

Art and design

From giant board games to Amazon's worker cage: Simon Denny's dark arts



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'I'm a cerebral kind of guy': artist Simon Denny inside Mine, his new exhibition at the Museum of Old and New Art (Mona) in Hobart. Photo by Jesse Hunniford/Mona

Mona's new subterranean exhibition from the New Zealand sculptor drills down on the ethics of mining for minerals and data

Last year, two academics revealed that in 2016, tech and retail giant Amazon had patented a metal enclosure for transporting workers around its warehouses. The news generated shock and horror internationally - that one of the largest companies in the world with some ethically dubious labour practices had designed an actual cage for its workers seemed positively Orwellian.

Amazon never pursued the device, and even the company's executives called it a "bad idea". Artist Simon Denny, meanwhile, made it.

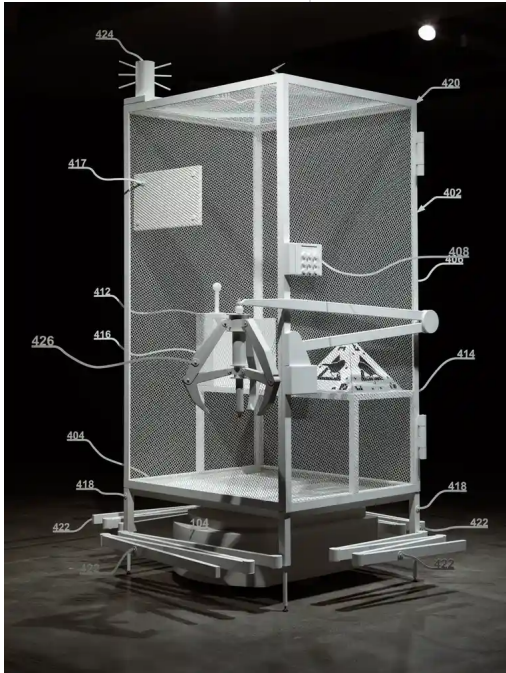
The white sculpture of the worker cage sits alone in a cavernous wing of Tasmania's Museum of Old and New Art (Mona). It is not a functioning prototype but a 3D model of the diagram from the circulated blueprint, replete with reference numbers hovering around it. Inside the model cage is an augmented reality (AR) marker in the shape of a bird. Scan it, and your device emits a melodic tittering - the song of the critically endangered King Island brown thornbill.

What does a tiny, nearly extinct bird with a sweet song have to do with the labour practices of a monolithic global corporation? Everything, says Denny.

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The bird and model cage are part of the 37-year-old artist's major new exhibition, *Mine*, which opened in Hobart on Friday. Enormous in its intellectual scope, *Mine* is the New Zealander's attempt to collapse observations about some of the world's most complex and intricately connected systems - capitalism, colonialism, labour relations, technological development and environmental catastrophe - into something digestible, three-dimensional and immersive.



Simon Denny's 3D model of a blueprint of an Amazon worker cage. Photograph: Jesse Hunniford/Mona

The bird in the cage is in part a play with the idiom, once a reality, of the canary in the coalmine: the bird as a non-human, uncompensated worker that gives its literal life to its labour. At the same time, the plight of the King Island brown thornbill, due to habitat destruction, is not a metaphor at all. "You have this non-human being who is giving its life to the process of industrial expansion and it's sending us a very clear message," Denny tells *Guardian Australia*.

It's a metaphor that's very apropos, especially with the current debate around the Adani Carmichael coalmine in Queensland, the mechanisation of labour and its effect on jobs, and the way that a bird - in that case, the black-throated finch - has become a symbol of political resistance to the rapacious and destructive nature of resource extraction.

Adani was front of Denny's mind during the development of *Mine*, but he said he realised along the way that he wasn't the right person to make a show about that specific issue. He decided to make something

broader instead, something that sat adjacent to the Adani issue and allowed people to see themselves and their own roles within the systems that made the mine possible.

Something like, say, a board game.

The lonely white worker cage in the cavernous black space is in stark contrast to the room that follows it. Tall, brightly coloured cardboard sculptures of machines, like giant Tonka trucks, are scattered about the room. Underfoot is a giant playing board from the game Squatter - a kind of Australian version of Monopoly based on sheep farming.

Instead of the traditional exhibition catalogue, Denny has created his own completely playable version of *Squatter* for gallery guests to take home. Called *Extractor*, it takes the principles of sheep farming and applies them to data mining. Players start out as "a small startup, desperate for a leg-up". Instead of hitting obstacles such as flooding or fencing repairs, you face diversity training and staff walkouts due to military contracts. The game is the heart of the exhibition, and the metaphorical hinge that connects all the ideas Denny is playing with.



📍 Denny's giant reproduction of the board from the Australian game Squatter. Photograph: Jesse Hunniford/Mona

“The show is about systems. It’s about how systems organise people, and the game is the perfect diagram,” says Denny. “My aim is to give people a very visceral experience of these interrelated ideas which I think are very important. To give them something tangible to walk away with, to hold on to.”

Social media and personal data might seem a long way from minerals being ripped from the earth, but “the viewer themselves is really implicated in this story”, says Denny. “You are being extracted from ... and you are extracting something from the show. You are seeing yourself as a resource and a user at the same time.”

The significance of this exhibition on extraction, being buried in Mona’s underground galleries, is far from coincidental. “While we’re in a mineshaft of a museum, we’re also in a data-mining business at the same time,” he says.

Mona’s O - a portable touchscreen device that serves as the museum’s map, information centre, exhibition pamphlet, wall text and more - is integral to the work. AR markers peppered throughout the exhibition allow you to access an extra layer of the installation, such as real ads made by mining and service companies using technology for things like surveillance, monitoring workers’ sleep patterns or replacing human workers entirely.



📍 Game Boys is Patricia Piccinini’s hyperreal sculpture of two children playing console games (centre). Photograph: Jesse Hunniford/Mona

All the while, the O collects your data for the museum’s use - or abuse. In the

third and final room of the show are sculptures borrowed from more than 20 different artists - including Patricia Piccinini, Fiona Hall, Li Liao and more - each of which represent a different interpretation of the concept of a worker. They sit on platforms above portals to real-time information about Mona's data collection: what it knows about you, what you like and don't like, what kind of device you use, and more.

Denny cheerfully admits he's "a very cerebral kind of guy who likes to pack a lot of ideas and information into shows", but equally important, he says, is sparking an emotional response in his audience - "making moving experiences that tell us something about how we feel and where we are in the world".

"We are living in and implicated in these different layers of extractive behaviours," says Denny. "Some of us are the thornbill, who is about to check out of that game, and some of us are far further up, about to harvest the win. But what's really going on is an organisation of things that doesn't need to be organised in that way."

● *Mine by Simon Denny is showing at the Museum of Old and New Art, Hobart, until 13 April 2020*

● *Guardian Australia was a guest of Tourism Tasmania and Dark Mofo*

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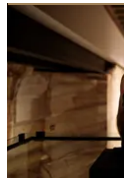
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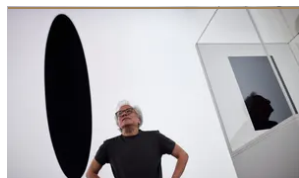
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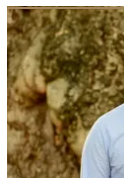
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