



PHOTOGRAPHY

From the glare of fame to a new shade of grey

freedom, cheerfully undermining a host of old art-museum assumptions along the way. MONA's subversiveness lies not with the art, but with the fact that it gives the finger to the pretensions upon which the contemporary art world is built.

The complaint that art museums are becoming "Disneyfied" has everything to do with expectations. The assumption is that art is an intellectual undertaking of vital cultural significance and museums must provide an appropriately reverent atmosphere for it. That may be true if we're thinking of Rembrandt or mediaeval icons, but it is considerably less so for Damien Hirst or Callum Morton. When art itself has become Disneyfied, the secular shrine starts to look incongruous.

It is not the flippancy of so much contemporary art that the public is wary of, but rather the unwarranted veneration lavished upon it by curators, academics and art dealers. There is something absurd — offensive even — about a pop-music video clip being treated like a Tiepolo. Although theorists might well go on about the blurring of the old distinction between high and low art, sensible people are smart enough to know when they are being taken for a ride.

MONA's most significant achievement, then, is to provide a setting that is singularly appropriate to the modest aspirations of most contemporary art. Despite its imposing structure, it fosters an atmosphere of light-hearted fun that suits the work it houses.

For example, Candice Breitz's multi-screen video of fresh-faced young people singing along to Madonna songs is entertaining froth, no more. In the hushed, sterile spaces of the traditional museum, where it would be presented as some sort of deep and meaningful critique of popular culture, its vacuousness would be an affront. MONA's visitors, however, freed from any injunction to pay homage, can enjoy it for what it is, with no feelings of guilt or inadequacy. It is just part of a fun day out.

Of course, we would not want all museums to turn into gigantic Wunderkammers, but it is to be hoped that at least some of the professional curators and museum administrators who came to Hobart for MONA's grand opening party in January went back to their own institutions feeling energised and eager for change.

■ This is an edited extract from *A post-Google Wunderkammer*, which appears in *Meanjin* Vol. 70 No.2, available from June 1.

BY STEVE DOW

ONCE, Stu Spence was the go-to guy for big-name portraits: Kylie Minogue, Barry Humphries, Magda Szubanski and Brett Whiteley captured in all their celebrity glory. These days, his images have become dream-like, with shadow and nuance where once there was artificial light and pin-sharp focus.

"I don't want to make it too easy for viewers," says the 50-year-old Geelong-born Sydneysider. "I want a story to have evolved to a point where the viewer can write the story either way." It took a personal crisis to bring Spence to this new juncture in his career.

Consider the images in his new exhibition, *What Gives*, to be turning points. In *Whilst They Slept*, a shadow figure walks on the shore beneath a tilted branch. In *Take My Hand, Sun, Just This Once* an infant figure stands in the shallows. "They're like short stories or songs; I liken a lot of my work to songwriting," he says.

Spence's career is a narrative of serendipity. After "dismally" failing all but science in his last year of school, he talked his teacher into allowing him to do his final assignment as a series of photographs on conservation with a "crappy little Kodak camera".

He started taking pictures of his friends, and about the same time fell in love with surfing and rock music. The day he turned 17, in 1977, he got his drivers' licence, went to a pub and shot his first band, Ross Wilson's Mondo Rock. He loved the process of getting the prints from the chemist, and had a crush on a girl who worked there.

Then, in 1980, he lucked into a photographer's cadetship with Australian Consolidated Press in

Sydney. Spence spent two years confined to the darkroom, working for the *Women's Weekly* — he was supposed to do four, but began quietly doing shoots in his own time for *Mode* magazine, his first being a nightclub fashion show of Jenny Kee's Flamingo Park label.

Spence shot fashion for many years, but became disillusioned. "You needed to live the life, the party life, rubbing shoulders. You needed to be into fashion. I was into photography."

So onward to pop celebrity. He

the next week... I had a very attractive assistant with me and what was going to be a five-minute shoot ended up lasting hours."

Funny people were kindred spirits. There was Magda Szubanski, in a plastic dinghy clinging to a plastic palm tree on St Kilda Beach. Spence shot Barry Humphries amid a gaggle of schoolgirls; the comedian supplied his own caption: "When in Rome, do as Roman does."

Spence felt a "deep connection" with Michael Hutchence and INXS — even though he forgot to agitate

ling stories, but I was using celebrities to tell my own stories, and after a while, that just didn't fit any more. It didn't feel right. There was a darkness there that wasn't being told through the celebrity photography."

After the break-up of a five-year relationship in 2003, Spence "went into this deep hole".

"I was still doing little bits and pieces, but nothing I was really engaged in. There probably was a time, about six months, when I didn't take a commercial job.

"But in that time, I started taking pictures with [a] phone camera, completely inadvertently. I know that sounds weird, but something inside me wanted to be heard. Remember, you've got somebody here who spent 25 years setting up pictures, pin sharp; very outcome-driven, all these editors wanting this product to be perfect — colour saturation, exposure; big, big deal.

"To be free, to shoot a picture that's out of focus, whatever it is, in this kind of strange, rudimentary form, for no reason at all, came from some other part of the brain, which was extremely liberating."

Then, because Spence was broke, a friend gave him a "banged-up, rudimentary" digital camera.

He'd found himself as an artist, open to ambiguity. *What Gives* includes an image of a fortune-teller with her cards upturned, looking ominously, while another has a suited man dipping his trilby hat in perfect symmetry with a swan folding into itself.

Perhaps the personal crisis was good for his art: his innate joviality has remained, but the latest work encourages the viewer to linger. The narrative is entirely their own.

■ *What Gives* is at MARS Gallery, 418 Bay Street, Port Melbourne, June 2-26. stuspence.com



Brett Whiteley and Barry Humphries, two of Stu Spence's favourite subjects.

snapped Kylie Minogue after *Locomotion*, and photographed Nicole Kidman at Balmoral Beach the day Phil Noyce phoned her with the news he'd cast her in the film *Dead Calm*. Painter Brett Whiteley would prove to be "a force". "He was very important to me, for my first big exhibition, *Salute*, 100 pictures of famous people. I had a mutual friend and went to see him. He was doing his birds series.

"He said, 'If you frame it this way, I'll do your picture.' So I came back

the black and white film during processing every 60 seconds for a shoot for their *Listen Like Thieves* release; the bubbles left on the pictures a "fantastic mistake" he passed off as deliberate.

Rachel Griffiths was shot hanging out her washing naked — garments strategically hung. "She's one of those ones that goes: 'Let's do something weird, something great, something provocative.'"

To make celebrities relax, he promoted his jovial side. "I'd started tel-

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