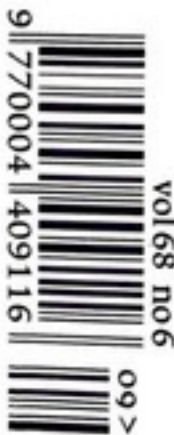


ArtReview

Barrão



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What's art for: pleasure, protest or profit?

The Science of Imaginary Solutions

Breese Little, London 10 June – 17 September

“It looks so modern,” we say of an ancient object in a museum, an implied compliment that sets the contemporary as the standard by which everything old is measured. The recent curatorial trend of the scrambled historical timeline, where the ancient and contemporary share a common space, embodies the observation. At its best, the conceit exemplifies Susan Sontag’s ‘erotics of art’, where objects shake loose their contextual shackles and discover unexpected affinities. At worst, it unfairly privileges the contemporary, casting ancient artists as unwitting early adopters. *The Science of Imaginary Solutions* succeeds by showcasing living artists whose work is archaeological in spirit, probing the ancient and modern past through antique craft traditions. The result, a sequence of overlapping dialogues between the old, the new and the very old, achieves a genuine historical suspension, a joyful temporal confusion. The past isn’t even past.

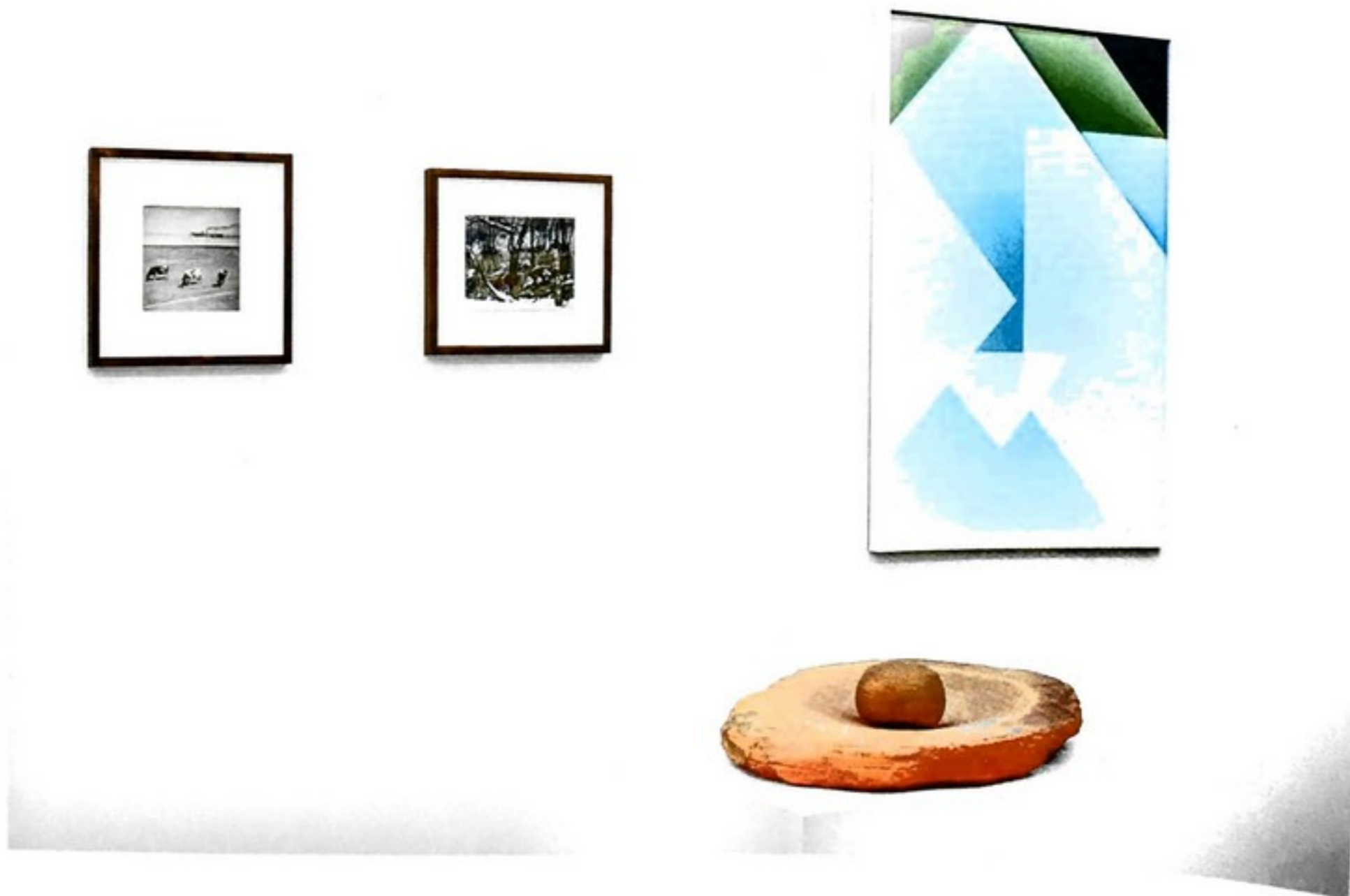
The exhibition’s title comes from Alfred Jarry’s definition of ‘pataphysics, a proto-Surrealist parody of post-Enlightenment

empiricism, which has obvious curatorial implications, happily mostly dodged here. Subverting the taxonomy of the traditional museum display may be old hat now (hey, they’re doing it themselves), but the exhibition doesn’t dwell too much on it, beyond the polite inclusion of master practitioner Marcel Broodthaers’s *Les Animaux de la Ferme* (1974), images of cattle breeds from an agricultural publication retitled with the names of car manufacturers. The most compelling works on display operate within a collapsed chronology, reframing the iconography of the past as open-source data. In Steven Claydon’s *Convolute* (2012), a plinth redolent of a 1980s bank lobby supports a sculpture of two conjoined bearded faces, like gothic prophets, cast in resin and bamboo fungus. Seen in the company of the Neolithic grinding basin placed alongside, the work’s physical specificity reads both as parody of material culture and melancholy reflection on its own listless historical moment.

This is curating as speculative fiction: things as they might be, or might have been.

Katie Schwab’s ceramics (2016) redo modernist designs by Nigel Henderson and Eduardo Paolozzi via slip-trailing, a prehistoric technique revived in the seventeenth century. Excising the originals’ allusions to modern technology, Schwab decouples style from its own history, letting the collision of materiality and form open up counterhistorical possibilities. David Thorpe’s two paintings (both 2012), their surfaces built up in sand, clay, lime and dung in wattle and daub (a process used in ancient wall making), pit the blunt fact of their quiddity against the illustrative delicacy of the quasi-botanical designs painted onto them. And when the ancient and current literally share a single space, in a vitrine combining Ruth Ewan’s bronze dinosaur, cast in 2013 from a toy found in the Freedom Press bookshop in Whitechapel after a firebomb attack, with ancient bronze brooches depicting abstracted beetles and birds made in the twilight of the Roman Empire, it’s as though nothing ever changed, or ever will.

Ben Street



The Science of Imaginary Solutions, 2016 (installation view).
Photo: Tom Horak. Courtesy Breese Little, London