

Ben Quilty

The Stain

9 June – 16 July 2016

TOLARNO GALLERIES

The Stain

The jackets are everywhere. A human tide has passed and left a high-water stain, a littoral marked vivid in orange and misery. We have seen the images in the news, but Ben Quilty together with acclaimed writer Richard Flanagan has walked the beaches, seen the abandoned life jackets, torn clothes and discarded shoes, listened to the heartbeat of the seaⁱ. What he saw in Lesbos and in the transit camps of Lebanon, Bosnia and Serbia appalled him but also inspired him to tell the story to others.

What Quilty experienced was the heart-rending evidence of the displacement and movement of people that has so far characterised the twenty-first century. Australians know something of the debate, from the war cry 'stop the boats' to the miseries of Manus Island and the ominous sounding 'Pacific Solution'. Our part in this drama is small when compared to the turmoil in the rest of the world however and what Quilty saw was overwhelming. So difficult was it to take it all in that Quilty's reaction is here presented as a series of disparate vignettes, heartfelt and poignant. The scale of the tragedy defies understanding and Quilty's work suggests that the contemporary world can only be interpreted as a series of emotional, rather than logical, responses. In these works and works made just before his journey, he presents a complex picture of fear, anger, empathy and reconciliation; images bittersweet and twisted.

The exhibition has a soundtrack, which emanates from the video playing in the centre of the gallery. No commentary is attached to the video: it's a boy, Ali Afzali, speaking in Hazari, a language most of us don't understand. This can be confusing and confronting: do we need to know more? The specifics are that Ali escaped Afghanistan where his Hazari people faced persecution and travelled alone first to Indonesia then to Australia by boat. While we may not know the back story, nor understand the words, we do interpret the tone, the fluency, the tics and gestures, the facial expressions and the body language of the boy speaking to us. His speech is alien but we 'read' him; we emphasise; we understand. The video, in some ways, is a guide to transforming the display of paintings from something initially arcane to something understood through a host of visual clues, the nuance of tone, colour, gesture and form.

A strident orange lifejacket appears in several works, including a large painting, *The Crossing* 2016 showing Ali encased in and defined by the jacket as a refugee. His head has been abstracted to the point that it looks like Picasso intervened in the portrait, creating a monstrous cubist visage, all facets and planes. This is an alien creature, not a fragile youth seeking refuge.

The visage of a woman has been similarly transformed in *Flowers for Heba* 2016. In the original drawing made in a Serbian station, the face is beautiful, a renaissance Madonna described with graceful, flowing lines. The painting, in contrast, shows a face distorted to the point that we want to look away. It is as if her inner feelings have leaked out, contorting her beauty. Indeed, only the day before, she had buried her son. The violet field behind her makes an equivocal setting, suggestive of a room, with a black rectangle that might be a door and a stove described in black line as elegant in its simplicity as anything by Patrick Caulfield. A vase of flowers, lovingly described in lush paint is placed on a table before her. Between the fragile ephemeral blooms and the ominous black portal, she sits and waits.

A trio of paintings, a tiny drawing and two life jackets, one for an adult and one for a child, lay Quilty's sympathies out in the open. The three paintings consist of *High Tide Mark* 2016, a lifejacket painted with an orange as loud as a shriek, *The Wall* 2016, overlapping arcs of bilious green-blue paint evoking sea or fish's scales, and a third painting crudely inscribed with the words 'border force' overlaid on a dull mottled background, a rattle of seasick orange, purple and grey as unsavoury as oily water.

Border Force: Were the names 'Australian Customs and Border Protection Service' and 'Department of Immigration' somehow less menacing than the new name conferred last year? Or is this perhaps just the effect of the new paramilitary uniform replacing the civilian shirt and tie when the unit was formed in July 2015?ⁱⁱ

Beside *Border Force* 2016 is a tiny drawing of a dingy by Muhamad, a boy who gave the picture to Quilty in a transit camp in Serbia. The drawing is of the very rubber boat that the boy and his family had used to cross the ocean. *Lesbos 24th January* 2016, comprised of two lifejackets, adult and child, completes a story of travel, obstacles and pathos.

The Family 2016, standing over three metres high, also uses life jackets found on the shore line. Orange fabric, floatation blocks and canvas tape that once encased refugees dangle from a hook, a bit like a grotesque fishing trophy but more something plucked from the water on a boathook. These are just the empty jackets but they tell a story: two are large, three are small. This was a family.

Alone, a tiny figure turns cartwheels. **Pyjamas for Heba** 2016 uses found clothing abandoned on the beach in Lesbos. The landing refugees would change on the beach into dry clothes leaving their soaking wet clothing behind. It was the diminutive size PJs that caught Quilty's shocked eye: they were for a little girl the age of his own daughter. Is hers a dance of exuberance at making land or is she being tossed by the waves? Quilty has surrounded her with the keepsakes of his childhood, things found or given, that he treasured and kept with him for decades. Painted orange by his son Joe, the memory-charged trinkets surround the tiny dancer like the ripples around a stone tossed into deep water. The offered mementos suggest the Biblical quote 'When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me' as one child's loves become the votive gifts at a shrine to innocenceⁱⁱⁱ

Much of what Quilty saw was painful and heartbreaking. But he doesn't see himself as a bleeding heart, with at best, associations of naivety and sentiment or less attractively, an accusatory polemic of blame. He believes his art is informed by realism, finding it difficult to make art that is detached and precious^{iv}. He would rather lead with his brush to make images with, so to speak, his art on his sleeve. His paintings are clunky and jagged, to better reflect messy realities and awkward truths which he believes must be felt to be absorbed. As Francis Bacon phrased it, art is the means to "unlock the gates of feeling".

