

MITCH CAIRNS POETICS AND PRAGMATICS

Mitch Cairns' paintings, drawings, cartoons and works on paper are underscored by both an intensive studio practice and an unashamed pragmatism.

By Dan Rule



Opposite
MITCH CAIRNS
NAS, 2015
oil on linen, framed
140 x 124.5 x 4.5 cm
Private collection,
Sydney

Above left
MITCH CAIRNS
Rose & Coffee Painting, 2015
oil on linen, framed
79 x 64 x 4.5 cm
Private collection,
Sydney

Above right
MITCH CAIRNS
*Painting in
Increments*, 2014
oil on linen, framed
139.5 x 125 x 4.5 cm
Private collection,
Sydney

Photo: Jessica Maurer
Courtesy the artist
and The Commercial,
Sydney



Sydney artist Mitch Cairns isn't one for hyperbole. A conversation with the 31-year-old – whose striking portrait of senior artist Peter Powditch was runner-up in this year's Archibald – plays out in refreshingly matter-of-fact terms. Thematic, narrative and conceptual strands are just that: conduits to the real business of making and clarifying an image.

But that's not to suggest that complexity is lacking from what is an at once wide-ranging and tightly focused visual language. Across his short but prolific career, Cairns has embraced a visual logic that has taken in modes as economically expressive as the cartoon, the text work and the linocut, all the way to his meticulously rendered and faceted paintings, which seem to effortlessly zigzag between aesthetic and formal elements that reference Synthetic Cubism, Constructivism and Futurism.

Having graduated Sydney's National Art School in 2006, Cairns spent time as Adam Cullen's studio assistant whilst steadily building his own career, which has seen him partake in a string of solo and group shows, including his highly regarded exhibitions at The Commercial in Sydney, *Dip or Skinny Dip* (2014) and *FINCHES* (2015). Amongst it all, his art has radiated with a vibrancy, poeticism and quiet sense of evocation that sees it playfully sidle its references without ever becoming bogged down or bound to them. *VAULT* spoke with Cairns while he took time out from working on *The Reader's Voice*, his forthcoming project space show at Heide Museum of Modern Art.

TELL ME ABOUT YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH PETER POWDITCH, WHO YOU PAINTED FOR THIS YEAR'S ARCHIBALD.

I didn't really know him beforehand. We've just got mutual friends. But I just think he's a brilliant painter and, while he's celebrated and well-known for a particular thing...he lives up on the north coast and he's sort of outside of the art world now and doesn't exhibit much anymore.

He ended up coming down for the Archibald and people kind of made a big fuss about it, which was excellent. His torsos and the paintings that are known more widely, they're just masterpieces. They seem really effortlessly made, they're almost without brush mark or hand, but they're utterly hand-constructed, and they play this soft, shallow, spatial game which I think is unsurpassed.

I'VE NEVER QUITE GOT MY HEAD AROUND YOUR WORK IN A CONCEPTUAL SENSE. I'VE FOUND MYSELF JUST LOOKING, AND THAT'S BEEN INCREDIBLY REWARDING IN ITSELF. HOW WOULD YOU FRAME YOUR PRACTICE OR ATTITUDE TO MAKING WORK?

I'm not afraid of images, I guess. I like playing with images and thinking about images and painting. The clarification of an image is the only way that I can finalise or formalise an idea. I suppose it's an image consciousness. The stuff like the cartoons or printmaking or these works that I've just finished making – these sort of

Letraset-based works on paper – it's all just about a broad image consciousness or visual literacy. It swims about in, more or less, the same sort of register. But it's just that painting courts a series of technical concerns that the others don't.

I don't necessarily think that moving paint around is magical or something like that (laughs), but it is a nice idea that you can have all these paints in their tubes and then, in time, a picture is made from them. So it's not about a love of paint or this idea that I must paint. It's more that it was a first point of contact with art.

