

BEN QUILTY

150 years

Tolarno Galleries Melbourne

8 – 29 February 2020

“Nellies Glen has been a favourite gathering place for locals for over 150 years. With beautiful ferns and moss covered rocks it provides a quiet haven for swimming or just relaxing in the cool, quiet surrounds.” – Budderoo National Park information plaque.

Through Quilty’s ominous and heterogeneous approach in *150 years* each work invites us to participate in a critical discussion. The same Quilty who explored the spiritual hollowness of contemporary masculinity in paintings of passed-out mates is present here, yet these themes are refracted through the decades since, through experience, a global and pervasive uncertainty, and a tangible level of disillusionment. In an age of authoritarian revival, Quilty’s decades-long interrogation of masculinity is gaining momentum.

Recently dubbed a ‘critical citizen’ by curator Lisa Slade, Quilty’s new work at Tolarno more explicitly depicts a *self-critical* citizen. In this case Self may not necessarily connote oneself, but one’s milieu, an individual splattered, dispersed throughout their socio-cultural plane. The artist – as well as a few family members and friends – are present in the landscape of the Rorschach, in the abstract works, and of course in Santa himself.

The first iteration of Santa, which appeared in 2018, was perhaps best confirmed by the response they elicited from media commentators. The depiction of Santa drunk and urinating in a pot plant was deemed iconoclastic enough for right-wing commentator Andrew Bolt to assert that “the new racism” had been “rubbed in his face”. Quilty chose Santa because he is (like the artist) a straight white male, but it is clear the series is as much about consumerism as it is about whiteness. Santa teaches us to be good, not for the sake of goodness, but solely in the pursuit of material reward. His dishevelled presentation in these paintings reflects this crass and deeply cynical ethos. With his imposing, bloated head, Quilty’s Santa carries something of the famous facade on Mussolini’s headquarters, or Big Brother. He does of course, surveil all year round.

Santa reminds us of something that has largely been overlooked in Quilty’s work, that given the right subject matter, it can actually be funny. That a satire of a fictional children’s character, who essentially serves no role in society, was received as a serious attack on Western values, or patriarchy, perhaps illustrates the impotency of those values more than anything else.

The knotted forms in *The Interior* and *The Ludicrous Mode* are an athletic accomplishment, tying together a myriad of elements, led by wielding brushstrokes. As always in his work, the blank sections of canvas are used economically, surrounded by decisive, thick slatherings of oil paint. Grey is prominently featured, often as a backdrop for vibrant bursts of red, pink and orange. In works such as *At the bottom of the fish tank*, colour and form work rhythmically, a choreography of our focus, dragged through the tangled composition. That is the tension here,

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that which tells us where to look and in what rough order, and that which simultaneously resists literal interpretation.

In *Self-Portrait, about my Brother*, the thematic issues explored elsewhere find a sounding board. A component or subtext in other works, the artist appears fully here. The palette used in the figure is curiously matched by the background. But rather than melting away as one might expect, he is lifted from the canvas. A few streaks of blue pull the character forward with a bizarre confidence.

150 Year, Rorschach paints a landscape Quilty and his son Joe found during a bushwalk in the Southern Highlands. A plaque on site (quoted above) suggests the waterhole has only been visited and enjoyed for 150 years. *150 Year, Rorschach* does not depict a specific tale of atrocity, marking it apart from a number of his earlier trademark works. The specific location is secondary to the beings which animate it, and what they have come to represent. A cat, toad, fox and goat adorn this site. The century before federation saw a long period of 'Acclimatisation', when all native species were vilified by white colonisers and the beasts of Europe were promoted, consciously seeded into the landscape. A systemic project one historian has wryly described as 'ecological cringe'. The introduced species of course do not act alone, a Rodin sculpture is mimicked, dancing jubilantly with the pests, as thick in the Western canon as he is here, surrounded by suctioned paint.

The huge mirror opens itself up to us, peeling itself from the centre and the inside, drawing us deeply into the blasted Australian landscapes which in this time hang on the precipice. These fractured ecologies are addressed with the textural complexity of the Rorschach, the miniature waves hanging in their thousands.

The sign at Nellies Glen, like so many others peppered throughout the Australian landscape, is a mechanism of erasure. It illustrates how effortless this forgetting, both intentional and subconscious, has become. The vast painting is therefore an invitation to better, more attentive ways of looking.

– Milena Stojanovska