

# Around Town

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by Wes Hill



Mitch Cairns, Mitch Cairns, *Geranium Pots (interior)*, 2016, oil on linen, framed, 216 x 170 x 5 cm  
Courtesy: The Commercial, Sydney; photograph: Sofia Freeman/The Commercial

Situated in a tiny, industrial-looking space in Redfern – the symbolic birthplace of the urban Aboriginal civil rights movement in Australia – The Commercial is one of the local galleries that has most successfully negotiated the sometimes tricky terrain of commercial art in Sydney, where small spaces that fail to balance critical inventiveness with marketability struggle to stay afloat. The recent exhibition ‘Stray Geranium’, by the brilliant young painter Mitch Cairns, has immediate nostalgic appeal but is also a deceptively slow burn: a lesson in image-making that draws connections between cubism, modernist cartoons and under-recognized Australian post-pop artists such as Robert Rooney and Dale Hickey. In *Geranium Pots (Interior)* (2016), Cairns’s signature angular lines and cubist-style shading depict a cartoonish middle-aged man with a moustache hammering away at a stretched canvas, alongside a banana, a bottle of wine and a paintbrush. The rows of bricks in the foreground are a reference to the artist’s brick-layer father. The exhibition at once exalts and lampoons Western art and working-class culture, evoking an ambivalence towards European tradition and heritage that somehow seems culturally specific, perhaps even symptomatic of the country’s unresolved colonial past. In Australian art, such issues of national identity rarely go uncontested.