

HEARTQUAKE: EMBEDDED WITH QUILTY

ANDREW DENTON

In 1926, Sherwood Anderson - an American writer who influenced Faulkner, Hemmingway and Steinbeck, no less - wrote this advice to his 17-year-old son, about to embark on a career as an artist:

The thing of course is to make yourself alive. Most people remain all their lives in a stupor. The point of being an artist is that you may live.

29 December 2012

Am writing with a request for you Andrew. I want to ask you to write for my upcoming Melbourne show. I'm over the dense art text I so often have to wade through. The show will be at Tolarno. my first in Melbourne for some time.

It'll be called The Fiji Wedding. After returning from Afghanistan I went to an old mate's wedding in Fiji. It was a dark and disturbing experience although no one else seemed to notice! Big gates keep the locals out of the 'resort' and singlets and thongs have taken over the inside.

Then out of the blue I was asked to mentor Myuran Sukumaran, Bali 9 fellow on death row. Things have been happening like that for me lately. One thing leading to another, out of my hands.

Can I get you both to Robertson before then to look at the paintings through your eyes? After beer? Makes the paintings look better.

Ben

2 January 2013

Hola Ben!

I have no idea what you mean by 'writing for your upcoming Melbourne show' and I would be delighted to accept.

Jen and I have just spent an afternoon wandering around the fecund mind of Mr F. Bacon so I am definitely in a mood to 'get on the turps', as I know you artists like to say.

Andrew

9 February 2013

How could I miss the Big Potato? The instructions to get to Ben's studio were clear "drive through Robertson and if you go past the Big Potato you've gone too far".

In my defence, the Big Potato looks more like a giant, rusted turd ... so, turn around and ... I've never been in an artist's studio before. It's big. Paintings everywhere.

Two things catch my eye: a large, much-loved library of art books, and an old table, now Ben's easel, groaning with used paint tubes, bottles of murk and brushes. One corner is entirely submerged under solidified globs of multi-coloured paint, as if a rainbow had crawled there to die. It looks creepily organic.

I fail Quilty 101 by asking, "who's that?" It's a self-portrait, dummy. Well he could have made it more *literal*.

* * * * *

Most of the paintings for The Fiji Wedding are on the walls. They float and pulse around me like bits of a broken nightmare washing up on the tide. My first instinct is to walk up very close. The paint is laid on thick, obscenely so, with pimples and knobs of colour sticking out from the surface. From this distance, the sheer bravado of being able to apply paint like this is almost breathtaking. Of course I know it is years of training and technique, technique, technique but when you watch a trapeze artist at the circus you don't think of the tumbles in practice, you only have eyes for the leap.

* * * * *

The Groom

"We don't want fucking Ben Quilty to paint our wedding" – reaction from Cuz, the groom himself, upon hearing that his old schoolmate was going to immortalise their big day on canvas. He had a point. You don't get Ben Quilty to paint something unless you're prepared for it to come back at you in a way you might not like. Maybe he didn't want his long-awaited Fijian nuptials to come back all exposed and sinewy like a freshly skinned rabbit?

Ben painted this the day after his friend Adam Cullen died.

* * * * *

9 February 2013

Ben and Kylie's house, Robertson. Four year-old Joe has lost a tooth and is anticipating a visit from the tooth fairy complete with coin. Ben has cooked two ducks for dinner. We eat and talk and drink. Then listen to music and drink. Then head out onto the verandah and watch a storm and drink. Now it is late, and I am aware that I am, not leaving, but weaving, for bed. Ben looks conspicuously pissed too. Not good when you're on call as the Tooth Fairy.

* * * * *

The Shower

What kind of a wedding celebration painting is this? Ben tells me it's of one of the guests who bought two expensive bottles of duty free gin then fell asleep in the shower and flooded the hotel room. It's grotesque, with just the faintest tang of arsehole. Turns out it's another self-portrait. I didn't pick this one either.

Ben: *"you can't make critical comments about the nature of things without including yourself"*

Best excuse for a piss up I've heard in some time.

* * * * *

10 February 2013

At breakfast, Kylie has preserved all kinds of fruits and Joe is very happy: the Tooth Fairy came. It seems the Fairy, who - it must be said - looks a little dusty this morning, awoke from his drunken slumber and staggered crazily around the house in the dark trying to remember the correct sequence of events: Take the tooth and leave the coin or is it the other way around?