TELL ME ABOUT YOUR INTEREST IN CARTOONS. WOULD YOU CONSIDER CARTOONS IN TERMS OF A PRACTICE OR PERHAPS JUST AS A LINE OF ENQUIRY?

It's kind of both now, but prior it was just an interest. I went to National Art School and their whole thing is studio discipline – everyone just draws their brains out for four years. So I'd draw and draw and draw, which, these days, is just part and parcel of my studio practice. But in terms of thinking about images, I suppose I might have been attracted to the economy of means and how so much can be said with so little – a cartoon is a vehicle for social questioning and that's its primary purpose, and that's my interest in it.

It's separate to painting, but it sometimes contributes to the making of particular paintings. It's both a means of generating paintings and a thing unto itself, which I recognise as having its own history.

I LIKE THAT A LOT OF YOUR WORKS ARE ALMOST ILLUSTRATIVE IN THEIR TONE OR VISUAL LANGUAGE, BUT THEY FUNCTION IN A COMPLETELY DIFFERENT, MORE ELUSIVE MANNER.

I think everyone has this internal Rolodex of images that they unconsciously draw upon – cartoons and illustrations among them – so when you employ a certain style or form, it doesn't necessarily equate to you thinking about that all the time. There's a kind of frivolousness to the work in some ways, in that you have to do whatever it takes to finish the picture, and that may court certain things. There's this sliding scale of consequence, where one might be an element of in-depth research, whereas another might just be a means to finish a painting. The linocuts and the printmaking are almost part of that same mode of image construction as painting.

SO IT'S ABOUT EMBRACING YOUR REFERENCES BUT NOT BEING BEHOLDEN TO THEM.

It's important to know what you're referencing, but once it becomes a laborious association with a reference, then the game's over. To signpost and flag everything you're doing at every moment is not entirely helpful. It might make an interview more interesting or something like that (laughter), but it won't help me when I'm in the studio.

IT ALSO SOUNDS AS THOUGH YOU'RE NOT WILLING TO PRIVILEGE PAINTING AS THE ULTIMATE OUTCOME.

There's no hierarchy, but I guess painting is the thing that I mostly do and think about. But that doesn't necessarily mean that I hold painting above anything else that I do. It's just the thing that I got caught up doing.

FEATURES

I'M INTERESTED IN THE WAY YOU INTEGRATE TEXT WORKS INTO YOUR WIDER VISUAL LANGUAGE.

Playing with text and thinking about the way it looks and the way it may function in other languages, sometimes it's a better means of main-veining an idea than trying to picture it in some way. It's just a method of sidestepping imagery for a moment and getting to the thing that you were thinking about the entire time. I know it's not a new idea, but I don't necessarily see any difference in using language or images, but ultimately with language you tend to fix that idea to a point.

BUT WHEN YOU APPLY TEXT TO A PAINTED OR OTHERWISE COMPOSED OR TYPOGRAPHIC FORM, YOU'RE IMMEDIATELY TESTING IT OUT AND PICKING IT APART.

Well ultimately, there's a very frontal, immediate hit of language. The text says 'this' then you go about pulling it apart. There's an immediacy in that which is different to a depth of field or other pictorial conventions.

AND THAT DYNAMIC BECOMES REALLY INTERESTING WHEN YOU PLACE TEXTS IN AMONGST OTHER IMAGES, LIKE IN YOUR FINCHES SHOW AT THE COMMERCIAL EARLIER THIS YEAR. THE TEXTS WORK TO OFFSET OTHER ELEMENTS AND THERE'S THIS KIND OF ANCHORLESS NARRATIVITY AT PLAY.

That's right. Anything that anchors you so strongly that it doesn't afford you that space for interpretation and imagination isn't so effective. It's not like I want to push people into a hall of mirrors, but you don't really want them to have that really obvious point of contact. With *FINCHES*, the first thing you saw when you walked into the space was a really huge painting of a seagull (laughter). Automatically, it was like 'Oh, wrong bird' (more laughter). Then you were thrown into some text paintings and these nocturnal landscapes, and as a body of work it just sort of comes together.

