

## Ben Quilty drawing

*'Le dessin est la probité de l'art.'* (Drawing is the probity of art)  
Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres (1780 - 1867)

It's almost a commonplace to introduce an exhibition of drawing with this quote but it has only become a cliché because of the potency of Ingres' comment. Ingres was of course the absolute master of precision drawn line. The dictionary defines 'probité' as meaning integrity, uprightness and honesty. Ingres ultra-realist approach to art might be considered too academic today but his statement is still valid and offers a valuable insight into Ben Quilty's drawing.

Ingres comment could be understood to mean that drawing is the 'honest' part of art in not fostering the illusionism or flashy pyrotechnics that can be achieved with painting. Its means are limited, it is direct. Ingres could also be suggesting that that drawing keeps painting honest. Drawing is traditionally used as the scaffold on which a painting is built, the means of defining composition. Preparatory drawings (of the composition or of particular details) would inevitably be made before an artist attempted a painting in Ingres' day. Good drawing in advance would ensure that the final painting is sound, all problems of composition or tone worked out in advance. This doesn't, however, accord with Quilty's approach; he does not make preparatory drawings to be scaled up for a painting. Nor, in fact, do most contemporary artists. With the emergence of new art forms since the 1970s - screen based practice, conceptual art, performance art and photography - drawing doesn't hold the central position in art that it used to in the past. The new media dispense with the need for drawings entirely, with photography, as David Hockney suggests, replacing preliminary drawing for many artists using more traditional media.<sup>1</sup>

Quilty's technique has always attracted attention, particularly in the striking execution using thick, juicy paint, typically applied with a palette knife. Nonetheless, drawing is at the core of Quilty's practice. He draws constantly but thinks of drawing as a means to an end rather than an end in itself, at least as far as public display is concerned. Until very recently, he had never made drawings with public display in mind. As a rule, he doesn't make presentation drawings, preparatory sketches and preliminary studies that might be considered conventionally polished display material. However, the reception of the drawings included in the 2013 exhibitions *After Afghanistan* (as an integral part of the Australian War Memorial's commission) and *Trigger Happy* at the Drill Hall Gallery in Canberra encouraged him to exhibit his drawings as a group at the Tolarno Galleries this year. Seeing the drawings as a body offers a perspective into Quilty's work methods, his themes and interests and his artistic evolution.

Quilty's output tends to divide into what are essentially observational and skill-based drawings or exploratory, conceptual works driven more by ideas rather than a desire to produce a finished work. In terms of numbers, life drawings dominate the group, not surprisingly given that Quilty regularly practices drawing from the figure with a small group of friends, producing many drawings at each session. The easygoing atmosphere of the life class makes it an ideal place where a variety of approaches and materials can be explored and tested. There are drawings in colour and in monochrome using pencil, texta, brush and ink, pen and ink, each medium responding differently to the paper. Quilty plays off speed against accuracy. Drawings can be made with academic precision, such as the two nudes Quilty describes over two sheets with thin line annotated with touches of colour, or made as expressionistic studies in brush and ink. A series of seated figures with skull heads announce a streak of morbid fantasy in Quilty's drawings that parallels the paintings of vehicles with fangs. Such drawings tended to evoke incredulity from the others in the drawing group but it was a way of taking the drawings beyond observed fact and 'adding an element of excitement'.

A series of drawings, built with firm outlines, couples the nude and a skeleton, like a medieval *dance macabre* of death and the maiden. On another occasion Quilty asked the model to get clothed and pose on floor, inspiring pathos and disquiet. Regardless of how the basic life drawing session was embroidered, the drawings establish a rich vocabulary of mark making: sketchy lines, colour tones, robust continuous contours, tentative scratches and bold cross hatching. These are exercises for the artist, not unlike a musician's scales, with constant practice honing hand/eye coordination to enhance skills in observation and transcription. Repetition and routine are important to good draftsmanship and developing visual fluency. 'Better drawings', says Quilty 'make for better art'. This accords with Ingres' suggestion that the drawing informs the quality of the painting that follows.

Like the life drawing sessions, Quilty's plein air landscape drawings also have a social aspect. They are usually made with friends and often made in sequence. The landscapes are usually drawn with brush and ink, giving them an atmospheric quality, a record of the motif in front of the artist and also the weather, literally in some cases! A drawing of Luke Sciberras' cottage at Hill End, for example, was made in weather so cold the watercolour formed into ice within seconds of being applied. The landscape drawings, made for the enjoyment of exercising hand and eye, allow the mind to explore the tracery of experience.

