that very strongly. His building works sensitively with the site.”

The MONA site includes two buildings by the late and renowned Roy Grounds, who designed the National Gallery of Victoria on St Kilda Road. Grounds' buildings will be incorporated into the new museum - the Round House will become the museum's library, and the Roy Grounds House will form the entrance, with a tunnel and

shaft linking it to the new underground museum.

A university drop-out and autodidact, Walsh has made his fortune in a somewhat unconventional manner. He has, as he puts it, a facility for mathematics. This gift for numbers - and outrageous luck - have been the foundations of his wealth. Walsh and his coterie of computer-geek friends applied their mathematical skills to gambling, developing a highly technical system that they use to bet on horse racing and every other sport. Walsh is reputed to bet in many countries and the level of his success can be gauged by his activities in the art market.

Skint at 25, by 30 he had made serious money. Aged 45, he is rated No. 45 on The Mercury's movers and shakers list for Tasmania, and was recently named as Australia's top art collector by BRW magazine.

With his millions, Walsh could have splurged on luxury cars, lavish apartments and left it at that. Certainly, he has an enviable real estate portfolio: a penthouse in Sydney, another in Melbourne (current home of The Bar), a house in Hobart with spectacular views of the Derwent estuary, and the Moorilla Estate winery, which he bought for a bargain \$2.53 million 12 years ago. But he is the only member of his gambling syndicate with a serious interest in art.

One of his high-rolling partners owns a Renoir, but the man's taste, says Walsh, is limited to pretty pictures.

“He likes art but he has no idea,” says Walsh. “It's great to go to a gallery with him because he walks around and he goes ‘shit, shit, shit, shit, shit.’”

Walsh's natural bent is towards science and maths, so why does art have such a hold on him?

“Because it attracts and infuriates me,” he says.

“Have you seen the movie *Ama-deus?*” he asks, and goes on to

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describe the moment where Salier curses God for giving him a deep capacity to appreciate music but not an equally profound talent for creating it.

Walsh openly admits that he feels guilty about his wealth, and that he is riddled by doubt. He fears and seeks the possibility that after his museum opens, someone will tap him on the shoulder and expose him as a fraud, tell him that he hasn't a clue about exhibiting art.

"I have an underlying structure to my appreciation of art, but it's not embedded in academia...academics...will rail against the lack of formal structure," Walsh says.

He recalls the criticism faced by London's Tate Modern when it opened to reveal that its collection had been displayed according to theme.

"Isn't that what I'm doing? Except I'm taking it a lot further than they did."

Veteran Australian art collector John Kaldor, who was ahead of his times when he brought Christo and Jean Claude to Australia in 1969 for a coast-wrapping project, embraces Walsh's vision. He says the second tier of private museums that is slowly emerging in Australia - between the public and the commercial sector - is helping to create diversity in the art scene. Not-for-profit ventures, such as MONA, TarraWarra or the Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation, can operate free of the restrictions of governments, boards, trustees, and the market.

"They are not accountable to governments and boards, and they don't have to sell work, so they can be more adventurous. People don't have to agree with what is being shown, but it offers a different insight into the art world. This diversity is a sign of a coming of age in Australia," says Kaldor.

As the commissioner of the Australian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, Kaldor has been privy to Walsh's generosity - the Tasmanian contributed \$50,000 to this year's Venice Biennale initiative.

The director of the Tasmanian

Museum and Gallery, Bill Bleathman, is another Walsh fan. He too has good reason: Walsh is TMAG's single biggest donor and recently bought a rare Huon pine furniture collection for the gallery. Rather than seeing MONA as competition, Bleathman says the new museum will complement the state gallery and be of great cultural significance - not just to Hobart, but to Australia.

"Mr Walsh has a very good eye for contemporary art and buys very well and very selectively," Bleathman says.

And what about the sex and death angle?

"It's a reasonable curatorial rationale and if people are serious about good art, then it's not always going to be comfortable."

