

**EDUCATION RESOURCE KIT**  
A CASE STUDY

# **BEN QUILTY**

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**CITY**  
**ART**  
**GALLERY**



## INTRODUCTION

*Written by Kate Caddey and published by Lake Macquarie City Art Gallery (LMCAG), this education kit is designed to assist senior secondary Visual Arts teachers and students in the preparation, appreciation and understanding of the case study component of the HSC syllabus. LMCAG is proud to support educators and students in the community with an ongoing series of case studies as they relate to the gallery's exhibition program. This education kit is available in hard copy directly from the gallery or online at [www.artgallery.lakemac.com.au/learn/schools](http://www.artgallery.lakemac.com.au/learn/schools).*

## A CASE STUDY

*A series of case studies (a minimum of FIVE) should be undertaken with students in the Higher School Certificate (HSC) course.*

*The selection of content for the case study should relate to various aspects of critical and historical investigations, taking into account practice, the conceptual framework and the frames. Emphasis may be given to a particular aspect of content although all should remain in play.*

*Case studies should be 4–10 hours in duration in the HSC course.*

Cover:  
Ben Quilty  
*Cook Rorschach* 2009  
oil on linen  
140 x 190cm  
© the artist

NSW Board of Studies, Visual Arts Stage 6 Syllabus, 2012

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## THE ARTIST

Ben Quilty in front of his HSC work as featured in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 March 2014  
Photo: © James Brickwood  
Fairfax Syndication

**'I am an Artist. My job is also my favourite pastime. It is my hobby and my passion. Visual Arts is the most direct and immediate way of making a statement about society.'**

**...it is through the Arts that we can tell the real stories – the truth. And with the truth we will make a better society.'**<sup>(1)</sup>

Ben Quilty has had a remarkable art career. Although relatively young to gain such a considerable reputation, he has cemented his place as one of the highest achievers in the art world nationally, with burgeoning international recognition.

Quilty's works are unique and instantly recognisable. His passionate and thoughtful approach to his subjects demonstrates his commitment to the idea art can reflect, suggest, provoke and lead social change. His is not the art of complacency; rather it demands a reaction from audiences and thrives on the opportunity to confront and engage the viewer. As Nick Mitzevitch, Director of the Art Gallery of South Australia once said, 'Quilty is not a painter who sits on his laurels and accepts his success, he is constantly reinvigorating both his subjects and his techniques. This is a rare thing in Australian art because largely the art-appreciating audience in this country wants to stick a label or pin a signature style on their artists. Quilty keeps dodging a single definition.'<sup>(2)</sup>

Quilty is and always has been an artist. In childhood, his parents encouraged his interest in visual arts. 'I always remember thinking as a little, little boy how magic it was to watch Mum draw,' he says. 'I became an obsessive drawer. Mum and Dad would think I was in my room studying economics but I'd just have folders full of drawings and copying.'<sup>(3)</sup>

Early success in public competitions encouraged him: at 16 he won the Age and Open sections of The Rocks Painters Picnic at the Sydney Festival of the Arts. His HSC Body of Work was selected for the 1991 *Artexpress* exhibition. It prefaced his interest in social issues by depicting an Aboriginal man hanging crucified above Sydney Harbour with a nearby smaller figure, the artist, hunched over in shame. Quilty's love of paint and grand scale are also evident in this student work. The triptych won the Julian Ashton Summer School Scholarship, awarded to the most promising two-dimensional work at the exhibition.

## THE ARTIST

Quilty went straight from school to art school, gaining a Bachelor of Visual Arts (Painting) from the Sydney College of the Arts, University of Sydney in 1994. He added a Certificate in Aboriginal Culture and History from Monash University in 1996, and a Bachelor of Visual Communication (including Feminist Studies) from the School of Design, University of Western Sydney in 2001. In 2002, the year he won the Brett Whitely Travelling Art Scholarship, he was able to become a full-time artist.

Since then Quilty's practice and reputation have grown. He has won acclaim for portraits submitted for major national prizes/exhibitions, winning the 2009 Doug Moran Prize for his portrait of rock singer Jimmy Barnes, the 2011 Archibald Prize for his portrait of Margaret Olley, and the 2012 Redlands Westpac Art Prize for a portrait of his father. He has had over 30 solo exhibitions in Australia and overseas, and participated in many more group shows. He has also been artist-in-residence at places as diverse as Hill End, Sydney, Melbourne, Paris and Barcelona. In 2011 Quilty was commissioned as an official war artist by the Australian War Memorial to spend three weeks in Afghanistan, documenting the lives and experiences of Australian soldiers in Kabul, Kandahar and Tarin Kot. This encounter led to the body of work *After Afghanistan*, exploring the impact of war on emotions and minds. The exhibition is on display at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra from December 2014 onwards.

Quilty lectures extensively, is on the Board of the AGNSW, and is an ambassador for the NSW Visual Arts Unit and Artexpress. He has been the subject of a number of videos, many exploring his past exhibitions and emergence as an artist, most recently concerning his Afghanistan experience. He is accustomed to using, and being the subject of the camera.

Ben Quilty lives in the Southern Highlands of NSW with his wife and two children.

<sup>(1)</sup> Ben Quilty quoted from The Arts Unit NSW website <https://www.artsunit.nsw.edu.au/ben-quilty-visual-arts>.

<sup>(2)</sup> University of Queensland Art Museum, *Ben Quilty Live! Interpretive Guide*, 2009.

<sup>(3)</sup> Nick Galvin, 'Artexpress: Ben Quilty and others look back on teenage work', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 March 2014.

