

## Seeing Red, Feeling Blue

The exhibition *Seeing Red, Feeling Blue* is notable for its provocative title. French Fluxus artist Robert Filliou once remarked, “Art is what makes life more interesting than art”, highlighting the complexity and intertwined nature of art and emotion, which Streak captures vividly. Discussing Greg Streak’s latest solo show at Commune1 proves complex due to the intrinsic duality of the artworks. The pieces juxtapose simplicity with complexity, making them difficult to categorize within traditional thematic frameworks. This exhibition departs from conventional structures, which typically follow a clear logic and sequence, and instead presents an ambiguous environment where certainty and resolution are intentionally absent. The thematic elements of ‘Seeing Red’ suggest emotions such as anger and hope, whereas ‘Feeling Blue’ introduces opposing sentiments like resignation and despair. The challenge in critiquing this exhibition lies in its position within a ‘liminal space’—it does not settle on a singular perspective but instead invites viewers to consider a range of interpretations that lie between binary extremes.

The exhibition centres on what might be considered its principal piece, *Doodle for Cathedra (after Barnett Newman)* (2013). Entering the gallery, visitors are immediately greeted by a striking electric blue rectangle, part of a large canvas that measures 4.47m by 2m, visible from 55 meters away. The canvas is divided into deep blues, accented with a bold white vertical stripe and a lighter blue stripe, which together create a compelling visual impact. This work replicates Barnett Newman’s famous *Cathedra* from 1951 on a proportional scale. From afar, the piece radiates a depth and richness of colour. The white and light blue ‘zips’ divide the expansive blue into well-balanced segments. On closer examination, the surface that seems painted is actually composed of dense, medium blue ballpoint pen scribbles. The raw, textured canvas displays the substantial physical effort required to layer such intricate pen doodles, visibly wearing and reshaping the fabric beneath.

This artwork represents the peak of a series of ‘doodle’ works by Streak, challenging the traditional perception of doodling as mere triviality. Instead, these scribbles are transformed into a profound artistic expression, enriched by the substantial time, thought, and energy dedicated to their creation. Streak explains, “Each stroke is a deliberate act of building upon the trivial to craft something monumental”, underscoring the depth and intention behind each piece. Initially overlooked by critics and sidelined for not conforming to the norms of abstract expressionism, Newman’s *Cathedra* gained notoriety following its vandalism in 1997 at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, from which it never truly recovered. Streak’s reinterpretation not only reflects the physical and historical aspects of Newman’s piece but also explores the fleeting nature of art and its interpretation, highlighting the inherent complexity of recreating a masterpiece whose true essence has been irrevocably changed. Art historian Hal Foster discusses the “traumatic return of the past as a ghostly other in contemporary art”, which resonates with Streak’s reinterpretation of Newman’s *Cathedra*—a reflection on history and its perpetual influence on the present.

*Proposal for a Doodle* (2011-2012), while not as large as the main canvas work, holds its own in depth and impact, measuring 2200 x 1400mm. Mounted within a 300mm deep shutter ply and glass box frame, this piece features Fabriano paper intricately marked with medium blue ballpoint pen scribbles. These scribbles, varying in density, craft a textured visual that after crumpling and starching, mimics a topographical landscape. Such meticulous manipulation shifts seemingly random pen marks into a purposeful, structured form, provoking viewers to reconsider their definitions of what a doodle can represent. The title and execution of the artwork playfully understate its significance, contrasting with the profound effect it achieves.

This work aligns with Slavoj Žižek's observations on superficial engagements in contemporary culture in which he criticizes the performative acts that support the status quo while failing to address deeper societal issues. Similarly, Streak's commentary reflects on how societal norms elevate the trivial through media and celebrity influence, thereby challenging these norms by transforming a simple doodle into a statement of significant artistic and cultural inquiry. Through this, Streak's artwork dialogues with Žižek's philosophical examinations of contradiction and pretence in cultural values, suggesting that commonly accepted truths often obscure more complex realities.

If *Doodle for Cathedra* serves as the artist's tribute to Abstract Expressionism, *Crumpled Doodle* (2012/13) marks his foray into Pop Art, showcasing a continued evolution in his engagement with Western art history. In this piece, Streak applies his characteristic method of doodling with a blue ballpoint pen across a vast sheet of Fabriano paper, spanning approximately 3.3 x 1.5 meters. Subsequently, he crumples the paper into a sphere, mimicking the way an A4 sheet is typically discarded after unsuccessful use. Yet, unlike mere waste, this crumpled mass is repurposed into a significant, standalone art object, measuring 55 x 55 x 45 cm and displayed atop a shutter ply plinth that elevates it 30 cm above the ground.

