

## Dark MOFO in Hobart serves up a feast of weird and wonderful art



Mike Parr's *Empty Ocean* is performed on Bruny Island in the early morning hours. Picture: Zan Wimberley

MICHAELA BOLAND THE AUSTRALIAN 12:00AM June 14, 2017

Whatever was Mike Parr thinking? And what kind of person allows an artist, or any individual, to corral about 30 participants and 200 onlookers into a windswept paddock on a remote island at the cruellest hours of the morning? Then, once everyone has been assembled, to engage in a rhythmic rock-clapping performance — if it can be called a performance — for more than an hour?

Initially the woman in the wheelchair next to me couldn't see the spectacle as the crowd surged forward to observe what the 30 grey-haired moonlit participants in striped pyjamas might do. Once they began rhythmically tapping rocks together she wasn't so fussed.

After about 20 minutes of standing, I sat on the ground, and within minutes a friend of mine was lying prone under a shrub, her beanie pulled over her eyes and trench coat tucked tightly against the bitter wind blowing off the water. As others followed, the scene began to resemble a beaten battlefield with collapsed bodies, lovers lying entwined and nodding figures trying to sleep where they sat.

We'd come to experience veteran performance artist Parr's *Empty Ocean*, the mysterious free tentpole event staged for the opening weekend of Hobart's fifth Dark Mofo festival, programmed after his asylum work for last year's festival caused a buzz.



The enormously popular Winter Feast.

We woke at 12.30am, walked through the night to catch a ferry at 1am towards Bruny Island, just off the coast of Hobart, then disembarked at 2am and traipsed with torches along a track to the performance spot where we were directed to stand and wait.

Parr led the performers along the path we'd walked a few minutes earlier. His gravelly voice through a megaphone called a slow beat — 1, 2, 3, 4 — then the rock clapping ensued.

By 4am we were back on the ferry. For the outbound trip we were allowed only water at the artist's behest. For the return trip, the cafe sold coffee, but many opted for alcohol instead.

As baffling as artworks such as Parr's *Empty Ocean* may be, tortuously adventurous performance pieces are rites of passage for Tasmania's nascent arts awakening that can be traced to the 2011 arrival of David Walsh's Museum of Old and New Art.

At MONA, left-field art shows and Walsh's purported disregard for the establishment have set the tone for Tasmania's cultural explosion. Since the museum opened, Hobart has been utterly transformed with fancy bakeries, flourishing art shops, heaving pubs and numerous fancy restaurants and hotels.

For Dark Mofo, from June 8 to 21, the city is chock-a-block. Weekend flights are full while locals holiday-let their homes, gleeful at the financial windfall and proud so many mainlanders are visiting their paradise.



Indigenous singer-songwriter Thelma Plum performs at the Odeon Theatre.

Dark Mofo executive director Kate Gould laughs when she recalls overhearing a group of flannel-shirt-clad men down a beer last year and say: "Come on, let's go and see some more art shit we don't understand." The men were in the Dark Park precinct, an expanse of decommissioned wharves fitted out with bars, food trucks and blazing braziers interspersed with artworks — like a biennale with booze.

Weirdly for what is essentially a tourism event, booze sponsorship has been surrendered to a Japanese beer and whisky from Scotland. Mainlanders love the Tasmanian versions of both: the state has eight craft distilleries producing two-thirds of Australia's whisky but, as one festival staff member observed, the parent companies of Asahi and Talisker must have paid a lot of money.

Staging Dark Mofo isn't cheap, though, and many key events are free while others are heavily subsidised. The \$9 million festival budget is equivalent to the Melbourne and Adelaide festivals. And while some things are cheaper in Hobart because of cheaper real estate, the cost of importing staging equipment, for example, makes putting on events even more expensive.

The state government contributes just over \$2m. The remainder comes from sponsors and festival founder Walsh. The programming budget is \$6.8m and 1000 people are employed during the event.

Dark Mofo had 280,000 attendees last year and this year 300,000 are expected, but Gould admits those figures account for repeat visits across venues. She likens Tasmania's present cultural burst to Adelaide in the 1970s, when Don Dunstan's government cranked up the Adelaide Festival, introducing the avant-garde to a population whose access to fringe art had been limited.

Gould says the legacy of that era is a generation of artists and arts workers who have subsequently made their mark well beyond South Australia, but also an arts-literate audience whose children have inherited the adventurousness of their parents.

"At the moment (Dark Mofo) is a visual art and music led festival," she says.

This is true of the opening weekend when Paul Kelly and Irish chanteuse Camille O'Sullivan performed *Ancient Rain* — stories inspired by 100 years of Irish letters — which has played the Melbourne and Adelaide festivals already.

Parr had a stomach-turning exhibition called *Exhibit A*, which was pretty much a gallery dotted with pails of urine. The Dark Park installations were like rustic versions of that strange Sydney festival of neon light installations and projections, Vivid.

Indigenous wunderkinds AB Original and Thelma Plum rocked the Odeon on opening night, and Mogwai filled the same venue the following night. A Redbull rave Transliminal took over the City Hall from 10pm and numerous jazz, funk, soul brothers popped up at Dark Park and the epic food venue Winter Feast.



AB Original performs on opening night.

At the apex of this city-changing activity is Walsh who, according to one Hobart university student I spoke to, "really is the closest thing to a modern-day king". Walsh is a generous benefactor who makes a fortune running the numbers on the international gambling circuit.

Dark Mofo is created by programmer Leigh Carmichael in Walsh's image and without regard to committees or quotas, so the result is pretty blokey.

The visual art exhibitions were patchy at best, with *Panopticon*, the window installations around the Centre for the Arts, one of the nicest diversions. The siren song broadcast at sunset from speakers atop buildings and hanging from a chopper was another standout.

Then of course there is a new show at MONA, where self-styled curator James Brett's *Museum of Everything* endeavours to bring outsider art into the mainstream.

This is pointedly a show Walsh could not have staged at MONA in its early days, when he was craving acceptance from the established art world, albeit on his own terms. Having shaken up the local establishment and earned admiration worldwide for his singular vision, Walsh is now pushing the point further.

He has given a huge proportion of the gallery to Brett's collection of mostly historical artefacts by so-called folk artists who were overlooked by the taste arbiters of their era. It's a fascinating proposition, not unlike walking through the Archibald Prize with visitors emboldened to say: "I like that, I hate that."

Brett, who runs his art business as a not-for-profit, is coy about where his money comes from, though Walsh has funded it to come to Australia.

The curator has scoured the world for the thousands of works on show, and plans to set off across the nation while here in a bid to augment the collection with Australian pieces.

On display until next April, *The Museum of Everything* gives everyone who has visited MONA before reason to go again. Which is the point after all.

*Michaela Boland travelled to Hobart courtesy of MONA.*

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