

BEN QUILTY

The Beach

31 July – 28 August 2021

This series, titled *The Beach*, was heavily influenced by American realist George Bellows' early 20th century boxing series. Where Bellows looked to boxing, the premier bloodsport of his age, Quilty has turned to the modern phenomena of the Ultimate Fighting Championships (UFC). Looking back on Quilty's work in recent years, his ongoing exploration of heavily abstracted, tortured anatomies, perhaps it was inevitable these figures, or their kin, would end up in a fighting pit, AKA the "UFC Octagon®". Crucially, while studying Bellows, Quilty revisited the iconic images taken by photojournalist (and cousin) Andrew Quilty of the 2005 Cronulla riots. Here, the beach and the Octagon are corresponding zones, symbolically potent places steeped in friction, violence and ritual.

Throughout the last century, much ink has been spilled exploring the place of the beach in the Australian consciousness. Most lazily, we are assured it is an egalitarian commons, an apolitical zone of relaxation and nation building. While the Cronulla riots, of course, stand out as a defining moment in the modern history of Australian beach culture, the articulation of bodies on beaches re-entered the public discourse early in 2020, as sensationalist fears they would become spaces of contamination in the Covid age were broadcast nightly. More level-headed observers asked, of all our public spaces, why was the beach considered uniquely perilous? One historian noted what a stark contrast this was to the events on the Victorian coast months earlier. At Mallacoota, as fires closed in, the beach had been a place of refuge and sanctuary for the town's entire population.

Without even considering sea level rise, these events speak to the radical, unresolved cultural ambiguity of these places. For Quilty, the beach has long been a stage and contact zone. Like a crowd it provides a witness, the waves and tides continue to roll in, onlooker to human drama on the shore.

Quilty and Bellows alike, place critical importance on the crowd. Orwell thought there was nothing more horrible in the world than watching a fight between a white man and a black man in front of a mixed-race audience. Quilty's *The Crowd* depicts one such scene, as did Bellows in his work *Both Members of this Club*. It is no coincidence these works reserve particular space and energy for the menacing crowd.

But what does it mean to paint a fight? To study it, to commit to its particular thematic propositions? Bellows was once criticised by an observer who noted that the hands and feet of his boxers were portrayed in positions that fighters would never use, to which the artist replied, "I don't know anything about boxing, I am just painting two men trying to

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kill each other". Despite his realist tendencies, Bellows was more concerned with capturing particular feelings and impressions elicited in an audience when observing (and caught up in, participating in) such carnage.

Following Bellows, Quilty is exploring the feeling in the pit of your stomach when viewing such dramatic violence. It is perhaps in this sense Justin Paton aptly describes Quilty's work as "experiments in the transfer of feeling". He is commonly concerned with bodily responses and fleshy experience, not representation. There is something to this unreality in the language of the combatants themselves. In the lead-up to one much-anticipated 2019 match, referring to his opponent, Khabib Nurmagomedov promised to "change his face". A statement which speaks both to very real objectives, and the (unintentional) surrealism which characterises much bloodsport.

The UFC is a highly globalised product. Kickboxers versus practitioners of Sambo, boxers fight adherents of Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu. In these ways, UFC is engineered to produce unexpected outcomes. It also nets a massive, global audience. Is Quilty drawn to it because of its popularity or for its other properties? Degas was obsessed with classical ballet not because he thought it beautiful but rather because it said something about the human condition. The UFC ethos is the minimisation of 'rules', one might say it is deregulated. Culturally, it is a 21st century giant, like it or not, UFC is the sport which best reflects our age, and our cultural disorientation.

Unlike the agile forms depicted in the paintings, *Freefall* displays the body of a 60-year-old retired first respondent who suffers from PTSD. The smashed bodies of the UFC contestants are juxtaposed with a different kind of fatigue that comes with its own set of traumas. He has a different temporal relationship to all this violence. The subject is inverted, arrow straight in the ground. His features buried and erased, the man, a personal friend of the artist, remains forever anonymous to us. He is not fighting on the beach, but removed from his context and his lifeworld, he is as vulnerable as can be. What obligations might we have for such a stranger?

- Milena Stojanovska, Assistant Director at Ngununggula – Retford Park Southern Highlands Regional Gallery, July 2021