

Things fall apart

Greg Streak's latest exhibition *Accumulative Disintegration* is a psychological snapshot of our times, writes Peter Machen.

If ever an exhibition title resonated with the spirit of the times, it is ***Accumulative Disintegration***, from acclaimed South African artist Greg Streak. As the first decade of the 21st century starts to draw to a close, it often seems that the world – the climate, the economy, society itself – is falling gradually apart. The show, currently installed at Bank Gallery in Florida Road, uses the cut and the blade as its central elements, accompanied by the implied bedfellow of blood, the work all the while clinging to the gallery surfaces as if it was skin.

The dominant work, or at least the one that I noticed first, is titled ***Cloud***. A three dimensional arc of metal hangs from the ceiling, its bottom surface covered in regimented rows of razor blade. It is a remarkably visceral piece; standing underneath it is an experience of heightened reality, as an inverted vertigo seems to pull the viewer upwards towards the blades. Next to the cloud – although I imagine that most viewers would see it only after having circled the gallery – is a companion piece called ***Secrets (for those who don't have)*** which consists of 2 000 paper envelopes for razor blades contained in a Perspex box.

At the end of the gallery, a large piece called ***For every time I wish you hadn't*** bears countless cuts, marks that seem to suggest both self-flagellation and imposed violence. In another piece, ***Paper cuts on the skin (random but deliberate)***, the cuts have inverted, seemingly keloided into scars.

Accumulative Disintegration is full of lacerations. While it is no doubt an exploration of the artist's own recent experiences, it also reflects our own individual and collective frustrations and pains, mental, emotional and physical. And to contain all the tears caused by the all the cuts, all the blood, all the pain, are hundreds of little ***Envelopes for tears*** constructed out of insulating tape and herded into the convention of the frame.

Taking all the pieces in the exhibition as a collective narrative, it is this work which offers, if not redemption or salvation, at least a place to cry, a place to acknowledge our pain. Despite the one-off emotional theatre of the TRC, this is not something we like to do in South Africa; repression is a more favoured option. The envelopes for tears are doubly moving because of their size. On the one hand, they are exactly the right size to hold real tears. On the other hand, they would be carried away in torrents if they invited the tears of the planet, the nation, or even the surrounding suburbs.

Despite all the repetitive brutality on show in ***Accumulative Disintegration***, there is a strangely transcendent warmth to the exhibition which glows – barely – as if in a strangely metallic dusk. That glow might be the relief of catharsis, of shared experience. For in this new South Africa, as in the old, we are all brutalised in countless ways. That does not mean that we are not also warm and compassionate people. We are, after all, human, and capable of so much.

And somehow, engaging with the works in ***Accumulative Disintegration***, their attempt at some kind of emotional precision, combined with Streak's remarkable ability to pull abstraction into the concrete, ignites that feeling of being human, and suggests how much we have to lose if we choose not to let our scars heal.

Then there is the fact that these scars, these marks of experience – as well as the new life and fresh experience that also comes with the passing of time – are the marks of pain, and pain always has a lesson to learn. Pulling back from most of the works, moving the focus from the micro the macro, new forms reveal themselves. In many of the works, the repetition of small individual marks – made presumably at some kind of random – builds up to reveal a larger landscape.

And what I saw – and perhaps I am just a shiny, foolish optimist – was landmasses, continents, islands – a new world being forged in the darkness.

- Peter Machen

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