The dense network of scribbles, stretched and distorted across the folds, adds a rich texture that challenges the perception of discard as merely chaotic or ugly. The scale of the artwork intensifies its emotional resonance, drawing attention to the melancholy inherent in its seemingly futile creation. This contrast—between the meticulous effort of the scribbling and the act of crumpling—subverts traditional aesthetic norms, asserting that the artwork's essence derives from its conceptual audacity more than its outward beauty. *Crumpled Doodle* thus encourages viewers to discover elegance in destruction and to question the interplay between the exterior form and the intrinsic value of artistic labour, rendering the piece strikingly beautiful in its distinctiveness. Cultural theorist Stuart Hall argued that popular culture is one of the sites where this struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged. Streak's *Crumpled Doodle*, which elevates the mundane to the level of fine art, can be seen as a critique of cultural hierarchies, reflecting Hall's insights on culture and power.

Directly across from *Doodle for Cathedra*, the vibrant *Hotspot* (2013) serves as a striking visual and thematic counterpoint. Constructed from 400 meters of red nylon tubing intricately woven around a galvanized mild steel armature with red telephone wire, this massive circular dish spans a diameter of 2100mm and dominates the gallery

space with its bold presence. The intense red hue of *Hotspot* contrasts sharply with the deep blues of *Doodle for Cathedra*, reinforcing the exhibition's thematic exploration of contrast and communication.

This sculpture merges the traditional design of a Zulu wire bowl with the modern form of a satellite dish, creating a dynamic interplay between past and present technological forms. The core of *Hotspot* features a conical centre densely woven with red wire, which acts both as a focal point and a metaphorical hub for communication. Its shallow depth, angled positioning, and the parabolic shape enhance the piece's dynamism and interactivity, allowing it to functionally echo the voices of those who speak near it. This engaging feature, though serendipitous, adds a profound layer to the sculpture's interpretation, inviting reflections on global communication dynamics. Described as a "third world satellite dish", *Hotspot* humorously yet poignantly bridges the gap between traditional craftsmanship and digital connectivity, symbolizing the complex dialogue between developing and developed regions. The use of obsolete telephone wire further comments on the repurposing of old technologies in new contexts, highlighting themes of obsolescence and innovation. Anthropologist Arjun Appadurai's idea of 'scapes'—ethnoscapes, technoscapes, and mediascapes—provides a framework for understanding Streak's *Hotspot* as a convergence of global cultural flows within a localized context.

*Flesh* (2012/13) and *Bone* (2013) offer a compelling exploration of contrast within the exhibition, with each artwork serving as a stark counterpoint to the other. *Flesh* is composed of an MDF wood panel, sized 2770 x 1710mm with a 100mm depth, its surface and edges intricately carved with fine incisions. These cuts imbue the panel with a dark, bruise-like coloration, giving it a texture that evokes the appearance of open wounds and transgressive acts. In direct contrast, *Bone* is crafted from a material called Jesmonite (Material One), which visually and thematically follows from *Flesh*. In *Bone*, the incisions found in *Flesh* are reinterpreted as raised welts and keloid-like scars—prominent features that stand out against the sculpture's off-white surface.

The dimensions of both works conform to the Golden Ratio, embedding a sense of intrinsic harmony and balance amidst their visual dichotomy. Symbolically, *Flesh* and *Bone* act as yin and yang within the exhibit, representing the visual and thematic interplay of darkness and light, substance and void. Through these pieces, Streak elucidates the concept that such binary opposites are not isolated phenomena but are interconnected elements that define and sustain one another. This duality aligns with the overarching theme of the exhibition, *Seeing Red, Feeling Blue*, illustrating how each emotional state or artistic expression requires its opposite to complete a larger, more complex narrative of contrast and coherence.

On the mezzanine level of the main exhibition space, visitors encounter four distinctive works, among which the set of three origami-folded pigs stands out. Perched atop shutter ply plinths, these sculptures are each crafted from 300 R10 notes. The notes are intricately stitched together and folded into origami shapes, then reinforced with a mild steel armature. Each pig is distinctively filled with foam batting and encased in white cotton thread, lending them a bloated, almost cadaverous appearance. The individual pigs vary not only in their physical posture, each presenting a unique pitch, angle, and form, but also in their material makeup: one consists solely of old R10 notes, another of new notes, and the third a blend of both.

This trio encapsulates a variety of explicit and implicit tensions. As symbols of greed, crafted from real currency often termed the 'root of all evil,' these pigs prompt viewers to contemplate the intrinsic value and the inherent absurdity of material wealth. They echo aspects of 'ukukhothana,' a practice observed in some South African townships where extravagance is flaunted and valuables are deliberately destroyed to display wealth. Each sculpture is fittingly titled *...and this little piggy* (2013), suggesting multiple layers of interpretation that playfully engage with themes of excess and consumption.

