



Mitch Cairns in his studio, photo  
© AGNSW, Mim Sterling

# Restless legs

## Ahead of his exhibition, Mitch Cairns talks to Tony Magnusson about poetry, puzzles, 'perfume paintings' and not working '9 to 5'.

Mitch Cairns greets me in the hallway outside his painting studio, tucked away on the second floor of a Rozelle warehouse opposite White Bay Power Station.

'I've been here four years now,' he says as we step inside the light and airy space. 'I used to have a studio in Alexandria, but the building was sold, and anyway, I needed to be closer to home in Balmain because our son was starting primary school.'

Cairns's partner is the artist Agatha Gothe-Snape, whose portrait he painted to winning effect for the 2017 Archibald Prize. (The painting was acquired by Monash University Museum of Art in the same year.)

Dressed in a T-shirt, jeans and Birkenstocks, the 40-year-old is sporting a freshly shaved head, which makes his boyish face appear even younger. Tortoiseshell specs frame his blue eyes, which become wide and animated when he talks.

The studio has a double-height ceiling, a bank of windows and a loft space, which Cairns has converted into his drawing area and library. 'When my son comes here during the school holidays, he goes up and hangs out on the daybed,' he says.

Cairns's new exhibition at the Art Gallery, *Restless Legs*, is still some months away, and the oil paintings facing us are in varying states of not-finished-yet. Even so, they are already arresting, enticing one closer with their dazzling formal precision and enigmatic iconography.

One of the largest canvases is *9 to 5*, which combines the rotund numerals of the workaday phrase with several extinguished candles and other elements in a tight, flat compositional space. The expression came to Cairns while he was reflecting on his late nan, who, in 1978, launched Australia's first skincare salon for men – the Face of Man in the Strand Arcade.

'When I was studying at the National Art School [NAS], I'd often head into town to meet her for lunch and we'd go to Soup Plus,' he recalls fondly. 'I was thinking about her catching the train into the city every day from where she lived and what a standard working day used to be. So, this

painting is a conflation of "9 to 5" as a common-usage phrase about time and labour, and candles as an early form of light.'

As Cairns readily acknowledges, '9 to 5' ain't what it used to be. The term feels almost quaint. 'We seem to have a slippery relationship to time and work now,' he says. 'And artists work endlessly. We're like the perfect workers because we don't ever stop.'

Cairns calls this, and several others in the group, a 'perfume painting', a metaphor that elegantly captures the process of how ideas are nurtured in his imagination, gradually coalescing into something formal, compositional and eventually pictorial. 'It was enough for me to think, I don't know how to make an image of "9 to 5",' he says. 'There was no image construct already made.'

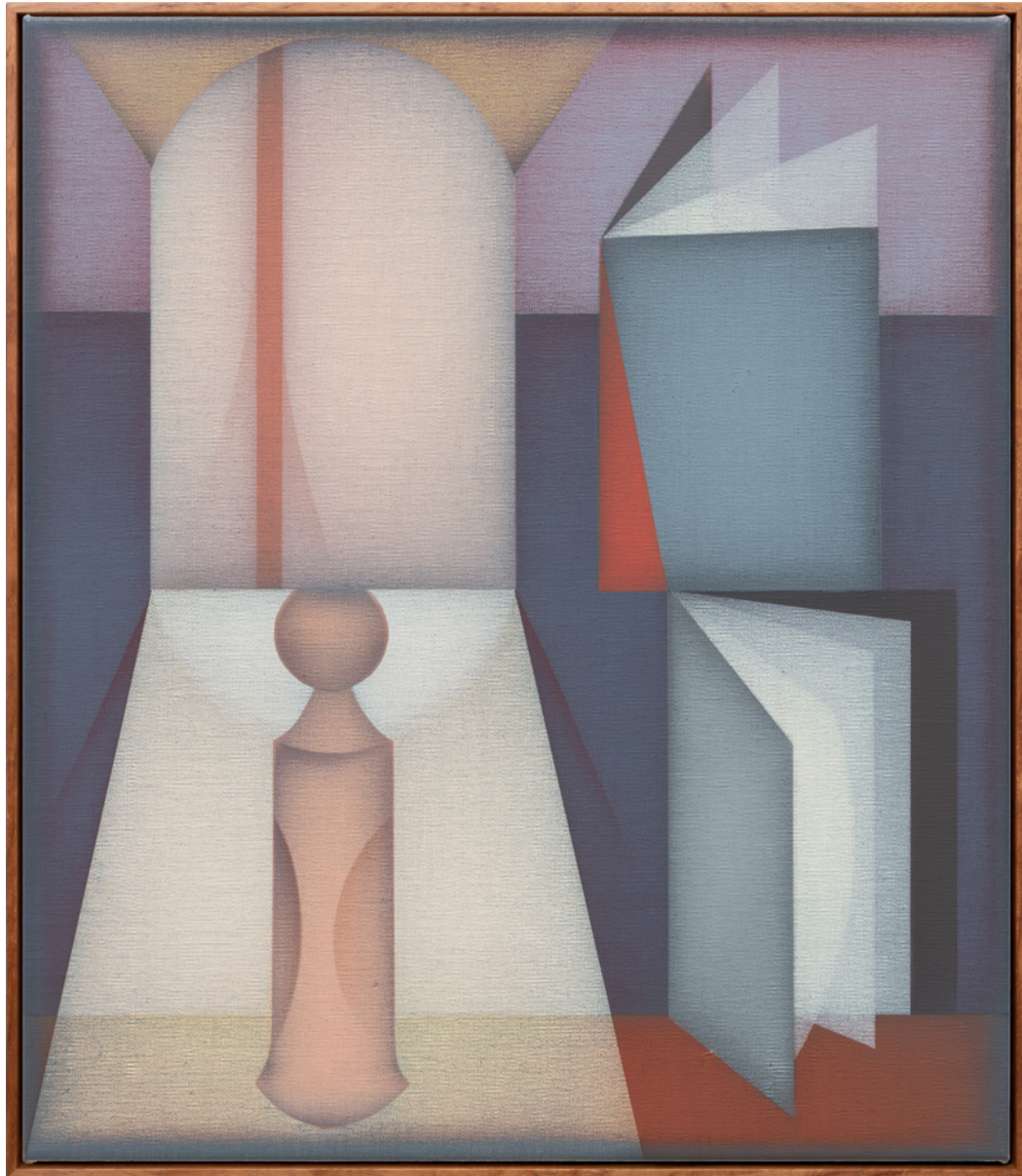
Between an idea and picking up a brush, there's plenty of drawing. 'But the painting can't be a simple echo of a successful drawing, otherwise what's the point? The painting should get as many nutrients from the drawing as possible, and then become something slightly different.'

