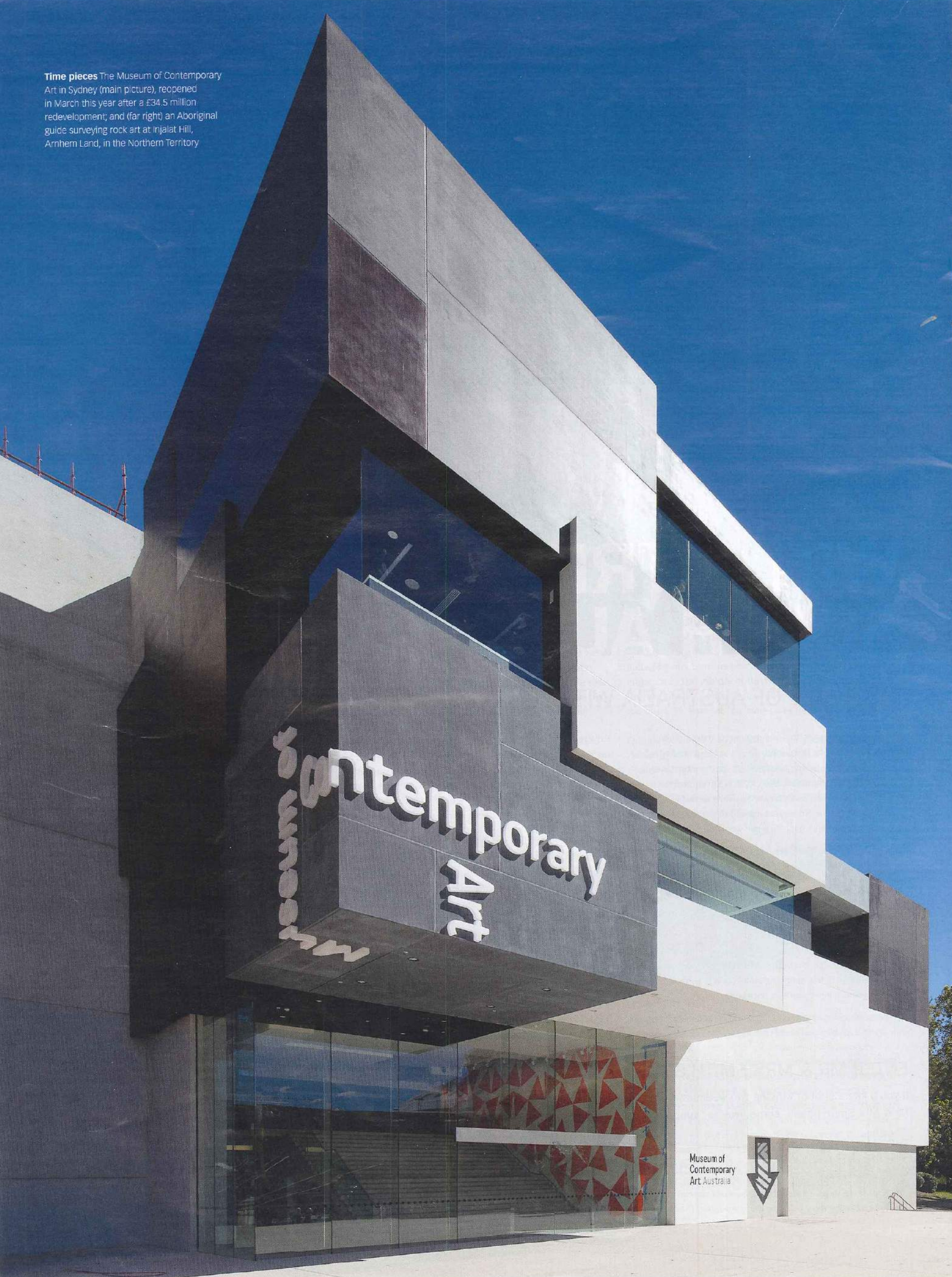


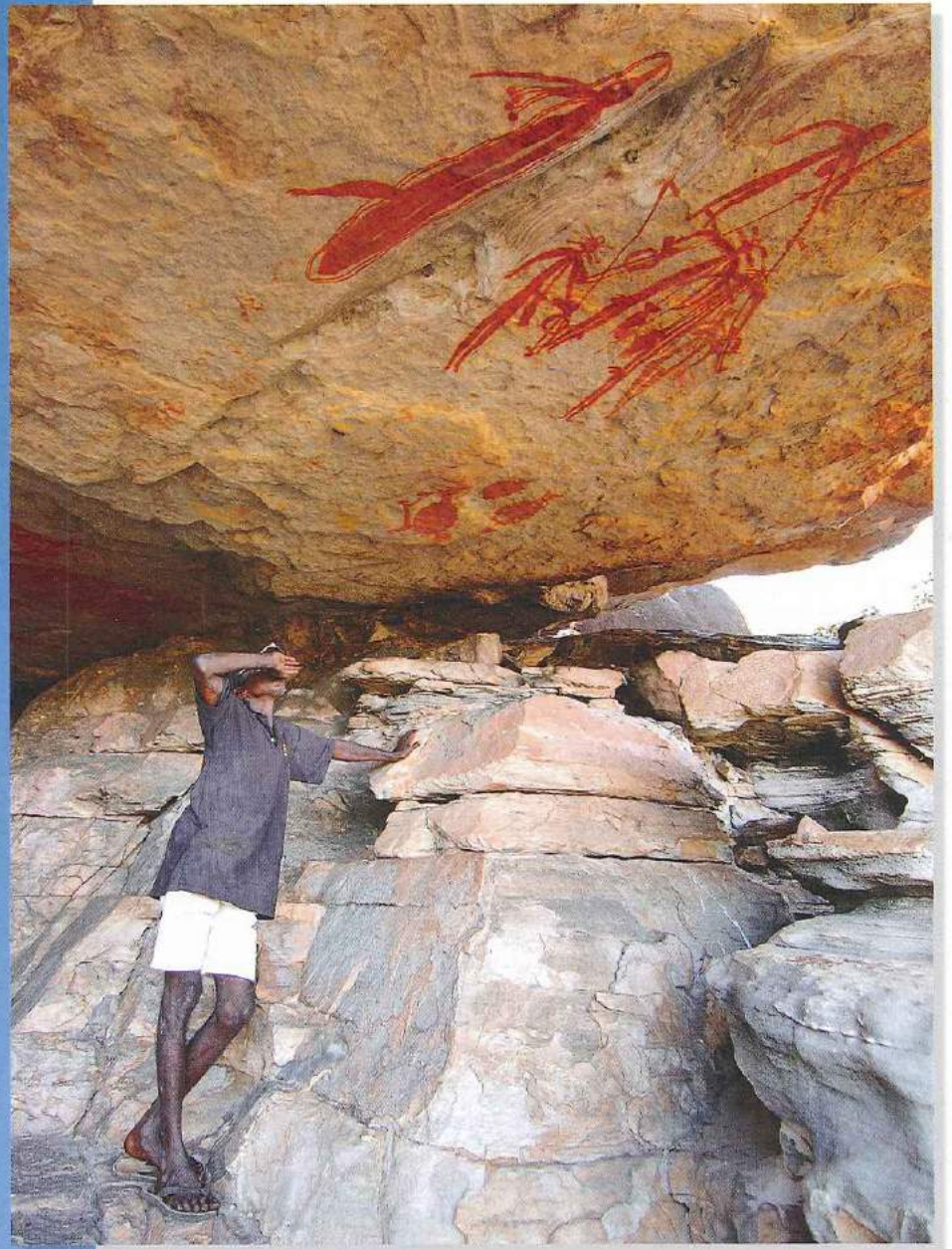
Time pieces The Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney (main picture), reopened in March this year after a £34.5 million redevelopment; and (far right) an Aboriginal guide surveying rock art at Injalat Hill, Arnhem Land, in the Northern Territory



Contemporary
Art

Museum of
Contemporary
Art Australia





COAST TO COAST ART

From the cool metropolitan spaces and quirky galleries of Sydney and Melbourne to the world's densest concentration of cave paintings in the north, art is everywhere in Australia. On a connoisseur's tour, the *Telegraph's* critic **Richard Dorment** is bowled over by modernity and comes back a convert to Aboriginal art

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efore my trip this summer, Aboriginal art meant little to me – but going to Australia has a way of changing your preconceptions and opening you up to new experiences. Flying out of the tropical heat of Darwin in an alarmingly tiny plane and landing 250 miles east, in Australia's Aboriginal and wildlife wilderness, I expected to find the kind of desert scenery you see in photos of Uluru. There was my first preconception shattered. Arnhem Land is a 37,000-square-mile expanse, north of Kakadu National Park, of grasslands, flood plains and rainforest. The area I was to explore has had an Aboriginal presence for at least 40,000 years and, as a registered sacred site owned by the Aboriginal people, offers entry by permit only. While many visitors come to hunt and fish, art-lovers like me come because it is honeycombed with caves containing thousands of paintings, some thought to date back 20,000 years.