# PRACTICE

## PRACTICE

*Students... learn that practice refers to the social structures, positions, actions and sequences that affect choices, perceptions, directions, ways of working and views of those involved in the visual arts.*

*Students learn that the nature of practice involves the inculcation of beliefs, actions and ideas over time.*

NSW Board of Studies, Visual Arts Stage 6 Syllabus, 2012

## CONCEPTUAL PRACTICE

Ben Quilty puts his own life experience into his art. What he thinks and how he feels about his immediate world, the people he knows, his environment, Australian culture and society all form the base of his conceptual practice from which he visually explores observations and propositions. Over time many of these explorations have continued, blending into others or evolving into something new. This is partly due to Quilty's willingness to be spontaneous in his practice (both conceptually and materially), but also due to the risk-taking generally a part of an artist's practice.

Following are some of the conceptual threads that are part of Quilty's practice.

### Explorations of masculinity and mortality

'My work explores the life that I have led and the subcultures and rituals that best describe the nature of male angst and rebellion. I always think the work I make is fairly autobiographical. I'm not trying hard to build some conceptual framework and, in fact, the more closely I look at my own life the easier it is to make work.'<sup>(1)</sup>

Quilty grew up in the north-western suburbs of Sydney. He recalls his childhood in Kenthurst as being close to idyllic but this changed in his teen years. Life became looser, more social, wilder, riskier, and cooler. The invincibility of male youth with its bravado, anti-authoritarianism, restlessness, spontaneity and hedonism fuelled a passion for mates, alcohol, drugs, muscle cars, heavy music and risk-taking behaviour. He absorbed it, observed it and used his art to probe its logic. It stimulated a life-long fascination with masculinity – what it takes to be a man, how to define it and how boys become men.

Wild times with a group of friends, nicknamed the 'Maggots', from the same area of Sydney inspired much of Quilty's early work. These men are still very much part of his life. Photographs of late night drinking sessions and celebrations prompted large scale portraits of these mates in various stages of 'getting maggot'. *Kenty (maggot)* 2010 is such a work. Here Quilty is not so much interested in portraying a particular individual, who is also a mate, but rather a state of mind. In fact, the artist has also portrayed himself in similar states: he won the University of Queensland Art Museum's inaugural National Artists Self-Portrait Prize in

## PRACTICE

2007 with *Self-Portrait Dead (Over the Hills and Far Away)*, a portrait of himself 'dead-drunk in the early hours after a night of drinking'. 'It is a comment,' he says, 'about reckless masculinity rather than a celebration of drunkenness. I hadn't even thought about it as a self-portrait, but more about the ideas. It's me as a willing participant in the mayhem that is modern man. It's quite critical, the statement I'm making. I want people to see the vulnerability.'<sup>(2)</sup>

Quilty continues to be baffled by the lack of social guidance in the transition from boyhood to manhood in white Australian culture. Referring to his own experience he states, 'Rites of passage? We made them up ... at your 18th birthday you drink alcohol (legally) and there is this expectation that you wake up the next day a man!'<sup>(3)</sup> Quilty's insights into the complexity of male youth are empathetic. He looks at the vulnerability of young men coming to terms with their own masculinity in an adult world and observes, 'There is a sensitivity, an openness and an awkwardness that is very beautiful in young men.'<sup>(3)</sup>



*Torana 2007*  
oil and aerosol on linen  
50 x 160cm  
Collection Goulburn  
Regional Art Gallery,  
donated through the Australian  
Government's  
Cultural Gifts program  
© the artist



## PRACTICE

The muscle cars of the 1970s, cult icons to many young males, were also part of this subculture. The Torana and the Falcon were cars that 'reeked of rebellion.'<sup>(4)</sup>

Even their design appeared to push forward in an aggressive way, a way that 'mirrors the way you would like to be perceived later on.'<sup>(4)</sup> Quilty's images of these metal gods, such as *Torana* 2007, personify an idea of masculinity that is strong, powerful, swift and threatening, but not, as it turns out, without vulnerability. Like the masculinity they represent, they can crash and burn as depicted in the work *Crash Painting 3* 2012. Quilty has observed first-hand the death and injury that can result from extreme behaviour.

Quilty has also explored the dark links between creativity, addiction and potentially lethal excess, particularly of alcohol. In portraits of rock legend Jimmy Barnes (*Jimmy Barnes – there but for the grace of God* 2009) and artist (the late) Adam Cullen (*Cullen before and after* 2006) he depicts states of exhilaration brought on by drinking. One is reminded of Brett Whiteley's observation that 'many gifted people shipwreck'<sup>(5)</sup> when commenting on his own addiction. Quilty uses well-known adult male subjects who have famously battled their addictions while engaged in high-flying, creative careers. His approach is compassionate rather than damning, presenting another male following the crash-and-live/crash-and-die trajectory.

*Cullen – before and after* 2006  
oil on canvas  
150 x 320cm  
collection Newcastle Art Gallery  
© the artist



## PRACTICE

In more overt references to mortality, Quilty has depicted the human skull in many works. The image has its more recent artistic roots in the *vanitas* and *memento mori* images of the late Medieval, Renaissance and Baroque art periods, but can also be found in non-Western and pre-Christian art. Lately there has been a commodification of the skull or 'death's head' as a motif in popular culture. It has also been reborn in the visual arts in artworks such as Damien Hirst's *For the Love of God* 2007.

