

Ben Quilty: God's middle children

'It's just as Yeats said: in dreams begins responsibility. Turn it on its head and you could say that where there is no power to imagine, no responsibility can arise.'

Haruki Murakamiⁱ

When I visited the Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, in the early 90s the statues in the rear courtyard particularly impressed me. Monumental bronze representations of the one-time leaders and heroes of the collapsed communist regime, pulled down from the streets and civic squares, were lain out like so many corpses in the storage area behind the gallery. Ben Quilty's 2007 exhibition at GRANTPIRRIE consists of a new body of work – portrait heads of a baby boy (his 6-month old son Joe), young men and old men. A number of the heads are shown on their side as if reclining, reminding me of those toppled bronze heads in Moscow and their associations of troubled beliefs, loss of sureties and social revolution.

While Quilty has painted portraits before – his work appeared in the 2005 and 2006 Archibald prizes – this body of work signals a dramatic shift in subject from the macho visions drawn from boy culture in the West of Sydney. Quilty's current paintings of his newborn son Joe are an unlikely subject for the artist, given the testosterone driven bravado of his earlier paintings of fast, mean machines and heavy-metal death heads. His images of the 1970s Holden Torana, a car legendary for its 'street cred' and designer machismo, first attracted attention only a few years ago. They were followed by a series of fantastic anthropomorphic vehicles: vans and cars with skull faces that put a twist on the 'happy-face' appeal favoured by contemporary car designers. Toothed and grimacing, the fierce veneer suggested an outward expression of male angst and also embodied road rage as a response to the urban condition. At the heart of these paintings is the metaphor of potent male sexuality. According to Quilty, 'a lot of my work has been about young men looking for initiation.'

While babies might seem a long way from this turf, they represent an evolution in life's initiation for the artist. Quilty's earlier work represents the apprenticeship of fast food and fast cars, drinking and drugs, graffiti and petty vandalism that typified the Australian male rites of passage in the 1980s. The 'Joe' paintings, in contrast, speak of a manliness acquired through fatherhood – parental delight, pride and responsibility. Celebrating the emergence of a new life, the paintings counter the phallic cars, skulls and self destructive impulses of adolescence. When shown at the National Portrait Gallery in the *Truth and Likeness* exhibition, a female colleague reported that the paintings of baby Joe had to have been done by a man. A woman artist, I was assured, would be accused of sopiness and sentimentality but a man might paint his child as an expression of tenderness that could only emphasise an authentic masculinity. (A similar reversal of the gender claims on subject matter occurred two decades earlier when male artists found it near impossible to depict the female nude without suggesting aggression but the same subject iterated feminine values in the hands of a woman). However, this is not to say that Quilty's paintings of his bubby are all fluffy and angelic or conventionally 'feminine'. Each endearing face is built from a welter of vigorous and robust brushstrokes. If these paintings were sculpture they would be carved with a chainsaw. The images of Joe, like all the portrait heads in the exhibition, possess an imposing aspect that both disturbs and

challenges viewers' preconceptions, an effect derived from their monumental scale and the dialogue between paint and what is painted.

Quilty's paintings encompass more than subject matter to include the application of the paint itself. He employs broad gestural strokes, trowelled on to block out the broad masses. The chunky brushstrokes tell of energy and activity, marking a trail of aesthetic decisions determining colour and form, while acting as a building block for constructing likeness. Quilty's exuberant paintwork is held in check by contour and tone, which describe salient features of each subject. The very physicality of the impasto paint plays a significant role in the recognition of the painting as an object and, simultaneously, as a constructed image. Quilty's paintings play out an alternating focus from image to painterly topography. He negotiates representation from the resistant, sensual materiality of the paint medium and the conventional desire for a recognizable image.

Quilty is conscious of the legacy and symbolism of his references to Australian youth, and the violence implicit in his subject matter is inevitably redeemed by cheek and good humour. How else could one describe an approach that uses an aerosol can to sketch out Australia's national hero, Captain James Cook, like a piece of urban graffiti and thereby undermine the inherent nobility and high art seriousness of the John Webber original? The face of John Howard, this nation's longest serving leader, is similarly drawn with a spray can, the overspray emanating from his visage like a black halo. Howard's head is shown on its side, as is that of *Untitled (Douglas)* the face of Douglas Wood, the Australian contractor held hostage in Iraq in 2005. Individual identity and political allegiance does matter but each of these men also stands in for their generation, looking old and exhausted. This exhibition is in fact constructed around three generations: the older men; young men represented by the artist in two self portraits, his friend Lloyd, and an anonymous participant in the Cronulla riots; and the newest generation in Joe Quilty. James Cook stands in as the ancestor of this antipodean male line.

'As these works were made', noted Quilty, 'I realised that that the show is beginning to navigate a path through the history of Australian males.'ⁱⁱ The artist is conscious of Australian history – before these portraits of Cook, Howard and Wood he painted figures from art history (Arthur Streeton, Frederick McCubbin and Albert Namatjira) to work out his place in this aesthetic lineage. It may seem pretentious to think of this agnate line stretching from James Cook to Joe as a history encompassing life, death, the whole catastrophe, but Quilty understands his medium and knows the limitations of what art can do and what it can't, particularly as far as politics is concerned. He offers no manifesto or call to arms, proffering instead states of feeling not to be grasped by more assertive, didactic means. He explores history to find an intersection between public history and personal experience.

