

Questions and Answers: Interview by Leigh-Anne Niehaus with Greg Streak

• Please explain the motivation behind the title of the show, *Seeing red, feeling blue?*

The show was made over a period of time in which I was reflecting on many things. I knew that the show was not going to be your standard exhibition in which there is a clear running narrative either with continuity created through use of a material or one specific concept. This was intentional. So I suppose that the title of the show attempts to preempt what you are going to see, which is ponderings and questions that sit in the spaces between anger and resignation, participation and retraction, hope and despair etc. I wasn't interested in making a clear thematic. I didn't want it to be an easy ride. I wanted the connections between things to be tenuous, even non-existent if that's how it came out. I don't see the world as a place of linear order or easy connections, which is how we would maybe like it to be. I see it as a chaotic space full of hypocrisy and contradiction, and I wanted to explore this in whatever direction it took me, without being concerned about continuity or thematic. The theme, if one wants to pin it down in some way, is one which is dismissive and searching, rather than stable and clear.

• Would you say this exhibition is a political commentary, or, more specifically a state of the nation address, and why?

Big question. I think it is probably a bit of both to be honest. I am, for my sins, a closet activist and therefore am compelled to make work which tries to engage with issues, but in an obtuse way, and hence a lot of the abstraction and tongue-in-cheek glib titles. I think it is closer to social commentary, which would of course encompass politics, and by extension it is then too about the state of the nation. Engaging this is probably where the *seeing red* comes from ... and the result of having done so is probably the *feeling blue* part. Not sure if any of this makes sense? It's probably one of those questions where I feel it is for others to make sense of and comment on ...

• The title of the sculpture, 'Things fall apart' speaks explicitly about decay and deterioration and the use of the Protea implies a connection to South Africa. 'Vial of useless information' refers to the inaccessibility of information, so too does 'Archive for Amnesia', is this perhaps a reference to the recently passed secrecy bill? Can you explain these works further?

I think all of the above is spot on. The Protea is the national flower and therefore a symbol of the country – I have constructed a dense six metre armature out of 6mm mild steel round bar. The armature strips it down to its skeleton, and it is rusting – in a state of decay. It also lies prostrate on the floor, one leaf coming off of the stem, curling upwards – and this all obviously adds to the sense of degeneration. I think it is one of the more literal works. It is what it is. This is probably the work which speaks to the "state of the nation" – to answer one of your earlier questions. '**Things fall apart**' – I suppose, on the one hand, was a literal prompt of how to engage the work, but it also happens to be the eponymous title of Chinua Achebe's monumental novel from 1958, and I suppose with him having just passed away, it seemed an appropriate work – with its funereal sentiment – to dedicate it to him.

It's interesting, because with the benefit of some distance from the show now, the space where these works are, is quite desolate in an overall sense. It is about the collapse of many things. '**Vial of useless information**' consists of a clear acrylic tube compacted with disks of paper, which happen to be the cores removed from a set of encyclopedias which hang, as another work, also in the same space. The encyclopedia work is called '**Fake Empire**' and has a 50mm mild steel pipe skewered through it where the core was bored out. This core was then reconstituted back as individual "books" and suffocated into the acrylic tube. '**Archive for Amnesia**' is a bronze cast of the front section of an old library index card unit. It looks like it is embedded into the wall and the front draw section emerge out and are complete, in the sense that all of the 24 draws are in tact with empty name plates and draw handles. None of them obviously open. All of these works are dysfunctional. What you need for them to "work" has been destroyed, removed, sealed. There is a sense of futility in these works I think?

Well, the secrecy bill is really a euphemism for the “Protection of Information Bill” or is it the other way round?! The problem with this bill is that it has, within it, the authority to incriminate whistleblowers, who might expose corruption and worse, all under the guise of national security. I was very aware of the timing of these works in relation to the issues around the “secrecy bill”, and as such, the works become a marker in time of these political decisions. In the same way that ‘**Things fall apart**’ is dated (2013) – it places the weight of the works concerns with the here and now ... not the past ... nor the future.

