



Sydney Morning Herald
Saturday 19/05/2018

Page: 10
Section: Spectrum
Region: Sydney, AU
Circulation: 88634
Type: Capital City Daily
Size: 860.00 sq.cms.



slice
CUT STRAIGHT TO YOUR NEWS

press clip

VISUAL ART



**John
McDonald**

Shifting the focus

Head On, a photographic festival with a worldwide reputation, is still struggling to find secure financial backing.

Head On is still not getting the attention it deserves. We make a big fuss about the Biennale of Sydney, we go wild for Vivid, we swarm over the Sydney foreshores during Sculpture by the Sea, but after 10 years the Head On Photo Festival survives on a fraction of the resources devoted to other events. One might think that an annual spectacle that boasts 700 artists from 22 countries, spread across more than 100 exhibitions doesn't have anything left to prove.

This year the NSW government and the City of Sydney council are listed as supporters, but as usual, Head On relies on volunteers and poorly paid staffers to put together a photography festival with a worldwide reputation. One can't get too excited about modest handouts from a state government that is willing to spend billions demolishing and rebuilding sports stadia or vandalising the Powerhouse. Or a City of Sydney council that has just invested more than \$900,000 in a set of little bronze birds by Tracey Emin.

Is it too much to expect these representatives of the people to get behind an established event that attracts many thousands of visitors and generates income for the local economy? Head On's cash problem is exposed by its brevity. Most

of the major exhibitions close after only a fortnight. This is a ridiculously short run for an event that requires such herculean efforts. The Biennale drags on for almost four months, as does the wretched Archibald Prize.

The major venue this year is Paddington Town Hall, where one may sample a staggering array of exhibitions. There are more shows within a minute's walk, at the Paddington Reservoir Gardens, and Juniper Hall, which is also hosting

the finalists of the Moran Contemporary Photographic Prize (until May 27).

Other significant parts of the festival may be found at the Royal Botanic Gardens, and Delmar Gallery on the grounds of Trinity Grammar School, Ashfield. To explore the full program, one should refer to the Head On website or pick up a booklet at any venue.

There's no way to review such an event in an even-handed manner. Instead, I'll look briefly at the shows in Paddington, and the three Chinese-themed exhibitions at Delmar, where I spoke at the opening last week.

Paula Bronstein's *Afghanistan: Between Hope and Fear* at the Town Hall is a first-class piece of photojournalism, documenting the effects of a long drawn-out conflict on everyday life in a country defined by suffering and endurance. However, it's not all bad news, as Bronstein also shows aspects of Afghanistan that don't make the news bulletins.

The same might be said of *Dread and Dreams* by Afghan photographer, Zalmai, at the Reservoir Gardens. These images are in stark black-and-white, whereas Bronstein's are in colour, but they show people trying to live ordinary lives in extraordinary circumstances.

This is almost the defining mission of the world's best photojournalism: to put a human face to the vast, impersonal conflicts that flash by on our TV screens; to bridge the ideological, sectarian divides that generate so much hatred and fear.

Alongside these shows there are bizarre displays such as Taro Karibe's *Saori*, about a 61-year-old Japanese man who co-habits with a life-sized love doll; or Alain Schroeder's *Living for Death*, which documents an annual ceremony in the Pangala region of Indonesia in which the corpses of family members are removed from



Sydney Morning Herald Saturday 19/05/2018

Page: 10
Section: Spectrum
Region: Sydney, AU
Circulation: 88634
Type: Capital City Daily
Size: 860.00 sq.cms.



slice
CUT STRAIGHT TO YOUR NEWS

press clip

their graves, cleaned and given new clothing. You'll be amazed by the affection lavished on these decayed bodies.

It's not sufficient that a photographer merely documents a place or an event, there must also be a formal element that sets their work apart. One sees this in its purest form with Debi Cornwall's *Welcome to Camp America* at the Reservoir Gardens: a portrait of Guantanamo Bay that had to conform to the most rigid set of rules.

