

Ben Quilty draws constantly, makes etchings and sculpture and paints as if his life depended on it, which in some ways it does. Quilty's work has a strong hint of autobiography, and he has painted his way out of the self destructive lifestyle and emotional politics of his youth to the concerned social conscience that guides his art today. He combines painterly bravado with technical innovation but builds on a fine art tradition of solid drawing. Quilty believes that art has a responsibility to communicate, using the conventions of art history and popular mythology to critique contemporary life. With a decade of work behind him, Quilty is already considered one of Australia's major artists and is represented in numerous private and Australian museum collections.

Quilty's has always painted self portraits and portraits of friends and family. The portraits he has painted in the last 12 months differ significantly from those made earlier. These are willfully distorted, their features altered - by enlarging, stretching, shrinking - beyond normality. These heads share a kinship with de Vinci's caricatures and with the masks and humorous faces in Hokusai's manga. Both artists produced many studies of different types of faces from a desire to explore human physiognomy, though da Vinci was attracted to grotesque extremes and Hokusai to the reassuring humor of ordinary faces. In his paintings Quilty likewise embraces the joy of seeing in a world of differences. He enjoys showing the extremes of mood affecting physical structure of face. But there is a twist: Quilty's distorted faces are made in concert with his two children who suggest the sitter be depicted with bigger ears, horns, etc. Effectively this means the painting is less a response to the world of appearances or even of prostheses and plastic surgery but to a child's subjective vision. The images reflect emotions, feelings, and inner psychological drives and specific features are enlarged according to importance or the mental impression they make. Like Hokusai's drawings, these paintings are gentle and whimsical rather than cruel, and invite empathy.



Quilty's Rorschach paintings offer a similar perspective in which the suspension of logic allows interpretation by the unconscious. The thick oil paint used by the artist dries slowly so that the still-wet image on one surface could be transferred to second by pressing the two together resulting in a near-symmetrical central pattern, visually akin to the 'ink blot' images used in the Rorschach test. Like the ink blots, the symmetrical image in ***Kuta Rorschach No. 1*** 2013 can elicit associations outside of what the viewer actually sees.

Bali and particularly Kuta Beach, is considered the exotic playground of Australians on holiday. In a place where Australians feel that the rules don't apply to them, cultural clashes are inevitable. The Bali bombing of 2002 is an extreme example of what can happen as different belief systems meet. Australians are tempted to flaunt local rulings on drugs despite the knowledge of the harsh (by Australian standards) laws on drug possession in Indonesia, and inevitably people are caught. The Bali Nine and Schapelle Corby are the most notorious. Quilty has visited Kerobokan Prison in Bali to provide art lessons to Myuran Sukumaran (on death row as one of the Bali Nine) and saw the friction between tourism and local custom. In ***Kuta Rorschach No. 1*** collision is evident: physically, between the two paint-covered canvas panels but also symbolically, in the mash of two cultures. The optical pattern of shapes formed by the Rorschach generates unsettling images which emanate from the chaotic centre area, which like reality and its mirror, have so much in common they cannot be separated yet cannot ever see each other.

Michael Desmond May, 2014