ART FROM THE FRONT LINE

Artist Ben Quilty says his latest Brisbane exhibition will be both honest and confronting

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Ben Quilty is mad as hell and he is not going to take it anymore. But what to do?

Paint of course. Quilty is one of Australia’s most respected artists and his figurative expressionist works range from the beautiful to the confronting.

His latest Brisbane exhibition, which opens at Jan Murphy Gallery in Brisbane on Tuesday, is entitled The Last Supper and it is a tough, uncompromising visual commentary on the state of the world. It’s activist art by a modern master and Quilty makes no apologies for the fact that some of the works may not be pretty.

“Beauty is all right and part of the creative process but we need to be confronting issues right now,” Quilty says. “I can’t in good conscience come into the studio and make beautiful things because the world is facing massive issues and we need to be talking about them. We’re in trouble if the saviour the Western world puts forward is Donald Trump. Every artist should be working on their issues.”

Quilty, 43, lives in the Southern Highlands of New South Wales with his family. He has exhibited in Brisbane for more than a decade and at one stage was such a regular visitor that people assumed he was a Queenslander.

“I never mind that, though,” Quilty says. “I’m happy to be mistaken for a Queenslander.”

His first show here featured funky retro imagery of Toranas and budgies and he has a talent for portraiture, including self-portraiture.

He won the Archibald Prize in 2011 with a portrait of his friend and mentor, the late great artist Margaret Olley. Archibald Prize winners are often controversial but most agreed Quilty’s painting was a standout winner. As he has matured as an artist and gained a wider audience, his subject matter has darkened. That process may have been helped along by being an official war artist (appointed by the Australian War Memorial) in 2011.

He was attached to the Australian Defence Force in Afghanistan visiting Kandahar, Kabul and Tarin Kowt to record the life of soldiers. Back home, he kept in touch with veterans and his powerful touring exhibition After Afghanistan, which came to Brisbane in 2014, explored the aftermath of war and the effects war has had on those veterans.

Quilty also famously went to Bali to work with the Bali Nine and became close friends with condemned prisoner Myuran Sukumaran who became quite an accomplished painter under Quilty’s tutelage. Sukumaran’s execution shook Quilty to the core.

Last year, Quilty visited the Middle East and Europe with writer Richard Flanagan. The pair visited refugee camps in Lebanon and elsewhere, chronicling the desperate plight of refugees in the region.

One of the paintings in his Brisbane show, Vest, is a potent reminder of what’s happening.

“I picked that child’s safety vest up on the shores of the island of Lesbos,” Quilty explains.

“That vest is in my studio as a constant reminder. It’s so easy to forget what’s happening when we’re here but that little vest is a powerful reminder.”

Many works in his Brisbane exhibition reflect human suffering. The Last Supper series, in particular, uses expressionistic, even vaguely cubist elements, to portray humanity’s torment. One thinks of Picasso’s masterpiece Guernica and Quilty is fine with that. In a catalogue essay accompanying the show, writer Beth Jackson describes that series as “a series of meta portraits of a grotesque collective consciousness” which sounds about right.

There are also grotesque portraits such as The Judge and CEO and a haunting Self portrait at 41 which looks like the sort of painting that Dorian Gray might have had in his attic.

These are powerful, disturbing works that are reminiscent of the works of Francis Bacon and Quilty intends them to be confronting.

“I’m looking at human issues,” Quilty says. “War is part of the human condition but we’ve been at war now for decades and what I can’t understand is – when will we stop being at war?”

With things the way they are artists should be on the front line protesting and offering commentary, Quilty says.

“There’s an imperative that artists should become activists,” he says. “What we’re doing is not working. We’re destroying the planet and millions of people are being displaced.”

Like I said, he’s mad as hell and he’s doing what he can. The beautiful paintings may come again but not right now because he has important work to do and his Brisbane show will be his new front line.

Ben Quilty: The Last Supper, May 23 - June 17, Jan Murphy Gallery, Fortitude Valley; janmurphygallery.com.au