A UQ Art Museum Touring Exhibition
The University of Queensland Art Museum, Brisbane, 8 May – 19 July 2009
TarraWarra Museum of Art, Healesville, 15 August – 15 November 2009
ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

**BEN QUILTY LIVE!** is the first comprehensive survey of Ben Quilty’s painting. The exhibition focuses on Ben Quilty’s calibre as both a colourist and painter of large pictures, tracing the stylistic changes in his practice including his recent massive Rorschach paintings, use of heavy impasto, and his abiding interests in mateship, mortality and identity. The key curatorial themes explored in this exhibition include:

**High octane adolescence**
Ben Quilty grew up in north-western Sydney. His own ‘high octane adolescence’ (a phrase coined by Jacqueline Millner) has inspired him to explore issues of masculinity and mateship. Quilty is both a participant and an observer in the rites of manhood.

**Antipodean male line**
Ben Quilty combines personal experience with public history. His interest in Australian art history began with him taking up Australian Impressionist Arthur Streeton’s nationalistic charge to ‘look in one’s own backyard’ for artistic inspiration. Quilty has reworked paintings of colonial history featuring Captain Cook and Heidelberg School landscape paintings, focussing upon what Michael Desmond has described as the ‘Antipodean male line’.

**Painting’s Lazarus**
The physical possibilities of painting are a constant challenge to Ben Quilty, an artist who went to art school at a time when painting was believed to be dead. Quilty revives painting and its future in his large-scale experiments, which include his Rorschach paintings.

**Heavy metaphysical**
The metaphysical possibilities of painting are also of interest to Ben Quilty. His skull and Death Metal paintings and his more recent Horschach paintings see the artist grappling with his own mortality. It is as if he is trying to paint death into a corner. Quilty can be linked to the Renaissance painters who painted what are known as vanitas, a Latin word that translates as emptiness. These vanitas paintings were still life paintings that symbolised the brevity of life, often through the inclusion of rotting fruit and flowers, timepieces and frequently skulls. Quilty, like his precursors, points to his imminent demise by referencing death, and also reminds the viewer of their own mortality.

Lisa Slade, Curator of **BEN QUILTY LIVE!**

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ABOUT THIS INTERPRETIVE GUIDE

This interpretive guide is intended for use in conjunction with a visit to the exhibition **BEN QUILTY LIVE!** It may be used prior to, during or following a visit, in association with the downloadable pod and vodcasts, that have been produced to accompany this exhibition. Alternatively, this online guide, together with the pod and vodcasts, may be used for independent teaching and learning experiences, to provide content and direction for a case study on the work of Ben Quilty for senior students.

These resources aim to enhance understanding of Quilty’s practice for new audiences, and enrich the appreciation of his work for those already familiar with the artist. Quilty’s physical painting technique and the wide appeal of his subject matter has guaranteed his success with secondary school audiences. Each year Quilty presents workshops to school audiences in state and regional galleries in New South Wales. To complement this interpretive resource, and the exhibition at the UQ Art Museum, masterclasses will be held for Queensland senior secondary visual arts students for the first time. These structured two hour workshops will enable participants to interact with Ben Quilty, gain insight into his practice, and learn about approaches to contemporary curatorship and exhibition development.

The images and text in this guide relate to the themes explored by the curator Lisa Slade in the exhibition, and include an interview with Ben Quilty. Six images are highlighted in the guide. Extracts from essays by Michael Desmond, Clare Lewis, Lisa Slade and Don Walker, written for the publication **BEN QUILTY**, are accompanied by additional text by Jenna Blyth.

The information and activities in the interpretive guide are intended to support the inquiry learning model of the Queensland Visual Art senior curriculum and align with the general objectives of **making** and **appraising**. This guide provides opportunities for Year 11 and 12 senior students to:

- extend their **knowledge and experience** of contemporary visual arts practice and career paths;
- develop their capacity to **research, develop, resolve and reflect** on their own and others’ art works in the specific context of audiences and purposes; and
- explore how the visual arts reinforce and challenge their own individual experiences.

Gillian Ridsdale
Curator Public Programs, UQ Art Museum
Can you describe your painting style/practice?

Firstly, I am a mass consumer of paint. I mix large quantities of oil paint with gel medium. The medium helps the work to dry. My last studio was in an industrial area near Sydney airport and the factory unit next door made cup-cakes and brownies and introduced me to the cheapest, and largest palette knives in the Southern hemisphere - cake decorating tools!