In Europe, we rightly make a big deal of the cave paintings at Lascaux in France. But Arnhem Land has the densest concentration of rock art anywhere in the world. To see as many of the paintings as possible, daubed on to walls blackened by smoke from campfires made 1,000 years ago, I climbed with the guide Clare Wallwork and her team up and down rock escarpments all over the park.

Food and water are plentiful in Arnhem Land, meaning the inhabitants did not need to make maps to tell them where to hunt or find watering holes. Their paintings therefore had little to do with the indigenous semi-abstract art found elsewhere in Australia. The function of these paintings was to entertain and instruct. Working with thick brushes dipped in ochre, red and orange pigments, and using cypress leaves for close-up work, artists covered the walls and ceilings of their cave-dwellings with representations of creatures, from snakes and turtles to pot-bellied figures and the mythical beasts that illustrate their narratives. Once the story had been told, the picture ceased to be important. To tell the next story, the narrator painted over earlier pictures or used the nearest available space.

At the end of a morning's climbing, I was deeply grateful to be staying at Davidson's Arnhemland Safari Lodge, where each afternoon my guides would take me out to explore Cooper Creek by boat. The rainy season had ended only a few weeks before, so we passed down the flooded river past drowned palms and half-submerged paperbark trees, the canopy of leaves overhead dappling the grey-green waters with flickering light. Along the way, Wallwork pointed out the greater egrets, sea eagles, ibises, bitterns, magpie geese, night herons and darter birds that dive into the water to spear their prey.

When the time came to leave, I wished I had two more weeks to see more of this magical world. Not to have seen it would have been to miss something essential about the country that makes it so extraordinary: a wilderness that gives it its backbone, its character, maybe even its soul.

But then, there are many extraordinary things in Australia for which nothing can prepare you – including MONA, the Museum of Old and New Art in Hobart, the capital of Tasmania, the brainchild of the inspired collector David Walsh. Until Walsh came along, Hobart had only one art gallery, the admirable Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, founded in 1863, which displays art, natural history, coins, medals and artefacts relating to cultural heritage. By comparison, MONA, which opened in 2011, seems to have been conjured from a James Bond movie, circa 1970. In fact, if David Walsh weren't as civilised, ruffled and easygoing as he is, he would make a great Bond villain,

plotting from his underground bunker in suburban Hobart to subvert the conventional museum-going experience as a prelude to taking on the whole of western civilisation.

