

BEN QUILTY

The Bottom Feeders

*Santa is really the only cultural icon we have who's male, does not carry a gun, and is all about peace, joy, giving, and caring for other people.*¹

It is difficult to imagine having such faith in exemplary and positive male figures in 2018, given the daily antics of the free world's leader, American President Trump; the revelations of twisted pastoral care by religious institutions; the accusations of Harvey Weinstein's harassment and assaults on women; and daily reports of sickening domestic violence.

Ben Quilty's series of paintings, *The Bottom Feeders*, shows a greedy society with a cargo cult mentality, whose cultural leaders dispense materialist trophies. A corrupt Santa stands in for the men who were initially revered as figures of implicit generosity and assumed benevolence.

While the original St. Nicholas served the needy, Santa now is a symbol of self-gratification, conspicuous consumption and corporate greed, with Quilty adding uncontrolled lust for good measure.

His approach to this series echoes his indignation: paint is slathered on, scraped and overworked in the immediacy of his response. He has realist passages amid abstract zones, the searing colour and jagged shapes reinforcing a vision of dark nature and the chaotic state of society. The heat of his outrage risks being seen as overwrought but Quilty has always worn his art on his sleeve: he is above all a moralist and these paintings can handle it. They retain a sense of moral indignity even, perhaps especially, in the rarefied calm and aloof atmosphere of a gallery or museum.

What are the options for a man in the era of #MeToo? Support, shame, guilt, retaliation or silence? Ben Quilty is hostile by nature to compromise and his career has been built on a moral perspective. His principles compel him to translate the voice of his conscience into painted narratives. It would be naïve to think that a painting might change an ingrained culture and few artists think that art can shift the politics of a society. But Quilty believes that additional voices, the voices of fair-minded women and men, are needed to expose messy often painful truths to open discussion. He encourages viewers to deal directly with the meanings in his work to access both the conversation and their own feelings and so participate in the debate.

– Michael Desmond, 2018

¹ Aldrich, Ian. 'Why should we believe in Santa? We ask Kris Kringle, a.k.a Jonathan Meath', *Yankee Magazine*, October 12, 2011. Jonathan Meath is an American children's television producer who has worked as professional Santa for many years.