



Visual artist Ben Quilty. Picture: Adelaide Festival/ Daniel Bond

FESTIVAL

Adelaide Festival 2019 review: Quilty

Katherine Arguile, The Advertiser
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Quilty

Visual Arts / Australia

Art Gallery of South Australia

Until June 2

Ben Quilty's first major survey exhibition, developed by the Art Gallery of South Australia and skilfully curated by Lisa Slade, confirms him as one of this nation's most exciting and important contemporary artists.

Quilty's sculptural application of paint lays bare his process, his rage and exuberance visible in his brushstrokes and globs of paint.

While the work is unmistakably Quilty's, there's a nod to art history, some works reminiscent of British painters Frank Auerbach or Howard Hodgkin.

His *Self-portrait at 43* (2016), Quilty tells me, is influenced by his contemporary, the Romanian artist Adrian Ghenie.

As searing as one of Francis Bacon's screaming popes, he paints himself here as horrified witness to the tragedies behind the paintings hanging in the room alongside it.

Quilty fulfils the ideal role of artist: he observes and mirrors back what he sees, often through a lens of moral conscience.

Self-portrait after Afghanistan (2012) shows his state of mind after a stint as war artist there. He's visited Bali's Kerobokan jail, the refugee camps on Lesbos, has read the horrific contents of the Nauru Files.

His observations are relayed back to us through the filter of his emotional response to what he sees.

Nothing is contrived; there are no grand statements – he simply bears witness and shows us what must be noticed.

The impact of the twelve life jackets in this exhibition, each depicted on separate canvases and painted in 2016, is devastating.



The twelve life jackets, each one representing a person who committed suicide while in detention on Nauru.

Each named after the twelve people who committed suicide within the space of six months while in detention on Nauru, every lifejacket contains a marker for the individual that owned it. One belonged to a child.

Look, says Quilty, these are human beings who have suffered the terrible consequences of global government actions, who must not remain faceless.

In *Flowers for Heba* (2016), a mother is immobilised by sadness in a makeshift tent in Lesbos, the black and grey background behind her uncharacteristically flat.

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Her face is distorted and spiky with pain from the death of the young child she'd fled with from her war-torn country. Quilty tells me he brought her the colourful flowers in the foreground from his garden, but it seems there's nothing that can rouse her from her overwhelming grief.

"My work is about working out how to live in this world," Quilty says. "It's about compassion and empathy but also anger and resistance. Through it I hope to push compassion to the front of national debate."

Quilty is free to the public, so go: this is a show that, decades from now, you'll be telling people you had the privilege to see.

Quilty is at AGSA until 2 June 2019 and will be touring Queensland Art Gallery 29 June – 13 October 2019 and the Art Gallery of New South Wales 9 November 2019 - February 2 2020.

– Katherine Arguile