There's a way of making works in the studio that I don't really question too heavily. Things don't develop in a direct, straight sentence worth repeating. But they do involve associations that keep me interested and keep me guessing.

There's a staccato movement throughout a lot of the work - a facet-like movement through a lot of the paintings. It introduces quite a lot of different subject areas that you have to tic-tac through.

IN THE ESSAY FOR THE SHOW, MATTHEW HOLT WROTE ABOUT THE IDEA OF PAINTING AS A PRIVATE SYMBOLIC LANGUAGE, WHICH I THOUGHT WAS PARTICULARLY POIGNANT.

I guess this idea of a private language or symbolism is true of any painter. There's that utterly esoteric indulgence, really, to painting, which is very private, even though you end up disclosing parts of it when showing the paintings.

I've always liked the simplicity of making paintings in a studio. The clarity of an image - to find some sort of clarity through all the thoughts, the making, the application and the construction of it all - is difficult enough. It's almost as ambitious as I could possibly be. **V**

Mitch Cairns: The Reader's Voice shows at Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne, from October 24, 2015, to February 14, 2016.

Mitch Cairns is represented by The Commercial, Sydney.

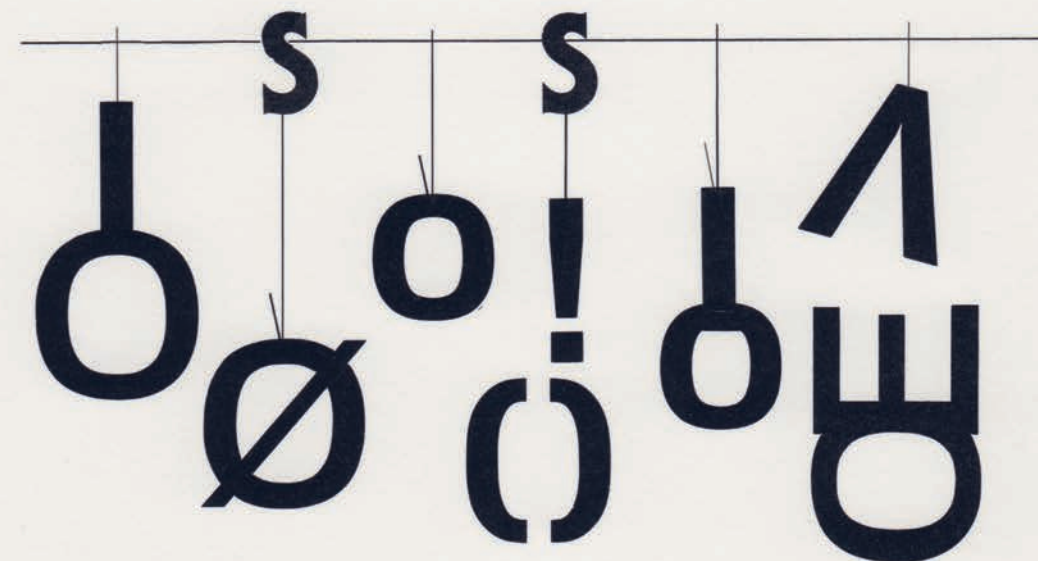
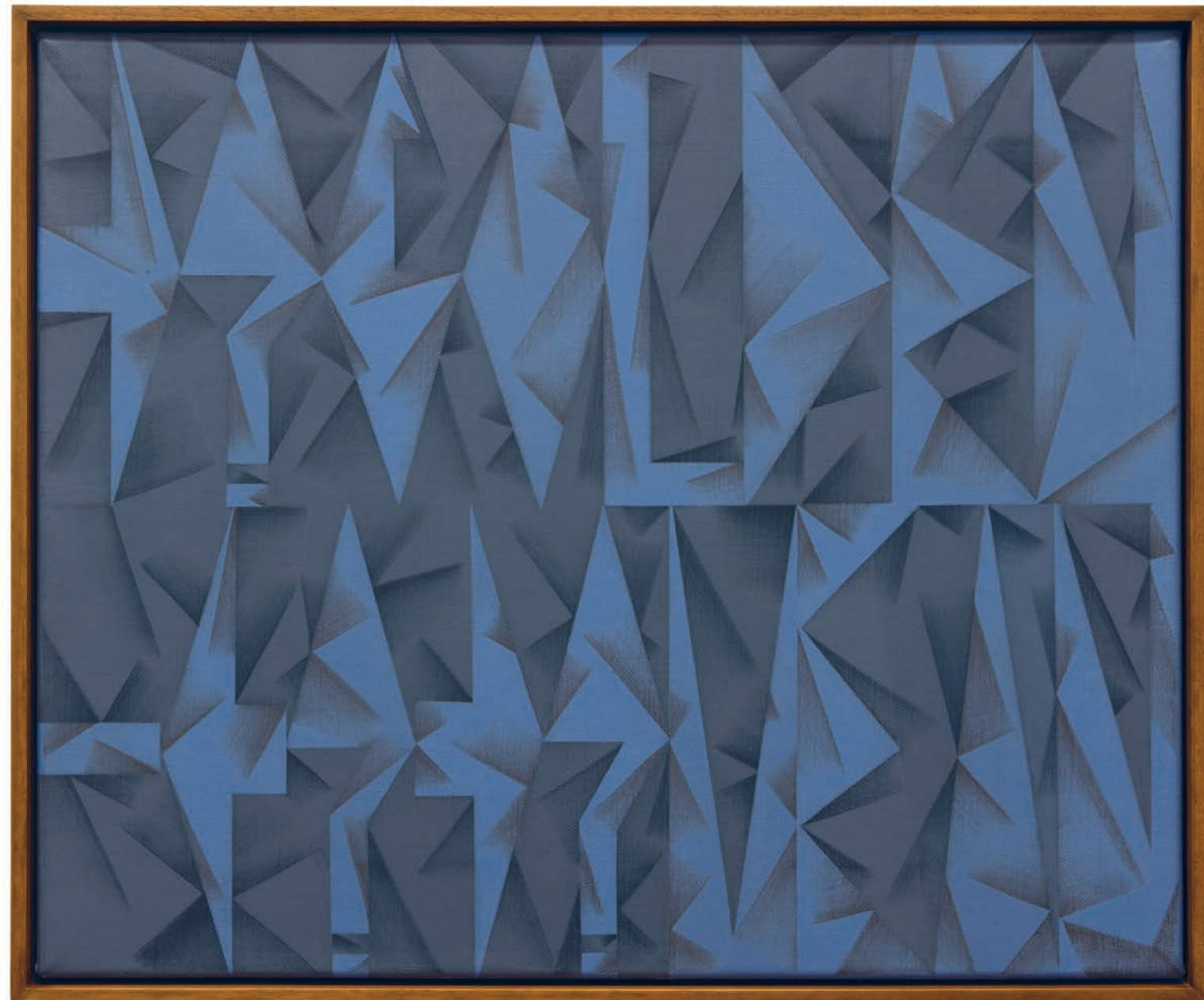
thecommercialgallery.com

heide.com.au

mitchcairns.info

MITCH CAIRNS
?GOLDEN-? ?MEAN,
2014
oil on linen, framed
53.5 x 63.5 x 4.5 cm
Private collection,
Sydney

Photo: Jessica Maurer
Courtesy the artist
and The Commercial,
Sydney



MITCH CAIRNS
Untitled, 2015
from the series
The Reader's Voice
letraset and sticker
on paper
21 x 29.7 cm

Photo: Jessica Maurer
Courtesy the artist
and The Commercial,
Sydney