

BEN QUILTY

Notes on Chaos

Tolarno Galleries

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The world today doesn't make sense. So why should I paint pictures that do? Pablo Picasso

Trump tweets, North Korean missile launches, global terrorism, vengeful weather, disruptive economies and Middle East instability: it feels like the rug has been pulled from under us. How do we respond to a world upside down, a place of crumbling sureties? Ben Quilty's new work expresses the uneasiness of a society anxious about the future through the lens of personal experience.

The artist says he is responding to this topsy-turvy moment:

*Making art that flirts with insanity might just start to explore notions of the world's political framework. The success of a narcissistic ego maniac like Donald Trump needs to be met with a level of unhinged surrealism, don't you think?*ⁱ

Quilty's new work at Tolarno certainly has the nightmarish cast of surrealism with its potent expression of dismay, fear and disconnection. His paintings are not immediately recognisable images, but interestingly he hasn't abandoned observation – he takes it into the realms of sensation.

He first paints a realistic figure study, then buries it under a layer of intuitively applied and emotionally charged paint. With the exception of *The Politician*, a caricature of Tony Abbott, professional models, friends and family posed for the figures on these nine canvases. These studies were then worked on from all sides, the artist turning the painting around to 'lose' the figure and see it purely as abstract shapes and as a prompt for emotional mark-making. Artists traditionally turned a canvas upside down to see the composition, but for Ben Quilty this annulment of realism is the means to make further additions connected to the original only by association and mood. This approach favours unpredictable results and is in some ways akin to action painting, melding free-flowing improvisation with pictorial rhetoric. His process – the colours and colour contrasts, the subtle or brutal application of paint evidenced in the smears, brush marks and splatters – reveals his internal response to the contradictions of the world-at-large, rather than to the original sitter. It is as if a reassuring, comprehensible reality has been buried in confusion and disorder.

To see these works exclusively as a comment on contemporary social disintegration would be wrong. As socialist Mikhail Bakunin noted in 1842, 'The passion for destruction is a creative passion, too!' In presenting a view of chaos, Ben Quilty puts the onus on the viewer to interpret, to seek an aesthetic, and visually restore order. Views of what *was* also offer the possibility of what *might be*.

The slashes and ribbons of paint, predominantly in grey and fleshy colours, with accents in orange, reds and cool blues produce weird biomorphic forms, vaguely intestinal, with recognisable parts of the images, often eyes and mouths, peeping through. The human fragments accentuate a sense of horror and creeping disgust that is classic Surrealism with the added sensation of powerlessness. These urgent forms are equally a reflection of the medium – the action of the brush, and the fluidity of the paint. For Quilty, paint is both medium and subject, so his forms respond to the nature of paint as much as to the subject of a chaotic world.

Despite the lush paint, Quilty does not create beautiful or seductive images. The self-consciously brutal over-painting is not a perversion of the paintings that might have been, but a riff or improvisation on the original image. It is important that there is an archaeological layer to each work, a telling painting just below the

surface. This is not pentimento, tracing where the artist might change his mind and alter the composition, but something different. Nor is it an act of calculated vandalism. This is instead more like a palimpsest, where text or image makes way for a new script, yet is never totally erased. The past is inspiring but is always being overwritten: here a new story unfolds with a logic determined, not so much by what was there at the beginning and how it's going to end, but with the logic of each step prompting the next both in the rhizome of thoughts and in the mechanics of paint. Mind and body are critically involved in the making and in the viewing (as the physicality of paint is important): there is something both provocative and visceral here.

Ben Quilty's work inevitably derives from memories and specific stories and the layered autobiographic message here is tempered by his response to external currents, usually political and social. His paintings include numerous clues – dimensions that relate to moments with or facts about the subject. In *Whytie used a machete*, the face of one of Quilty's oldest friends peeps out from a scaffolding of grey paint. Something of a 'bad boy' in his youth, Whytie had made good after turning around an unpromising start to life, making this a moral tale of anarchy and then rebuilding. In *Richard had Ben*, Quilty's father appears beside a red post box. Again this suggests, in its reference to the recent marriage equality postal survey, that entropy can evolve new positives.

The sculptures share the same sensibility and are a response to the Syrian refugee crisis. The sculptures incorporate orange/red life jackets now symbolic of escape from the war zone. The paintings have a human image hidden under painted emotions. The sculptures, by contrast, are objects that float on the surface of a tragedy we have buried, something we would rather forget.

Each of the four sculptures is like an episode in the story. Clad in an old coat Quilty couldn't bear to throw out, *Waiting for Heba*, despite its tadpole tail, is just floating – a bloated victim. *Coast Guard*, though it is fabricated with life-saving vests, is more like a predator with its scorpion tail and crocodile skin. Opportunists sell unreliable boats, vests and instructions to the desperate with no concern beyond profit. Dodgy vests exist aplenty and in *Home*, a grey form oozes as if from a shell, an unsettling image of protection that failed. *Tent*, a geometric form that resembles a buoy, offers at least the illusion of sanctuary. Time will determine if there is any escape.

One of the problems of painting, as most artists know, is when to call a work finished. Ben Quilty does not feel compelled to ensure all ends are tied up neatly. His paint surface is energetic and his powerful compositions are active but meaning is uncertain, prompting as many questions as answers. The volatile energy and 'unresolved' narrative generates tension. This is risk taking, an all or nothing throw of the dice, a gesture that coincides with today's desperate gamble in political futures.

Ben Quilty's new works are not for the squeamish – few comforts are offered. The process produces clamorous compositions, fuelled by burning emotions, fear and indignation, but also a challenge.

Michael Desmond
Curator and writer

¹ Quoted from an interview with Marcus James for *Q&A WITH BEN QUILTY* in *Art Collector* May 2017