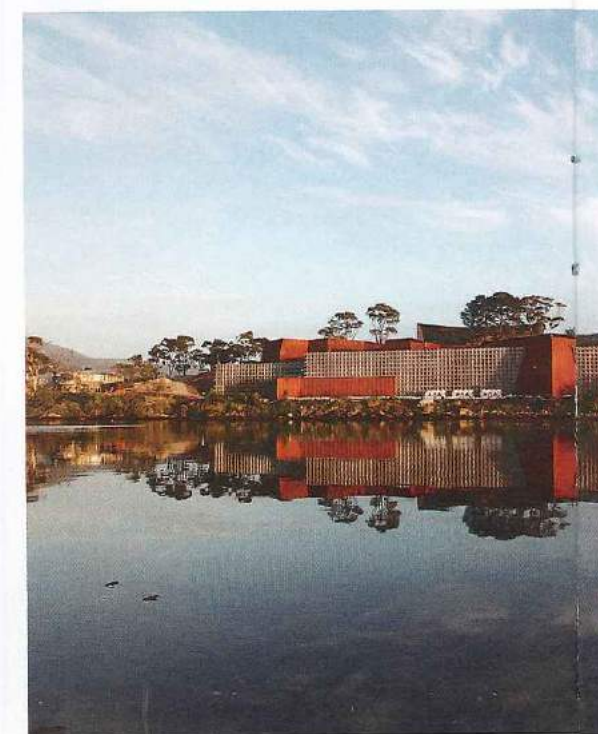
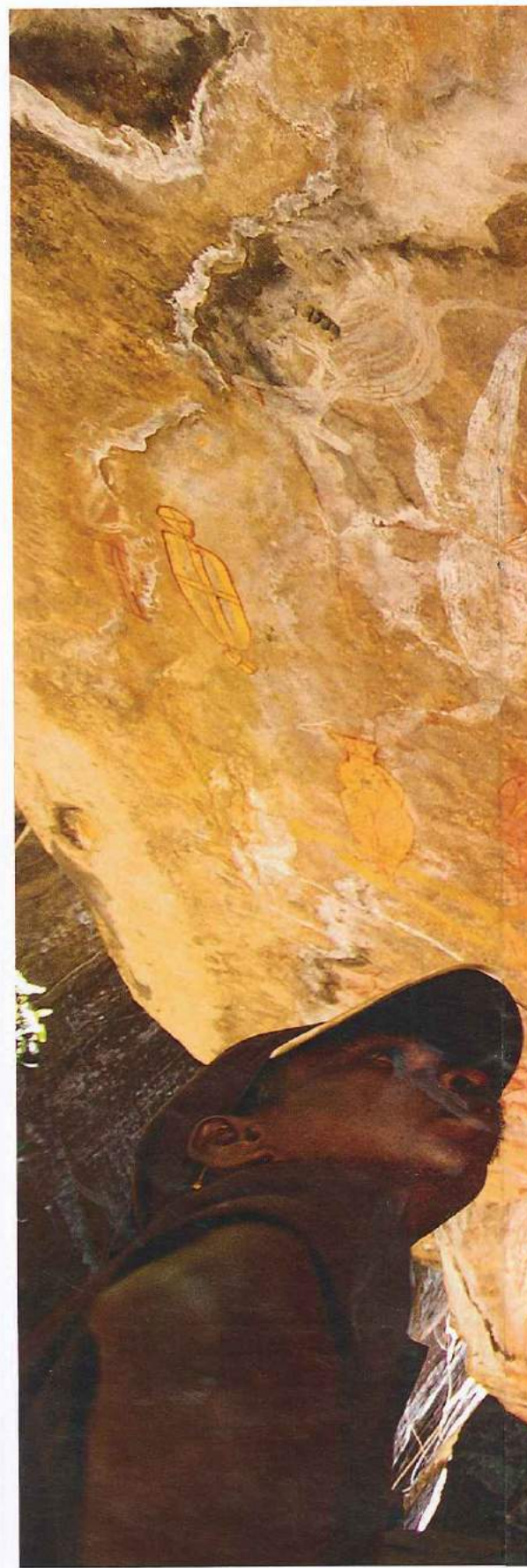
In Walsh's own words, his museum is "no bloody cathedral". I'd second that – and add that MONA is like no other gallery on earth. After buying your ticket you descend in a glass lift three subterranean levels until you reach a vast underground cavern cut out of sandstone, with, at its entrance, a bar. Walsh believes visitors enjoy museums more when they have indulged in a glass or two (ideally, of fine Australian wine). After that, they are free to wander through the 14,000sq ft of gallery space, without a set route or wall label in sight. That's because Walsh believes that too much is said and written about art; what you need to do, he says, is to look at the stuff and trust in your own reactions. "If you think it's crap, say it's crap" is his mantra. He also hates conventional museums, which he sees as "post-Enlightenment temples to the will of the state". His is almost an anti-museum: a place where the public can trust their own intelligence to see and understand what they are looking at.

