

Interview

REDEFINING PORTRAITURE: AN INTERVIEW WITH BEN QUILTY

Ben Quilty is an Australian painter whose gestural, often Abstract, and social-specific pieces have enthralled art lovers all over the southern hemisphere. His success at the Prudential Eye Awards — the prize's first edition — garnered him his first solo show at London's Saatchi Gallery and further international acclaim. Currently in Paris, staying at Montmartre's famed artist's residence — Cité des Arts—, AMA went to talk to Ben about how he hones his craft, investigates Australian identity and the state of portraiture today.



Your "Rorschach" series forms a large part of the exhibition at Saatchi Gallery — what was your aim with these?

It seemed like a natural progression from where I was at with my painting, which had become very gestural and fast. For a visual language to be interesting it needs to develop; becoming more nuanced, more in depth and more intelligent. The "Rorschach" series started off as an experiment, but as soon as I did it, I knew there was a lot of potential in them as a visual language. The act of making literal childhood Rorschach paintings — what we call a 'squashie' in Australia —, is innately child-like, yet there's also something very destructive about ruining something you've spent a lot of time working on. Especially when they're really big, you do expend a lot of energy and materials. You essentially destroy it, but ultimately, to make something more beautiful.

The paintings are literally folded together, which in a sense makes them a monoprint — the original is still there, just altered. It was only after I started using this simplistic method that I then looked deeper into the meaning behind Rorschach tests and psychoanalysis; reflecting upon why I was doing this, and how it would be read. They've been critiqued as my exploration of masculine identity; about glorifying decline and accelerating destruction. To create a visual language, you have to understand how people will perceive your statement. You have to be armed with the knowledge, in order to move forward.

*Ben Quilty in his studio
Photo: Andre de Borde*

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The original idea behind the ink blot tests was totally abstract: if you saw something in them, you were showing signs of paranoid or delusional behaviour; which in a way is a very poetic and beautiful pun on the audience, because you're not really meant to see anything in them. So with these big landscapes, and some of the works that are at Saatchi Gallery, they are very literal, and if you walk up close it's just a mess, but as you go further back it becomes quite obvious that it's about something else.

Lucian Freud, whose style you've been associated with, was famed for taking a long time to complete paintings – do you work in the same way?

No, the paintings are really fast. Everything is made in a day. There's a lot more at stake when you work that quickly, but often the mistakes — the gestural errors — are the exciting parts, if they can be used for the benefit of the painting. And as well it's just my personality; I'm impulsive, I never feel like I've got a lot of time. I guess that's why I make an effort to reinvent my own practice, because the worst thing that could happen is that I become bored. Painting is like my church — the most spiritual place for me is inside my studio so I intuitively protect and care for it. I focus on adapting my message — the dynamics and theatrics of having an audience is really important for me; particularly coming from Australia, where the whole art thing is quite contested. We're so fanatical about being outside and playing sport that aspects of the art world just aren't really supported in Australia.

Self Portrait Smashed
© Ben Quilty



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What part does your Australian identity play in your work?

It seems like such an obvious thing that any creative person, particularly if they are Australian, would question their own sense of identity. I have Irish blood; but I live in a country that calls itself an independent nation of original people, which is so far from the truth. Most of the white people have Irish roots, there's a huge Asian population and we've settled on the land of people who have inhabited it for 40,000 years. In terms of human identity, it doesn't get much more complex than that.

You're the first Australian artist to host an exhibition at Saatchi Gallery, what does that mean to you?

Saatchi do their best to represent international artists, but yes, it's a great honour. Prudential Eye Awards is an amazing thing to be involved in, as it includes all of Asian art: Australian, New Zealand, Chinese, Japanese, Russian, Korean — a huge swathe of the world that's very underrepresented here in Europe. Most of my exhibition history has been in Seoul, Korea, Singapore and Hong Kong. I'm now represented by Pearl Lam, who has a gallery in Singapore. I think the award, if it's done in the right way, will only grow, especially if Saatchi stays involved. Prudential really supports representing Asian artists; the judging panel is formed of professionals from all over South East Asia, as well as Nigel Hurst, the director of Saatchi.

In 2012 you were chosen as the official Australian War Artist for Afghanistan – how did this affect your painting?