Cornwall wasn't permitted to show faces, or indeed prisoners. The restrictions required ingenious responses, leading to images of empty rooms, soldiers with their backs turned to the camera, and the cute merchandise sold in the camp gift-shop. It makes the prison look like a deserted holiday resort, full of forced, empty cheerfulness. Cornwall has captured the air of unreality that pervades the entire enterprise. She followed up her stay in Guantanamo by photographing former detainees who had been released, without charge, into countries such as Albania and Uzbekistan where they don't speak the language and don't have permission to leave. By focusing on the artificiality of Guantanamo Bay, Cornwall has exposed the camp as an absurd,

mendacious mix of torture and "fun". There is no drama, no editorialising. The images say it all.

The same play with artificiality characterises the three exhibitions at Delmar Gallery. Peng Xiangjie's *Cosplay* shows young Chinese who have adopted the Japanese practise of dressing up like cartoon characters and superheroes. In Japan it's a rebellion against stifling social conformity that merely substitutes one set of codes for another. In China it has a more desperate edge, as a harmless, permissible deviation in a society that discourages political disagreement.

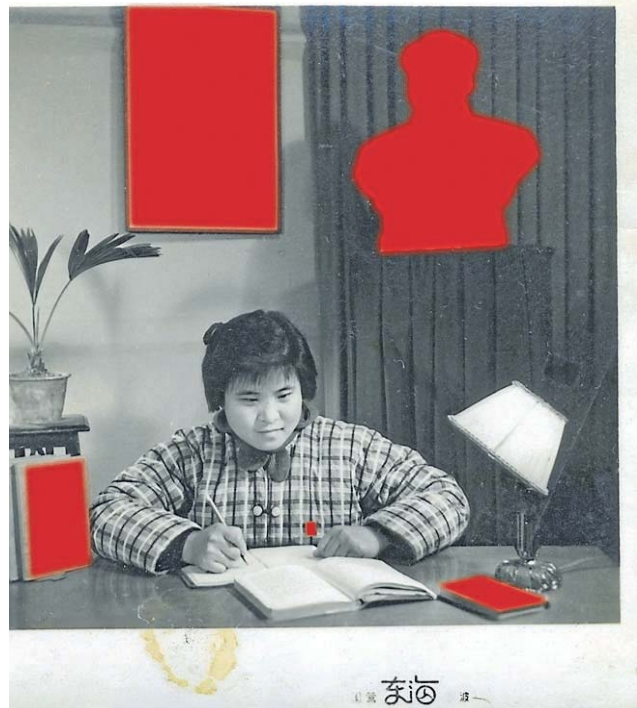
Olivia Martin-McGuire's *China Love* focuses on the multibillion-dollar industry of Chinese wedding photos, often taken a year in advance of the actual ceremony. Another form of cosplay, the photoshoots are lavish, show-off displays of personal wealth that underscore the idea of marriage as primarily an economic arrangement.

The Disneyfied aspect of these marriage photos is put in context by Sheila Zhao's *The East was Red*, a devastating installation of found photos from the time of the Cultural Revolution, in which every piece of propaganda has been coloured an opaque red. In this sea of smiling faces, of hands joyfully waving the little red book, one sees the roots of China's dangerous love of make-believe and self-deception.

What began as brainwashing has become a

habit of mind, as the emphasis on the collective has given way to rampant individualism. The most extreme forms of communist fervour find their mirror image today in the new capitalism, in which the greatest glory, following Deng Xiaoping's famous pronouncement, is to get rich.

Head On 2018 is at the Paddington Town Hall; Paddington Reservoir Gardens; State Library of NSW; Royal Botanic Gardens, until tomorrow; Parliament of NSW, until May 24; Delmar Gallery; Juniper Hall, until May 27. The full program is available at: headon.com.au