* * * * *

Fairy Bower Rorschach

Ben: *There's also a multi panel 6 metre Rorschach painting about a waterfall in the Southern Highlands where 30 aboriginals were murdered some time in the 1830s! It's dark, but a breakthrough show for me.*

Dark? Maybe. Menacing? Certainly. Engaged? Definitely. This is, after all, the man who took a course in Aboriginal history at Monash University when he was 22 and who now tells me that an elder from the Illawarra *"gave me his blessing to talk about the massacre"*

What was it Germaine Greer wrote about Ben's Torana paintings? *"He has been attacked for glorifying mindless machismo, but the phenomenon he is struggling with is real. Its appalling consequences are real, too. I want him to paint the burnt-out cars on the Sandover highway. He is one artist, who could show you in a heartquake what they mean."*

'He could show you in a heartquake'. I like that. It fits.

* * * * *

15 February 2013

I am at home, happy and worried. Happy, because I have just sent Ben and Kylie a thank you package - a CD of Joe Cocker's 'Cocker Happy' and a book of Picasso's black and white work. Worried because I don't know how to write about Ben's show. I have turned out to be the lamest of clichés- *"don't know much about art but I know what I like har har."*

If there's stuff I don't get, should I say so?

"It's a breakthrough show for me"

Is it ok, perhaps, to take the piss?

* * * * *

White Man

Ben: *"The crazy, heeled, lacy underwear wearing Baconesque image is made after an old friend of mine. Am not sure he'd appreciate the content so have changed the name."*

I'm struggling with this one. Don't know what I think of it. Don't know what to say. It is - well - pretty weird.

How about this:

I'm troubled by how the internal dynamic of the negative space endangers the devious simplicity of the larger canvas?

Not bad. I am playing with the Instant Art Critique Phrase Generator. It's an online tool for creating the kind of dense art text Ben hates. Maybe I should send him a collection of these and tell him that's my take on his show?

"Hey Ben - although I am not a painter, I think that the disjunctive perturbation of the negative space contextualize the eloquence of these pieces - what do you think?"

No, not fair. After all, this is a man who cooked us, not one, but two ducks.

On the other hand, it would be worth it to see the look on his face.

* * * * *

20 February 2013

The Old Darlinghurst Gaol. Haven't been here since the 80s when an excruciating Kathy Lette play / punfest made me reflect on man's inhumanity to man. It's opening night for Ben's new show 'After Afghanistan'. I was expecting - what - maybe a hundred and fifty people, with a sprinkling of berets and cravats? The place is packed, inside and out. Must be 800, easy, and its not cravats, but unexpected flashes of military medals, which catch my eye. One Afghan vet walks past and he can't be more than 20.

Just manage to squeeze my way into the gallery for the speeches. Alan Jones and Craig Reucassel are both in the crowd. There aren't many in Australia who could put those two men on their supporters list. Speakers are Brendan Nelson, retired Air Commodore John Oddie and Ben. The words about the work come easily and from the heart. In the crush, it's hard to see Ben's paintings from the distance they require, but it's clear the War Memorial has something unexpected on its hands. Soldiers posed naked, torsos distorted into the shapes of war, tumorous shadows floating across faces.

Ben explains the nudity to a journo: *"Skin - we're fairly desensitized to it in Australia. But a soldier hit by shrapnel or a bullet, their skin is damaged, their flesh is damaged"*

John Oddie, one of his subjects (though not naked), has a different take: "Ben's technique.... is confronting ... It's probably not a painting you'd hang in the bedroom"

Too bloody right, says Cuz from Fiji.

The speeches are over. Out of the corner of my eye, I see an Afghan vet fairly groaning under the weight of his medals and on a walking stick. I introduce myself. He is Pete, Special Forces, one of the contorted torsos now on display for we chardonnay-sippers. The walking stick is a legacy of a Blackhawk crash he miraculously survived in Afghanistan. There is a hint of the devil in Pete's eye. Shortly after, I meet Mick. Youngish, quietish, also bemedalled. Another Special Forces man, he was one of the first on the scene at the helicopter crash and saved Pete's life. There is something about Mick that draws me. I ask if, maybe, we can have a drink some time. Two days later I write to Ben about him.

23 February 2013

Ben: Mick is a lovely young man... pretty severe PTSD, was suicidal but has control of that. At the end of his second deployment in 2009 his mate Mason was accidentally shot in the head and killed while on training exercises by one of his own men. Mick was splattered with Mason's brains. Mick burnt that shirt with the brains on it two weeks ago in a little fire in his backyard.

A month out from his third deployment he was complaining of 'sleeplessness, waves of sadness and nightmares'... pretty classic beginnings of PTSD and the Warrant Officer basically said go back or be discharged. During his third deployment he was the first on the ground to the black hawk crash in 2010. He helped drag three of his dead mates out and as a medic was responsible for deciding who to treat and who to leave. A few months after returning from his third deployment he had a pretty full blown break down.

I broke up a fight between Mick and Pete, the SAS Sgt on the walking stick at my opening, at 2am the following morning... was always going to end in tears!

