

## **Ben Quilty**

### **Trinkets**

I have a shell I picked up on the beach a few years ago. I can't recall which beach or which year, but I know it was the south coast, and I know it was in the last five years.

I keep the shell in a place I reach for every day, so I get to see the shell, touch the shell and remember that I love this shell. Sometimes I take it from its everyday place, into my hand and roll it around my palm. My one big question to this shell is 'how old are you?'. I speak to this banal phenomenon of my every day because it was one of the first things that popped into my mind when Ben shared the title of this show with me, 'Trinkets'. We had been in the studio, rolling the potential works for this show between us, and decisions had been made.

Trinkets are a strange thing. When I search for the etymology of the word I find it was first recorded in a play in the late fifteenth century, 'I haue..sene her trynketts For payntyng thyngs innumerable Squalmys & balmys'<sup>1</sup>. Very nice! Little objects, with associated words attached such as toy, ornament, showy, small have long been rendered in perpetuity. Trinkets have a bit of an identity crisis then, *little* things of *little* value that we cherish and hold onto forever and ever? Alas, I reach a dead end on the meaning of Squalmys and balmys, but a theory will emerge soon. I come to the conclusion that trinkets, with their humble place in the world, can transcend systems of time and value.

Time and value are two forces that run our lives, most of us are at the mercy of both running out concurrently. We can pitch one against the other on any given day in the hope of prolonging pleasure or hurrying along the awful. I have hope this is what the squalmys and balmys might be alluding to — the pace in which we individually move through the world and what we can hold on to when things move too fast — people gone too quickly, when it hurts, and life becomes measured in the unendurable length of one second and then another.

This collection of works, Ben's trinkets, has all of this within it. We know Ben Quilty, we know he paints hard and fast. The paint is thick, smells great (to me), and yields to the artist completely. Some think Quilty's work takes on the literal weight of the world: heavy, twisted, thick paintings that don't budge.

But time moves forward and there are new things for us to look at in 'Trinkets'. Works set to a more personal rhythm, the relative values one human being; working, loving, making, painting,

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<sup>1</sup> Fernando De Rojas, 'Celestina, Or, the Tragicke-Comedy of Calisto and Melibea', Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 1499, 2009.

drawing and people all pitted against his own time, running out. Ben talks about mortality, often. Some of the people in this show are no longer alive, but he still loves them. When we talk about each work and the people within them, I realise that Ben doesn't really use past tense in his speech. When I see him on any given day, I see a person whose emotions ferment over time, intensely, in a way that charges each day with that same intensity. His inner terrain is enormous, and it can get dark. But therein lies the glorious compulsion to make.

'Trinkets' shows us Quilty's range, with honesty. The big, hard and fast oil paintings have been put aside for the most part. This show has the fury and the pain we expect of Ben, but there is vulnerability and, more ellipses than ever. I ask questions as my eyes run over ink, gouache, charcoal - who is dying, what are you so worried about, what the fuck happened that night? Some of these inks are darker than the oil paint dares to be. Devoid of colour, new and old faces are beaten into shape by the artist's charcoal, by his memories and potentially, by his fear. Fear that time is running out, before we can secure a new and lasting way of valuing life, and the very thing that we have fought so hard for, the choice to value humanity over the other more frightening potentials when it is lost.

Ever present in this show is the eye — lid drooped, barely open or way too open, staring in all directions. This could be a way to see into the emotional landscape of the artist, to meet him, eye to eye. Rather than looking away when it's too sad, too hard, too confronting. It isn't sad to me that there is a tortuous feeling imbued into most of these works. It makes me proud the artist has found a way to share his inner world, outside of his comfort zone and away from the protection of the paint we have made him so responsible for. I follow the stare of one rancid eye to another and see the things that time can do to our perception; it can bulge, distort, yellow and fade whatever good we thought was left. But what it can also do is transcend the little bit of love, of hope, of colour. That little bit might be just the size of my shell, small enough to roll around in my palm, but it could swell into something crucial and spectacular that cannot be stopped. Hope is not lost here, nor for Quilty, because he is still compelled to make work, to capture the living before they are dead, to remember them as they are. Making work is hope, making work is resistance to the worst that could happen. Making work is a way to stay fixed in the present.

'Trinkets', as a collection of works by Ben Quilty, challenges the relative value a system might place on them. Trinkets, if we let them, are not simply 'things' but rather pathways in colour to a kinder place, one that is special. In darkness, that pathway can be what we need most.

— Gina Mobayed