In each of the three 'generations' Quilty uses colour symbolically, creating a clear demarcation between the older subjects described in greys and blacks and the rosy hues of the new baby boy. Their faces float ambiguously in space, providing no description of place or moment, emphasising painterly facture. It is difficult not to be impressed by the *alla prima* virtuosity in the deft touches – the artist's bravado, and occasionally nerves, are evident. The repertoire of brush marks, licks, smears and strokes is essential to the emotional articulation of these works. The ravishing brushwork, as sensitive and sensuous as anything by Hugh Ramsay, does more than fill in the contours of a regular architecture of colour relationships.

Quilty finds and uses photographs as the starting point of his paintings, using them not as an end product (as might a photorealist) or as a vehicle for cool irony (as might a pop artist), but as images that are in tune with his emotions and thus able to carry a powerful freight of feelings – of hurt, of dread, or elation. The speed of facture, the action of painting – summarised by the spray can underdrawing and virtuoso brushwork – is intended to hold the immediacy of emotion and is intrinsic to reading the image. The element of ‘Pop art meets abstraction’ plays off the potential for profundity and universality offered by abstraction against the campy, quotidian specificity of figuration.

The two self portraits – *Untitled (Bonehead)* and *Untitled (Dead)* – are not flattering and are far from the stereotypical image of the artist, brush and palette to hand, gazing intently at a reflection or viewer. Instead Quilty presents himself as seedy, tired and bombed out after what the artist calls a ‘head wetting’. The face of his friend Lloydly similarly shows the lugubrious effects of a night out on the turps. The slit eyes and unwholesome pallor of both men suggests the price of self-induced excess. The only smile in the exhibition, *Untitled (Cronulla)* masks the same desperate tendency and betrays a certain menace. Three generations: greed and power, burnt out youth, and an unproven but potentially rosy future. Quilty prefaces his history of men with the face of Cook whose journal he read while painting the portraits.

‘I thought that they beckoned us to shore, but in this we were mistaken, for as soon as put the boat in they again came to oppose us... I fired a musket between the two, which had no effect...one of them took up a stone and threw it at us...’ⁱⁱⁱ

Quilty was moved to read that Cook shot again, hitting the older of the two Aboriginal men and was amazed to realise that this first meeting of Australian cultures was tarnished with violence, our own original sin.

Quilty’s paintings of men bruised by life’s encounters suggest dissatisfaction with the current state of masculinity and a search for meanings. A generation of rudderless men, believing that traditional male roles have become less relevant and society is increasingly less prepared to tolerate masculine excess, feel they are ‘all part of the same compost heap’ yet continue to define manhood with the nihilistic philosophy of *The Fight Club*. The 1999 film described the inner battle between Edward Norton’s character, the guilt-driven emptied narrator, and the primal Tyler Durden, played by Brad Pitt. The film describes a moment when men have fallen from grace and have lost direction. According to Tyler Durden, ‘We are God’s middle children, with no special place in history and no special attention.’^{iv}

It seems fitting to pair lost men with an explorer of unknown terrain and equally to offer hope in the new life of a child. The idea of an idealistic, elevated art, either deeply spiritual or conceptually highbrow, is not pushed by Quilty, though his turgid brushstrokes lend themselves to the idea of expressionist struggle dependent on inner vision and emotions. He prefers to maintain a sardonic edge and a plain speaking matter-of-factness that is allied to the materiality of his means. The idea of ‘artist as hero’ is imparted by the fearless application of paint as much as by the subtle autobiographical essence. Life is confusing and bruising but the implied drama in living out the Australian dream speaks of ordinary life as somehow heroic too. We have moved beyond the old romances of the Australian landscape and Quilty’s cars, skulls and vulnerable men suggest new myths for a contemporary Australian identity.

His social critique may not offer redemption but there is at least recognition – of the troubled, riven self – and perhaps there is something epic in that.

Almost as a postscript to the portraits, Quilty includes a suite of what he calls Rorschach paintings: images based on a central symmetry. These differ from the mirroring of objects across two panels in a painting such as *Van Rorschach* (2005) as they utilise genuine symmetry created by pressing a still wet and juicy painting against a blank canvas to create two near-identical abstractions that are exhibited together. One of the Rorschach series started its life as a painting of Cook and another of his ship the Endeavour, though the jammy textures and smeared hues reveal little of the original template. A Rorschach test is a form of visual interrogation and facilitates an investigation into the self. Quilty's *Rorschach (Cook)* and *Rorschach (Endeavour)* permit a latent recognition of the primal image, an echo of the past. Though intended to be an objective test of perception, the Rorschach blots also allow the imagination to explore a range of possibilities and influence the responses. Poet John Keats stated that 'in dreams begins responsibility' and novelist Haruki Murakami suggested that where there is no power to imagine, no responsibility can arise. Ben Quilty maintains a belief in the social role of art, a persuasive power of commentary that derives from the artist's imperative to imagine the dreams of society and prompt eventual responsibility.

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ⁱ *Kafka on the shore*, Haruki Murakami, Vintage, London 2005, p141

ⁱⁱ Correspondence with the artist, 22 January 2007

ⁱⁱⁱ Cook's Journal, 29 April, 1770

^{iv} *Fight Club*, Chuck Palahnuik, WW Norton & Co, 1996, page 141