Other canvases in train include an urban sky-scape with twin Centrepont Towers, which is an homage to a painting of Redfern's old twin TNT towers by John Bloomfield, one of Cairns's painting teachers at NAS.

I spy three self-portraits in very early stages as well as a diagonal landscape with a stream, a still life of books and a bedside lamp, and a PacMan-like letter 'e' (or possibly 'a') going for a stroll.

Then there's a large painting of a hand playing a harp. 'I was thinking of Erato, goddess of poetry, whose attribute is a lyre,' Cairns says, producing a stack of Guinness bar coasters he recently acquired.

'As you can see, I've spent my time trying to work a hand into the Guinness trademark of the harp. This has introduced a lack of proportion to the image – it's either a very large hand or a very small harp,' he laughs.



Left: Mitch Cairns *Life-Like 2024*, oil on linen, 79 x 68.5 cm © Mitch Cairns, courtesy of The Commercial

Right: Mitch Cairns's artworks in progress, photo © AGNSW, Mim Sterling

Accompanying the paintings will be a suite of unique bronze reliefs incorporating textual elements, as well as a reclaimed wooden power pole, which, at six metres in length, will function as both way-finding and seating in the space.

So, what's behind the title, *Restless Legs*? 'I don't know if I have Restless Legs Syndrome, formally, as a condition,' Cairns says. 'But when I'm reading in bed at night, which I like to do, it's something that occurs. It's an irritant to my reading habit and it interferes with the computation of language. And so, as subject matter, it's found its way into several of the paintings.'

Cairns creates his highly distilled imagery with a super-steady hand whose flawless execution leaves behind no sign that a brush was even involved. The secret is the consistent application of multiple thin layers of pure pigment using the same kind of brush, with each layer allowed to dry completely before painting on top.

'For the last decade I've used the same five or six paints,' he reveals. 'I recently introduced purple, but only because I was at the art shop with my son and he said, "Why don't you use this?" He cracked my code, as it were. But I like to keep the choice down to a minimum in order to exact as much knowledge out of what's possible with them,' he says.

'I also mix colours with titanium white, which allows for a certain degree of opacity and creates pastel tones as a consequence,' he adds.

Although the paintings present as puzzles, one doesn't need to understand the significance of the subject matter in order to enjoy looking at them. 'My paintings are shallow and their depth of field is scrim-like,' Cairns says. 'Because they're quite graphic-looking, initially, the registration is very clear, but then a certain level of diffusion occurs and the harder edges are able to coexist with softer passages of paint.'

As the process suggests, each painting takes 'months and months' to complete, with Cairns wrangling multiple canvases simultaneously. 'I'll work on one, then go over to another while the first one is drying, and so on.'

Five years before his Archibald win, Cairns was awarded the Brett Whiteley Travelling Art Scholarship in 2012. 'I was only in Paris for three months, so I didn't paint, but I made prints and wrote and did daggy things like drawing from busts and statues in museums,' he says.

'Some of the best drawings I've ever made were on that residency, and it provided me with material for paintings for quite a while afterwards. I still can't believe I was afforded the opportunity.'

He returned the favour by judging the scholarship in 2022. 'The beauty of it is that artists don't have to "perform" a program. It takes the pressure off, because the scholarship is about making. Going to Paris made me a better painter.'

It's time to leave this painter to his paints (Winsor & Newton, Old Holland) and brushes (he prefers a \$3 synthetic brush and has dozens of them). Those perfume paintings won't finish themselves.

'Sometimes I wish they would,' he quips, as he shows me the way out. 'You know, being an artist is difficult, but I haven't ever wanted to do anything else, so the idea of simply persisting is very natural to me.'

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Tony Magnusson, Sydney-based arts writer and consultant

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*Restless Legs*, Naala Badu, our north building, lower level 2, 8 March – 9 June, free