I work with overalls, gloves and gas mask. For me the actual painting process (which is only a fraction of the time I spend in the studio) is an action…and a very physical one. For me painting will always exist. It is a very real thing and always has been. From my earliest recollections of art, I remember looking at art books and being moved by the way a painting could be such a wonderful departure from ‘normal’ life. I remember seeing one of Fred Williams’s last exhibitions before he died and being mesmerised. I have learnt to love sculpture and photo-based media and digital art but, for me, my love of painting is instinctive.

What ideas and themes underpin your work?

My work explores the life that I have led and the subcultures and rituals that best describe the nature of male angst and rebellion. I always think the work I make is fairly autobiographical. I’m not trying hard to build some conceptual framework and, in fact, the more closely I look at my own life the easier it is to make work.

Most of my work investigates the relationship between a luscious surface and the darker and more confronting nature of the overall image. I enjoy the theatrics of forcing the viewer to move back from the enticing surface to see the more figurative imagery hidden in the paint. My application of paint is quick and violent, and the imagery is often connected to the uneasy feeling of facing an uncertain future or the indulgent glorification of decline.

When was your first big break?

In 2003 I won the Brett Whiteley Travelling Art Scholarship administered by the Art Gallery of New South Wales. It allowed me six months in Europe; three spent in residence at the Cité Internationale des Arts in Paris. Apart from a generously funded trip, it was also the first time I had spent time making work without having to work a ‘day job’. Giving away my day job was freedom!

You are well known for your portraits, having been represented in the Archibald Prize five times, and recently being announced the winner of the Doug Moran National Portrait Prize. Can you describe your process in making portraits?

The selection of each sitter is pretty organic. I have been looking, though only for males – and only males who had made a significant impact on my view of the world. It became an exploration of ‘male-ness’ in Australia, only because that’s where the work was being made and that was where my immediate experience was based.

The portraits have all been of males with the exception of one more formal and conceptually traditional portrait of Beryl Whiteley, which was hung in the 2005 Archibald Prize. The male ‘sitters’ have come from disparate parts of society (my mates, John Howard, Captain James Cook and my son Joe), but all form a part of the way I have experienced the world.

In my exhibition Pride and Patriotism at GRANTPIRRIE, Sydney in 2008, I placed a portrait of my drunken mate Lloydy alongside venerated figures like Captain Cook. I hope the placement of Cook alongside the drunken head of Lloydy brought into question the morality of Cook. Also the work explored the subversiveness of using (wasting) massive amounts of premium oil paint to create the likeness of an anonymous drunk man placed in the same room as a scowling Captain Cook. I also hoped that the Goliath-like heads, surrounded by aerosol, would suggest huge sculptural works crumbling and breaking apart – the head crashing to the earth away from the body. And imagine the enormous heads carved from sandstone watching Easter Island, lying in ruins around the heads of Sydney Harbour.

Jimmy Barnes became a sitter for me after I met him in 2005 at a fundraiser for sick kids. Before I met Jimmy he had been through a very dark and life-threatening time – addicted to drugs and coping with a dangerous heart condition. His public persona as a rock star is very different to Jimmy as a musician and family man. I was interested in making a portrait of Jimmy as a fallen hero. I asked him to act as though he were ‘off his head’, as though he was re-living his dark past. I then squashed the carefully made image against another canvas and destroyed the original. The act of destroying the first image creates a more beautiful Rorschach ‘butterfly’ – and a glorification of decline.
Bedford Downs Rorschach (2008) depicts two skulls face to face. The right-hand skull was painted directly, while the opposing skull is its inverse imprint — produced by pressing together the two canvas panels.

Instead of being a perfect replica, the second image reveals cracks of raw canvas, laying bare the image's mode of production. The allusion to symmetry relates to the psychoanalytical tradition of Rorschach ink-blots: silhouetted mirror-image shapes used to prompt mental associations in patients.

Recently, the skull has become ubiquitous to contemporary art; it now recurs with such regularity in art and design that it is easy to forget that it represents part of the skeletal structure we each possess. However, it does not function as a decorative or fashionable ruse in this work; rather, it is a sign of mortality.

‘Bedford Downs’ is the name of a cattle station in the East Kimberley region of Western Australia, the site of a notorious massacre in which a number of Aboriginal people were secretly poisoned by the station owner, Paddy Quilty, for the theft of a bullock. The story is made more grisly by the fact that the Aborigines were forced to cut down trees and construct the pyre on which their bodies would later be burned. These events were witnessed on a nearby hill by two Gija women, whose accounts permeate the contemporary narratives of the descendants of those killed – most famously, the artist Paddy Bedford, who, in a bitter twist of irony, was given his name by Paddy Quilty.

