

BEN QUILTY

TRINKETS

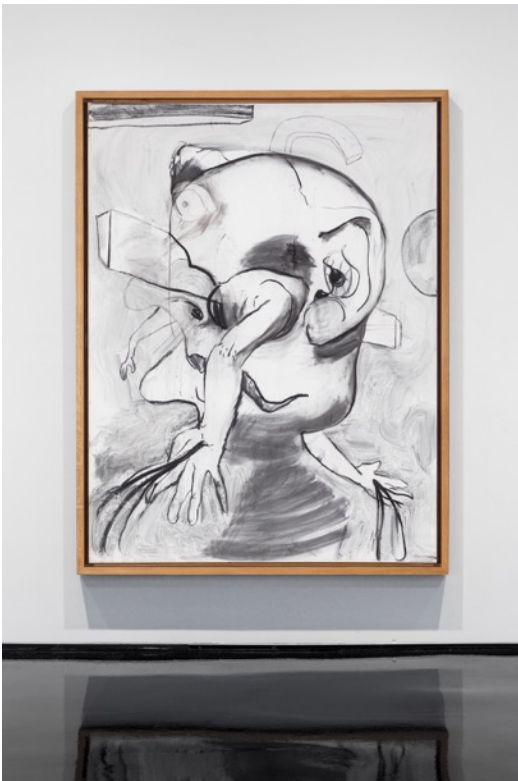
15 FEBRUARY – 15 MARCH 2025

In this formidable new body of work, Quilty focuses almost exclusively on the human figure – especially heads, eyes and mouths – as he wrestles into existence urgently expressive, even grotesque, embodiments of the way many of us are feeling right now, the artist included.

“The older I grow, the more awkward I feel about being part of the human condition,” Quilty says. “The world is in turmoil. Nothing seems straightforward anymore. We lead these complex lives overlaid with solastalgia, a massive and realistic fear of what’s happening to the planet. It makes for an odd existence.”

Quilty’s protean subjects enact complex emotional states. They’re bodies in extremis, dismembered and remixed in hellish proportions.

Some heads have two faces. The head dominating *On Top Of The Hill* 2024 has a pair of arms with flapping hands sprouting from it, recalling an apocalyptic creature by Hieronymus Bosch. And the screaming head in *The Price of Bread* 2024 has been cut up and recomposed as an avatar of pure rage.



Ben Quilty
On Top Of The Hill 2023
Charcoal, graphite, gesso and oil on linen
188 cm x 142.5 cm
Framed: 196.5 cm x 151.5 cm



Ben Quilty
Vacuum Cleaner (Variable) 2023
Ink and Gouache on paper
152 cm x 108 cm variable
Framed: 163 cm x 119 cm variable

"For the first time in my life I've been making work that references my Catholic upbringing," Quilty says, adding that the catalyst was encountering James Joyce's autobiographical novel, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916).

"There's a chapter in which he talks about being flogged by a Catholic priest. Well, when I read that, all sort of things came up," he says.

Vacuum Cleaner (Variable) 2023, is a multi-sheet drawing in the shape of a cross. But instead of Christ's body we get a surreal composite – three naked male bodies with their heads buried in the ground as the 'arms' and 'legs', a misshapen head in profile with one enormous eye as the 'torso', and a woman's face and shoulders at the top.

"I'm interested in the pomp and ceremony of faith-based systems such as Catholicism," Quilty says, "and how the symmetry, order and architectural precision of places of worship give you that sense of otherworldliness."

Two smaller paintings in the exhibition provide a window into Quilty's working methods. *Reconsideration* 2023 places a single green eye with pink lid against a heavily impastoed background of dirty orange and red, beneath which a nose, mouth and chin in profile have been marked out in black paint.



Ben Quilty
Reconsideration 2023
Oil on linen
82 cm x 71 cm



Ben Quilty
Conversation (NPD) 2023
Oil on linen
61 cm x 51 cm

"I'd been working on *Reconsideration* for about six years, and then suddenly," Quilty snaps his fingers, "I finished it in five minutes. If you scrape away the layers, there's probably half a dozen paintings under there. I just kept working and working, trying to find the image."

Meanwhile, *Conversation (NPD) 2023* was painted in a day using a French brand of cerulean blue that Quilty purchased in Paris when he was living there some years ago.

"I posted an image of this painting the day Donald Trump won the US election," Quilty says. "But I think it can speak to a whole range of emotions that we experience as humans, and they're a lot to have at the moment."

('NPD' is the acronym for narcissistic personality disorder.)

The purply-blue pigment has been worked up into goopy crests like a raised relief map, and it appears to obscure an entire head except for a ketchup-and-mustard mouth opened wide in a scream – or is it a yawn?

"It could be either," agrees Quilty. "I'm not sure. To me, these two paintings speak to what a creative practice means – pushing and pushing until you achieve a breakthrough. Six years. But then, it can also happen in a day.

The show's largest painting, *The Inquiry 2023*, depicts an oversized head balancing on wide shoulders, eyes closed, mouth open in an endless cackle.



Ben Quilty
The Inquiry 2023
Oil on linen
202 cm x 180 cm

"This creep's looking over the whole situation with complete disdain," Quilty says. "His eyes are shut, he's not even acknowledging that we exist and he's not letting us in."

Reminiscent of the bronze 'character heads' of German-Austrian sculptor Franz Xaver Messerschmidt, the subject also two faces as well as mismatched ears and a tongue in the wrong place.

"This is the one that's not me," Quilty adds. "The rest of the works in the show are more autobiographical."

As a visual representation of absolute power, the painting is terrifying, yet it's also radiant and engaging, executed in a tropical palette of peach, pink, purple and green with touches of bright red.

In *The Night Before Christmas 2024*, one of Quilty's distinctive 'bad santas' has been decapitated just below the shoulders, with a smaller self-portrait of the artist placed on top to form an irregularly shaped oil on linen.

"There are so many conventions in painting," Quilty says. "It has to be square or oblong, you have to fill in the corners, there has to be a softer pale colour alongside a darker colour and there has to be stillness and strength and movement.... Bullshit. I'm going to stick my head on that Santa and have it beautifully framed in its unorthodox shape. There are no rules."



Ben Quilty
Night Before Christmas 2024
Oil on linen
206 cm x 135 cm, variable



Ben Quilty
Portrait of a dying man 2024
Ink and Gouache on paper
165 cm x 103 cm variable
Framed: 182 cm x 117 cm, variable

Finally, in *Portrait of a dying man* 2023, Quilty memorialises a friend with a dozen drawings that he made towards the end of his friend's life. Presented right way up and on their side, the ink and gouache drawings have been incorporated to form a larger face whose lips and chin occupy the bottom section of the overall image.

"He would come to my studio and rest here for half a day, and I made many drawings of him," Quilty says. "Then I began to arrange them together on the wall. He knew I was making a work about him. I said I was going to call it *Portrait of a dying man* and he thought it was very funny. He passed away three months later."

"He was much more than a single image, and my memories of him are much more than a single image," Quilty continues. "This work is about my friend's mortality and my experience of having him here, talking about it, towards the end of an extraordinarily well lived life."

— Tony Magnusson



Ben Quilty, *Trinkets* 2025, installation view