*Skull Rorschach* 2009 turns what is usually a very sombre subject into a gloriously colourful, vibrant rendition of a skull, with its smeared and distorted Rorschach twin floating decoratively alongside. The artist veers towards Pop Art with its ironic take on images of commodity, although Quilty's gestural painting style evokes Larry Rivers and Robert Rauschenberg rather than Andy Warhol and Robert Lichtenstein. 'The only image more confronting (than images of living humanity) to the human should be the human skull, the head – devoid of flesh and hollowed out of consciousness and brain. At the death of the West's religious fervour the skull though has become a symbol of the human ideology of endlessness, a mocking reminder of the antiquity of religion. Still it remains for me a powerful part of my own portraiture,' says Quilty.<sup>(6)</sup> As Gillian Ridsale, curator of Public Programs at the University of Queensland Art Museum observes, 'It is as if he is trying to paint death into a corner.'<sup>(1)</sup>

*Skull Rorschach* 2009  
oil rorschach on linen  
diptych 60 x 100cm  
(each 60 x 50cm)  
Collection Goulburn  
Regional Art Gallery  
© the artist



## PRACTICE

By 2011, Quilty had established a painting vocabulary often featuring humanity *in extremis*; in states of rage, delirium, vulnerability and fear. His visit that year to war-torn Afghanistan gave him the opportunity to observe firsthand an alternative to some of the masculine behaviours explored in the past.

In *After Afghanistan*, soldiers he came to know in Afghanistan were asked to pick a pose that referenced one of their experiences. The resulting raw, confrontational nude portraits are more an investigation into emotional states and the psychological consequences of war than a portrait in the traditional sense. 'When I came back home,' he says, 'I realised I had a thousand photographs, but it was less about the likeness, less about the landscape, more about the human experience.'<sup>(3)</sup> The works in *After Afghanistan* have the dark expressionism of a Francis Bacon or Chiam Soutine painting, as do his own self-portraits from this time, for example, *Self-Portrait After Afghanistan* 2012.



*Self-Portrait After  
Afghanistan* 2012  
oil on canvas  
130 x 120cm  
private collection  
© the artist

## PRACTICE

Margaret Olley 2011  
oil on linen  
170 x 150cm  
Art Gallery of New South Wales  
on loan from the artist  
photo: AGNSW  
© the artist



Quilty's conceptual practice is largely autobiographical. His own image and world is evident throughout his body of work. Concerns with masculinity, mortality, creativity, history and identity are filtered through his immediate and past experiences of friends, family, objects and places as a young Australian male. Subsequently, male images have been a large part of his oeuvre.

When discussing his portrait process for the *Ben Quilty Live!* exhibition in 2009, Quilty said, 'The selection of each sitter is pretty organic. I have been looking, though only for males – and only males who had made a significant impact on my view of the world. It became an exploration of "male-ness" in Australia, only because that's where the work was being made and that was where my immediate experience was based'<sup>(1)</sup>.

'The portraits have all been of males with the exception of one more formal and conceptually traditional portrait of Beryl Whiteley (Brett Whiteley's mother), which was hung in the 2005 Archibald Prize. The male "sitters" have come from disparate parts of society (my mates, John Howard, Captain James Cook and my son Joe), but all form a part of the way I have experienced the world.'<sup>(1)</sup>

However, Quilty won the Archibald Prize in 2011 for his portrait of female art icon Margaret Olley, who was a great friend and mentor. He has also depicted another iconic woman, feminist Germaine Greer. Quilty is proud to have been the only male in the Feminist Studies course he took at the University of Western Sydney. He spent time with Greer at her property in Queensland in 2007 and wrote the essay 'Germaine Greer: a Portrait' about the encounter for the Australian literary journal *Meanjin*. The artist made several Rorschach portraits of Greer in 2010. For *After Afghanistan* he has also painted female soldier Captain Kate Porter.

## PRACTICE

Now in his early forties and married with two children, Quilty is not quite an angry young Australian male anymore. His current exploration of male culture encompasses his own growing son, his father, mates who are finally moving out of adolescence, historical male signifiers like Cook, and soldiers coming to terms with their experiences in Afghanistan.

The women who support and inspire him in his personal life are also there in his art. His mother, wife and daughter have been painted many times. Their relationships are a part of Quilty's identity, contributing to the ongoing autobiographical nature of his work.

- (1) University of Queensland Art Museum, *Ben Quilty Live!* Interpretive Guide, 2009.
- (2) 'Dead Drunk Self-Portrait Wins National Prize', [www.news.com.au](http://www.news.com.au), 22 October 2007.
- (3) Ben Quilty and Richard Fielder, 'Conversations with Richard Feidler', ABC Radio 702, 3 December 2014.
- (4) Quilty quoted in Lenny Ann Low, 'The Hot Seat, Ben Quilty', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 March 2007.
- (5) *Difficult Pleasure: a Portrait of Brett Whiteley*, Featherstone Productions, 1989. <http://aso.gov.au/titles/documentaries/difficult-pleasure/clip1/>
- (6) Ben Quilty, 'Observation Point', *Portrait 38*, National Portrait Gallery, December 2010 – February 2011.



*Captain Kate Porter,  
after Afghanistan 2012*  
oil on linen  
180 x 170cm  
collection the artist  
© the artist

**Humanitarianism and social issues**

Quilty is very aware of the inequities of our ostensibly egalitarian society. Afghanistan alerted him to ongoing issues with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), that plagues the lives of returned soldiers and can result in depression, disconnection, addiction, anger and suicide. He empathises with the soldiers' struggle with mortality and normality upon return to home and family, and uses his art to draw attention to this often overlooked toll of war.

