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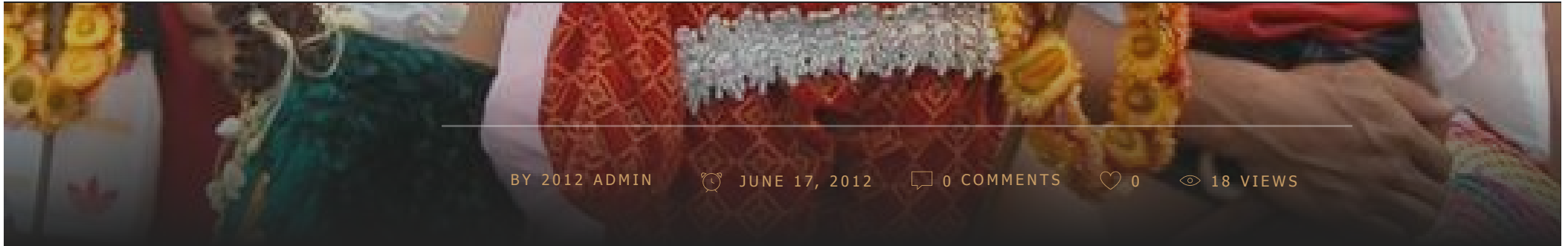


## Review: Variable Truth

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**A bad performance is a letdown but there's nothing more disappointing than neutrality. At least the former enlivens some degree of emotion. The exhibition currently on display at the 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art is unfortunately more flat-line than variable and here's why:**

Like most concept-heavy shows, although a lot of the works featured have undoubtedly evolved from extensive conceptual development, they nonetheless fell short of the mark aesthetically. The show aims to present varying artistic perspectives of Australia's role within the Asia-Pacific region, responding to such personally and politically rich issues as the nation's social history, geographical significance, globalisation and the burgeoning Eastern economy. It also aims to illuminate how a change of perspective often triggers a change in historical commentary – art theory included. And these issues are all complex and interesting, but as concepts alone, they are not art.

Relying predominantly on a concept as an artist is always a dangerous move because if the viewer struggles or fails to grasp it, and the work is not aesthetically strong enough to stand alone as a source of visual engagement, then the work may ultimately mean and say nothing at all.

This conundrum surfaced in artist Brook Andrew's 'Flowchart'. Eight fluorescent tubes inter-crossed at small, aged postcards. I stood before it initially intrigued, but after a minute or so, I felt mostly underwhelmed. The title and the postcards hinted at it being something historical, or personal, or both in some modern take on a family tree, but the link between giant glow sticks and tea-stained images appeared arbitrary, which deducted as opposed to added meaning to the work.

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Such works could be redeemed if accompanied by a conceptual breakdown, elaborated by the artist, and at the viewer's disposal. Rebutting, hypothetically, that it is the artist's intention to 'leave the work open to interpretation' is viable but only if there is at least some tangible opening for intellectual follow-through. Otherwise, the viewer is left standing there before a work, either desperately devising their own pompous over-analysis or half-yawning as they pivot away.

The works upstairs were comparatively more engaging, but on the whole were not polarised towards the really bad or the really good. They were, I'd say, settled smack bam in the middle of a mediocre continuum. This is not to deny the conceptual richness of the works, but in viewing them as works of art not academia, they just didn't excite the eye.

However, one work which seemed to stick out from the rest was Greg Semu's 'The Assassination of Atai' – an evocative, large backlit digital print in a dark room. It featured three men in tribal attire forcefully pinning down another man with a rifle pressed against his temple. The man's outstretched arm was clenched by his captor's blood stained hands and his eyes bulged with fear. The scene was clearly staged, but deeply haunting and visceral nonetheless.

In complete contrast were two other works, both featuring miniature paper models of architectural structures. If not powerful, these works were at least quaint and playful. Artist Melissa Howe had printed, folded and kitted out a paper replica of her strikingly kitsch family home, built in the 1970s on the outskirts of Canberra. Peering into the rooms and observing the detail of such features as a velveteen sofa, stuffed toys, a bowl of tropical fruit and quintessentially mod wallpaper and matching curtains was an uncanny experience.

The other work, 'After Humans', by architect-turned-artist Michael Lee was a series of photographs depicting paper constructions of famous monuments. The models were coloured and illustrated in painstakingly veridical detail. A human hand is shown playfully interacting with them – lifting, plucking, tipping over and crushing the Arc de Triomphe, Big Ben and the Statue of Liberty, to name a few.

Another work also dealing with destruction was by Sydney-based artist Tim Silver. Fragile sculptures made of spices were documented photographically as they incrementally disintegrated on the water's edge, including a Rolex watch made of ginger, a nutmeg Coke can and a sandalwood TV remote, not to mention a disintegrating Croc shoe. The idea was simple but surprisingly arresting.

Which is more that I can say for the adjacent work: garishly coloured wallpaper in Macdonald's red and yellow had been



applied from floor to ceiling. It featured a repeat of cartoon faces of aboriginal children and the word 'DEADLY'. The theme – if you can call an assault on the eyes a theme – was continued in two large posters packed full of pop references, mainly of manga super hero characters. I didn't quite 'get' the work, so I consulted the catalogue.

When it comes to art, there's always something about a group show that doesn't quite fit. Either the bodies of work are so distinct that the show feels fractured, or, the artworks are similar to the point where it's hard as a viewer not to judge them side by side and implicitly draw a winner. 'Variable Truth' had good intentions, but was unfortunately flooded by neither goodness nor badness, but worst still, mediocrity.

### Variable Truth

Tony Albert, Brook Andrew, Melissa Howe, Roslisham Ismail, Michael Lee, Greg Semu, Alexander Seton, Tim Silver and Tony Twigg.

4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art

181-7 Hay Street, Sydney

25 May – 14 July

*Harriet Levenston*

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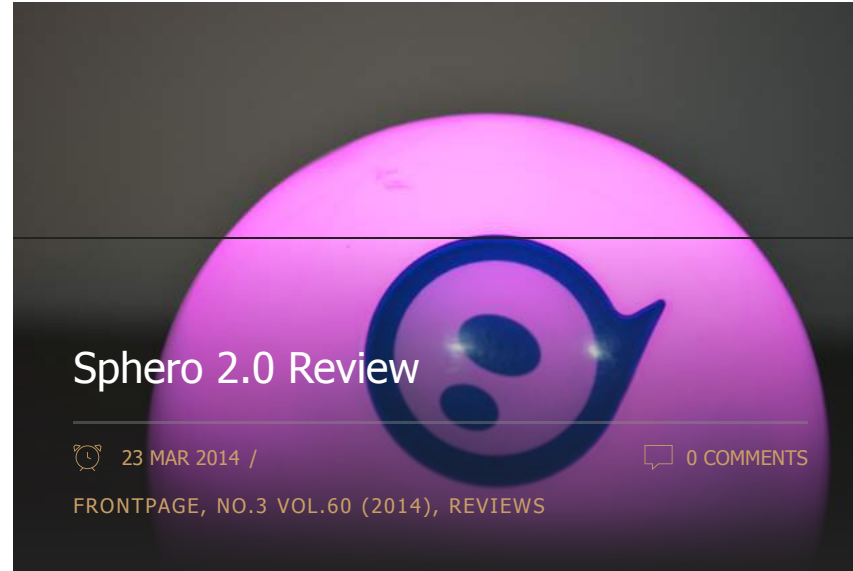
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