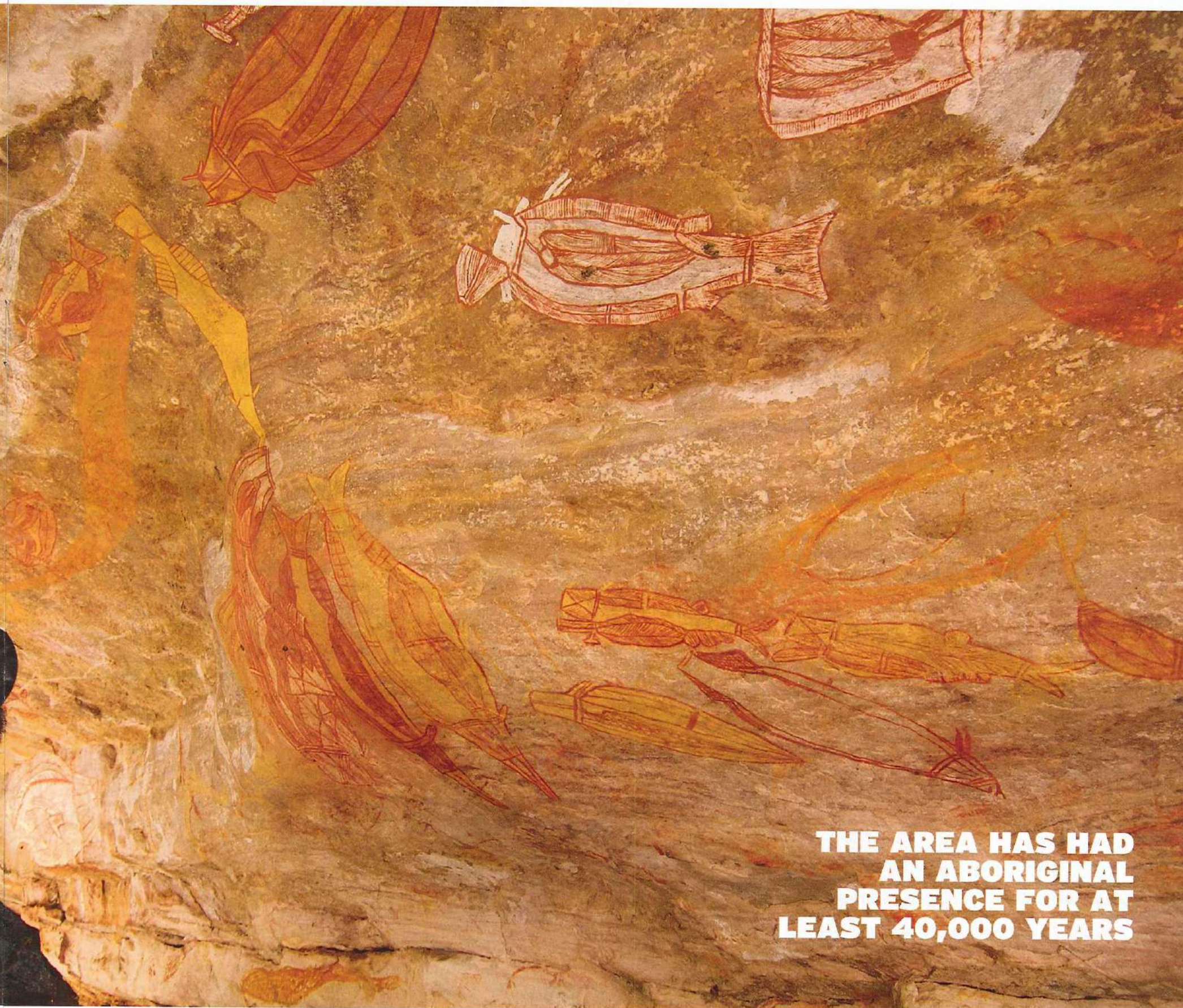
Almost the first thing you see provides a perfect example of Walsh's aesthetic philosophy. The German artist Julius Popp has created what looks at first sight like an indoor waterfall, but is actually *bit.fall*, a wall of falling words made out of water. Five words are chosen at random from that morning's newspaper, fed into the computer programme that runs the artwork, then dumped one by one: "call", "trial", "teen", "Newman", "senator", each watery word disintegrating within seconds of its trajectory. In addition to being mesmerising, Popp's work comments on news media: on the ephemerality of historical events, on the in-one-ear-and-out-the-other culture we live in.

Walsh rotates his collection in a series of changing displays. When I was there, a superb canvas by Anselm Kiefer entitled *Constellation* hung on a wall near a 150ft mural by Australian artist Sidney Nolan in the form of a snake made out of 1,620 separately-framed sheets of paper. In between works by these two well-known artists was a piece by someone I'd never heard of, Gregory Barsamian. It was called *Artefact*: a monumental decapitated steel head lying on its side like a monument from an archaeological dig with panels that enable you to look into its interior on to enchanting scenes: falling apples caught in open palms, yellow birds swooping down like elusive thoughts.

