

***Sensitive Art***

by Susan Gibb

**Catalogue Essay**

**Bass Principles**

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*"When are pictures freed from phony 'artistic' pretensions so that they can become better pictures?"*

- Ad Reinhardt cartoon

I first visited Mitch Cairns' studio twelve months ago. He had just moved in and was busy with the finishing touches. Feeling through the feng shui. Located in the inner city suburb of Chippendale, behind a heavy roller door, the space was aloof from the world. It was a marked change from his previous set-up, a home in Rozelle out of which he had lived, worked and hosted *The Cosmic Battle For Your Heart* - an artist-run-initiative co founded with Agatha Gothe-Snape, Brian Fuata, and Kelly Doley - since 2009. There the outside world had been invited in for exhibitions, performances and dinners, and in response, the domestic influence had projected itself outwards, through the work Cairns produced in this period - modest in size, banal in tone, domestic in subject matter and historical reference. In this new studio, the objects that had dominated attention in Rozelle - a Persian rug, a cane daybed - were secondary to - an easel, freshly stretched canvases, a tray of brushes, a bag of rags, a paper draw - with the smiling, slightly drunken faces that had illuminated 'A Cosmic Battle', reduced to pocket-sized snapshots caught in the unwavering objectivity of fluorescent light. This new space was clearly about work. The most noticeable object of all reclined gently on a table surveying the scene. A plaster study of a woman, this sculpture was the result of Cairns' recently completed life-sculpting course at the Tom Bass Sculpture Studio School. Titled *Bass Principles*, the figure would oversee the development of Cairns' latest body of work, and echo in *One Half of a Woman's Waistline Repeated*.

It is often noted that Mitch Cairns studied at the National Art School. Known for its commitment to the atelier model of teaching and steeped in the history of Australian modernism, these days it stands as the least radical of art schools on offer, having failed to adapt to the shifts in art practice ushered in by conceptualism. For Cairns', who "wanted to learn to paint", the National Art School was an assured selection. Painting, or "picture-making", is at the heart of Mitch Cairns practice, his line of enquiry, the enduring problem of filling the frame. In our earliest conversations about this new body of work, Cairns floated the idea of "sensitive art" as a working concept. Perched behind him on an easel at the time, was a cartoon study of *Poor Mum*- a portrait of a woman, namelessly, and somewhat humorously, at grief in the world. Drawn with an economy of line, and resonating for its clarity of expression, the cartoon would later develop into a painting for the exhibition.

Coinciding with his study at the Tom Bass Sculpture Studio School, Cairns also undertook the Alan Moir Advanced Cartoon Classes - a ten-lesson over the Internet package. Originating in the Middle Ages, the term cartoon was first used to describe the preparatory sketch for a work of art. Subsequently, in the 19th century, with the invention of the modern print medium, it was adopted for its more contemporary use - to describe humorous sketches in newspapers and magazines of social or political comment. It was in the 1960s that cartoons reached a peak in popularity. In Jonathan Franzen's *The Discomfort Zone: A Personal History*, across a chapter he reminisces on the most popular of them all, Peanuts. In this Franzen muses on cartoons saying, "Individual faces may vary greatly but a smirk on one is a lot like a smirk on another. Smirks are conceptual, not pictorial. Our brains are like cartoonists - and cartoonists are like our brains, simplifying and exaggerating, subordinating facial detail to abstract comic concepts." *Poor Mum* and her frown is not illustrative, it is an idea. A point extended in *Smokey Sad Square*, or reached from reverse.

For Cairns' pictures are concepts. His interest in the Tom Bass and Alan Moir course, or the consideration of artists practices such as Ad Reinhardt, Eric Thake and George Molnar - who all utilised cartooning as part of their larger oeuvre - can be understood as an engagement with formulas for constructing these, the base principles and the generative results. In this way, *Bass Principles* continues Cairns work in series, each defined by self-imposed limitations, which he describes as a "triumph" for it enabling him to focus on one thing to create a series of further problems. Here the palette is reduced to blue and yellow. The paint has shifted from his use of enamel, then acrylic, to oil, which is worked back into with mineral turpentine. Smoke is a recurring motif. The artist at work in the studio the site. The series also reprises tensions between abstraction and figuration, male and female, high and low culture, past and the present, and how such court each other, that have remained throughout. Returning to the idea of sensitive art, one might ask what this means, what this might look like? We may not all know the history of art but we are versed in pictures, and continue to understand the world through these, a fact Mitch Cairns is sensitive to.