

Mitch Cairns
Stray Geranium
The Commercial Gallery, Sydney
19/11/16 – 17/12/16

exhibition text by John Cruthers

When asked to write about Mitch Cairns' work, I wasn't confident. How do you explain magic? Mitch is a showman and his art is a kind of prestidigitation, a shuffling through of a mental store of images that are then deployed and worked up into mysterious and suggestive combinations. Visually dazzling and immensely satisfying as objects, they defy a simple reading. How did he do that?

Mitch is also proudly an artisan, a workman whose trade happens to be picture making, just as his father's is brick-laying. (The row of brickwork in each painting may be in part a homage, but it also grounds the painting.) He respects and values a well made object. Like the artisan in *Geranium Pots (interior)*, he arrives at the studio every day, taking the painting from where he left it the day before. What to make of this cloth capped everyman? He is at work on a strainer that appears already to be broken, while a pool of spilled paint is on the floor beneath. Surrounding him are the objects of the studio – a can of paint and brush, rugs, a wine glass and bottle, and a studio cat familiar from one of Mitch's earlier works. Anchoring the painting is the row of brickwork, from which a pair of painted eyes stare back at us, the viewers. A patterned back wall and a painted frame complete this painting of a painting.

Seeing it evolve over months has been a lesson to me in Mitch's willingness to take his work into new areas. In this case the genre is studio painting, much beloved of the moderns and for them often a veneration of their workplaces as sites of transformation. Mitch's studio is a joyful place of making and mending, of comical accidents, of pre-occupation in absorbing, steady work, and of abiding love of and respect for the craft of painting. This painting is a gift that Mitch has given us, a paean to that magical place in which he is fortunate to spend his working life.

As a series *Geranium Pots* is named from a line in the Irish song *Seven drunken nights* by The Dubliners. Arriving home drunk a husband spies a pair of boots beneath the marriage bed and asks his wife to explain. Blaming his drunkenness she says they are geranium pots, to which the husband replies "laces in Geranium pots I never saw before". The idea of something being presented as something else – a misrepresentation – underlies the exhibition. The peacock feathers in two works could just as easily be badminton shuttlecocks, while the talon-like hand sharpening a quill in *Geranium Pots (penne)* is ambiguous and menacing in equal parts.

Counterpointing the paintings are two texts inspired by the UK Broadside poster poems of the 1970s. Mitch has always loved text and graphic design, right back to the Booby Font (yes, breasts) developed with Agatha Gothe-Snape and used in the *Cigarette cm* screenprints. Each text recounts odd, awkward or irrational human situations Mitch has experienced, and the emotional residues they create. Through careful selection of detail and tone they achieve the same ambiguity and strangeness as his paintings. It brings home the importance of intense observation to any form of art, but also how pointless it is to limit the artist to one medium.

I'd like to thank Mitch for inviting me to write about *Stray Geranium*. It was a pleasure to see the paintings develop in the studio and discuss them with him. Not that he let any cats out of the bag in our chats – and I hope neither have I!

JOHN CRUTHERS' NOTES OF MEETING WITH MITCH IN HIS STUDIO

I have put things together I consciously would not do in this paintings show.

Parallel practice - text/cartoons/painting.

Template of brickwork – 1/3 of painting guaranteed.

Father's a bricklayer

- speaks of word, a structure.
- stand-in for the stretcher., for the decorative to hang on.

Conceptual art and picture making practices – hover one above the other.

Broadsides – poster poems from the UK
Brian Fuata
Writing as a counterpoint

Two Broadsides/no narrative

Brick motif/neutral space – a uniform structure that neutralises the image.

Making or breaking a stretcher/statis.

The activity of making something. "Inside a thing" – no escaping it.

"**Couple** from linocut made in France about three years ago. A painting of a linocut of a memory of a holiday without your girlfriend."

Intention to do the thing but doesn't present as such.
Patternation, juxtaposed patterns.

Not an ideas painting, more compositional, borrowed from decorative arts tradition.

Restoring the chair/exhibit the chair.

Singularity of the painted painting – texts also about image construction.

Texts came out of Reader's Voice project. Wanted to make simple pictures, but words ran along with it. Straddle the two.

Badminton/shuttlecock/eyes/peacock display

Quill – sharpen on brick wall. Ambiguity. Unravel/spaces revealed.

Does a bit more than a picture.

Soft meditation on image construction/accelerant not too strong.

Put together or dismantle –
- broken stretcher
- spilt paint

Geranium pots – Dubliners song.

Something is being presented that is something else – a misrepresentation.

See pathos in Hickey and Rooney and their use of melancholic source material.

Internal rolladex of images on the go.

Self made/unitary base.

Submitting to the rule. Rules based.

The motif is central to each painting.

Conventions of picture making and picture presentation.