Seroquel

Ben: The image of the man hovering upside down above the dead palm tree island. Seroquel is also the name of a drug used for schizophrenia, and more recently for Afghan vets with PTSD to help them sleep. I 'tried' one in Hong Kong a few years ago after a very big night. My bi-polar friend doled me out one as a sleeping aid. Holy sleep did I sleep! But then I woke and the Seroquel took another 8 hours to wear off. Was truly awful experience.

I thought only journalists were supposed to become embedded?

Here's what I don't get about Ben. About artists generally. How do they know about colour? I cannot reconcile looking at Ben's work from 6 inches away and seeing chaos, then stepping back 6 feet and finding shape. How does he know that that purple with that orange and that brown will not ending up looking like the carpet of an RSL after a 21st? I'm going to have to find out.

25 February 2013

I just spent the morning, two double flat whites with a quarter of a sugar, dog asleep on the lounge, Cocker Happy grinding sweet tunes through the studio, learning how to use black and white from someone who seriously knew how to use everything. I love being alive and I love you both!

Benjamin.

Well doesn't that warm the cockles of our hearts? Or, in my case, vice-versa.

Question for you: Could I come to your studio and watch you paint for a few hours? I won't interrupt, just watch. I'm fascinated by how you do what you do and it will help me get my thoughts together for the April show.

Andrew.

Yes I'd love you to come down and watch me paint! As long as you don't copy me. I've been wanting to get Mick back for another sitting. Maybe that could work? Can you do that AD?

28 February 2013

Ben is stirring the possum in today's paper:

"During the week following my 2011 Archibald win, one Melbourne radio announcer introduced me with the following: "So if you can wear a horse suit and go 'neigh' you can call yourself an artist – on the line I have Ben Quilty' I'd fired him up because I'd suggested in my Archibald acceptance speech that I felt it was time a HECS fee was implemented at the AIS

Don't get me wrong. I love sport. I'm about to start my 20th season playing right midfield for the Burrawang Robertson Rovers. I am not asking for HECS-free art schools.... I'm just asking for equality because in Australia there is such enormous inequality with sport ... and I won't stop talking about it"

Ben 'The Missile' Quilty: Has to ring to it.

8 March 2013

Mick is sitting, just in shorts, on a chair in Ben's studio, his hands held out in front of

him as if he were carrying something precious, something like a baby. Ben paints quickly, Mick's form taking shape in front of me as if out of thin air. I stand up close to Ben as he chooses colours from his 'oozle' – my invention, to describe that oozing easel - trying to understand how he can be sure that orange and purple and white are who Mick is. Ben shows me that all he is doing is highlighting the tones that are already there in Mick's skin – the contrasts of pallor, ruddiness, tan, that you or I don't notice. He explains that orange and purple sit on opposite ends of the colour spectrum and that's why they work well together. Anyone can do this, he says. All I see is alchemy. I am reminded of the word 'synaesthesia' used to describe people whose brains allow them to see time in three dimensions or music as colour.

* * * *

While Ben paints, Mick talks. He is intelligent, articulate and quietly spoken: A member of an elite commando regiment and Team Medic, also a Pashto speaker who had lived with an Afghani warlord for three months and who understands Afghanistan in a way, you suspect, our boys in Vietnam never could. Every cliché ever uttered about war applies to Mick. *He has seen too much for one so young...The things he did in our names...You want the truth? You can't handle the truth.* And the other is there too – the bit less talked-about in polite society; the truth we can't handle - that war is the most fun some boys will ever have.

While Mick talks, Ben says nothing. Even when the talk became seriously dark, Ben is silent. It's not just that he is focussed on the painting. What is clear is that Ben's studio is a confessional, and that Ben not only listens, he hears.

How many people, I wonder, can Mick say that of? How many others does Ben listen to?

The painting is finished, an essay in dark radiance. It has only taken two hours. I'm shocked. If I can't quite get my head around the colour thing, can I at least have a tortured artist?

* * * *

Mick and Ben and I are at the local pub for lunch. Now Ben talks. He is angry at how the army is treating these boys with PTSD. He is taking sides, stirring the possum; he wants answers from the ADF. No longer a war artist, but an artist at war.

He also tells us he thinks the painting he's just done of Mick is 'no good' and for the bin.

A tortured artist after all. What a relief.

* * * *

13 March 2013

Ben: "I've ordered a book called Peace, of Bjarne Melgaard's work. He's the man for me at the moment. I tried to make a Melgaard last night and the result is bad enough to make Adam Cullen vomit"

And yes I'm into the darkness. Marg Olley always criticised that about my work. But Olley suffered completely debilitating depression and I could see why the darkness for her was so confronting. Not for me. I'm into it. The darkness is not spoken about nearly enough and without the dark there ain't no light!"

