

three colours red, yellow and blue (a trilogy)  
Primary Faith

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Greg Streak's *Three Colours Red, Yellow and Blue* (1999-2000) is a video trilogy of optical primaries. It speaks to a painterly heritage that Streak doesn't practice, but by which he is clearly influenced. Streak cites Caravaggio's *The Sacrifice of Isaac* (1601-02) as a reference in *Dreams in Red* (1999) and Jan Vermeer's *Young Woman with a Pitcher* (1664-65) as an association in *Leaving (blue)* (2000). He describes the work as a triptych, a form that within the tradition of the west is most often found in Catholic altarpieces and he invokes Barnett Newman's, *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue* (1966-67) as the prompt for the three.

Streak's choice of modernist master is pertinent. Newman's abstraction, like so many of the modernists, was rarely merely a play of Greenbergian formalist values, but rather a modernist urge to an essential that went beyond the picture plane, a platonic call to source and a means to give back colour its expressive possibilities .

In Streak's work *Dreams in Red* the alizarin crimson that seeps beneath the prone figure is bloody. In *Leaving (blue)* the growing spread of the liquid indigo gradually mirrors the sky on its surface and the departing figure signals separation and its attendant emotional blues. In *Jaundiced (yellow)* the acid yellow stain that spreads through the water wherein floats the figure has a uric quality to it.

In each piece the action within the image is minimal. Reinforcing this sense of stasis two of the videos are silent while in one the audio barely registers. The emphasis on a singular image reinforces the visual link to painting, but a painting, having emerged out of the viscosity of paint, dries, fixing the image into a final, static state. The painterly analogy in Streak's videos continues, not in immobility, but in continuing fluidity

In each piece a tinted liquid moves across the screen, colouring the reading of what we see. The move from abstraction to figuration is thus also a play between stillness and movement. While virtually nothing happens the work is highly dependent on the temporal possibilities video offers and the small shifts in action that do occur: bubbles shimmering on a meniscus, the ripple across a surface as a breeze passes, the almost imperceptible passing of a bird seen against the sky through a window. Such ephemeral detail, transitions between one moment and the next, between staying and leaving, are as important as those that exist between life and death.

Informed by a heritage of baroque images located in the Counter Reformation, where the Jesuit teachings leaned heavily on images as a means of reinforcing the believer's faith Caravaggio's influence is felt in more than the dramatic chiaroscuro that throws the face into shadow and deepens the colour saturation. Both Streak's *Dreams in Red* and Caravaggio's *The Sacrifice of Isaac* are about the staying of death. In both a force

intervenes and stops the anticipated end. In *Dreams in Red* there is a moment where a hardly perceptible shift occurs, when expiration ceases and a hiatus occurs, a barely discernible instant of transition when outflow returns to inflow and the body appears to draw blood back into itself and the condition we presume is final is reversed. Here the intake of breath heard to resume at the end of the video marks a shift in perception signalling the possibility of rebirth.

Where *Dreams in Red* has a marked three-dimensionality the piece that represents yellow is so tonally lean it is almost without relief. Evoking the delicacy of Renaissance silverpoint drawings it is as if we are witness to the feet of Christ, unbound from his cross, floating through a pale liquid. The transcendent Saviour who, once dead, arose again, is a symbol of hope and salvation for those left behind, yet Streak's take on this is entitled *Jaundiced (yellow)* – an off-colour indicator of sickness, marked perhaps by the malaise of cynicism. These feet gently hitting the bottom and drifting on index a Christ unanchored, and the residue of Gothic spirituality in such attenuated linearity is here despoiled by the yellow stain, an abject reminder of mortality - as though in a moment of great stress or fear the contents of the bladder had been released.

Streak's *Jaundiced (yellow)* is a nod to Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ* (1989). The photograph of a crucifix submerged in the artist's urine was defended by Serrano as neither impious nor blasphemous, but Streak, a lapsed Catholic, is jealous perhaps, of those who have faith, those who believe. His work is marked by ambivalence. Nothing is certain – all remains in flux. A sense of the indeterminate pervades the work. The figures float, drift, hover in reflection and the act of leaving haunts each piece with an insistent anxiety. This is not the language of faith, but doubt. Here the human figure is either prone or inverted. The world upended is turned upside down. Overturned one is upset. In *Leaving (blue)* the silhouetted figure in the window evokes the images of German Romantic Casper David Friedrich. The figure facing the light of the void activates the play between inside and out, only in this instance the figure, is not only in shadow but is shadow, a shade ghosted in the mirrored reflection, insubstantial and as ephemeral as the liquid which brought it to our attention. Transience, inversions and endings signal loss. In the face of this Streak's work questions faith, but displays a resilience of spirit.

## Bibliography

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