

Blue Period

Mitch Cairns / Matthew Tumbers

Review: Erik Jensen

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SOCIETY, February 24-26, 2012.

Somewhere in Matthew Tumbers' late adolescence, his father developed a product called "Footy Food" - literally party pies in the shape of footballs. A trademark was got. Tumbers and a friend developed a short promotional video and jingle, with characters loosely harvested from the Footy Show. Fatty Vautin was approached as a brand ambassador. Then the deal fell through. Tumbers had shown him the caricatures in his animation. "He giggled, but also saw a resemblance and wanted a bigger cut," the artist recalls. "I would not have owned that I resembled that drawing."

The episode seems a perfect introduction to the Matthew Tumbers-Mitch Cairns show *Blue Period* - a show from an Australia of relentless optimism; a time of prosperousness and possibility, when the dollar was about to be floated and the America's Cup had just been won. Alan Bond was yet to be disgraced. Keith Williams had only recently bought Hamilton Island. At the exhibition's opening, curator Susan Gibb served smoked mussels with gin and tonics.

The show's pivot is a video by Tumbers - *Blue Lonely Holiday II* 2012, a nirvana of planes and bain maries, a paradise packaged up and sold back to us. There is hypnotic footage of planes, human stop motion, great empty spaces across which float half-formed ideas and broken down aphorisms. Tumbers loves language. He gargles vowels. His is a vocabulary built on the meaningless and the absurd, the sort of snake-oil aspiration found in tourist brochures and middle Australia.

It is in this text - phrases like "buffet seductions" and "broken alchemies" that glide across the projection - that Tumbers' work forms its most obvious intersection with Cairns'. While the former's text seems lifted from a time-share infomercial, the latter's could be picked from Spike Milligan's comic novel *Puckoon*.

Both are comfortable with a comedy that affectionately mocks Australia. These are boys from outside Wollongong and up the Northern Beaches. In one drawing, Tumbers depicts would could be a bingo caller or perhaps an RSL stand-up. In the end, it doesn't matter. It is a humour of class, and one needs to be inside the family to properly appreciate it.

"Blue has these working class connotations," Gibb says of the show's title. "Mitch's work has often this tension between classes and genders and Matt looks at class in a similar way."

The class here is one of blank optimism, a class that holidays at beachside caravan parks and takes footy weekends at Great Keppel Island. Even the scale of Cairns' work talks to this - paintings deliberately

domestic in size, referencing signwriting or the painted windows of old-fashioned pubs. The painting *Collector with 'Bass Principles'* 2011 captures the deliberate tension in this, depicting a smoking figure as he surveys smaller renditions of his own corpulence - a man who doesn't quite understand the irony of his affected connoisseurship.

Cairns' tightly painted oils recall Eric Thake's linocuts - and he includes, although perhaps not the show's strongest moment, a portrait of him crossed with a young George Gittoes. Reviewing a Thake retrospective in 2005, Penny Webb wrote of his "acute social and cultural observations, invariably expressed with laconic good humour".

She writes of Thake as if he could be Cairns: "The glare of the outback is succinctly conveyed by the whiteness of the un-inked areas of paper in images of views to the outside through pub doors and windows... Australian-ness in this fabulous retrospective is in the old style: laidback, but watchful."

Cairns' set of four pictures - *Drawings from Bass Principles* 2011, presented in a row at the back of the gallery - show him doodling with a pencil to reimagine the set up for a silkscreened punchline repeated in each frame. There is even a "knock knock". Cairns' touch-points here are British, as were Thake's. He jokes like Milligan trapped again in Woy Woy. Or Stanwell Tops, to be more accurate.

At times in this show, Cairns is a painter aping a cartoonist. Tumbers, on some levels, is a cartoonist trying to be serious about painting. He uses the expression "medium bothering" to describe his practice, and it is probably an apt one. A vitrine in the middle of the show houses a small retrospective of Tumbers' medium bothering, dating back to 2000. There are old drawings and found objects. A blue penis sits off to one side. This thought, from Gibb, is a nice one. For more than a decade, video has been a central plank of Tumbers' practice. Time is always an aspect of his work and it is good to see how it affects his paintings - in this case, a series of mainly blue boxboard works leant like drunks against one wall.

"Mitch has a very formal approach to picture making and to hangs. Matt has this salon approach which is so loose," Gibb says. "I like this idea that you could remove either artist's work and the hang would still work, but they tease these things out of each other's practice. They each have their own vernacular."

The impression from Tumbers' work is a man struck by impulse, a man constantly forming narrative and storing away shards of language. But in his boxboard paintings - a relatively new development - there is a sense he is struggling towards the final image. Not all of them work. Tumbers is muddling away until something happens.

When it does, he realises a sort of unexpected brilliance. He can paint like a black woman, like a less grand Emily Kame Kngwarreye. There is a hint in some of the pictures of Ian Fairweather's China paintings, on the cusp of his surrender to abstraction. The sense of femininity is strong.

For a time, the suite of Cairns' paintings shown here had the working

title "Sensitive Art". Set beside the looseness of Tumbers' painting, Cairns' exacting style sheds some of its masculinity and begins to look almost feminine. The tight lines fall into neck napes and back smalls. In this show, Gibb coaxes underlying themes from both painters. From Cairns she produces a sometimes hidden mirth; from Tumbers, a seriousness he has been edging towards for several years. There is the sense of two friends challenging each other in the studio, making works as provocations, egging each other into new forms. As Gibb did in an earlier show - exhibiting a video by Agatha Gothe-Snape alongside another by Campbell Patterson - she has created a larger narrative for the work. She has created a kind of Smart Suburbia, a punchline hewn from the city's fringes.