Portraiture occupies a major place in Quilty's oeuvre and this is reflected in his many portrait drawings. With only the odd exception, his portraits are personal and record an intimate connection: friends and family dominate. One exceptional project was the portrait in coloured pencil of Myuran Sukumaran, one of the Bali Nine, made in 2012 when Quilty visited Kerobokan Prison to teach painting. Colour pencil is used to depict fellow artists Guy Maistri (Guido) and Luke Sciberras (Scribbler). Maistri and Sciberras often join Quilty to sketch. The portraits of senior artist John Olsen (in brush and ink as well as pencil) were done on one of these regular occasions. The water soluble pencil used in many of the portraits creates a delicate but firm line that can be cross hatched to produce tone, or wet to create areas of colour. Quilty's colour pencil portraits, executed with a crispness and attention to detail, fall somewhere between tight realism and flights of fantasy. Two drawings of his children, for example, are not just drawn as he sees them but are made in an imaginative, cooperative way, Quilty asking 'how would you like to be seen? - with huge claws? Sure, I'll do that!' The artist's skill as a draftsman gives logic to fantasy.

In one set of drawings the nature of the subject is not immediately apparent. Figures appear with their eyes X-ed out, like stuffed manikins. One drawing shows Quilty's brother deciding to be a doctor and another, an aggressive hybrid of head and gun, is radio shock-jock John Laws whose mouth is a weapon. These cartoony early works did not go any further but Quilty's determination to make art a vehicle for social comment continues. In other portraits, those of his daughter Livvie, for example, a likeness is caught with Matisse-like direct and broad strokes of the brush holding the contours, a combination of simplicity, economy and insight. These bold brush and watercolour portraits are, in some ways, the closest that Quilty gets to his painting on canvas. The confidence to paint those bravura performances in oil, derives from the regime of life drawings. The title of this exhibition, 'Ben Quilty: Drawing' indicates the contents of the exhibition but also suggests the *action* of drawing. The most basic definition of drawing is that it is the record of a tool moving across a surface. Looking at Quilty's drawings it is easy to imagine the act of creation, the free and easy curve of a brush, the quick flick of a pencil or the moment of concentration over a detail. Part of the appeal of a drawing is the immediacy of the experience, the viewer following the line just as the artist traced it.

Quilty's drawings tend to be spontaneous and quickly executed, not intended for exhibition when made, perhaps with the exception of the Afghanistan portraits and colour pencil drawings of friends, which have a greater appearance of finish. His prints, however, are drawings specifically made to be

shown and shared. In 2011 Quilty worked with Legs Press, Sydney, to produce a suite of 6 etchings of the Maggots, the gang of friends who he hung with (drinking, smoking, driving, carousing ) during his late teens and early twenties. Quilty drew the images directly onto the plates as energetic but simple line drawings, creating tone through hatching and contour. A second group of etchings made a few months later were of his friend and mentor Margaret Olley: two were done from life, the third following his Archibald Prize winning portrait . The etching of another senior artist (and neighbour), John Olsen was also sketched directly onto the plate when Olsen posed for a group of friends, as were several drawings, in pencil and in brush and ink, made in the same session.

A very small number of drawings chart preliminary investigations into the potential of finished works: two coloured drawings of budgies were made to work out aspects of a sculpture in fibreglass; several drawings of skulls determine the design for tee shirts; and two detailed pen and ink drawings describe elements of the metal birdcage made for the installation of *Inhabit* 2011. A rarer group of drawings appear, only to disappear: The installation *Inhabit* was hung against walls that had been covered with decorative drawings Quilty had made with spray cans. His Jesus Rorschach 2008 has been displayed several times with a hand-drawn, spray-painted 'frame' of hissing snakes and ornamental curlicues behind it. The painting itself was started with a spray painted underdrawing, still visible in places but ultimately obscured by successive layers of paint. Glimpses of such 'hidden drawings' can be seen buried in many of the early paintings.

The confidence and skill of such underdrawings derives from his regular practice of life drawing and sketching. One of the implications of Ingres comment that 'drawing is the probity of art' is that drawing is central to art making and 'drawing is what keeps art honest': Quilty's practice endorses this idea. His drawing keeps his art honest, gives it integrity and expression beyond the domain of line and the meaning it generates.

Quilty draws constantly and this gives his work a powerful graphic quality. But drawing is more, however, than an expression of form. Quilty speaks of 'finding paintings' in the act of drawing . Drawing for him is a means of visual thinking, a conduit in the formation of ideas and a way to articulate thoughts. Drawing is the avenue to invention: it makes things tangible, it makes things real yet the starting point is always a blank sheet of paper.

This exhibition of Ben Quilty's work privileges an experience of the drawing process: to see, to feel, to know. The immediacy and intimacy of a drawing allows a connection with the artists thoughts and emotions, a bridge to the artist's mind and his intense relationship with the world.

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<sup>i</sup> David Hockney has suggested not only that contemporary artists use photography in place of drawing to compose their paintings but have done so since the Renaissance, using primitive devices such as the *camera obscura* or *camera lucida* to assist them. See Hockney's book Secret Knowledge: Rediscovering the Lost Techniques of the Old Masters, Thames and Hudson, 2006