

REVIEW

The Museum of Everything, Museum of Old and New Art



James Brett at The Museum of Everything in Hobart. Picture: Mathew Farrell.

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What does it take to make? What internal noise and external pressure? What physical materials, personal space? What existential questions? I think about this now as we pack up the almost 2000 objects that arrived in Hobart last summer with *The Museum of Everything*, which closed its doors at the Museum of Old and New Art last week.

Where I come from, Tasmania is known as the back of beyond; yet, in Tasmania, where I come from is the back of beyond, too.

The beyond is a common theme in the world of art. As a sometime outsider, I don't subscribe to the label. Yet many do and many have. For years, the relative others in the art world were the innocent victims of the prevailing us-and-them culture: the establishment and the rest. Yet creative beings also swim in side streams. Few merge easily with the main. We make systems and groupings; they make museums and galleries. Only recently have we begun to question the assembly of the canon.

There's that word: canon. Years ago I barely knew art-specific nouns, such as practice and dialogue, intended to define, distance and formalise. For me, certainly for many of the artists and authors *The Museum of Everything* represents, making art doesn't work this way. It's closer to breathing, eating, sleeping.

Perhaps it's a sentimental view, but it is also a considered one, forged during the process of arranging the 2000 private proofs and personal rituals that comprised the exhibition. Among the objects is a hand-carved cupboard fashioned on a 19th-century plantation by an enslaved African; a cluster of ceramic cameras by a Melbourne-based maker with neither vision nor sound; early 20th-century spirit drawings, intended to communicate and convert; and the woven sculptures of a Californian studio artist rescued by her twin from institutional seclusion. What is the worth of these items? Where do they fit in the canon?

Some of these works are by the hand of the artists we featured when we began the project eight years ago in a former recording studio in northwest London. Yet for the past nine months our home has been one of the most radical - contemporary art spaces in Australia. So, the question: are we succeeding in the promotion of cultural equivalence? Are we somehow expanding the canon? Or are we just more grist for a 21st-century art mill?

The various biennales and triennials of recent months know little of these dreams. Their focus is local or international. What integration there is seems cautious at best. *The Museum of Everything* experience at MONA has been instructive: there is no beyond. The experience of artmaking is universal; the process and its result has the power to speak to us all.

James Brett is the founder and artistic director of The Museum of Everything.