*Troy Park, after  
Afghanistan 2012*  
oil on linen  
190 x 140cm  
collection the artist  
© the artist



He has been a keen observer of Aboriginal society, having had the experience of two years off school when young to travel around Australia with his parents and two younger brothers. It was his contact with Aboriginal people during this time that established a lifelong admiration for the traditions and values of the First Australians. He spent a fondly remembered time near Uluru playing with kids who had a pet baby camel and 'really wanted to be one of them and not go back to school'. He notes that in traditional Aboriginal society it can take up to 13 years to prepare a young man for adulthood and that in our contemporary society 'it's just one night!'<sup>(1)</sup> (making reference to the 18th birthday).

More recently, Quilty has taken up the cause of the Bali Nine, in particular Myuran Sukumaran, to whom he has been giving art lessons over the past three years, along with Andrew Chan. Recently he, with Megan Washington and others, staged a candlelight vigil in Martin Place to support these men, who have spent 10 years on death row inside Bali's Kerobokan prison for smuggling heroin.

In a recent article Quilty said 'he was 'extremely proud' of his friend [Sukumaran], who is finishing a Bachelor of Fine Arts by correspondence at Curtin University. He empathised with the pair because of his own encounters with drugs, alcohol and the law ... They are at the very extreme end of what can go terribly wrong for young men,' he said. 'They made stupid, self-indulgent mistakes, but so did I.'<sup>(2)</sup>

<sup>(1)</sup> Ben Quilty and Richard Fielder, 'Conversations with Richard Fielder', ABC Radio 702, 3 December 2014.

<sup>(2)</sup> <http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/music-for-mercy-ben-quilty-megan-washington-to-hold-martin-place-vigil-for-bali-nine-death-row-inmates-20150129-1303qd.html#ixzz3QHCN8XZg>

### Australian identity and history

As a fifth generation Australian from an Irish background, the artist is very aware of the displacement of Aboriginal people with the arrival of Europeans such as his own Irish ancestors. This has emerged in works such as *Fairy Bower Rorschach* 2012, depicting a beautiful place not far from his own home, believed to have been the site of a massacre of Aboriginal people by white settlers in the early 19th century. The Rorschach process creates a distorted mirror image, a 'butterfly painting' that is both beautiful and a corruption of the original, echoing the beauty and violent past of the place.

Quilty has used Nathaniel Dance's eighteenth century image of Captain Cook as the starting point for a number of paintings of the explorer (Dance was the official draughtsman on Cook's third expedition). Quilty chose Cook as one of a number of men he feels have links with Australian male identity: others he has portrayed include ex-Prime Minister John Howard; Douglas Wood, the Australian contractor held hostage in Iraq in 2005; and artists Albert Namatjira, Frederick McCubbin and Tom Roberts.

Cook's image is central in Quilty's 2010 suite of works *Inhabit*, which examines the idea of 'us having inhabited a country for only 200 years, and ... our identity and my own identity'.<sup>(1)</sup> He regards the 16 paintings and one sculpture that comprise *Inhabit* as a self-portrait exploring his own role as a white Australian male in the history of this country. Quilty has reinvented the image of Cook in paintings using spray paint and the Rorschach technique, moving away from historical accounts and into his own personal experience and interpretation. He links the process to other areas of his conceptual practice: 'I guess it's about reinventing history, and young men do that all the time. They tattoo themselves with Ned Kelly or the Australian flag or both! It's about the idea of men, Australian males, making up these big parts of history to try to define themselves as Australians.'<sup>(2)</sup>

<sup>(1)</sup> Ben Quilty: interview, Saatchi Gallery, London, July 2014, <http://vimeo.com/100535405>.

<sup>(2)</sup> Ben Quilty, *Live!*, interview with Lisa Slade, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a60mrj1-sJA>.

### Material Practice

Ben Quilty's material practice is delivered with the same energy and passion evident in his conceptual practice. His characteristic sweeps of thick impasto oil paint have been described variously as painterly, gestural, expressive, vivid, sumptuous, lush, ripped, broad, visceral, smeared, smudged, caked, slapped, juicy, sculptural, direct and intuitive.

The scale of his paintings is usually big and bold, appropriate to the amount of energy he brings to the act of painting. His tools have evolved from brushes and palette knives to 'the cheapest and largest palette knives in the Southern Hemisphere – cake decorating tools!'<sup>(1)</sup> These days his *alla prima* technique often starts with an underdrawing in spray paint.

Quilty links his material practice to his conceptual practice. There is, he says 'an inherent violence that surrounds young men now, and going back to when I was a boy that was then directed into the way I made paintings. There is a very violent application and things move very fast, but I could harness all my own ideas about masculinity into my practice'.<sup>(2)</sup> 'The start [of the painting] has to be a letting go ... the gestural as an outpouring of emotion and masculinity.'<sup>(3)</sup>

The artist's Rorschach canvases that emerged in 2007 are also risk-taking. There is the chance that the blotting of the original image might destroy both it and its twin. Masses of oil paint are used in what Quilty admits is not only a famous psychological test, but also the type of 'butterfly painting' much beloved by kindergarten students. He enjoys the use of a high art medium like oil paint being used in such subversive ways. The darker subject matter chosen for the Rorschachs is transformed into something beautiful and more decorative in the process.

