

10 Years 100 Artists: Art in a Democratic South Africa

Major publication serves to showcase what South African art looks like after a decade of democracy and the country's reintegration into the international community.

Greg Streak

Greg Streak is an interdisciplinary practitioner working in sculpture, video and installation who has been increasingly active on the exhibition and residency circuit abroad. His cool, aesthetic, even minimalistic work is characterized by formalistic concerns and a preoccupation with the materiality of substance and things, but also space, both physical and psychological. At first glance, Streak's oeuvre to date reads as the diametric opposite of so much 'body'-focused work of the last decade, but on closer examination, reveals its involvement with a full gamut of issues aligned to the experiences of a young, white male during a period of instability and transition.

After postgraduate work at Technikon Natal, Streak secured a coveted place at the Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunste in Amsterdam in 1998. Locally, his no-less active artistic practice has been somewhat eclipsed by his work as project facilitator for Pulse, an artist-run initiative of which he is the founding member. Linked to the Rijksakademie International Network (RAIN), which includes six other similar initiatives in India, Brazil, Argentina, Mali, Mexico and Indonesia, Streak is drawn to immersive working environments that encourage a critical dialogue between fellow participants, the project environment, the creative process and social space.

The Pulse projects have occurred biennially since 2000, with Open Circuit, followed by Violence/Silence (2002) and most recently, HIV(E) (2004). Not simply an exhibition series, Pulse has facilitated conferences, site-specific exhibitions, traditional gallery exhibitions and most recently, artist-designed facilities for an HIV/AIDS centre for children in Kwamashu, KwaZulu Natal.

Violence/Silence took place simultaneously with the exhibition 'Violence' in Durban, one of world's fastest-growing cities and the capital of a province where political instability is still rife; and site-specific works as 'Silence' in Nieu Bethesda, a tiny desert town synonymous with sublime vistas and a palpable sense of alienation. Abbreviated, Violence/Silence produces 'vs', indicating Streak's conscious juxtaposition of two very different spaces, where despite geographical distance, conceptual friction refutes easy distinctions.

Streak's Drain (2002) is an arresting and poetic response to the psychological trauma of nothingness. In the floor of a disused reservoir, a structure designed to hold, contain and preserve, Streak sunk a drainpipe fitted with a steel collar. Lined with coal dust, the interior of the pipe appears fathomless and infinite. An emblem of emptying, removal, even purging, Streak likens its industrial, impersonal form to "a chamber in the body of an organism", an orifice in a void whose quiet presence seems rather deadly.

Streak's output to date reveals a conceptual consistency that one suspects is only truly clear with the benefit of hindsight. Drain's precursor, coincidentally also produced in Nieu Bethesda, is Hermit (2000), a minimal, beveled, cruciform shape sunk into the earth. Simultaneously archaic yet reminiscent of what we're told evidence from alien landings might look like, Hermit is a suffocating, invisible tomb – the criss-cross roofs of a house, bastion of domesticity and signifier of culture rather than nature, now subsumed by its harsh environment. Considering Streak's ongoing project "Proposals for places I'd like to live", there is a sense of irony here. Hermits, in many instances, choose their isolation. It's a self-imposed imprisonment rather than an enforced one.

Produced for 'Violence', Witness (2002) is the conceptual shadow of Drain's silence. Streak fed a sequence from the film Witness, depicting a man cutting another man's throat, witnessed by a young boy, into a edit suite and out again in a continuous process that resulted in the footage

losing a generation of quality each time. The progeny of his critically acclaimed video trio Dreams in Red (1998), Leaving (Blue) (2000) and Jaundiced (Yellow) (2000), Witness begins as mimicking reality in a naturalistic if dramatized manner, yet ends as abstract painting in motion, a seething, pulsating field of electronic colour-stains and televisual noise. An indictment of the vagaries of truth and memory, Streak was interested in the process of erosion. Through the dissolution of the image, one is forced to forget whether the men are black or white and whether the man attacked has a hood-like object obscuring his face. These details were uncannily mirrored in the retelling of horror experienced directly and vicariously through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Streak's most recent video piece, Shadow Boxing with James Gregory Streak (2003), literally embodies the psychological conflict and constraint implied in previous works, where two versions of Streak, ego and alter-ego, battle it out against a solid brick wall. The space is claustrophobic and hemmed in – there is no hint of anything else beyond the frame or behind the wall – a perpetual boundary against which the two ghosts of the artist engage in an existential war between selves. While subjecthood might be mutable, organic and shifty, in Streak's case, he seems to suggest that the very idea of subjecthood is caught in an internal conflict.

Where his sculptural pieces refer directly to retraction and isolation in ways that sublimate the 'human' almost completely, Streak's video work explores these psychological interstices in an embodied way: they are figurative studies which retain elements of human identification and in this, imply the possibility of transformation.

- Kathryn Smith

Kathryn Smith is a visual artist, curator and writer based in Cape Town, South Africa