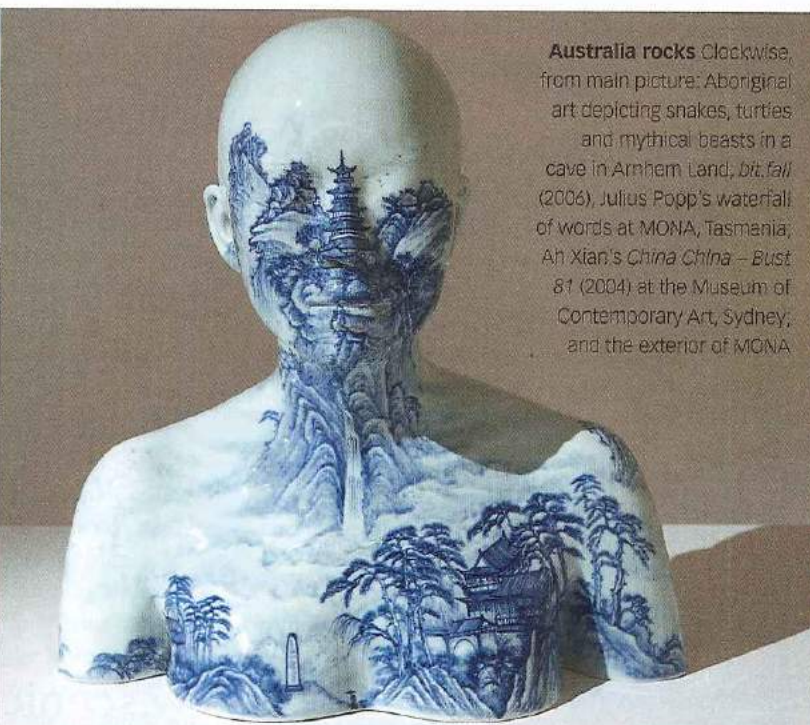
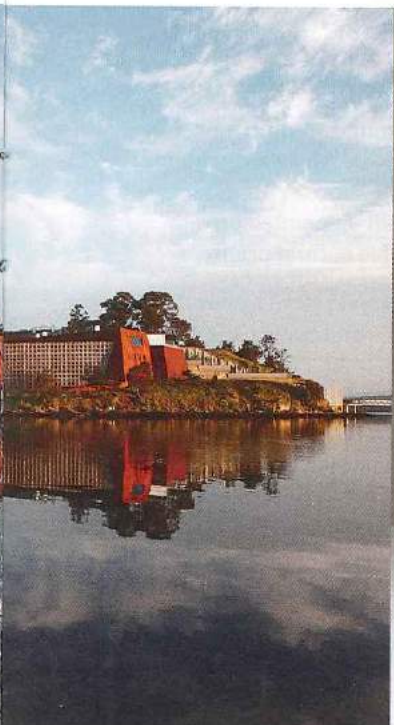
There are no labels, but Walsh provides an audio guide at the entrance that tracks visitors as they wander through the cavernous spaces. Whenever you stop in front of an art work, a sensor picks it up. If you press "play", you are given a choice of hearing either facts about the artwork of the sort you might find on a conventional label or a commentary by Walsh and others. If you go for the latter, you might be told that the work in question is dreadful, or that he wishes he hadn't bought it, or why he thinks a painting by Jenny Saville isn't up to much. But the good and even great pieces far outnumber the mediocre. There are first-class films by Candice Breitz, a classic Paul McCarthy, a great early Chris Ofili, and a surprisingly erotic Pipilotti Rist that you view from the floor looking up at the ceiling (beanbag provided). Walsh doesn't collect famous names; his indifference to fashion is one of the strengths of the collection. He likes art that is fun and grabs your attention, that packs a sting in the tail or a punch in the solar plexus.

I've never had so much fun in a museum, and while not everything is wonderful, there was enough to have kept me entertained for two long visits over two days. Soon after my visit