It was the first time I didn't use humour in my work — I think most great art has a sense of humour; with a full, independent language — but there was nothing funny about my time there. It was dark and I'm still dealing with those people; making work with them and about them. The Vietnam War ended the year before I was born, and as a nation, we grew up not knowing anything about those people, not talking to them about their experiences. They were this silent minority within the community. I've become very interested in those men because, in a way, their reality could be the future of what's happening to these men now who are coming back from Afghanistan. Of course it has a lasting effect. It's so outside of your comfort zone it's insane.

View of Ben Quilty's studio

Photo : Mim Stirling



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A lot of your work is autobiographical and has been described to have an element of brutal masculinity – can you tell us about this?

A lot of things that happen to young men in today's societies go unquestioned, which is bizarre. I really wanted to understand why men behave the way they do. Some women do the same thing, but my story is about my own masculinity, and I'm intrigued by that. My work is autobiographical because I'm always there. As long as you've got a mirror, you've always got a subject. It's funny; often people suggest that there's an inherent vanity in self-portraiture, but anyone who has spent an hour looking at themselves in a mirror would know that there's nothing vain about it. You become really, profoundly ugly. And you start to grasp what humanity is about, by observing yourself that closely. In fact it's the opposite of vanity; you can't help but start to peel away the layers of pride, of all things that are associated with fashion.

I'm not trying to make ugly paintings about myself, it's just coming back to a practice — like yoga, like football — where if you do it enough, you build up a visual language and a conceptual framework in a very organic way. And by having that subject there – yourself — it means you always have something to make work about.

Your portraits of family and friends are quite menacing and distorted — why do you present them in this way?

When I play with portraiture it's in order to try and understand the psychology and emotions behind a human being's face, and in order to do that you have to play with the physicality, but you have to have people trust you. If someone has a big ego then they're generally not going to like the portrait that I make of them; to enjoy them you have to be self-deprecating. My son Joey thinks it's hilarious, my dad loves them — it's an extension of self-portraiture because they are part of who I am. I come from a close family, where there's always been a discourse around the dinner table about politics, society and the environment; and that dialogue is part of a group of people, so my portraits of them are very directly autobiographical.

Do you do anything to the canvas: cut it, carve into it?

With some of the big works, you can see I cut back a lot. There's a sense you're wrestling with the square — it's about breaking the rules about what you can do to that surface.

How do you view the stance of portraiture today?

In a sense I feel like portraiture is dying out — there seems to be a lack of inventiveness —, although some prizes, like the Archibald Prize, show the strength of what's happening in Australia at the moment. Using materials to capture a likeness is an inherently human behaviour — it's part of having a conscience, looking at ourselves. I think it's sad that some of the bigger contemporary artists aren't pushing the boundaries, because even though the word portraiture isn't fashionable, it is an act of capturing an essence of what it means to be human.

My landscapes are often about how the psychology of a place has been altered by humans. They all have this physical beauty, but the human history is often very dark. *Fairy Bower Rorschach* (2012) depicts the site of a very vicious massacre of aboriginals by two white Irishmen in 1834. In fact, the whole of Australia is covered in these very brutal and sad histories and that's why I make those big landscapes; it is equally why I turn the mirror on myself — to look at my own European ancestry and what it means in relation to the world. Often these arguments are very idealistic but I think it is necessary to look at those things.

There's a complex meaning behind anyone looking at themselves; anywhere in the world, your history, your ancestry — it's the whole point of being alive. The history is an essential part of my practice.

Who do you include among your inspirations?

I saw Ukrainian photographer Boris Mikhailov's show, about 12 years ago at Tate Modern and it had this brutal honesty that really made me think. He received quite a lot of criticism saying he was taking advantage of his subjects, because they're really brazen images of real people in poverty in Ukraine. But if you look at those photos in the context of the last few months, it's such a cry for help. He inspired me to make the work I felt I needed to make; rather than try and follow fashion.

It's only with time that some are considered great artists — like Mikhailov —, where you can see that it comes from a very heartfelt, powerful and socially important place. I'm driven by painting, but I look less at other artists now. The world is such a massive, intricate place, with a lot of dark paths, but the experience of being alive makes me feel lucky to have this experience. Being alive is the biggest inspiration of all really. ■