

ARTS

Honouring the child victims of our 'collective adult insanity'

Ben Quilty began creating one work for each child killed in the Gaza conflict. It was soon impossible. By **Kerrie O'Brien**.

Ben Quilty has always tried to make sense of the world through art. Even when there's no sense to be made.

"That's why people have always made art," he says. "It's a way of coming to terms with who you are and why you're here."

A series of portraits created by the acclaimed artist after the October 7 Hamas attack on Israel, and during the devastation of the Israeli government's subsequent retaliation, opens at Tolarno Galleries tomorrow.

"I made one work for every [Israeli] child under 12 who was killed or kidnapped [on October 7]," he said, adding that it was an instinctive reaction – painting because he felt overwhelmed and helpless.

In the October 7 attack on Israel, at least 33 children were killed, and Palestinian armed groups abducted an estimated 40 children as hostages, according to Human Rights Watch.

Watching the number of Palestinian children killed in the "unbelievable response" by the Israel Defence Forces, Quilty kept working. "The number climbs by hundreds of children, every single day," he said. "I don't have enough lifetimes to adequately respond to or comprehend this complete and devastating breakdown of humanity."

The number of children killed in Gaza is currently estimated to be 11,500, according to Gaza's Hamas-run Ministry of Health. UNICEF says at least 17,000 children in Gaza are unaccompanied or separated.

The child featured in the paintings is not one of those caught up in the conflict, but the anguish written across his face underscores the universal horror of seeing the innocent suffer. Depicted is three-year-old Sonny, the son of a friend, his face a picture of pain after he had fallen during a visit to Quilty's studio.

"It's such a visceral feeling when a child hurts themselves," the artist says.

When Jan Minchin from Tolarno Galleries saw the portraits on



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Instagram, she found them incredibly moving, made contact and said she wanted to show them. The result is a series of 30 works called *Sonny*.

Having seen the impact of war on children firsthand in the Middle East, Quilty says he will never forget it. He was compelled "to actually say something in defence of the children who had no say, can't vote, who are honestly the victims of our collective adult insanity".

"They are the true victims of adults going each other. Complicated by history, by race and by religion, it's always the children that suffer the most. And [that] creates the notion of trauma that we've been pretty good at ignoring in this country."

As an official Australian war artist, Quilty went to Afghanistan in 2011. Then, in 2016, he and writer Richard Flanagan visited Greece and Serbia and refugee camps in



Ben Quilty with part of his *Sonny* series. Above left: *Sonny 9*. Below: A drawing by Syrian refugee Amjad, 11, from the book *Home* depicting the death of his brother after an attack by armed people. Main photo: Sahlan Hayes

Lebanon and Jordan with World Vision. "The trip was devastating for both of us. We found ourselves in tears many times. Particularly people crossing from Turkey to Greece – that river of humanity is something I will never forget," Quilty says.

Looking down from the plane upon arriving in Lesbos, Quilty was struck by the coastline lined with fluorescent orange, which he initially thought was an algae bloom. It turned out it was hundreds and hundreds of orange life vests, discarded by people fleeing war and destruction. That trip resulted in his life-vest series, *High tide mark*, part of which is now held at the NGV and the Art Gallery of South Australia. "I feel like *Sonny* has become a bit of a talisman or reminder of the jackets that were found at that scene," Quilty says.

Many of the life vests on the beach were filled with straw – they didn't even float. The sheer volume

created an environmental issue, prompting the Greek government to ask anyone who could take some to do so. Quilty imported as many as he could back to Australia and still has one that hasn't left his studio. "It's a tiny little life jacket with a sticker of Bugs Bunny on it."

A trip to Syria followed. "I felt like I owed that experience more, so I went back and spent some time and got children to draw," he says.

"Every single child draws the truth," Quilty said at the time.

Some of those drawings by Syrian refugee children are also on show at Tolarno, taken from a book Quilty curated called *Home* in 2018, with a forward by Flanagan. All proceeds from sales of the book, published by Penguin, go to World Vision.

Anyone feeling overwhelmed by the horror of what is happening in Gaza can help, the Southern Highlands-based artist says. Last year, he contributed a painting to a fundraiser organised by his artist

friend Nathan Hawkes, which raised several hundred thousand dollars for Medecins Sans Frontieres.

"If every Australian gave \$1 to a cause that would help children in the Middle East, you would be looking at tens of millions of dollars."

"It's not hard to find people doing good work," he says, citing as an example a Palestinian father who lost his daughter in an IDF attack and an Israeli father who lost his daughter in a Hamas attack who joined forces to ease their grief. They met at Combatants for Peace, a group created by ex-fighters from both sides to find solutions.

Quilty also urges the federal government to increase our foreign aid budget, which has been cut dramatically in the past decade.

"We all just need to give a little. And find peace among ourselves as well."

Sonny is at Tolarno Galleries from tomorrow until March 23.