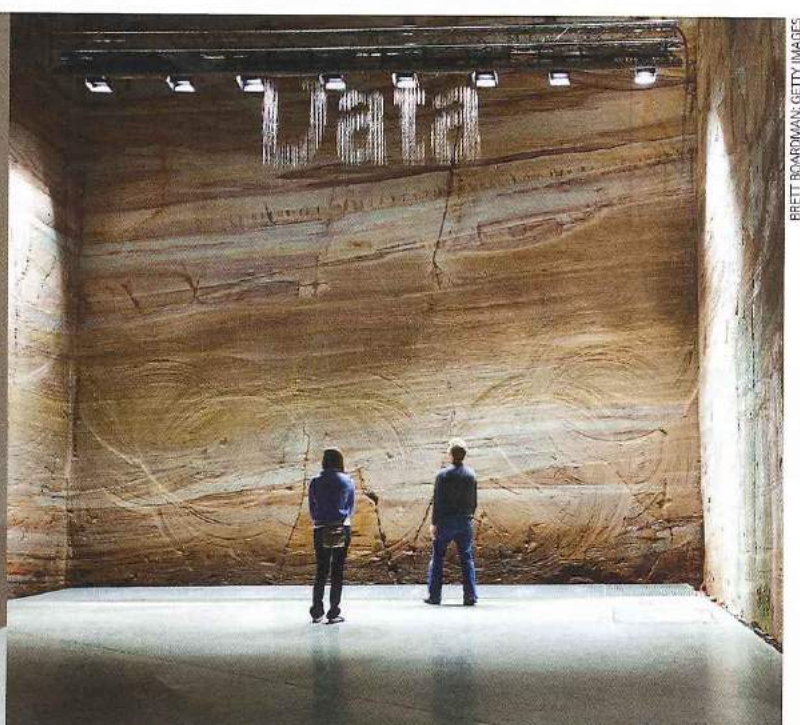




**THE AREA HAS HAD
AN ABORIGINAL
PRESENCE FOR AT
LEAST 40,000 YEARS**



Australia rocks Clockwise, from main picture: Aboriginal art depicting snakes, turtles and mythical beasts in a cave in Arnhem Land; *bit fall* (2006), Julius Popp's waterfall of words at MONA, Tasmania; Ah Xian's *China China - Bust 81* (2004) at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney; and the exterior of MONA



BRETT BOARDMAN, GETTY IMAGES

it became even more sensational when MONA joined forces with the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery to present a blockbuster multimedia exhibition organised by the legendary French curator Jean-Hubert Martin (until April 8, 2013). If you're thinking of going to Hobart for art, this is the moment, but book early and try to stay at one of the eight well-appointed, modern pavilions overlooking the Derwent River next door to the main gallery. Or at least dine at the restaurant, where the food is as outstanding as the wine and beer, produced on the estate.

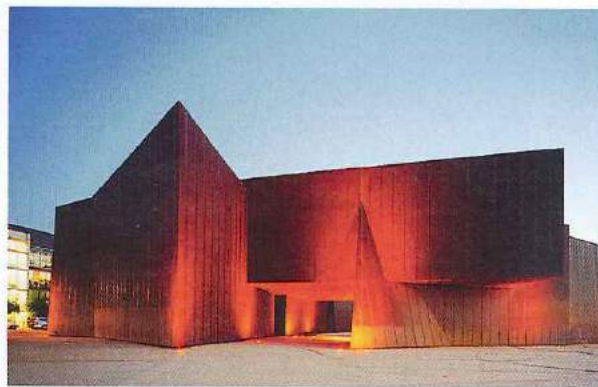
In Australia they understand that food in galleries matters, because the kinds of people who travel to see art tend to like good restaurants and fine wine – as well as luxury goods. Nowhere do they understand this synergy as well as they do in Sydney, where artists, museum directors, curators and gallerists have worked with chefs, entrepreneurs and wine experts to transform the city into a well-rounded luxury travel destination.

Although the city has had a Museum of Contemporary Art since the 1980s, and its biennale is the third-oldest in the world after Venice and São Paulo, even five years ago its burgeoning mixture of art, architecture, money and talent had not yet ignited into the full-on cultural renaissance it is now. The catalyst was the \$53 million (£34.5 million) redevelopment of Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art Australia (MCA), which included the building of a splendid new extension with a glorious roof terrace. Sited on one of the most desirable pieces of land in Australia, the modernist building was designed by the local architect Sam Marshall, and its elegance, restraint, and determination to serve the art – not the architect's ego – have met with universal acclaim. Seven weeks after its opening in March 2012, more than a quarter of a million visitors had been through its doors. With the new space available to her, the museum's dynamic director Elizabeth Ann Macgregor can now show works by world-class Australian artists such as Shaun Gladwell and Fiona Hall, alongside young and emerging film-makers and installation and performance artists.

If the MCA were the only space showing contemporary art in Sydney, you might feel short-changed, which is why it is essential to see it in tandem with the Art Gallery of New South Wales, a splendid neoclassical structure surrounded by parkland overlooking Woolloomooloo Bay. In addition to its collections of British 18th- and 19th-century Old Masters, from Hogarth, Reynolds and Gainsborough to Leighton, Rossetti and Burne-Jones, it boasts one of the finest collections of blue-chip modern and contemporary art in Australia.

