

Mitch Cairns — Free TAFE & Railway Cake
The Commercial, Sydney
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text by Wes Hill

Mitch Cairns' latest exhibition title is perfectly cumbrous: a declaration that TAFE should be free grafted with the 'hobo dessert'-sounding 'railway cake'. Here, the likely future setting of most visual arts degrees (once universities have officially had enough of our unproductivity) is contrasted with a term that may or may not refer to a jelly roll cake dating back to the 1860s, in the early days of train travel. It's an incongruity that chimes beautifully with the show's various subjects, which include a 19th-century artworld figure in a top hat, gowns displayed as if on a stage, noir-like pursed lips, and a candelabra. As we have come to expect from Cairns, these references are anachronistic; part historicised, part nostalgic, a collection of vaguely modernistic archetypes delectably refined and commingled.

With each new body of work by Cairns I think of those cartoon parodies of cubism and futurism made in response to the 1913 Armory Show in New York, signalling mainstream recognition of an avant-garde. The caricaturesque graphic lines of, say, J. F. Griswold or Frederick Oppen are in stark contrast to the rigidity of the near-abstract paintings being satirised. They captured two distinct cultural outlooks at the time: a sardonic, archetypal art concerned with the 'common man' and an inquisitive art that, in response to a world sped-up, tried to alter the habitual look of things. Cairns' works amalgamate both those ideas, producing farce-like illustrations of a working-class bent that morph into scrupulous, high-end symbolic studies.

In truth, Cairns neither outright parodies nor pays homage to cubism so much as uses it as a device to anatomize our looking and to break us out of our contemporary heads. He's into metonymic free associations more than issues or assertions, but at the same time he is also wary of abstraction for abstraction's sake. What at first looks purely decorative in his paintings often turns out to be something else: a beer drinker's hallucinations (*Coloured Glass [for a Beer Drinker 1-9]*), falling leaves, a brick wall. Some works, such as *Ongoing Valuation* and *Ongoing Education*, explicitly address the subject of art—the critics who try to theorise it but fail to see it; the students who are too preoccupied to either see it or think about it—but they are also part of a larger, ongoing practice that sets out to test pictorial problems by dissecting culturally embedded archetypes. His stand-in subjects are often familiar yet so estranged from contemporary life that they take on peculiar puzzle-like qualities, on the verge of signifying something profound and totalizing if only we could just unlock their logic.

During World War II, Picasso's portrayals of Harlequins, Pierrots, and Punchinellos (stock comedic characters from populist, pre-industrial Italian and French theatre) signalled cubism's domestication, and it is this same domestication that Cairns continues to mine, even if, 100 years on, cubism for him comes after the likes of Lari Pittman and Charline von Heyl. Cairns' version of *passage*—the cubist technique that produces patch-like intersecting planes and colour gradations—reads more like a cartoon adaptation. He doesn't focus the viewer's eye on visual slippages between adjacent elements (as a material account of a scene's "real life in the mind", to paraphrase Jean Metzinger) so much as on the stagy, curtain-like demarcations of the overall picture plane. Leaves, clothes, clouds, skin and even glass can seem composed entirely of pleats and folds, as if any inside is nothing more than a fold of the outside, and vice versa. It's a technique that reinforces how any 'inner' meaning gleaned by the viewer is indelibly linked to an 'outer' appearance, returning any symbolism to its deliberative forms.

In *Self-portrait w/ Reading Lamp*, Cairns sets out to capture an aspect of himself that is beyond resemblance, continuing an idea explored previously in *Self-portrait as a Lemon Tree* (2020). It attests to how, despite the circular exchanges of form and content, it isn't objects or reality that he paints so much as sensibilities or identities established through poetic chains of association. The bent reading lamp in *Self-portrait* recalls German artist Martin Kippenberger's own (drunken) self-portraits as an antiquated gas streetlamp, such as *Mirror for Hang-Over Bud* (1990), in which one is ingeniously deployed to frame a makeshift oval mirror. Cairns is a tree. Kippenberger is a public lamp. Both are 'problem painters', honing private symbolic codes (undisclosed ideas, references, and hunches) into inter-subjective languages, then turning any legibility gained into more fodder for dissection.