Despite the rapidity and apparent spontaneity of his paint application, the artist's compositional skills and his use of contour and tone to pinpoint the individual features of his subjects is planned and practised with care. As art critic John McDonald wrote in 2009, 'Instead of simply focusing on his heavy application of paint and rapidity of execution, one becomes conscious of the intelligence that underpins the action. Quilty may slap on paint like a berserk warrior, but he plans his themes and motifs in the manner of a general mapping out a campaign.'<sup>(4)</sup> As with other artists such as Nicholas Harding and Jun Chen, who use a strongly impasto technique, Quilty's canvases look like sculptural abstracts up close, only coming into focus when we step back.



## PRACTICE

Quilty regards himself primarily as a painter. 'I have learnt to love sculpture and photo-based media and digital art but, for me, my love of painting is instinctive.'<sup>(4)</sup> However, he has experimented with mediums such as gouache, Chinese ink, oil stick and spray paint. He has recently created a series of 'Toby' jugs in porcelain delicately finished with gilt and floral overglazes, portraying various male subjects who have also appeared in his paintings.

The artist has a great passion for drawing ('like recording the pleasure of being alive'<sup>(5)</sup>) and continues the practice of life drawing and other forms of observational drawing in sketchbooks and diaries. 'I taught myself to draw. I wanted to be able to draw when I was pretty young, but drawing is only one tiny part of a practice. Practice literally means to practise, like yoga or football.'<sup>(6)</sup> In his school days he was reluctant to keep a visual diary, but 'now I can't work without one. All my ideas are jotted down in diaries. I'm always asked about "writer's block" ... without a diary maybe, but with a few on the go it's become for me about curating my own ideas. I have too many ideas. I need to settle on ideas that can take me somewhere ... ideas that have legs. Ideas that can carry my studio practice for more than just one work'.<sup>(6)</sup>

Photography has a role in Quilty's art and is important to some aspects of his practice. A photograph or quick series of photographs can sometimes record fleeting facial expressions faster than a pencil; for example, in the oddly adult expressions on the faces of infants, or the unguarded devilry on the face of a mate on a night out. In Afghanistan he asked soldiers of the Special Operations Task Force to adopt the same pose for the camera. This involved facing the sun with eyes closed, then opening them. At this point the artist took the photograph. 'To me,' he explained, 'this symbolises what they are facing, something immense, overwhelming.'<sup>(7)</sup> After working in his studio on the images, he changed his mind about using the photographs, instead opting for live sittings with returned soldiers. Perhaps because of this experience Quilty has recently been moving away from the use of photography, preferring to use memory and imagination in his practice.

<sup>(1)</sup> University of Queensland Art Museum, *Ben Quilty Live! Interpretive Guide*, 2009.

<sup>(2)</sup> *Difficult Pleasure: a Portrait of Brett Whiteley*, Featherstone Productions, 1989

<sup>(3)</sup> Ben Quilty on New Masculinities in Australian Art with Kit Messham-Muir [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3g1R\\_qbHDWg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3g1R_qbHDWg).

<sup>(4)</sup> John McDonald, 'Rev-head drops down a gear', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 October 2009.

<sup>(5)</sup> Ben Quilty, and Richard Fielder, 'Conversations with Richard Fielder', ABC Radio 702, 3 December 2014.

<sup>(6)</sup> Ben Quilty, 'Advancing society through the arts', *What Matters*, University of Sydney interview, <http://what-matters.sydney.edu.au/topic/support-for-the-arts>.

<sup>(7)</sup> Janet Hawley, 'Tour of Duty', *Good Weekend, The Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 February 2012.

## THE FRAMES

*Students learn about the frames – subjective, cultural, structural and postmodern – that provide different philosophical/theoretical and interpretive frameworks for understanding the layering of meaning, significance, value and belief in and about the visual arts.*

NSW Board of Studies, Visual Arts Stage 6 Syllabus, 2012

### ARTWORK ANALYSIS USING THE FRAMES

#### Structural Frame

*Students... consider how artworks can be read and their meaning understood in terms of how specific symbols refer to the world. Students... study how visual information is transmitted in artworks, how the formal and organisational relationships in a work mean certain things and how the visual arts can operate as a visual language at a certain time and over time.*

NSW Board of Studies, Visual Arts Stage 6 Syllabus, 2012

*Cook Rorschach* 2009 features two large heads organised around a central axis of symmetry. Initially the image was created on unstretched linen, which was stretched after the painting process finished.

Quilty has chosen to base his work on an important eighteenth century portrait of explorer Captain James Cook by Nathaniel Dance, commissioned by Sir Joseph Banks after Cook's successful second voyage of discovery. In Dance's painting, Cook is seated to the left and faces to the right. In Quilty's version, Cook's image is bodiless, the facial expression taking on a sinister grimness.

The artist created the original part of the image in thick swipes of paint onto the right hand side of unstretched linen using a palette knife/icing spatula as a tool. The image on the left has been made by folding the linen on the left over the painted image on the right in the manner of a monotype or 'butterfly painting', resulting in a mirrored image on the left. The heads are joined to one another at one point along the axis of symmetry near the eyes. Streaks and spots of oil paint on the flat white background, testament to Quilty's vigorous application, are also mirrored in the left image. The left image has less clarity than the right – it is blurred, some colours have not transferred, and the texture of the original image with its chunks of knife-applied colour have become smeared and rippled. Some facial features are almost destroyed.