The John Kaldor Family Collection contains about 200 works of art, making it the most important donation in the gallery's 140-year history. It includes first-rate examples of work by Joseph Beuys, Giuseppe Penone, Christian Boltanski, Rachel Whiteread, Francis Alÿs and William Kentridge, creating an international context for much of what is happening at the MCA and other galleries. The Kaldor family also funds public art projects; on my visit I saw an elaborate installation by the German artist Thomas Demand, occupying an entire floor of a hotel and club in downtown Sydney. Almost as impressive is the Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation, which awards a bursary of \$100,000 (£64,000) to artists such as Ai Weiwei to realise a project that would otherwise be unaffordable, and the White Rabbit Gallery, a private collection of new Chinese art. It runs a lively programme of changing displays showing art of astonishing beauty and complexity.

On my second day in Sydney, the independent dealer Mark Hughes took me on a whirlwind tour of the city's smaller art galleries. A native Australian who had built up a career as an art dealer in New York, he came home two years ago to set up on his own. Smart move. So far, Australia has had nothing like the economic downturn as the US and Europe, and there are signs of prosperity everywhere. Upmarket restaurants and shops selling Louis Vuitton, Gucci and Armani have moved into quaint 19th-century buildings in the historic district near the MCA, while in more rundown neighbourhoods, galleries have opened. Hughes is clearly delighted with his move



THE WORKS WERE CHOSEN BY AGENTS WITH THE CURATORIAL EQUIVALENT OF PERFECT PITCH



Rich pickings
Top to bottom: the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne; Seated figure (1950s), Mask (20th century) and Mrs EP Reed (1917), all at the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

back from New York. "It is a good moment to come; the situation here is changing very fast. Constant travel and art fairs have changed everything, so clients know more and buy with more knowledge and discrimination."

Nowhere in Australia is this discrimination more apparent than in Melbourne. The city's National Gallery of Victoria is far and away the most important museum collection in the country. No other Australian city has holdings of Old Master and non-European art to touch it. It also has the best selection of Impressionist pictures, and outstanding Asian and Oceanic art. The European agents selecting these works had the curatorial equivalent of perfect pitch – not necessarily buying the most famous artists, but finding the best or rarest work each artist was capable of producing. Rare masterpieces by Van Dyck, Reynolds and Gainsborough hang on the walls of the vast (and, it must be said, lugubrious) building. This is worth going to Australia for, even if it is the only gallery you see.

Although Melbourne doesn't have contemporary art galleries to match those of Sydney, it does have the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (ACCA) tucked away in the industrial area on the edge of town. Here you will see exhibitions of some of the best modern artists around – including Nathan Coley, Pipilotti Rist, Richard Bingham, Martin Creed, Janet Cardiff and Shirin Neshat. Under the directorship of Juliana Engberg, the energy and optimism of the ACCA is palpable. The city also boasts the acclaimed Gertrude Contemporary, which opened in 1985 in the city's Fitzroy area, several other commercial contemporary galleries as good as Sydney's, and an annual Art Fair that attracts an impressive 30,000 visitors.

But then, when it comes to new art, Australians struck me as far more open-minded than the British public ever was when I started writing about art in the mid-1980s. Perhaps the vast distances they have to travel to be connected with the rest of the world make them all the more curious about what is happening elsewhere, and all the more determined not to be out of touch. I now know what one dealer meant when he said to me, "Provincial isn't a place on the map: it's a state of mind".

Qantas (0845 774 7767, qantas.com) flies daily to Sydney from London Heathrow. Return economy fares start at £899. More information: australia.com.

THE DETAILS

Davidson's Arnhemland Safari Lodge (arnhemland-safaris.com); **MONA** (mona.net.au); **Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery** (tmag.tas.gov.au); **Museum of Contemporary Art Australia** (mca.com.au); **Art Gallery of New South Wales** (artgallery.nsw.gov.au); **Kaldor Public Art Projects** (kaldorartprojects.org.au); **Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation** (sherman-scaf.org.au); **White Rabbit Gallery** (whiterabbitcollection.org); **Mark Hughes Art Advisory** (markhughesart.com); **National Gallery of Victoria** (ngv.vic.gov.au); **Australian Centre for Contemporary Art** (accaonline.org.au); **Gertrude Contemporary** (gertrude.org.au).