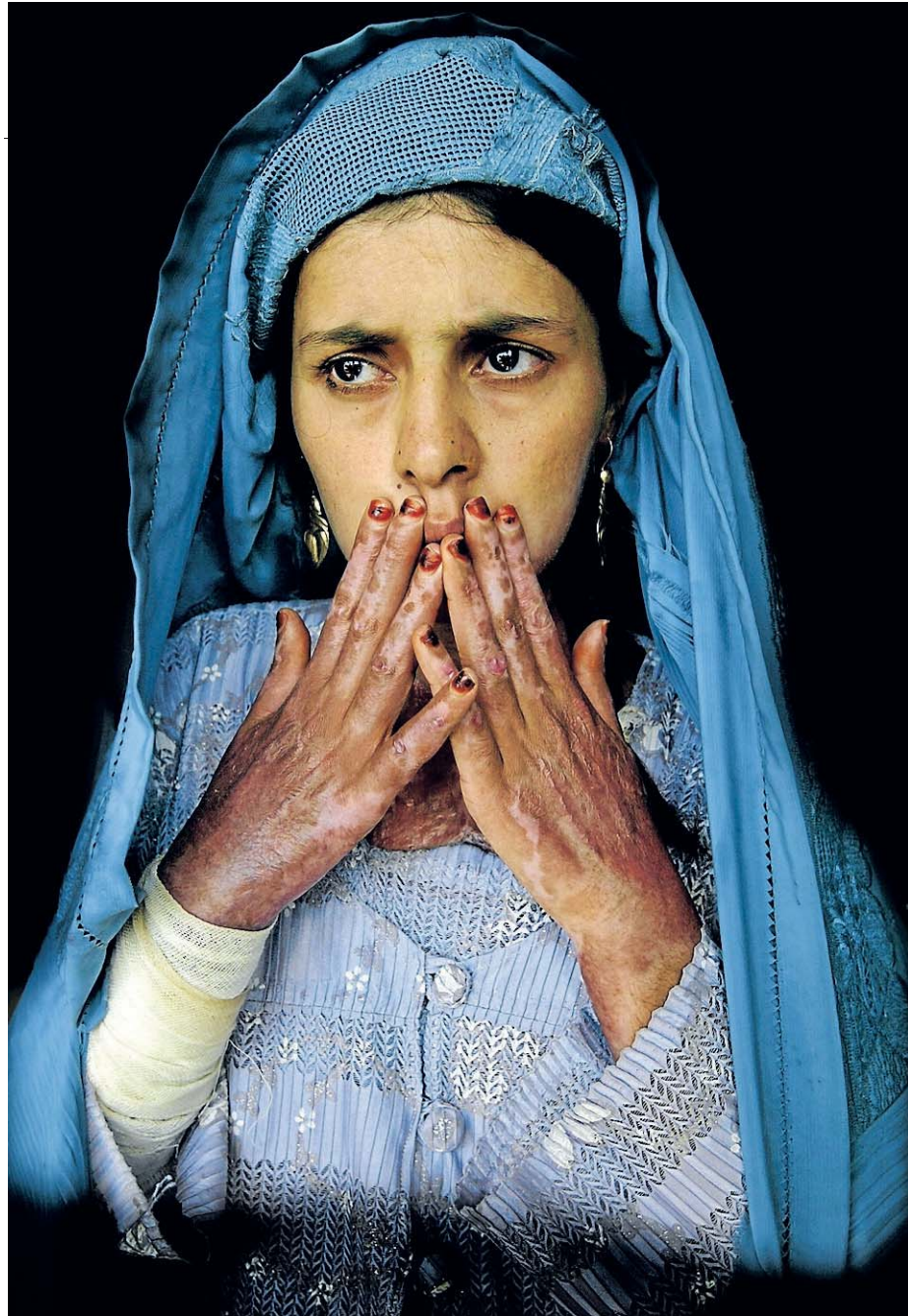
Sydney Morning Herald
Saturday 19/05/2018

Page: 10
Section: Spectrum
Region: Sydney, AU
Circulation: 88634
Type: Capital City Daily
Size: 860.00 sq.cms.



slice
CUT STRAIGHT TO YOUR NEWS

press clip





Sydney Morning Herald
Saturday 19/05/2018

Page: 10
Section: Spectrum
Region: Sydney, AU
Circulation: 88634
Type: Capital City Daily
Size: 860.00 sq.cms.



slice
CUT STRAIGHT TO YOUR NEWS

press clip



From left: Paula Bronstein's 2004 image of Masooma, 18, who has severe burns on 70 per cent of her body from self-immolation; from Sheila Zhao's exhibition *The East was Red*; from Taro Karibe's exhibition *Saori*.