- **How are sculptures like ‘Hotspot’ and ‘Bad idea’ relevant to the above thematic?**

I think ‘**Bad idea**’ is strongly related to these works, and could quite easily have been ‘curated’ into the same space. It is a large light bulb which has been cast into solid material one with black oxide mixed in. It literally hangs from a noose from the ceiling. The ubiquitous bright idea symbolized by an upright, lit light bulb has been subverted. I suppose it carries some possible readings. Maybe the death of the idea, or rather perhaps, a signal that we have had our ability to think for ourselves taken away from us – sometimes in forceful ways, and other times in ways that border on subterfuge. This work is also clearly about its non-function.

‘**Hotspot**’ is a little different. The work is part woven zulu wire bowl and part satellite dish. This is a third world satellite dish – a comical confluence between the crafted / hand-made and the implied space of virtual connectivity; the third world speaking to the first world with no reply? Hotspot refers both to a place of contention as well as a specific location where communication can take place within the wireless mobile device ambit. I suppose this was about setting up juxtaposition between two different worlds, constrained into one work with all the attendant political ramifications.

- **The leitmotif of the doodle runs throughout much of the show (both literally and theoretically), could you unpack the use of the doodle?**

It is strange even to me, how the doodle has become such a dominant element in the show because it is, by definition, and by what it represents, probably the quintessential example of random nothingness. That having been said is precisely why I set out in the beginning, wanting to use it. The extreme levels of subterfuge in society nauseate me in general ... where puffery and smoke and mirrors project the arbitrary into the realm of significance. We see this all the time with advertising and commercial branding. Very ordinary stuff is inflated to appear to be far more than it actually is. This also goes with the obsession with the celebrity; the elevation of very average people to superstar status for all the wrong reasons. The problem is that our role models are paper-thin and our obsession with wearing a particular brand supersedes basic human interactions. I wanted to do the opposite ... to take examples of what is generally accepted as random nothingness and raise it up to something substantial, almost as a counterpoint or foil. I love the George Orwell quote – “*saints should be treated as guilty, until proven innocent*” – and what I love about the doodle is that that it is guilty as charged – and I am trying to get it off the hook.

The first work, in what has turned out to be a bit of a series, was ‘**Proposal for a Doodle**’ (2011/2012). Here I doodled with medium blue ball-point pen over a large sheet of Fabriano paper, in varying density. I then crumpled it up, teased it open and spray starched it into what now looks like a topographical landscape. It is mounted inside a shutter ply box frame behind glass. I suppose I felt I hadn’t quite exhausted the extent of the doodle, so I embarked on doing pretty much the same thing as before, but this time on a larger sheet of paper, which when completed, measured about 3.3 x 1.5 metres of varying density scribble. I then crumpled this into a ball, much like you would a piece of A4 paper that you were discarding. ‘**Crumpled doodle**’ (2013) sits on a wooden plinth 300mm off of the ground and measures 55 x 55 x 45cm. ‘**Precious Nothing**’ (2012 / 13) followed, and was an attempt to take the doodle off of the page and into space. It consists of one continuous line of 400m of galvanized wire that was powder coated a cobalt blue so that it linked back to the drawings. There are two distinct points, a beginning and an end I suppose, that sit at the two furthest points of the piece from each other. They are connected to each other, but via a maze of chaos. ‘**Doodle for Cathedra (after Barnett Newman)**’ (2013), was the final work in this particular series, and was a way for me to push the doodle to its logical extreme in terms of

scale and density. The work is scale proportionate to Barnett Newmans 'Cathedra' and measure 4.47 x 2m. I wanted the density of the pen to be built up to a point where, from a distance, it would appear as though it were painted. The reality close up, is that since this was scribbled onto primed canvas and not onto paper like the other works, the surface shows signs of physical deteriorating and clearly reveals the physical process of the pen on canvas. All the titles here are dismissive, and imply that the works are really just nothing, but I hope that their re-constituted form and scale, in reality, make them much more?

- The original Barnett Newman's "Cathedra" is, like his other works, to do with metaphysical notions of the sublime. In 'Doodle for Cathedra (after Barnett Newman)' it has been reproduced in ballpoint pen. Why have you appropriated this important painting specifically?

