

Ben Quilty: after Afghanistan

Jaimee Edwards

Ben Quilty has always toyed in his work with questions of surface and depth. His recent exhibition *After Afghanistan*, that was originally hung at the National School of Art and is now touring the country, deploys his familiar strategy in which the vigor of his impasto surfaces results in positive conceptual interpretation. Reviewers and critics have focused on the assumed profundity of Quilty's vision of modern living for young men vulnerable to self-destruction. Champions of the painter, such as Germaine Greer, credit his work with a lurking kind of commentary that calls out the dangers of getting wasted, driving too fast and thinking too little, as though the mere representation of a controversial subject makes art meaningful. There is no doubt that Quilty's paintings gesture toward these dangers. Yet such gesturing cannot be more than superficial, given that the lockstep of modernist form and contemporary content disallows any possibility of provocative inquiry—as is shown by the reiterative, un insightful analysis that is stimulated by the work. An analysis that even the more ambivalent press critics such as Jon McDonald and Robert Nelson have endorsed. Indeed, the expressionistic tradition that Quilty paints in, with its affected swagger and bravado, is used to chart his version of normative manhood in ways that are unsurprising.

Of course shock is not Quilty's project, he is an establishment painter and to berate him for not being subversive would usually be incongruous. However, there is more at stake with respect to *After Afghanistan*, whose constituent works appear to move well below the surface of official war discourse, and thus to confront a depth of suffering that has hitherto gone unacknowledged by the military. For then Quilty has pretensions: he strives to be subversive.

However, the works that make up *After Afghanistan* do not challenge conventions. The show is the result of Quilty's commission as official war artist for the Australian War Memorial. Quilty's appointment is, by his own admission and that of exhibition curator Laura Webster, logical—considering the continuum that links masculinity, (Quilty's consistent subject), and war.¹ Quilty even identifies this exploration of the military subject as the “height” of his preoccupation with

masculinities, and has reflected on his motivation for going to Afghanistan as a “duty.”² Of course the pairing of war and masculinity is logical; war has been a male endeavor for thousands of years, part of the masculine narratives that Quilty explores. Nevertheless, what the concentration on the masculine highlights, even with respect to the war in Afghanistan, is a commitment to visible norms rather than their complications. Furthermore, what the War Memorial sanctions as a national institution are the visible and recognizable images of nationhood, not images of war’s uncontained horror. As Judith Butler has discussed, nationalism regulates affinities, the seen and unseen, who is inside and who is pushed out.³ What is conceived of as one’s national identity determines one’s affective responses to precarious subjectivities. In the name of maintaining this identity, our empathy is evoked for some subjects while it is occluded for others. This practice has characteristically meant the traumatized figure is made invisible in the aftermath of wars. By re-presenting the iconic digger as a traumatized subject, Quilty tries to negotiate a national discourse, while paying attention to the individual subject, in his attempt to put the suffering of Post Traumatic Stress (PTSD) on the national agenda. But his allegiance to The War Memorial limits the effectiveness of his work in challenging popular ideas of the Australian serviceman.

After Afghanistan consists of paintings and works on paper, though it is the large portraits of servicemen and one servicewoman in Quilty’s impasto style that draw the most attention. These mainly nude figures painted at Quilty’s studio on the soldiers’ return home are subjects whose bodies are raw and uneasy. Comparing the paintings made from photographs of soldiers in Afghanistan with the studio portraits, the former appear starker, the subjects’ pupils are restricted, the surface of the canvas less built up—as if fewer strokes more aptly convey the trance-like clarity of active duty in contrast with the weight of post-duty reflection. In Troy Park, after Afghanistan, a studio portrait and one of the exhibition’s key images, an undecidable force, a wave of energy, is either escaping or invading the figure whose posture is slumped. It is from his heavy head that a wide stroke of blended reds and oranges makes a continuous path like a stream of memory that burdens him. While the catalogue makes no mention of PTSD the condition is clearly referenced by Quilty’s subjects whose responses to being confronted with

their own deferred emotional turmoil upon seeing their portraits are recorded in the catalogue. One digger states, “I hadn’t really been fully honest with...what I was feeling”.⁴ And as Trooper M says, “You have to keep doing your job and keep moving forward...there is no time...until you get home, to stop and think.”⁵ It is Trooper M’s portrait, Trooper M, after Afghanistan, no.2, that is perhaps the most tortured. His foreshortened and supine figure is almost crushed into the limits of the frame, but it is the black hole of his gaze that tells the viewer this subject is suffering from reminiscences.

In the Australian Story episode that is screened as part of the exhibition, Quilty expresses his concern for the lack of support returned soldiers receive from the Australian Defense Force (ADF). Countering what Quilty suggests are the ADF’s efforts to minimize responsibility for the prevalence of PTSD among returned soldiers, his paintings aim to “tell their [the soldiers’] story”.⁶ However, the exposition of these soldiers’ stories—their suffering—remains somewhat troubling, as the significance of the soldier’s trauma is arguably confined by an interpretative framework shaped by the War Memorial’s patronage. As part of the military institution that for many years denied the existence of PTSD, the War Memorial’s best efforts at acknowledgment cast the condition in such a way that it is connected to notions of ANZAC sacrifice. Compared to more confrontational images of war and its aftermath by artists such as Otto Dix or Goya, Quilty’s soldiers reveal less of the horrors of war as they, unwittingly or not, contribute to existing expressions of the ANZAC’s potency. In these portraits the viewer is invited to recognize suffering as an act of courage in war, as if losing one’s sanity was analogous to losing a limb. Yet, without more distinct signs of horror, what kind of subversive claim can really be made? After Afghanistan presents war as an unquestioned duty, and soldiers as being in need of our compassion, but its terrors are never truly made visible. For the alignment of Quilty and the War Memorial ensures that the ravages of war—those that cannot be assimilated into the prevailing Anzac narrative—continue to be buried.

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¹ Laura Webster, *Ben Quilty: after Afghanistan* (Canberra: The Australian War Memorial, 2013) 10-12.

² Ibid.

³ Judith Butler, *Frames of War: when is life grievable?* (London, New York: Verso, 2009).

⁴ Webster, 20.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ben Quilty interview by *Australian Story*, 'On the War Path', *Australian Story*, ABC Australia, Monday 25, March 2013.