Not all of Walsh's collection makes for uncomfortable viewing - it is rich, varied and includes aesthetically beautiful works. Some combine delicacy with a dark edge, such as Sydney artist Fiona Hall's Scar Tissue, an installation of body parts and children's toys - a Mickey Mouse, a golliwog, a bear - all knitted from videotape. Others, such as a large Tim Maguire still life, would probably get the thumbs up from Walsh's pretty-picture-loving mate.

"I think it's a great painting, but everyone has a f---ing big Maguire," says Walsh.

Perhaps surprisingly, Sidney Nolan is Walsh's favourite artist - an entire mezzanine will be devoted to the Australian Modernist at MONA. The masterstroke will be Nolan's vast multi-panel mural Snake, which has never been displayed in Australia. Forty-seven metres long and six metres high, it is composed of 1600 panels, which are arranged to form a giant rainbow serpent.

Walsh admires Nolan's tenacity. "Yes, he was not a meddler, and he is the artist that most interests me," says Walsh, "He was utterly relentless."

Other artists in Walsh's collection include Australians Charles Blackman, Peter Booth, Callum Morton, Del Kathryn Barton,

Howard Arkley, Brett Whiteley, Russell Drysdale and international artists such as Egon Schiele, Wassily Kandinsky, Gerry Judah, Su-enn Wong, Fernando Botero, Paul McCarthy, Erwin Wurm and Susan Rothenberg.

Walsh cannot help but push people out of their creative comfort zones. He has high expectations - of himself, and others. He points out your every grammatical, lexical and logical mistake, and makes puns at your expense - usually in good humour.

Over dinner at Hobart's best waterfront restaurant, he berates me for failing, in most of my articles, to get to the bottom of what makes people tick. That's a bit rich, I think, given his reticence to discuss his private life, and his avoidance, until now, of being interviewed. So I throw back the challenge. What drives David Walsh? He takes my pen and writes in my notebook: "My motives are complex and often internally contradictory. I don't think I am capable of a consistent picture of myself. I am a mess of little boys fighting in a sack."

Walsh grew up in the shadows of Mount Wellington, in the working-class area of Glenorchy, the youngest of three children. His older brother, Tim, died 15 years ago, of cancer. His sister, Lindy-Lou Bateman, is working with David on MONA, as a curator.

It's not that surprising to learn that Walsh was a highly intelligent child, and the class weirdo.

"Yeah, I was a misfit kid, I was reasonably bright, but basically I was a nerd, I was a nerd just at the cusp of when nerddom was becoming fashionable," he says.

"It's absolutely astounding to me that the same girls who used to pillory me for what I was then, are now trying to lay down for me everywhere."

Walsh has two daughters - two-year-old Grace and 16-year-old Jamie-Lee - who he hopes will never show an interest in art or science. While many parents anxiously search for signs of genius in their progeny, Walsh wishes only

that his daughters be "normal" and happy. He is excited by their sheer humanity and would rather that they not be burdened by the introspection that has marked and sometimes marred his life.

Like many people of acute intelligence and intense interest in numbers, Walsh shows some of the characteristics of Asperger syndrome, which is related to autism. He perceives and relates to the world a little differently to so-called neuro-typical folk, and sometimes this can be a strain on personal relationships.

He is an enthusiast of evolutionary biology, from which he draws theories about why art is made - and they basically boil down to sex.

"Many evolutionary biologists now believe that the human brain evolved as a result of the selection pressure of art," Walsh explains.

"As peacock feathers make peacocks more likely to reproduce by making them more attractive, so the human brain, through the vehicle of art, makes the artist more attractive. Selection pressure selects more creative individuals to reproduce and evolution creates more artistic brains."

Walsh uses the same evolutionary theory to explain his belated success with women. His money and his art collection are his fitness markers, his peacock feathers. He's not so shallow or egocentric to feel entirely comfortable about the allure of wealth and power.

"I don't have so much ego built into this thing that I think I'm doing something that is the most important thing in the world for everybody. Some people will be touched by it, some people will find it abhorrent, and I'll have a good time."

Nonetheless, we can look forward to further dazzling displays and peacock preening.

"This is the beginning of what I intend to do," he says.

www.moorilla.com.au