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Ben Quilty at the Saatchi Gallery ... things just got interesting



A solo show at the Saatchi means an artist has already entered orbit. Pelham Communications and Prudential Eye Awards

Ben Quilty is the first Australian artist to hold a solo show at the Saatchi Gallery in London. Opening last Friday and running until August 3, the exhibition is a big deal for Quilty, naturally, but also for art in the southeastern corner of the globe.

Since the Gallery opened in 1985, it has hosted solo exhibitions by major figures of international contemporary art, such as Jeff Koons (1987), Damian Hirst (1992) and Tracey Emin (2000). A solo show at the Saatchi doesn't so much launch the careers of major contemporary artists; it means an artist has already entered orbit.

Most Australians know Quilty as the winner of the 2011 Archibald Prize for his painted portrait of the late Australian painter Margaret Olley. Olley was an unusual subject for Quilty, whose work since the early 2000s has focused on the destructive nature of youth masculinity.



Ben Quilty's "Margaret Olley" – winner of the 2012 Archibald Prize. Art Gallery of New South Wales: www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au

Quilty's work explores what it means to be a man in contemporary Australian culture – cars, drugs, drunken holidays in Fiji. Some of his earliest paintings were of Holden Toranas, the classic Aussie muscle car, smashed-out on large canvases in bold, thick, rich strokes, applied with a cake-icing knife.

Then, as his work began to explore the darker side of Australian masculinity, the cars became crashed wrecks, and the self-destructive death drive of male youth percolated more clearly as the central theme of Quilty's work.



Ben Quilty Self Portrait Smashed Rorschach 2009 Oil on linen 140x190 cm. Image courtesy of Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne, and Jan Murphy Gallery, Brisbane.

Being smashed was a popular theme of Quilty's paintings in the mid-noughties, in paintings such as **Cullen – before and after** (2006), a portrait of 2000 Archibald Prize winner and wild man of Australian art, Adam Cullen. Cullen became "the late Adam Cullen" in 2012, when he became a victim of his own bohemian cliché at the age of 47, dying from liver failure from years of drug and alcohol abuse.

In 2012, Quilty was appointed an Official War Artist by the Australian War Memorial and sent to the Australian base at Tarin Kowt in Orūzġān province, southern Afghanistan. The trip had a profound affect on Quilty.

It was not so much **his time in Afghanistan** that left an impression, but the experience of working with the soldiers who sat for him after returning from Afghanistan, trying to live normal lives at home, "to then watch them try to struggle to come back and fit in, and drop, fall, crashing down to the earth with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder is very crushing and confronting."

Quilty's Official War Artist commission raised him to a different level of public consciousness in Australia. He featured in two episodes of the ABC's Australian Story documentary series, which focused on his work with Australian Afghanistan veterans.



Ben Quilty, *Captain S, after Afghanistan*, 2012, oil on linen, 140x190cm. Australian War Memorial collection

As an **Official War Artist**, Quilty has quickly become the best-known artist of his generation in Australia, and he gave a powerful public voice to the many Australian troops who faced overwhelming trauma after returning from Afghanistan.

For those with an interest, his exhibition **Ben Quilty: After Afghanistan** is currently touring Australia.

After Afghanistan, Quilty's fascination with the destructive tendencies of youth masculinity led him to mentor Myuran Sukumayan, a convicted Australian on death row in Indonesia since 2005. Sukumayan, one of the Australian drug smugglers known as the **Bali Nine**, took up painting in his cell at Kerobokan Prison. Under Quilty's mentorship, Sukumayan himself has entered a self-portrait into the Archibald Prize this year.



Ben Quilty *Fairy Bower Rorschach* 2012 Oil on linen, 8 panels 240x550 cm. Collection Art Gallery of New South Wales. Image courtesy of Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne, and Jan Murphy Gallery, Brisbane.

In the last year or so, Quilty has become as close to a household name as an artist can in Australia, and was included in this year's Adelaide Biennial. Joanna Mendelssohn writing on The Conversation earlier this year, **described his work** in that exhibition, The Island, as "gigantic, dark, brooding and menacing".

But Quilty's international profile has not matched his fellow Australian artist and former Sydney College of the Arts classmate, **Shaun Gladwell**. Gladwell's video installation work, **Approach to Mundi Mundi**, 2007, was the centrepiece at the entrance of the Australia exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts in London, in September last year.

On January 18 this year, that all changed.

At the inaugural **Prudential Eye Awards** ceremony in Singapore in January, Quilty won both the Painting category and Overall Winner. The prize, awarded to an emerging artist from "greater Asia", is USD\$50,000 and a solo exhibition at the Saatchi Gallery in London.

For his solo show at the Saatchi, Quilty has painted a new suite of large-scale Rorschach paintings, which are created from a clean canvas pressed upon a thick and freshly painted canvas. The results are **mirror-image paintings**, like large and edgy butterfly prints, split down the centre.

Given his Saatchi exhibition opened just last Friday it's too early yet to know how Quilty's work will be received critically. Some may argue that, as part of the Prudential Eye prize, Quilty's solo show at the Saatchi is different from the solo shows of Koons, Hirst and Emin.

But the international art world of 2014 is a different place from when Emin's **My Bed** was nominated for the Turner Prize in 1999. Prizes like the Prudential Eye might well be an indication that in art and culture, as in so many other aspects of economics and politics, the 21st century is emerging as the (greater) Asian century.