I think in the beginning, I was trying to see how far I could take the doodle and was searching for an anchor. '**Cathedra**' became this. A monumental expanse of blue which I could re-interpret in ball-point pen. That was just on a formal level. Conceptually, I think it is also important. When the work was first unveiled in 1951, it was not actually considered important at all. In fact it was denigrated by many critics because it didn't have the same free flowing mark making of a Pollock or de Kooning that they had come to associate with Abstract Expressionism. It only became one of his heavy weight paintings over time. In 1997, the work was severely damaged whilst on exhibit at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. Naturally it was restored, but we all know that the original was lost forever. It can never be what it was. All of this fascinated me. The doodle represents much of this. Maligned and arbitrary. I thought that by imitating it on the primed canvas as a very dense doodle, it would become the perfect conceptual marriage as a contemporary reproduction.

- Please discuss the use of proportion and the juxtapositioning of chaos and order throughout the exhibition?

I am not sure what you mean by the use of proportion, but when making many of these works, I instinctively knew that they needed to be on a large scale. What that would exactly be differed. '**Hotspot**' for example, could not have been half the size, because it would have been too close a relationship to a domestic satellite TV dish and therefore would have just become purely aesthetic. It also needed to take the idea of a woven zulu bowl to another level, or it would have also suffered from just becoming an illustration of reality. The **Protea** was about the country. It needed to be massive and imposing to the viewer. Many of the doodle works were about taking the level of abstraction and its intensity to a point where it transformed into something, rather than its nothingness when viewed on a scale we are all familiar with. '**Flesh**' and '**Bone**' are interesting works in terms of their proportion, in that they conform to the Golden Section in terms of the length to width ratio. I started with a full sheet of wood, and with that determined I calculated the strange width proportion. The idea that these panels, which both contain intense conflicted surfaces, were framed by perfect balance and harmony, seemed like a valid reason for their final scale, and of course in setting up the contradiction of their position.

Chaos and order. Yes, I think the show is contained between polarities and binaries. It comes back to the title of the show. It sets up the expectation of an experience of between, rather than fixed. I have never really been interested in black or white. Grey seems more honest and far more real. We get conditioned to believe in absolutes and to fixed realities, when much of how things really play themselves out is the opposite. I suppose it comes from the need for control and order. There is a supposed comfort in knowing. I simply don't know. So the work vacillates between these points. I am not sure whether that will change either. I am also not sure whether I have answered the question at all?

- Two themes run concurrently throughout the show, firstly the idea of the doodle, the elevation of something low-caste to the state of art object, valued culturally and monetarily- and secondly political concerns. How do these two coexist and advance one another's meanings?

I am not sure of the themes but perhaps you are right. It's a consequence of just having made the work in an intense way, with some works feeding off the other, some being conscious ripostes and others merely finding their way into the mix intuitively etc. and then when you step back, I suppose we always try to define it in a way that makes sense and that's why these themes appear. Whether the observations you make have a happy middle ground, or whether they support each other in some way, I am not sure. I am also not sure whether they enhance each other's meaning at all? Is there specific works that you would like to draw comparison to, and maybe I can answer the question more directly then?

- In 'Flesh' and 'Bone' one is a direct negative of the other, how do they fit in with the 2 predominant thematics?

'Flesh' and 'Bone' as companion pieces, probably set up the binaries of the show best. They are probably the most literal combination of polarity. Flesh is dark, broody and the incisions are open wounds, transgressions and negative spaces. Bone is its antithesis. It is light and the raised welts are like healed scars, and somewhat redemptive. But I think the work goes further. 'Bone' was actually cast into the cut panel surface of what became 'Flesh'. It was the mold from which the protrusions of Bone were born. We tend to see polarity as diametrically opposed, when in fact the one exists because of the other. That is what interests me. Day only exists because of night. If there was no night, there would be no day, it would just be. And the same goes for all the big binary themes of Good and Evil, Ying and Yang, Dark and Light etc. I think for myself, as i said earlier, it is not about black or white, but grey. Its not about the question or the answer but the contemplation between.

- And how does limelight fit into all of this?

It doesn't really, does it? And I think that is why it is there. It is the maverick element within the show because it is the spare wheel; the unexpected guest. But I do also think that it is therefore important. It is tactless in every sense. It is the word lime, written in the artists handwriting, in lime green neon and it is a light. It is a crass caricature of itself. In the same way that overt attention seeking and the shameless pursuit of fame is pathetic and garish, the neon tube is the perfect representative. 'limelight' takes up an entire wall with its saturated ego and 'bad idea' hanging next to it, is both its ideal retort, as well as its perfect bed partner.