

FERGUS BINNS - LIFE SIZE SPECIAL (FX) CAVE (PAINTING) OF FORGOTTEN REALITY...
ELEPHANT (AND FLOWERS) IN THE ROOM (CAVE) OBVIOUSLY
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Gertrude Contemporary and Art & Australia
Emerging Writers Program
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This catalogue has been produced as part of the Gertrude Contemporary and *Art & Australia* Emerging Writers Program. The Emerging Writers Program pairs four young writers with an experienced mentor each, culminating in the production of a catalogue essay for Gertrude Contemporary's Studio 12 exhibition program and a review to be published in *Art & Australia* magazine.

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Text: Miri Hirschfield
Mentor: Bala Starr
Image Captions: Fergus Binns, *Life size Special (FX) Cave (painting) of Forgotten Reality... Elephant (and flowers) in the Room (cave) obviously*, (installation shots), Studio 12, Gertrude Contemporary, 2013

Photo Credit: Mark Ashkanasy

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Life size Special (FX) Cave (painting) of Forgotten Reality... Elephant (and flowers) in the Room (cave) obviously is a painting by Fergus Binns in which nine panels are arranged in a grid to form a square. Each panel is an individual hand painted canvas that Binns purchased from a discount store. Each canvas has a somewhat generic picture and there seem to be repeated images, as though a stencil has been used. The left and right-hand panels contain flowers, and in the centre top and bottom are gestural marks resembling calligraphy. The central image is an elephant. When I first saw the work, the shape of the Apple logo was cut out of the centre of each panel; the negative space covered in paper and coloured with a fluorescent pattern.

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The shape of a diamond cuts across the panels, the full height and width of the outer square. The diamond's hard edges unite the smaller squares of the different canvases, and inside it the colours are slightly different, creating a kind of kaleidoscopic effect. There is symmetry. The top right and left-hand panels have the same image of flowers (tulips?) and the bottom right panel does too, only most of that one is obscured by white paint, with just a trace of the original image showing through.

Binns has made his own additions to the bought canvases, adding colour and texture in areas, but it is not completely clear which marks are his. Silver and white added to the bottom-right panel contrast with the metallic bronze of the panel above: the sleek colours of the Apple brand versus cheap and kitsch. This seems in keeping with Binns's previous work, in which highbrow and lowbrow elements often coincide.

The shapes and the form of the work seem significant. Geometric abstraction. The modernist grid. Yet unlike pure formalism there is figurative imagery. Representation. And while I look at it, the grid begins to resemble a game of noughts and crosses. It hangs in Binns's studio opposite another painting that incorporates a grid shape – *Toy Painting (Astronauts and Crosses)*, 2011, and suddenly this doesn't seem like such a wild idea. Is Binns poking fun at high modernism?

The special effects (FX) mentioned in the title could refer to an iPhone app called Camera +, which Binns used to create the work. Camera + allows the user to digitally edit photographs by applying special effects. Binns has painted some of these effects in the area either inside or outside the diamond to create that form, so the work not only references Apple through the logo, it incorporates Apple technology as well.

But is the work a critique of global corporations? This seems too serious, somehow, and unlikely, given Binns's use of Apple products.

Hung on the far wall of Studio 12, the painting has changed since I first saw it. Five of the Apple logos have been replaced with bananas. Lady fingers. The most comical of fruit, they inject an element of absurdity that I didn't see the first time. That's in keeping with Binns's previous work too. The Apple reference is less prominent now, its potency undercut by humour. No longer Apple, the corporation, now it's just apples and bananas.

Nearly the full size of the wall it hangs on, the painting has an imposing physical presence. Cables and power boards emerging from the bottom give the piece a homemade, DIY feel. The low-tech back-lighting echoes the fluoro bulbs in the ceiling of Studio 12, creating a subtle dialogue between the painting and the space it occupies. And yet, the work is slightly at odds with its surroundings: with nothing else competing for attention, its crowded, busy surface contrasts with the stark room. A pop art painting within a white cube. There is contradiction and polarity – handcraft, technology; politics and irony, but it is slippery and shifting. Hard to pin down.

Binns's work gets inside my head and plays with my emotions, making me question what art should be. Funny? Or serious? Politically engaged? Attractive? Profound? An elephant in the room is something large and difficult to ignore, yet awkward to talk about, and so is Binns's painting. And perhaps here, standing in front of this piece, words are unnecessary.

