Growing Pains – A journey through BEN QUILTY LIVE!

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AS THE DOORS SLIDE OPEN to BEN QUILTY LIVE! I enter through the centre of one of Ben Quilty’s Rorschach skulls which menacingly separate to either side. Forecasting some sort of existential journey into the artist’s mind, what I arrive at is a showroom containing a fleet of Toranas, Falcons, utes, a BMW, all promising to ‘take me there’. The journey, it appears, may be gentler than originally anticipated.

Quilty reveals an undeniable appreciation for the automobile and its role in establishing an Australian male identity. The possession of a car is a familiar rite of passage for many young men. Parked cars with popped hoods, cruising the open road, the acrid scent of burning rubber, the grunt and roar of an engine; its iconic status as a symbol of freedom is reinforced by its metal armour and often provides its proud owner with a feeling of immortality. Quilty clearly demonstrates his particular preference for the Torana. One can’t help but recall the unwittingly humorous exchange between father Darryl and son Steve in Rob Sitch’s 1997 masterpiece of Australian film, The Castle:

Darryl: Steve, could you move the Camira, I need to get the Torana out so I can get to the Commodore.

Steve: I’ll have to get the keys to the Cortina if I’m gonna move that Camira.¹

Quilty’s cars haunt the Australian landscape, indeed, can be read as landscapes that retrace the historic travels of Australian art royalty.² However it is the ’autophile’s object of desire that is kept alive and well in these works, elevating this notoriously low culture activity with the lofty heights of a fine art tradition. It seems that negotiating these two worlds is something Quilty has mastered with great success.

Continuing his critique of Australian identity, Quilty casts his way back through history, revisiting images of Captain Cook as seen in The arrival (2007) and Untitled (Cook) (2007). Produced after returning from Europe, these paintings suggest a hint of provincialism that reflects on the tradition and culture found ‘over there’ as it compares with Australia’s own incipient colonial history. Vanquishing the heroic associations of colonial conquest, Quilty deconstructs...
and demystifies with what he describes as the destruction of the surface in *Cook Rorschach* (2008).3 Employing the Rorschach ink-blot method – a psychometric instrument commonly used to determine cognition and personality variables4 – Quilty purposefully exploits its ambiguity to induce in the viewer a sense of unease and indeterminacy.

Surface is indeed one of the most appealing characteristics of Quilty’s paintings. He reveals a sensitivity to his medium that belies the machismo ‘fuck the world’ attitude evident in some of his work. The treatment of his subject matter is strangely tender and, rendered in deft, buttery strokes, Quilty shows he understands the expressive potential of oil paint to convey the physical properties of flesh and skin. This is most apparent in the paintings of his son, Joe, and the various states of toxicity portrayed in the ‘hangover’ paintings of himself and his friends. Together, these works harbour some fundamental tension and present an interesting insight into the shifting emotional landscape of Quilty’s life. The viewer is able to identify the struggle with ‘growing up’ as it clashes with the desire to indulge in the dizzying, hedonistic lack of responsibility enjoyed pre-parenthood. Captivatingly dark, the hangover portraits such as *Untitled (Lloydy)* (2007) and *Smashed Rorschach* (2009) evoke similar visceral reactions to the likes of Géricault’s *Severed Heads* (1818). In these works, Quilty allows us to enter the hallowed space of ‘blokes’ territory at the same time that he interrogates the after-effects of social rituals like ‘wetting the baby’s head’ which are played out after the birth of a child by consuming alcohol. Here, the conversation between the disembodied, inebriated heads and his son Joe’s screaming visage produces a frustrated narrative that attempts to reconcile the world between youth

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and manhood. This is mirrored in the sheer physicality of the painting; its push-and-pull effect polarising Quilty’s transformation from a social to a paternal identity. Judging all this activity from the centre of the room is a small series of trophy heads entitled Man Cave, 2007. Like treasured mementos, these trophies acknowledge and reward the kinship between men while reflecting upon notions of masculinity within the identifiable Australian vernacular of mateship. As both participant and a keen critical observer of Australian male rituals and life, what is striking about Quilty’s work is that it is so ‘white heterosexual male’ and yet so unequivocally broad in its appeal.

Progressing to the last room, one can sense a palpable change in temperament. The dark walls are lined with a vanitas theme that suggests the artist has moved on from his celebrations of the present and toward a more introspective position meditating on the cycle of life and death. Here, the ‘Death Metal’ paintings like Art Megadeath (2005) and Smoking skull (2005) no longer possess a sense of adolescent urgency; rather they can be seen in nostalgic tribute to the recklessness of Quilty’s youth.

In his more recent works however, Quilty’s use of the Rorschach technique comes into its own. The entropic results from this method of production are most effective in Bedfords Downs Rorschach (2008). The doubling of the skull forces the viewer to linger longer and perhaps ruminate over the gruesome tale that exists behind those voids, where eyes once saw the truth of the Bedford Downs massacre in 1920. Again, Quilty presents a neat critique of Australian nationhood in Landcruiser (2007). The entanglement of native fauna and stacks of skulls expresses a dynamic tension between the accomplishments and inevitable losses that go toward building a nation. However, this reinterpretation of the Australian coat of arms points toward a country in strife and a history yet to be entirely reconciled.

Finally as one exits the show, they encounter Jesus Rorschach (2008) where Quilty doubles the chance of redemption with not one Jesus, but two. Inspired by a residency to study graffiti culture in Barcelona, the work is framed by decadent Rococo-like filigree, hastily and irreverently rendered in spray-can graffiti onto the wall of the museum. The combination of the Rorschach technique with this iconic image produces a heady mix. There is neither ambiguity nor paranoia to be revealed in clearly seeing Jesus here though; instead its application is intentional, causing the destruction of Jesus’s unassailable likeness and where he is left ‘to face off’ against himself. Perhaps Quilty is commenting on the erosion of religious values, questioning the excess of the Catholic Church or, more simply, his own beliefs having been raised a Catholic. Whatever the viewer arrives at, the graffiti framework replete with nude women, hissing serpents and trucker-art motifs reminds us not to take it all too seriously.

Quilty’s work recognises deep and underlying patterns in Australian culture – patterns that reflect continuing concerns about Australian male identity and Australia’s place in the world. This is a diverse and complex body of work that touches the nerve of life in the suburbs and sits at the intersection of urban culture, high art, and postcolonial critique. The exhibition leaves one feeling as if they’ve come on a journey that is rather like a coming of age. Many of these paintings remind us of the freedom of youth: a time to make mistakes and believe that what we are doing can make a difference. Quilty administers his own psychological evaluation where you can see his growing pains metaphorically recede as you progress from room to room.

In a conversation with the artist, I asked, ‘Where to next?’ Quilty happily divulges that he is exploring large-scale Rorschach landscapes. It would seem he has come full circle; where he started with landscape, he returns to it. This time though, not with the heavy weight of an Australian art history to carry on his shoulders, but on his own terms.

Notes

BEN QUILTY LIVE!, curated by Lisa Slade, was exhibited at the University of Queensland Art Museum in Brisbane from 8 May to 19 July 2009. The exhibition is currently showing at TarraWarra Museum of Art, Healesville, Victoria, 15 August to 15 November, 2009. GRANTPIRRIE | OFFSITE presents Ben Quilty in Melbourne, 15 October to 15 November: www.grantpirrie.com

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