## THE FRAMES

'Humans are very good at readapting/reordering history to suit their sense of national pride or social identity,'<sup>(1)</sup> says Quilty. Cook is an iconic figure, a hero to many, who is also partly responsible for the colonisation of Australia by the British. What is overlooked in many of the official accounts of Cook's place in history is the impact of the ensuing white settlement on the Aboriginal occupants of the country. Quilty comments, 'Captain Cook symbolised the end of their community ... their Dreamtime ... their culture, and quite often a very destructive and violent death.'<sup>(1)</sup>

*Cook Rorschach* 2009  
oil on linen  
140 x 190cm  
courtesy the artist  
© the artist



Through his choice of subject and the actions employed in the creation of this work Quilty considers the historical significance of Cook, more especially how 'official' history can distort, blur or even obliterate whole aspects of people and events. The artist presents us with two versions of Cook – a clear but brooding version, and a smeared, corrupted version – both mutated from the earlier painting by Dance. By deliberately making the corrupted version the same orientation as Cook's pose in Dance's original, Quilty implies corruption as a starting point. His violent application of paint and palette of reds suggest a sense of brutality.

<sup>(1)</sup> Ben Quilty: interview, Saatchi Gallery, London, July 2014, <http://vimeo.com/100535405>.

### Cultural Frame

.... students ... consider how notions of cultural identity can inform the production of artworks. Students may study differing cultural attitudes towards the visual arts and the effects of scientific and technological innovation, politics and economics. They may study concepts of social and cultural identity (e.g. gender, Indigenous, regional, national, modern, contemporary etc.) on artistic practices in particular places at a certain time and over time.

NSW Board of Studies, Visual Arts Stage 6 Syllabus, 2012

Quilty believes in the power of art to effect social change. 'I feel I can talk about things that are taboo,' he says. 'If you look into the face of a taboo, then you get a better sense of what it's like to be human.'<sup>(1)</sup> The taboos or uncomfortable truths he raises in *Cook Rorschach* relate strongly to concepts that resonate throughout his practice.

Images of men who Quilty feels have links with his own Australian 'straight white male' identity have occupied many of his works. In *Cook*, he examines one of the heroes of a white Australian upbringing – a man reputed to be fair, a natural leader, a person of great skill, determination and resourcefulness.

The unquestioning acceptance of 'Cook-as-hero' in the conventional historical account is probed. Quilty's Aboriginal studies revealed the amount of resistance Cook encountered when he landed at Botany Bay and the violence that occurred. Quilty was shocked that the truth of that first meeting had somehow become diluted in historical retellings. 'We began with violence,' he says.<sup>(2)</sup> He believes that by drawing attention to Cook and historical depictions of the explorer he is able to present an alternative view; that to the original inhabitants, Cook represented the beginning of the end. This theme has been developed in the *Inhabit* body of work and series of *Cook* images.

<sup>(1)</sup> Ben Quilty, 'Observation Point' *Portrait* 38, National Portrait Gallery, December 2010 – February 2011.

<sup>(2)</sup> Ben Quilty: interview, Saatchi Gallery, London, July 2014, <http://vimeo.com/100535405>.

### Subjective Frame

*... students ...develop personal responses to artists and artworks that are highly significant to them. They can explore artworks as expressive and unique objects, develop notions of individual styles, and interpret the work and the influence of those artists who are of great personal interest to them*

NSW Board of Studies, Visual Arts Stage 6 Syllabus, 2012

Quilty's art is both dramatic and confrontational. Its great swoops of colour, texture and scale underpin frequently dark themes. The artist is very aware of the theatricality of art: he comments on how the surfaces of his paintings are at odds with the more distant view – the lush colours and textures resolve into images that can be ugly or violent.

The artist links his vigorous paint application to aspects of his masculinity, to risk-taking and aggression. 'The best paintings are about pushing the boundaries and about me losing control of the medium.'<sup>(1)</sup> He walks a fine line between control and plan, and lack of control/spontaneity. There is also the risk he takes with the Rorschach process of either destroying the painting entirely or 'squashing the image and creating something more beautiful ... By destroying an image via the Rorschach process ... you can force the audience to view something that might be an uncomfortable truth.'<sup>(1)</sup>

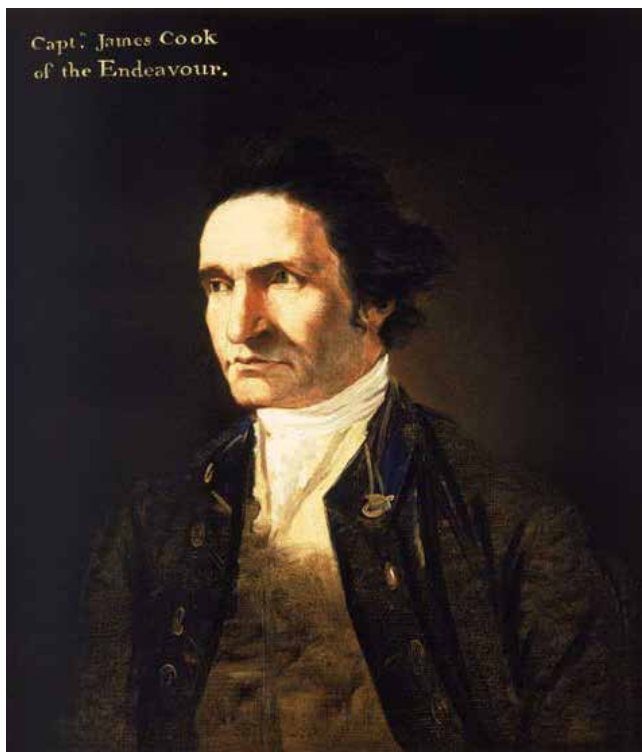
The artist's practice is subjective and self-aware. Quilty feels strongly and shows his emotions in his work, drawing on his own immediate experiences from the past and present. Many of his works are portraits. In *Cook Rorschach* the large twinned heads disrupt our ideas about the explorer, forcing us to question this remaking of a familiar historical figure into someone bigger, rawer and more threatening.

