

Ben Quilty: Ache

A billboard near Ben Quilty's studio displays a gleaming Mazda Atenza with the emphatic by-line 'emotion in motion' obliterated by aerosol-can scribble. In its place in urgent, unruly upper-case graff are the words 'CLIMATE CHANGE' - a pertinent reminder of the ecological havoc wreaked by our collective love-affair with the car. Despite using this defaced advert as the opening image on his website, Quilty is by no means immune to the seductive curves and crevices of the motor-car; in fact, vehicles have formed the starting point for a number of his bodies of paintings (Torana 2003 and We've Gotta Get Out of this Place 2004). In his latest series Quilty has generated a fleet of juicy looking cars, trucks and vans in his signature impasto oils - but what fuels this self-confessed rev-head to elevate the humble panel-van to gallery status?

For Quilty, the conventional landscape vista and the concept of Australia as being defined by the 'desert, the outback and the Artist-hero'[1] has lost its currency in the highly urbanised environs of metropolitan Sydney. Comprising a kerbside medley of cars and vans on multiple canvases of varying scales, ache depicts a more accurate rendering of Quilty's suburban situation. Collectively spanning the length of the gallery wall, this street scene is a bold still-life which treats vehicles like life-models, each commanding an imposing, individual personality and perspective. Far from vessels which transport passengers from A to B, Quilty sees every vehicle as a telling extension of its owner, a prosthesis of each character type perhaps. They can also be viewed as a symbol of the initiation process of almost every young Australian into the mobile market economy, a sexual rite of passage or a first taste of freedom for every new owner.

Entitled ache because of the double-edged connotations of the word, both of desire and pain, Quilty paints the car as a nexus of meaning for the Australian, and the Australian landscape. Ache both acknowledges and critiques the West's obsession with the lifestyles attached to consumer choices, forming and reflecting the owner's vision of themselves. Through Quilty's liberal, almost gluttonous application of paint, these works elaborate on the existing commodity fetishism of the car in contemporary culture, creating subjects which ooze with personality and occasional foreboding. As such, some automobiles in this exhibition have taken on lives of their own, relating to the personification of drive-time in advertising and the notion of the car as a living entity for consumers.

Quilty's practice as a form of social critique becomes most apparent in works such as Not in our backyard and Automanic, which highlight the hypocrisies of car advertising rhetoric. Automanic sees the front of a white van develop a demonic skull with imposing fangs, raising

the debate surrounding personification and mortality in the forays of car-culture. While Not in our backyard explores the dichotomy of the real and imagined in car advertising. This work draws on Mercedes' 2005 campaign which exploited the advertising potential of their model's durability in the face of the unforgiving Australian terrain - and yet they adopted a European alpine backdrop for theatrical effect. In response, Ben adorns his luscious Mercedes with moose antlers, which appear both ridiculous and menacing. In its native Canada the moose is much coveted game, but also the most destructive beast, involved in more deaths through motor-car collisions than any other animal in the country. This vista then begs the question; is it the moose or the car that is under scrutiny in this painting? Are we looking at a compromised Australian ethos piecing together ideals inherited from the northern hemisphere? Or are we scrutinising the paradox that motor vehicle transport creates in the natural world?

Quilty often depicts subjects which refer to much broader themes of cultural identity and the strange ways in which we construct meaning and individuality in our post-colonial habitat. However, what is most striking when considering these works is the unapologetic and sensual manner in which he executes them. It is the physical treatment of the subject which gives weight to the issues being addressed: these works are as much about painting as they are about sociocultural identity. Each 'portrait' emerges through an unabashed application of paint, creating areas of light and shade with confident swathes of well-observed colour. He paints these vehicles in a style verging on Fauvism[2] with a reverence for their individual form, recreating the nuances of bodywork and presence with an economy of brushstrokes and great slabs of impasto. Although the appropriation of the 'everyday' and far-reaching definitions of the Australian identity in painting are by no means unexplored genres, Quilty's paintings go beyond these tested conventions, reinvigorating our sense of materiality and process. Sensuous and tactile, these are surfaces which celebrate the possibilities and immediacy of a contested medium.

The splashes, daubs and imperfections of unrestrained expression are testament to Quilty's compelling negotiation of the capitalist structures which govern and shape our individual lives. In an aesthetic language unconfined by the weight of artistic change or the burden of grand narratives, Quilty invites us to consider the dualities of life in the fast lane. Through these corporeal folds of paint we are presented with both moral contention and desire; oppression and indulgence; possession and concession.

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[1] Charles A Green, *Peripheral Vision: Contemporary Australian Art 1970 – 1994*, Craftsman House, Sydney, 1995, p.116

[2] John McDonald, 'Archibald Article', *Sydney Morning Herald, Spectrum* 30.4 – 1.5.05 pg 28
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