WHAT BEN QUILTY OFFERS US

Anna Zagala, Adelaide

Ben Quilty’s haunted impasto visage gliding past on city trams was a regular occurrence this past autumn during the artist’s survey exhibition at the Art Gallery of South Australia, but it was the sighting of exhibition merch in a far-flung suburb of Adelaide – a tote bag – that confirmed that Ben Quilty is a very popular artist.

In a 15-year period Quilty has accumulated accolades and swags of awards: the Brett Whiteley Travelling Art Scholarship (2002), the AU$50,000 National Self-Portrait Prize (2007), the AU$150,000 Doug Moran National Portrait Prize (2009), as well as becoming the Australian War Memorial’s Official War Artist in 2011 – the same year he won the popular AU$100,000 Archibald Prize for portraiture.

Given the contemporary art world is a broad church, it’s not surprising that my attention was somewhere else – flipping through the Sydney Biennale catalogue, catching up on ACCA’s programming, wondering what’s happening at IMA in Brisbane – while Quilty was stealthily rising from graduate to prize winner, accumulating frequent flyer points on international human rights activism missions and augmenting his position as a very important person with a board position at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in Sydney.

I’d noted the fallout from the Good Weekend magazine cover published in the lead-up to the Adelaide opening, on which Quilty appeared wearing a crown of thorns – headwear favoured by Jesus Christ and no-one else – with interest. The iconography alluded to the artist’s very personal engagement in public campaigns for the abolishment of the death penalty in Indonesia for drug traffickers, the plight of refugees fleeing war in Europe and the Middle East, and, closer to home, the Frontier Wars of early settlement and Aboriginal massacre sites around Australia. The inference was that Quilty might have a ‘messiah complex’.

While exhibitions of individual artists have always been commonplace, even a cornerstone of commercial and state gallery programming, the broader contemporary art ecosystem – university art museums, ARIs, small-to-medium-sized independent visual arts organisations, biennales – has generally concentrated on staging group exhibitions. The works represented in these exhibitions include artists that could loosely be described as working in a postmodern framework: conceptual, self-referential, attuned to sociopolitical structures, preoccupied with representation, exploring relationality. Painters in this cohort belong to an esoteric club: their practice has, for the most part, been ongoing conversations with art history.

Stepping into Quilty’s exhibition in Adelaide, quite quickly it became apparent that this artist’s practice is animated by a different set of concerns, speaks to a different audience, in another dialect altogether. Clearly, Quilty sees himself as belonging to an Enlightenment/Romantic tradition, with his own pursuit of emotion and self-knowledge as the necessary precondition for improving society.

In the first instance, there’s no escaping the way the artist inhabits a very conformist heteronormative masculinity – Anglo, straight, able-bodied, adventurous, rugged – as much as he seeks to critique it. As a number of writers have observed, if Ben Quilty didn’t exist, you’d have to invent him. Masculinity, as a social construct, has been of interest to Quilty from the outset: his first paintings documented reckless and self-harming behaviours – late teenage mateship rituals – among young men, though few of these artworks have been included in the exhibition.

The travelling survey includes the series ‘Inhabit’ from 2010 featuring 16 energetic paintings on the subject of Captain James Cook: these expressive works which oscillate between abstraction and representation, and shift between skulls and faces, self-portraiture and explorer, bring an inevitable sense of mortality to this historical figure.

In Adelaide, this body of work was followed by 21 paintings as part of ‘After Afghanistan’, a series of landscapes and portraits, for which the artist is best known and made in response to being an Official War Artist. The artworks deploy gesture, brushwork and composition to depict the returned soldiers as physically vulnerable and anguished. Unmasking the high price of war on service personnel wasn’t exactly news.
Quilty, exhibition installation view, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, 2019. photo: Grant Hancock
to anyone who grew up watching *Apocalypse Now* (1979), but in the context of an official government initiative the series seemed almost risqué.

Quilty subsequently turned his attention to the refugee crisis following a trip to the sites of their arrival on European soil. The resulting works, individual paintings of the discarded and faulty orange life jackets to represent the lives of peoples who had died undertaking the perilous journey, adorned the walls. Was it kitsch of the highest order, or moving? The works certainly strove for maximum emotional impact.

Quilty’s wall-sized landscapes in a nearby room similarly evoked and invoked strong feelings. These large paintings, made up of panels measuring in total more than five metres in length, were inspired by the artist learning firsthand of officially undocumented massacres of Aboriginal people. For this body of work Quilty returned to a favoured studio technique of pressing a painted canvas against a blank one to produce a mirror image, in the style of a Rorschach inkblot.

The psychological test devised in 1921 and comprised of ten individual images was used to diagnose disordered thinking and severe mental illness. Nowadays the technique and distinctive inkblot images signify in popular culture the mystery of the unconscious. With it Quilty has found a neat metaphor for the horrors that accompanied colonisation and the denial of past atrocities. While elsewhere in the exhibition Quilty displayed a capacity to energetically control the unstable planes of his compositions with his vigorous gestural style, this was not the case here with the vast expanses of murky colour and impasto texture.

For punters, none of this will matter. He is making art for them. This is Quilty’s offer: he will bear witness, he will bring news. He makes art set to a dial of 11 about the anguish and perplexity of being a man in this world. As such his work and activism combines the contradiction of enjoying the benefits of white male privilege – dominance, status, success – while taking no apparent pleasure from it. How he embodies the confusion of our times.


Curated by Lisa Slade, ‘Quilty’ was first shown at the Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, from 2 March to 2 June 2019, before then travelling to Brisbane’s Queensland Art Gallery / Gallery of Modern Art, the exhibition is now in its final destination at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, until 2 February 2020.
Opposite:
Quilty, exhibition installation view, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, 2019, photo: Grant Hancock
