

Written & Recorded by Ringo Starr  
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Catalogue Essay

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BREENSPACE, November 2008.

What ever happened to the working class, that mythical subject and object of history through which the lofty philosophical ideals of western culture - or at least the stalled ideals of the Enlightenment - would properly come to fruition?

Like most things in the orbit of consumer capitalism the simple answer - too simple probably - would be that it disappeared into an aesthetic category, into representation. The working class is an image, we might say, abounding with the melancholy, illusions and speculation that have always been the privy of 'mere appearances'.

The subject matter of Mitch Cairns' work is, in part, a direct, and to some extent autobiographical, engagement with the varying dimensions of this image. Perhaps not exclusively to those mythical and historical dimensions once allocated to it, but to the aesthetic disposition - that is, the tastes - of this class, which are, as Pierre Bourdieu has reminded us, not simply the result of the accumulation of capital (or failure to do so) but a complex product of acculturation, of an entire cosmology of familial and social relations that the subject inherits and learns from birth.(1)

Perhaps the most obvious means through which Cairns' work explores this 'image' is in its use of working class humour, an example of which is especially evident in *Low Rent*. This painting depicts a caricatured set of breasts and accompanying brassiere (replete with HONK HONK punch-line) that unequivocally evokes the type of farce and slap-stick made popular by the English television show *The Benny Hill Show* or *Carry On* film series with their working class comic tradition that in turn derives from the 'sea-side postcard' and the 'music halls'. Equally, Cairns' paintings connect to the politically dubious (and now somewhat innocuous) double entendres of this comic form, especially when we consider the sort of linguistic inversions at play between titles - for instance, the 'misogynistic' civility and politeness of *Hold Doors Open for Girls* which is quickly belied by the ambiguously sexual *Hold Girls Open Up For Doors*. Then there is the darkly ironic semantic and representational inversion of *Happy Hours*, which depicts an entirely unhappy and upturned bouquet of flowers. Cairns' use of these specific class tropes of coarseness and vulgarity, or bleak stoicism and unromantic frankness, clearly exhibits both the type of comportment and speech that the working class has - according to academics, anyway - used as a means of expressing its difference. Or more exactly, Cairns' paintings connect to those carnivalesque and valiant forms that have been viewed as a direct expression of its class affinity (its self-reflexive understanding of its social position and predicament) through a playful transgression of the very middle class values, tastes and formalities that 'author' it from above. What Cairns might be said to be tapping into here is the logic of

refusal Bourdieu sees as exemplified in the morality of working class speech 'which converts transgression into duty' and refuses the 'submission and docility implied by the adoption of legitimate ways of speaking.' (2) In such speech the concessions of politeness always contain their own political concessions. Political concessions, I would suggest, that are well evidenced in the darker flip side of *Hold Doors Open for Girls*, which figuratively dislocates the banal and aristocratic argyle print with the profane and 'cheap' alcoholism of green ginger wine (Bon Scott's drink of choice).

Yet Cairns is neither celebrating this purported 'refusal' nor presenting a nostalgic yearning for some far away English working class experience. Rather, there is a deep ambivalence in his exploration and use of this theme. In this way Cairns' work reminds me of the songs of The Kinks' front man Ray Davies, particularly *Victoria*. *Victoria* connects the fall of the British Empire to the homelessness and unemployment that would lead to the mass immigration of Britain's post-war working class and its resultant diaspora. (A diaspora, for what it is worth, which would include Cairn's own family). Davies, sounding 'boozy and patriotic', longs for a historical England in which, as John Mendelsohn describes it, 'morals were clearly defined, the wealthy could be as ornery as they pleased and the poor, knowing that Her Majesty loved each and every one of them, willingly died for their country'. Yet the tone of Davies' delivery is ultimately parodic, mocking not only this very morality but Davies' own nostalgic impulses, as well as the working class patriotism in general.' (3) A similar sort of mocking tone - with its ambiguities, tensions and bifurcations - exists in Cairns' paintings, which in their most fey and intoxicated moments celebrate the more precocious dimensions of this class ethos while at once recoiling from this ethos in self-reflexive disgust. In fact, it is in line with this general ambivalence that Cairns chooses to have the boozy folly and all too neat gender relations, which comprise some of his subject matter, recede into a vacuous and empty void - a void that might be seen to stand as a sign for the purported disappearance of this class, along with the more anachronistic elements of its customs and relations.

A similar engagement with this image is evident in the formal concerns of Cairns' works. On a basic level, Cairns' paintings seem to occupy the line that divides figuration from the non-objective conceits of minimalism, the latter being particularly evident in the paintings' material uniformity and monochromatic ground, along with the modernist seriality of the paintings' hang. At this level, Cairns' work is in line with a tradition of Australian painters who have, in broadly analogous fashion, upset post-Greenbergian formalism by introducing the presence of subject matter and the figurative body into the monochrome or colour field (the late-eighties paintings of Linda Marrinon, the latter-day works of Robert Rooney, and the seventies works of John Brack come to mind). Yet in Cairns' case the art-historical referencing is probably a dead weight. The stress here is less on this now well-worn referencing and hybridisation of art historical forms and more on playing with notions of skilled work and of 'craftsmanship'. In this manner, Cairns' minimalist technique of thoroughly integrating ink into the canvas - achieved through meticulous and repetitive rubbings - and his highly-stylised and technically-assured figures are essentially a play on those truisms of the tradesman, with

their accompanying (protestant) work ethic of 'getting the job done', or perhaps the artisan's desire to 'do the job well'. In a similar vein, Cairns' partially parodic use of fine art materials - Belgian linen, for instance - push further these clich's, representing the desire among the so-called aspirational classes for the 'best' and the 'classy'.

Actually, this engagement with getting the job done is an overarching theme throughout the exhibition, fixed in place by Cairns' use of Ringo Starr as its reoccurring motif - for instance, *Signature Painting (breakfast)*, *Entertainment* and *Time Signature*. After all, what was Ringo - according at least to the public's erroneous perception - but the meat and three vege of the Liverpudlian band?

1. Bourdieu, P *Distinction, A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice, 1984. Harvard University Press, p. 66 & 477.

2. Bourdieu, P *Language and Symbolic Power*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991, p. 95.

3. Mendelsohn, J *Liner Notes, The Kinks Kronikles*. Reprise/Warner Brothers Records, 1972.