

Young And Free?

This is an exhibition of portraits. They may not be eligible for the Archibald Prize, but they are images of well-known Australians with all their heroic, vulnerable and endearing personal qualities captured as they would be by a skilled and perceptive portraitist. Even Poly, the monumental polyurethane budgie, is a head and shoulders study in the classic form of a portrait bust (a rather large one).

Last year, while in residence at the Cité Des Arts in Paris as winner of the 2002 Brett Whiteley Travelling Art Scholarship, Ben Quilty reflected on his situation as an Australian abroad by producing a group of paintings that depict popular Australian icons. Those works are the basis of this exhibition. Significantly, there is no hint of tea-towel souvenir nostalgia, and the impasto he lays on thickly with a palette knife is not the painterly equivalent of Vegemite. We are too easily inclined to indulge in the frivolous celebration of familiar clichés and Quilty makes his symbols of Australia look a bit less familiar so viewers will examine them more closely.

The budgerigars and Torana cars depicted here have distinct, complex personalities, and sometimes a darker side. Not surprisingly, spending time in one of the historic centres of Western civilization has strengthened Quilty's urge to make art that matters. The result is Aussie larrikinism under pressure from the full weight of the European tradition.

This paradox matches the troubling ambiguities of Australia as a relaxed and comfortable country caught up in political, economic and cultural influences from elsewhere. His source material for the budgerigar paintings was downloaded from an internet site that displays specimens that have been selectively bred in the U.S. to sizes and colours never seen in the bird's native outback habitat. Artificially fluffed up for show by their American owners, these mutant pet budgerigars make slightly disturbing symbols of Australian identity.

Timothy Morrell