Several works, made outside the trip to the Middle East, have a strong bearing on the group as a whole. They share the palette of dominant colours - greys, orange and reds, blues and purples with only touches of bright green and yellow to relieve a mood of sombre drama. With the series of Rorschach paintings behind him, Quilty has been developing a new aesthetic syntax using more complex compositional strategies. While he takes liberties with the appearances of objects, Quilty draws on his own experiences to provide substance for his works. His feelings are joined to his beliefs, engineering a complex social and political imagery that he hopes will transcend mere decoration. And, experimenting with new ways of applying paint, Ben Quilty has been scraping back, brushing, glazing, increasingly using line as well as tone and colour to align with his concepts.

The claustrophobic space of **Flowers for Heba** 2016 is echoed in **The Break Up** 2016 which reflects the breakdown of a relationship. Of course there can be no comparison with the terrible break with home that a refugee endures but this might be considered a microcosm in the way that any relationship can sour and deteriorate. The portrait of a woman at the heart of the painting is directly observed and painted. Quilty has added the framework around her 'as if she were on stage' to convey the disorientation, loss and emotional instability of his subject. Lights at the edge of a stage and hint of a proscenium arch suggest the painful rituals of acknowledging separation to the community. The stage is tiny, surrounding the woman like a booth, echoing Francis Bacon's invocation of Adolf Eichmann, the man in the glass booth, isolated for his own protection. We worry that chaos is catching and distance ourselves from the rawness of emotions especially those being played out in a public arena.

First person shooter 2016 is based on a story Quilty heard on the radio, the dramatisation of a murder in NSW in which a woman was killed in front of her two young children. The children, found by the father when he returned home, were still trapped in their chairs at the table, plates of vegemite sandwiches untouched. Beauty and horror coexist in this disturbing image of domestic sanctuary upended. The impact on the small township was great but how had the horror effected the two boys? At the bottom of the painting the places of the boys appear as they might in a video game - a 'first person shooter' - where the viewer is included in the scene as a participant. Quilty questions our complicity in this culture of violence where young boys bear witness to horrific violence both real and the ubiquitous virtual violence of games. Is the urge to violence cultural or genetic? Is such behaviour learnt or is there an ugly stain on our soul, an innate predisposition to aggression, an inescapable original sin? Is the world doomed? Truly this is a world upside down.

The Stain 2016 epitomises that anxiety. A psychedelic blob - the stain - is shown in the centre of a small room. This is a new trope for Quilty, resembling, in part, an unresolved Rorschach blot, primal, chaotic and raw. **The Stain** weirdly conjures up a 1940s Albert Tucker-like image of fear and distress. In form, the stain is not unlike the images included in the exhibition of Quilty's work commissioned by the Australian War Memorial, *After Afghanistan*,

showing a mental state made physical. Recall, for example the black miasma next to *Trooper Luke Korman* 2012 or the pulsating vision of animus in *Kandahar* 2012. Quilty painted the stain by first lading paint on the canvas to form an impasto before scraping back clean to the canvas, leaving only the stained colour behind. Like other works in this display, *The Stain* uses the room as container for pent emotions, almost as a metaphor for the brain inside the skull. The focus of each work is individual but by extension, symbolic of the world in its current state of suppressed hysteria.

The exhibition underscores the uneasiness in the world and our concern with the human stain, whether it is the orange stain of life jackets on Mediterranean shores, the stain on the natural world left by pollution and exploitation of the land, or the stain of human cruelty. Ben Quilty makes no direct plea for compassion but suggests a role for art, in the application of coloured stains on a piece of fabric, to awaken a dormant conscience and offer solace.

Austrian neurologist Viktor Frankl, himself a refugee and Holocaust survivor who saw and endured horrific suffering, wrote a book soon after his liberation from the camps about his experiences. Published in 1946 as *Trotzdem Ja Zum Leben Sagen: Ein Psychologe erlebt das Konzentrationslager*, (*Nevertheless, Say "Yes" to Life: A Psychologist Experiences the Concentration Camp*), Frankl suggests that although negative things happen to individuals and this decreases happiness, it increases the meaningfulness the individual can find in life. This sense that life has meaning can assist individuals in coming to terms with suffering. Happiness, according to Frankl, follows having 'a meaning to fulfil or another human being to encounter. The more one forgets himself - by giving to a cause or another person to love - the more human he is.' Ben Quilty's works describe turmoil but ultimately make a plea to our conscience, prompting empathy and perhaps greater understanding.

Connections and memories are things to treasure and, as Frankl points out, create affirmative meanings (and purpose) in life. Quilty finds comfort in creating an image of *The Pink Dress* 2016, a painting of his partner Kylie wearing a favourite dress. Pale and ghost-like, this is an apparition from the past, hauntingly romantic, yet material only as love expressed in the creation and the memory stain of coloured pigment on canvas.

Michael Desmond 2016

ⁱ Quilty and Flanagan went to Lebanon, Serbia and Greece in February 2016 at the invitation of World Vision Australia.

ⁱⁱ Since 1945 the immigration bureaucracy has been known by various names including the Department of Labour and Immigration, Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs, the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs and the Department of Immigration and Citizenship.

ⁱⁱⁱ 'When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things.' 1 Corinthians 13:11

^{iv} Quilty believes that art has an important social role in society. Talking with composer Andrew Ford on ABC Radio he described his position: 'Margaret Olley said, don't be driven by causes, well, sorry Margaret, I love you, but that's what I am driven by, those causes ... I grew up outside the realms of the cultural norms of what we are involved in now ... and I have to find ways to give myself a belief in what I do ... it's not just entertainment.' *Making art: Ben Quilty and Andrew Ford*, *Earshot*, ABC radio, Monday 25 April 2016 1:56PM, <https://radio.abc.net.au/programitem/pe83wEOBNL?play=true>