

Heavy Lifting
by Danny Ford

Review: Piano Removalist
New work by Mitch Cairns
BOXCOPY, 3 - 24 March 2012

In the last five years Mitch Cairns has had an especially active role in Sydney's art experience. Between 2009 and 2011 *The Cosmic Battle For Your Heart*, co-founded by Cairns, staged exhibitions of Australian contemporary artists in their domestic space and in 2010 his portrait of performance artist Brian Fuata was selected as a part of the Doug Moran National Portrait Prize.

In this solo show at Brisbane's most geographically central ARI Boxcopy, titled *Piano Removalist*, Cairns profiles recent work in painting, drawing, printmaking and sculpture. The layout of the show in Boxcopy's room is well considered - one corner of the space sees two very different works explore the 'half-way': a canvas advertising a Damp Glass for half of a dollar is juxtaposed with a faceless (but most definitely male) figure mid-'limbo'.

Another corner of the space seems focused on portraiture. Of these three works, one mixed media, one sculpture and one oil painting on linen, it is *Smokey Sad Square* that has the most impact for this writer. Mashing up the aesthetics of international packing symbols, AIGA's No Smoking sign and the looseness of jazz album covers, this painting, presumed by this writer to be a self-portrait, is an example of Cairns' output at full volume.

The title of the show is dense with associations. The work in the show adopts a loose, almost-finished aesthetic - but of course when moving delicate and complicated instruments it is a given that they arrive slightly out of tune. The title's reference to a role, rather than a practice is also worthy of attention; some people play the piano for a living, others shift them from one location to another. For the painter Cairns to identify himself not with individual creative practice but with the 'grunt work' that supports it is telling, his job might be less about painting, drawing and building, and more about lifting hefty ideas and shifting them from location to location. Especially important to this reading of the title is that this is the kind of work you can't do alone. So who is helping to lift and shift these weighty loads?

Many hands make light work, and there could well be a good many hands involved in creating the contexts Cairns operates in. In Rachel Fuller's text supporting the show, and in titles of previous paintings by Cairns, Eric Thake is referenced, and the Victorian modernists sly, laconic style is easily apparent in the paintings of 'Piano Removalist'. Cairns name-checks the New Zealand painter Tom Kreisler in one work (ironically this work has arguably the least visible sense of humour in the show) and Australian non-objective painter Shane Haseman in another. Like a lot of young artists in his and previous generations (including Kreisler), has spent much of his practice in the location between high brow and low brow:

the overall tone of the show has the looseness of David Shrigley, the dick-joke anthropology of Mike Kelley and the complicated sadness of both. In general, Cairns seem more interested in how jokes can expand to fill visual space rather than exploring a Richard Prince-style line of ambiguous social critique, but nonetheless owes a small debt to Prince for securing a place for people's lowliest expressions in contemporary art. Maybe the strongest set of arms belong to Peter Tyndall, another artist whose application of retro styles belies contemporary practice at its most shrewdly self-aware.

Other touchstones for Cairns' sparse lines and exaggerated features lie outside of visual art's ledger - the long, angular noses and round glasses evoking John Lennon's self portrait used in posters for and opening credits of the *Imagine* documentary, the absentminded composition and juvenile strategies echo strongly with Vonnegut's supplementary doodles in *Breakfast of Champions* and other novels.

While no pianos have been lifted up the narrow stairs to Boxcopy, a bongo drum sits on the gallery floor, and crudely hand-drawn and sparse music notation appears above the likeness of the avant-garde French pianist in *Tom Kreisler as a jug as Erik Satie*. Other musical references can be found in the show, but it's hard to tell if they are intentional. The 2x2 grid of mustachioed, bearded, long haired men of *Cartoon XV* might be a crude mirror of the cover of *Let It Be*, the pub struck by lightning in *Cartoon XIV* might make a visual reference to Bad Brains' self titled album of 1982. Or, more importantly, they might not - the viewer is given free licence to create meaning: Mitch Cairns the Piano Removalist doesn't own these Steinways and Broadwoods, he is paid to move these items into our spaces, so after he has left we can be alone and play.