<sup>(1)</sup> University of Queensland Art Museum, *Ben Quilty Live! Interpretive Guide*, 2009

## THE FRAMES

Nathaniel Dance  
*Captain James Cook 1775-76*  
oil on canvas  
127 x 106.1cm  
© National Maritime Museum,  
Greenwich, London

William Hodges  
*Captain Cook 1775-76*  
oil on canvas  
48 x 55.4cm  
© National Maritime Museum,  
Greenwich, London



### Postmodern Frame

*students ...question practice in art and the generally accepted classifications of artists, artworks, movements and styles. They can identify inconsistencies in what is written. They can re-evaluate notions of the artistic genius and the masterpiece, and study influences and chronologies to reveal power relations, disjunctions and hidden assumptions.*

NSW Board of Studies, Visual Arts Stage 6 Syllabus, 2012

With his wig or perhaps powdered hair, dressed in his captain's full dress uniform and surrounded by objects symbolising his explorations, Dance's image of Cook is, as Quilty himself has observed, somewhat aristocratic and dandified.

It is worth comparing Dance's portrait of Cook with one made by William Hodges, who was the official draughtsman on Cook's second voyage. Both portraits were made at roughly the same time. Hodges' version of Cook is much humbler, more like a man who was born into a farm labourer's family in Yorkshire and rose to be the great navigator and explorer of his time. There is no wig or powder and the figure wears street clothes.

That Quilty has chosen to appropriate Dance's image for *Cook Rorschach* is significant. The image conveys a sense of power and authority: a sense that Cook, by his dress and manner, is a member of the ruling class. Sir Joseph Banks, who accompanied Cook on his first voyage to Australia's east coast, commissioned the portrait and it hung in his London house until his death. Banks was a wealthy and influential man who was prominent in English society.

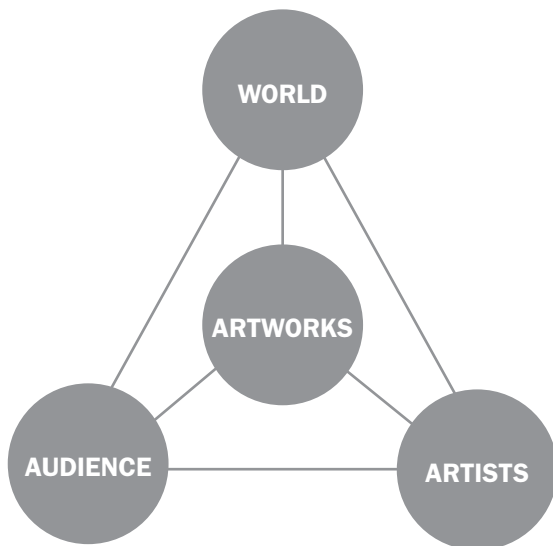
The artist takes Dance's Cook, removes the body, enlarges the head, and creates a smeared Rorschach twin. By subverting the original image, the artist queries the authority of history and the way we view our past.

Similarly, he takes traditional high art materials, oil paint on linen, and uses a technique which relates more to child's play and psychotherapy than painting conventions.

## THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework provides a model for understanding the agencies in the art world – the artist, artwork, world and audience, and the relationships between them. Through the conceptual framework, students learn about:

NSW Board of Studies, Visual Arts Stage 6 Syllabus, 2012



## ARTWORK

(Also refer to the Structural Frame and Material Practice)

**Artworks as real objects**, as material, physical and virtual objects. The concept of artworks includes art, craft and design as two- and three-dimensional works (including architecture), and four-dimensional and time-based works. Artworks also exist as representations of ideas that reflect such things as personal responses, cultural views, symbolic interpretations and critical reinterpretations of other ideas.

## WORLD

(Also refer to the Cultural and Postmodern Frames and Conceptual Practice)

**How interests in the world are represented** in art (art as a representation of experience, class, ideology, age, events of significance).

Many of Quilty's early works centre on the social and physical world of a young man in suburban Australia in the 1980s and 1990s. Fast cars, parties, risk-taking behaviour and boredom were part of that world. A sense of mortality accompanied the wild behaviour although in and amongst the more negative aspects of this world there is a sense of hedonism and raw exhilaration. Recently the impact of war on the psychology of returned soldiers saw Quilty exploring another aspect of men under pressure.

## AUDIENCE

(Also refer to the Subjective Frame and Conceptual Practice)

**The role and value of the audience** as a body of critical consumers. The concept of the audience includes art critics and art historians as well as teachers, students, entrepreneurs, patrons and other members of the public. Audiences for works change over time and bring different meanings to artworks, artists and interpretations of the world. Quilty's early commercial success and public recognition revolved around subjects taken from his adolescent/early adult world. Holden Toranas, the muscle car of 1970s'

Australia, crashed cars, drunk mates. The art market, primed by 1960s' Pop Art, lapped up his lavish use of oil paint and linen on such 'low art' subjects. In Ben Quilty, the search for an Australian vernacular had found a new hero. Winning the Brett Whiteley Scholarship allowed the artist to turn to his art practice full time. It also marked the start of his association with artist, patron and mentor Margaret Olley. Quilty's success in art prizes and competitions, including his Archibald win with his portrait of Olley, are well documented.