Ok, so not tortured, but – what – driven? Questing? Margaret Olley warned him not to let the Archibald go to his head. No sign of that so far.

Griggs

Ben: "Bald man staring at the viewer with funny right leg and cigarette in his downward pointing hand. Also yellow background. This live sitting of my artist mate David Griggs. Dave suffers from quite serious depression bought on after marijuana induced psychotic episode. Sydney freaks him out and he strangely feels less anxiety in the mayhem of Manila where he pumps out amazing paintings. He has spent time making work in the Manila Prison with the tattoo-covered prisoners. Amazing cross overs between his practice and mine."

17 March 2013

Myuran

AD, Barristers have said all stations go for Myuran. They're happy for me to speak about it and for you to write if you need. The young African man who was taken from Kerobokan to an out-lying Indonesian Island and shot on Saturday night means they're running out of time

Benny

I can hear the clicking of tongues. "That Quilty seems like a nice young man but he shouldn't be giving comfort to drug traffickers. I'm not saying they deserve to die, but on the other hand..."

Ben is in Kerobokan prison, home of that long-running soap 'The Corbys'. He is teaching death-row inmate, the young Australian man Myuran Sukumaran, about opposites on the colour spectrum and how to see what lies beneath the skin. "Make it definite. Try to do it in one hit"

Anyone can do this, he says.

Myu explains to a journalist "before I got arrested, I was never real good at anything. Zero skills, no hobbies, no real direction in life. This has given me a purpose"

Outrageous.

Ben tells the journalist "I wanted to meet My and wanted to give him just one happy day – and surprise surprise, he was not this dark character out of batman, but a young, shy, Australian man"

Click click click.

* * * * *

Bait

Ben: The man (Myu from a drawing in Kerobokan Prison) with the fish tail.

Me: Huh?

* * * * *

6 April 2013

Hey Ben,

In the letter you wrote me last December you described this show as "dark but a breakthrough for me".

What's the breakthrough?

A.

There's a long and boring debate been held in Australia and the rest of the more conservative world art scene that to make paintings the artist must make the work from life. The camera has been held up as the evil twin in an art practice that relies on the photographic image. I've always said that given the opportunity to use a camera any artist, Titian, Rembrandt all of them! would have jumped at the chance. So I began to use only models in the studio. Particularly with Afghanistan the work needed to be empowered by the presence of the subject during the creation of the painting. without them there it felt a bit hollow. Almost in response to a need for my privacy I made The Groom up the day after Adam Cullen died, straight out of my head. Was very liberating! Somehow makes me feel like a one man painting factory, no camera, no subject, just ideas.

Make sense? Now my practice for the very first time seems limitless. There are no boundaries. I can play with abstraction, and keep the figurative elements intact, there is no reliance on any other image than what drops out of my brain!

Ben

Bondi

Ben: The headlands along Sydney coastline have always intrigued me. As a kid I imagined an enormous Easter Island style broken, discarded stone Captain Cook head there in another thousand years as a reminder of our own past occupation. This landscape made after a night with friends overlooking the green phosphorescent waves during an algal bloom last year. We tried to feel the presence of our pacific neighbours just across the water.

"Made after a night with friends...?" Oh dear, Quilty has been drinking again.

Hi BQ,

Looking forward to your Oz Story tonight (I suspect you're not but as I'm only into self-gratification...)

Peace On Earth Or Nearest Available Planet.

Andrew

No I'm not! I feel like I've poked a bear with my little dogs paw and the ADF is throwing darts at a small photo of my head!

Ben

Your righteous dogs paw is poking a worthy bear - and there are many other dogs paws in support of yours.

Besides, what can a large group of highly-trained, heavily-armed, angry men possibly do to you?

A.

Both Ben and Mick – Trooper M – are on Australian Story, discussing the not-for-public-consumption effects of PTSD.

The next day Army Brass are on the phone to Mick. Let's talk....

Survivor

Ben: Definitely the cross over work between this show and the Afghan show. I'd heard

stories about a young Afghan vet who'd lost one eye, one hand and three fingers on the other hand plus one foot in an explosion. After I'd made the painting I found him and traveled to Tasmania to meet him. He was competing in the Mark Webber challenge, an insane 5 day endurance event. He was working towards a place in the Paralympics. The painting isn't really about him... more about my own survival of the Fiji wedding!

Ben on the choices young men make: At 19 they make a decision to go into the army, and a lot of them will live to regret it. And it's exactly the same with Myu.

Finally, the penny drops. Why didn't I see it before? I've just realised that all of Ben's paintings are self-portraits.