Additionally, these works engage with broader economic discussions, referencing the 2008 financial crisis and its exploration of unchecked financial greed that has shaken global economies. They also critique the art market's capricious valuation practices, which often assign seemingly arbitrary financial worth to artworks. At approximately 700mm in length, the pigs serve as a metaphorical reflection on the vulnerability of economic structures, symbolizing the societal challenge of maintaining stability in economically turbulent times.

The neon work titled *Lime Light* (2013) compellingly utilizes both colour and illumination to make a profound statement within the exhibition space. This neon sign, modest in size at 32cm by 12cm, radiates a vivid lime green hue, resonating with the colour of the R10 notes used in the other artworks. The sign, which spells out 'lime' in the artist's own cursive script, not only brightens the wall it decorates but also symbolically shines a light on societal behaviours. Despite its small scale, *Lime Light* delivers a powerful critique, targeting the incessant chase for fame and the dazzling yet often empty allure of the limelight. This artwork poignantly comments on the public's obsession with celebrity culture and the shallow, relentless pursuit of visibility.

Adjacent to the *Lime Light* installation, Streak's *Bad Idea* (2013) delves deeper into notions of notoriety and the essence of creativity. In this provocative piece, an oversized light bulb, cast in dark, oxidized material, suspends from a noose. This dramatic presentation challenges the conventional representation of an idea—a brightly lit bulb in an upright position—by introducing a metaphorical 'death' of original thinking. This installation may signify a critique on societal conformity that suppresses genuine creativity and independent thought, or perhaps it reflects Streak's introspective questioning of his artistic impulses, humorously labelling the concept a 'bad idea.'

Through *Bad Idea*, Streak confronts the deep-seated values attached to cultural symbols and critiques the art world's paradoxical celebration and commodification of creativity. This artwork serves as a stark reminder of the complexities within the mechanisms of fame and recognition, urging viewers to reconsider the authenticity and value of 'bright ideas' in contemporary culture.

The culmination of the main gallery space is marked by a thoughtful installation, *Precious Nothing* (2012-2013). This piece consists of 400 meters of 4mm wire, meticulously shaped into a single, continuous line that gracefully floats within the three-dimensional space of the gallery. Coated in a vivid cobalt blue, the wire creates a visual and thematic link to the ballpoint pen drawings displayed in the lower gallery, reinforcing the exhibition's cohesive narrative.

The intricacy of the wire's path increases to a point where following it from one end to the other is an almost insurmountable challenge, symbolizing the complexity that can arise from simplicity. At a length of 2.4 meters, the installation is defined by two distinct endpoints, representing the conceptual start and finish of the journey it depicts. These endpoints anchor the dynamic undulations of the wire, which weave through the space in chaotic twists and turns, echoing life's often erratic path. Through this metaphor, *Precious Nothing* explores the nature of human existence—our continuous search for meaning and connection amid life's inherent disorder.

This artwork not only engages viewers visually but also prompts a deeper contemplation on the themes of interconnectedness and the pervasive chaos that characterizes the human condition, making it a centrepiece that encapsulates the philosophical underpinnings of the exhibition.

Upon entering the second gallery space at Commune 1, visitors are immediately met with what could be considered the exhibition's centrepiece, overshadowing *Doodle for Cathedra* in both scale and thematic gravity. This commanding installation, titled *Things Fall Apart (for Chinua Achebe)* (2012-2013), features a six-metre armature of a protea flower, South Africa's national emblem, crafted from mild steel and displayed prostrate on the gallery floor. The artwork is a nod to Brett Murray's *The Spear*, yet it adopts a more subdued approach that arguably delivers a stronger impact.

The protea, presented in a raw, rusted form and appearing to decay, serves as a poignant metaphor for the nation itself—fragile, faltering, and in a state of decline. While Streak's abstract portrayal may not provoke the immediate, visceral reactions sparked by Murray's work, its subtlety enhances the powerful critique of moral erosion and societal neglect pervasive in contemporary South Africa. This piece not only reflects on physical decay but also resonates with the themes of cultural and ethical deterioration.

Furthermore, the choice of title, *Things Fall Apart*, deliberately invokes Chinua Achebe's classic novel, drawing a parallel between the disintegration depicted in Achebe's narrative and the ongoing fragmentation of the nation's fabric. The artwork, reminiscent of monuments toppled in fallen dictatorships, stands as a symbol of constructed decay—portraying degeneration while still preserving a trace of the original structure's grandeur, and subtly questioning the possibility of redemption and renewal. Through *Things Fall Apart*, Greg Streak offers a silent yet potent critique of a nation at a pivotal juncture, challenging viewers to contemplate the potential for recovery and restoration amidst pervasive decline.