Quilty's large scale oil paintings – portraits, landscapes, still-lives and appropriations – have a strong physical presence and energy. The artist attended art school in the 1990s, when the whole existence of painting as a viable art form, challenged by new media and postmodernism, was being questioned under the banner of 'painting is dead'. He alleges it made him more assertive in his attitude to his conceptual and material practice, challenging and questioning the process of painting as his body of work grew.

Australia – its past and its heroes – is part of Quilty's world. He sees our present Australian culture as lacking a proper way of guiding young men to adulthood. He also looks at how historical narratives influence our own sense of social identity, and how these should be questioned and challenged.

The world of popular culture has a place in Quilty's art, from rock singers like Jimmy Barnes and Jim Morrison, to artists like the late Adam Cullen, to popular cult objects like cars, hamburgers and death's head imagery. He works from a contemporary perspective, often combining elements that are traditional with pop culture, all rendered with his hallmark impasto technique.

<sup>(1)</sup> <https://www.artsunit.nsw.edu.au/ben-quilty-visual-arts>.

<sup>(2)</sup> Ben Quilty: interview, Saatchi Gallery, London, July 2014, <http://vimeo.com/100535405>.

He has received critical acclaim here and overseas, and is regarded as one of Australia's most prominent artists. Quilty likes to confront his audience, and is aware of the theatricality of the audience's experience when viewing his work. He works subjectively, and draws an emotional response from his audience.

## ARTIST

(Also refer to the Cultural Frame and Conceptual Framework)

**The role of the artist:** *the who, what, how, and why.*  
The concept of the artist encompasses practitioners such as artists, craftspeople, designers and architects. The artist can be thought of as an individual or as a group, school, movement, etc.

Quilty sees his role as an artist as one of questioning taboos. 'With truth we will make a better society.'<sup>(1)</sup>

Taboos, or forbidden subjects, include the violence of white colonial contact with Aboriginal people and the psychological ravages of modern warfare. His examination of Australian culture exposes the darker side of suburban male youth impression on him, including historical figures, family and friends and political figures. 'Artists examine and tear apart social norms. If you look into the face of a taboo you get a better sense of what it's like to be human.'<sup>(2)</sup>

The artist continues to practise as a painter. His large scale works in heavy layers of oil paint challenge some of the conventional practices of painting, particularly in his use of spray paint and the Rorschach technique.

## PREVIOUS HSC EXAMINATION QUESTIONS RELEVANT TO THIS CASE STUDY

### PRACTICE

- 1** Discuss how cultural experience informs the practice of artists, art critics, art historians and/or curators. (2012)
- 2** *As part of their practice, artists navigate emotional states and rational choices.* Discuss this statement with reference to a range of examples. (2012)

### FRAMES

- 1** *Art does not need to imitate life.*  
With reference to this statement, analyse how and why artists have used approaches other than realism. (2014)
- 2** *Great art is the outward expression of an inner life in the artist, and this inner life will result in his personal vision of the world.* Edward Hopper  
Discuss this statement with reference to how artists communicate concepts using a visual language. (2013)
- 3** Analyse how artworks represent and document cultural histories. (2013)
- 4** Explain why artists use recontextualisation when making art. In your answer, refer to a range of examples. (2012)
- 5** Analyse how emotion is used in artworks to provoke and generate discussion about ideas and issues. (2012)
- 6** *Most artists have critical and productive relationships with their culture.*  
Explore this statement with reference to a range of examples where these relationships are demonstrated. (2011)

### CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

- 1** *Art should comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable.* Banksy  
With reference to this quotation, examine how art can be a social commentary in response to world events and/or issues. (2014)
- 2** *Contemporary audiences often expect to be stimulated or entertained when engaging with artworks.*  
Explain how audience expectations influence the intentions and actions of artists. (2012)
- 3** Explain the significance of art awards, prizes and/or commissions to artists' success in the artworld.  
In your answer you could consider practitioners including artists, designers and architects. (2009)

## GLOSSARY

**alla prima** is a style of painting where, instead of building colours up with layers or glazing over an underpainting, the painting is completed while the paint is still wet. Strictly defined, an alla prima painting would be started and finished in one painting session, but the term is also more loosely applied to any painting done in a direct, expressive style, with minimal preparation. 'Alla prima' comes from Italian, literally meaning 'at once'.

**humanist/humanitarianism.** Concerned with people's needs and with finding rational ways to solve human problems.

**memento mori** is Latin for 'remember (that you have) to die', and refers to an object kept as a reminder of the inevitability of death, such as a skull. In art, *memento mori* are artistic or symbolic reminders of mortality.

**'painting is dead'**. The original quotation is attributed to the 19th century French painter Paul Delaroche, who is believed to have said 'from today, painting is dead'. The observation was probably made in 1839, when Delaroche saw examples of the Daguerreotype, the first successful photographic process. It has since been used to question the validity of painting as an art form in the face of philosophical, technological and postmodern challenges.

**Rorschach inkblot test** is a psychological test used to determine personality characteristics. The test, named after its creator, involves identifying images in a series of 10 inkblots. The inkblots are symmetrical, made by folding one half of a sheet of paper over fresh, randomly placed ink.

**vanitas** In the arts, vanitas is a type of symbolic work of art especially associated with still life painting in Flanders and the Netherlands in the 16th and 17th centuries, though also common in other places and periods. The Latin word means 'vanity' and loosely translated corresponds to the meaninglessness of earthly life and the transient nature of all earthly goods and pursuits.

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