Although not a direct descendant of Paddy Quilty, their shared name and Irish ancestry opened an avenue for enquiry for the artist about the collective responsibility that all Australians share for their colonial past and the way that past is implicated in contemporary exchanges and conflicts.

Clare Lewis
Clare Lewis is a Sydney-based writer and curator and is currently a Curatorial Assistant at the Museum of Contemporary Art.

ACTIVITIES
DEVELOPING
Create your own Rorschach by applying a generous amount of paint to a large sheet of paper and then fold the paper in half. Show your print to a friend and ask them what they see. Once the paint is dry, you could experiment with making another Rorschach over the top of the first one using different colours. Try to control where the paint ends up. Evaluate your successes.

REFLECTING
Carefully re-read Clare Lewis’s account of Bedford Downs Rorschach 2008. What are the key ideas that she is discussing in her writing? Devise a list of questions that you would like to ask Ben Quilty about this painting.

RESOLVING
Why do you think Quilty has chosen to work on this scale? Describe the steps that Quilty has taken physically to make this work (the photographs by Andrew Quilty of Ben Quilty working in the studio may assist you).
The car paintings also explore the broader nature of human identity – particularly young males and their obsessiveness with rebellion and initiation. In a car, men strive to prove their worth and in doing so risk their lives.

Ben Quilty

For us initiation was performed inside a car. Beer in hand we became valued members of a society and, as the motor screamed, the dizziness of expectation awakened the adult in us.

Ben Quilty

Quilty became aware of his mortality early on, at the age of 17. Both his parents and brothers were involved in a collision when Quilty, in Moree during a family visit, was learning to drive. While no one was seriously injured, the car for Quilty became an irresistible symbol of mortality, mateship and masculinity – a vanitas motif or reminder of the transience of life.

In 2002 Quilty began painting portraits of his 1972 Holden LJ Torana. The speed of the Torana meets its match in Quilty’s vigorous lashings of oil paint – this is dangerous painting where an over-zealous move can, at any point, lead to oblivion.

The speed with which Quilty skids the paint across the surface of the canvas also indicates his comfort with his subject. His One hit Toranas, first exhibited in 2003, are tiny hit-and-run paintings, made at the end of each day in the studio. They affirm Quilty’s belief that his paintings work best when painted quickly. His is a performative painting practice – a physical act that can be seen to extend the fast-and-furious ‘dragging’ in the Torana.

Lisa Slade

ACTIVITIES

RESEARCHING
Devise a list of words to describe Quilty’s One hit Torana series of small paintings. Do these words relate to the car itself? Why do you think Quilty chose the Torana as his subject?

DEVELOPING
Experiment with mark making using paint. Try matching the way you make marks with the subject you are painting.

REFLECTING
Research other artists inspired by the car, include both Australian and international artists. Consider the claim that cars as subject matter are a thing of the past because of their environmental impact.
In 2004 Quilty began painting Budgerigars, those gregarious Australian birds known for their ubiquity and marauding social habits. Quilty’s Budgie portraits – depicting pet Budgies – were painted in mug-shot style, with each bird isolated from the other, plumped up and useless and no longer capable of flight. By giving them nicknames like Lloydy, Whytie and Beast, they are, according to the artist:

far from their native form – both geographically and physically, and I thought a fitting representation of the way white Australian society has claimed its own identity.

Lisa Slade

While in Paris in 2003, Quilty considered the idea of an Australian art and its connection to place. His paintings of Budgies were images derived from Australia, indisputably non-European.

Quilty’s 2004 exhibition Young and free included ten Budgerigars and Quilty’s friend Whytie, tattooed and as splendidly colourful as any of the birds. While an ideal vehicle for his lush impasto paint, Quilty, more importantly, juxtaposed man and multi-hued caged birds to ruminate on the trap of beauty and the shackles of place.

Michael Desmond

Michael Desmond is Senior Curator at the National Portrait Gallery, Canberra.
In *Joe-burger* (2006), the image of Quilty’s own son’s face morphs into a ‘sloppy joe’. The surface becomes more than the execution of a subject; rather it recreates the viscous fatty burger sliding and collapsing across the canvas.

In 16th and 17th century still life painting, the depiction of food was frequently symbolic – representing the breaking of bread or the miracle of the fishes. Alternatively, food could be a flagrant display of wealth and luxury, illustrated with banquets of game, seafood and decadent serving ware.

