

Given the emphatically expressive nature of Ben Quilty's paintings, it might seem at odds to suggest that a documentary impulse is a key feature of his work. Certainly his seductively manipulated surfaces belie any sense of impartial representation. There is, however, an anthropological bent that can be discerned in his images: a desire to trace, scrutinize and reflect more broadly upon the social phenomena that have shaped the artist's own experience. In this spirit, *New Work from the Man Cave* brings into contact imagery from sources with a personal connection that resonates within a generic suburban, and particularly male consciousness.

In keeping with the allusion of the exhibition's title to a primordial mode of operation, these new works focus upon physicality and the body in varying degrees. A series of small canvases installed in the shape of a cross (itself anthropomorphic) confronts the viewer as a conglomerate of bodies. Sketched out rapidly in thick, muddied strokes are busts and faces that at first glance are barely identifiable as such. Upon closer inspection, the heads of Quilty's schoolboy sports trophies can be distinguished, interspersed between portraits of the artist's mates in the most undignified of drunken states.

Quilty's choice of subject is bold and unsettling, seemingly in defiance of any romantic legacy attached to portraiture. The human faces are captured in the performance of stereotypical male debauchery, detached from the essential armature of their bodies and hovering like masks within ominous voids. Hinting at the pretense of such behaviour as a kind of acting out or measuring up to social expectations, Quilty highlights the pathetic nature of this glorified deviance in their grotesque pallor and vacant expressions.

Alongside these images of self-induced emasculation are sporting trophy 'portraits'. Similarly related to moments of male bonding, the trophies refer to a literal field of action – a hallowed arena where certain behaviour is encouraged and cultivated that does not necessarily translate into the world beyond. This is, for instance, a space where ego is inherently linked to physical prowess and where violence and aggression are by-products of the demonstration of strength and dominance. There is an irony in the estrangement of the trophy heads from their gleaming metallic bodies, essentially the foundation of the set of values they represent. Shorn of any sense of grandeur or even identity, the trophy heads along with the faces appear cut loose, disoriented.

In a series of 'rorschached' skulls that dominate the remainder of the show, Quilty relinquishes his trademark casual dexterity to a naïve process of folding and pressing that favours organic chance. The gestures from which the skulls are formed – of squashing and, in effect, obscuring and undoing the original – enact the entropic decay of each singular figurative image. In their place are abstracted multiples pared back to rudimentary forms.

Quilty's insistent return to the skull over years of work reveals his interest in its force as signifier of decimated agency. Reduced to a common and fundamental form, here even replicated, the notion of individual subjectivity is pitted against a collective uniformity. Referencing the original concept of the Rorschach inkblot test in psychoanalysis as a means of revealing suppressed and residual emotions, the skulls serve as an omnipresent reminder of mortality and its effect on the psyche.

Commandingly oversized, these icons of rebellion and death hover in the space as definitive, if not overwhelming points of reference for the primal and destructive behaviours to which Quilty's other works refer.

Significantly, *New Work from the Man Cave* also includes the artist's first foray into video by way of a single, incisive work that conflates the ideas explored elsewhere in the exhibition. In *Bully Rorschach* we witness the frenzy and violence of an adolescent schoolyard fight. Chanced upon by Quilty, the original footage of this event has been crudely captured with a mobile phone, and the pixilated, low-res imagery maintains a sense of the raw adrenalin that spurs such action. By doubling and mirroring the image so that the movements of the bodies appear almost choreographic, Quilty accentuates the physicality of the event, which, in addition to the constant shakiness of the camera and spontaneous changes of perspective, produces a sense in the viewer of being utterly destabilized.

Here, as elsewhere in the exhibition, Quilty singles out a moment of rupture between mind and body, where the drives take over, and where ordinary social behaviour is suspended. Moments where the base and instinctive form the foundation of social interaction in an archaic throwback to primal means. There is a sense of despondency in his imagery, however, that acknowledges the redundancy of such male stereotypes as models for identity. Quilty portrays young men and their iconographic counterparts as spent and incapacitated, literally and metaphorically disoriented in an era where notions of masculinity are increasingly undefined.

Anneke Jaspers
Assistant Curator,
University of Technology Gallery, Sydney