The second gallery space of the exhibition is curated with an astute attention to thematic continuity, where each artwork seamlessly transitions into the next, enhancing the collective narrative. Central to this section is a striking installation involving a set of 29 encyclopaedias, each suspended mid-air, with their spines facing outward, symbolically encompassing the entirety of human knowledge from A to Z. A 50mm core has been precisely excised from the centre of each book, and a 50mm mild steel pipe aggressively threads through the entire collection from one end to the other, resembling a suspended lobotomy. This bold intervention serves as a potent metaphor for the dissection and examination of accumulated knowledge.

This installation not only echoes the themes explored with the cast light bulb in the main space, addressing the obsolescence of familiar objects, but it also critically reflects on the implications of postmodern thought. By rendering the encyclopaedias partially unreadable, the artist critiques the erosion of coherent and authoritative sources of knowledge in favour of a multiplicity of perspectives that the digital age has ushered in. The title *Fake Empire* (2012) challenges the notion that the democratization of knowledge through digital means leads to a richer understanding. Instead, it suggests that this plurality can result in a cacophony where too many voices can dilute meaningful discourse, leading to a fragmentation of truth and a lack of consensus on critical issues.

Through *Fake Empire*, the artist provides a contemplative critique on postmodernism's valorisation of pluralism and multiplicity, suggesting that an overabundance of voices and the consequent relativism might actually hinder our grasp of truth, rather than enrich it. This work invites viewers to ponder the potential pitfalls of an era where every voice is heard but clarity and depth are sacrificed.

Directly facing the suspended encyclopaedias, the installation *Vial of Useless Information* (2012) commands attention. This piece consists of a clear acrylic tube, elegantly suspended by two brass brackets, and filled with neatly compressed paper disks. The installation's title casts these contents as a compendium of redundant knowledge, positioning the tube as a reservoir for what the artist views as superfluous or outdated information.

Upon closer inspection, the origin of these paper disks becomes evident: they are the meticulously extracted cores from the encyclopaedias opposite, reconstituted into their original form, complete with covers at both ends, then densely packed within the tube. This precise reconfiguration challenges the viewer to consider the ways in which information that once seemed indispensable becomes obsolete. By preserving and isolating these cores, the artwork transforms them into a poignant visual and conceptual commentary on the fleeting relevance of printed knowledge in an era increasingly dominated by digital information. This juxtaposition not only critiques the ephemeral nature of such knowledge but also reflects on the broader implications of its preservation and obsolescence in contemporary culture.

The final piece in the exhibition, *Archive for Amnesia* (2013), is a thought-provoking bronze sculpture that builds upon the themes introduced in *Vial of Useless Information*. This work incorporates a segment of an antiquated wooden library index card unit, intricately cast in bronze and mounted such that it seems embedded within the gallery wall. The drawers, detailed with original nameplates and handles, protrude from the installation but remain sealed, symbolizing the inaccessibility of their contents and, by extension, the loss of their original utility.

The title *Archive for Amnesia* powerfully conveys the concept of a storage place for knowledge that is at risk of being forgotten, echoing themes of collective memory's decline and the waning of critical thinking skills. The artwork mirrors societal shifts toward cognitive conformity and emotional numbing, possibly induced by overwhelming media saturation or political manipulation. Additionally, the piece references contemporary concerns such as the 'Protection of Information Bill,' known as the 'Secrecy Bill,' critiquing how such laws could suppress whistleblowing and

diminish public access to crucial information. In this context, *Archive for Amnesia* serves as a stark symbol of the dangers of censorship, highlighting the precarious state of transparency and accountability in modern governance. Through this sculpture, Streak articulates the deep-seated anxieties and tensions of the current socio-political landscape, offering a profound commentary on the erosion of democratic freedoms.

*Seeing Red, Feeling Blue* by South African artist Greg Streak, effectively explores a range of themes with both visual impact and depth. The exhibition's scale and intensity engage viewers, prompting reflection on societal and personal issues. Streak's work balances simplicity and complexity, inviting contemplation of nuanced human emotions and societal constructs.

The curation fosters a cohesive narrative, encouraging viewers to question and consider broader implications. This exhibition highlights Streak's evolving artistic practice and suggests that his future works will continue to challenge boundaries and offer fresh perspectives. *Seeing Red, Feeling Blue* marks a significant moment in Streak's career, showcasing his commitment to innovative and thought-provoking art making.

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