Though the burger may not have appeared in *vanitas* paintings, it does hold its own symbolism for contemporary culture. The staple menu item of fast food restaurants, burgers are the food of the masses, representative of fast living and an unhealthy lifestyle. This morbid commentary on modern life partially unravels with Quilty’s choice of his own son’s young face as subject.

**Jenna Blyth**

Jenna Blyth is Assistant Curator, TarraWarra Museum of Art, Healesville.

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**ACTIVITIES**

**DEVELOPING**

Consider creating your own *vanitas* painting, drawing or photograph inspired by the world of fast food.

**RESEARCHING**

Look closely across Ben Quilty’s practice and identify works of art where he has used metamorphosis. The idea of metamorphosis recurs across art history, it is not only a contemporary subject. Research other artists who have used metamorphosis. You might like to start with the 16th century painter Giuseppe Arcimboldo.

**DEVELOPING**

Use a software program to enable you to create your own metamorphosis of one thing into another. Like Ben Quilty, you may choose to transform something animate into something inanimate. This transformation may be the starting point for a new body of work.
Painting the landscape around Mum and Dad’s house at Kenthurst, where I grew up, was how I taught myself to paint. I made this work, *Elwood Park – farewell winter*, from landscape drawings I’d made while we lived in Melbourne – in Elwood near the bay. I’d been trying for a few years to find a path away from painting the landscape; it said so little about me.

Anyhow, I met a very old cricketing friend of mine late one night deep in the heart of Melbourne’s red light district, St Kilda. Kylie and I had walked from home. It was freezing. Brett told me he was down on his luck and living rough on the streets. He came from a middle-class family and a middle-class suburb. When I asked why he wasn’t finding shelter in the St Vinnies soup kitchen and hostel around the corner, I realised why he was there – they were out to get him. The Vinnies people were probing him for information, and the aliens he met every night on the headland in Elwood – a four-kilometre walk – forbade it. So he slept under a dirty blanket, night after freezing night, on Acland Street. This winter Elwood landscape is the landscape Brett knew so well on the bay. Looking back, *Elwood Park – farewell winter* was, for me, a farewell to landscape painting.

**Ben Quilty**

I have been exploring the use of the human skull in western society - particularly in young male culture. The skull as an overwhelming un-natural phenomenon hovering menacingly over the landscape came from the ‘Skull-burger’ works.

**Ben Quilty**

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**ACTIVITIES**

**REFLECTING**

Read Ben Quilty’s description of *Elwood Park – farewell winter* and discuss the key ideas in his writing. Consider how these ideas link to the imagery he has used.

**RESOLVING**

Discuss why the work of art *Elwood Park – farewell winter* extends beyond the edges of the canvas. In the exhibition why do you think Quilty has chosen to work this way?

**RESPONDING**

Recount to a friend an unusual experience or recurring memory that you have. Invite them to make a work of art inspired by your story. What aspects of the story have they focussed upon?
It’s an old trick. Take a universal, publicly owned snatch of melody, fanfare, phrase or image and pervert it. Ben Quilty has used the Australian coat of arms, an image so official and hoary it’s almost invisible, and mounted it on a mesa piled with skulls. The shield-bearers are presented as road-kill, the kangaroo muzzle flattened by a double bogie. Between them now is a cairn of skulls knitted by worms and lies. The crest is a convict shackle, looking as though it was cut from a kerosene tin, just to make it clear that not all the bones belonged to Indigenous Australians.

Like most people, Ben Quilty defies caricature. A bogan who chose to pursue a degree in Aboriginal culture. A petrol-head who buys his art supplies at Bunnings, yet carries tiny notebooks full of the most exquisite pen-and-ink sketches of Venice done in his recent youth. Close in, where Quilty works, his paintings look like a bad paving job. Step back twenty feet and he’s caught the whole sordid tale, a country built by the survivors of pogroms, massacres and land clearances elsewhere, who found a haven here on land cleared by massacres of our own.

**Don Walker**

Don Walker is one of Australia’s pre-eminent musicians and songwriters and has recently published his first novel.

**ACTIVITIES**

**RESEARCHING**
Discuss the meaning conveyed by Walker’s choice of words. Why do you think Walker has chosen such lyrical language?

**DEVELOPING**
Consider why Quilty has chosen the title *Landcruiser* for this work. Create your own title to articulate what you think the artist is communicating in this image.

**REFLECTING**
Discuss how this work fits within Quilty’s body of work. How is it materially different or similar to his other works of art? How is it conceptually similar or different?
FURTHER READING


Ben Quilty. www.benquilty.com


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