THE ART OF WAR

The honoured tradition of war artists continues with an exhibition of portraits from the conflict in Afghanistan, writes Phil Brown.

AT FIRST glance Arthur Streeton and Ben Quilty may not seem to have much in common.

Their work is very different – Streeton was an influential Australian impressionist and Quilty, an Archibald Prize-winner, is a contemporary painter known for his figurative expressionism. The sedate surface of a Streeton in no way compares with the muscular topography of Quilty’s powerful portraits.

But they do have something in common – both have been Australian official war artists.

Streeton (1867-1943) was commissioned by the Australian War Memorial, Canberra, to cover the First World War and, nearly a century later, Quilty was sent to Afghanistan as part of the same Official War Art Scheme.

For Quilty, 40, who lives in the Southern Highlands of New South Wales, it was an honour connecting him with an honourable tradition and the results of his efforts can be seen in the powerful exhibition, Ben Quilty: after Afghanistan, which opens at the Griffith University Art Gallery next weekend.

“IT was a life-changing experience to go to Afghanistan,” Quilty says.

“And it was a pretty amazing opportunity, thanks to the Australian War Memorial which is wonderful institution. They have a massive collection of art and there are some amazing works. One of my favourites is a painting of the Battle of the Somme which features these tufts of explosions on the horizon. He was painting that scene en plein air and the first day he painted, 40,000 soldiers died. Streeton witnessed that.”

The horrors of war need to be chronicled, says Quilty, who was deployed in 2011 to observe and paint the activities of Australian servicemen and women in Kabul, Kandahar and Tarin Kowt during Operation Slipper.

In doing so he became part of a tradition that includes some of Australia’s greatest artists. It’s impressive that Streeton is among them but there are many other famous names on that honour board including Will Dyson, Yosl Bergner, William Dargie, William Dobell, Donald Friend, Sidney Nolan, Grace Cossington Smith and, more recently, Peter Churcher, and Wendy Sharpe.

As Quilty points out, his brief was not to glorify war or to memorialise the military but to tell it like it was, or at least how he saw it.

The artist readily confesses that he was somewhat reluctant at first to take on this artistic mission.

“I never wanted to go there, to be quite honest,” Quilty says. “I didn’t want to go and risk my life but I did feel strongly that it was my duty, for some reason.”

And when he went he met men and women who are still his friends. Meeting them under duress in extreme conditions abroad was only part of the story because he maintained contact and has also chronicled their emotional turmoil and the mental scarring that occurs in war.

Quilty is brutally honest about this and about how we underestimate the effect war has on returned soldiers.

“One thing I have observed is there is a miscarriage of justice in the way we care for these people,” Quilty says.

“For example, I had a very disturbing conversation with an officer back here and was told there was no such thing as post-traumatic stress disorder.”

He begs to differs and his powerful paintings show servicemen and women with great dignity in extremis. In the painting Lance Corporal M, after Afghanistan, his naked subject seems to writhe in pain.

Captain Kate Porter, after Afghanistan portrays a woman whose emotions are as naked as she is. And so it goes in a series of the most moving, most powerful paintings you will ever see. But Quilty is no one-trick pony as he demonstrates in the lyrical landscape Transparent might, after Afghanistan. Anyone who knows Australian art will recognise the homage here to Arthur Streeton’s famous 1896 painting The purple noon’s transparent might. It’s a nice touch.

This Australian War Memorial travelling exhibition...
shows an artist at the height of his powers tackling a subject that is as old as time. But Ben Quilty brings something new to it. Male angst has long been one of his main themes and he says some of the male soldiers he met have attempted suicide as they battle their demons. This exhibition salutes them and pays tribute to both the strength and fragility of the human spirit.

SEE IT

BEN QUILTY: AFTER AFGHANISTAN
WHERE: Griffith University Art Gallery, 226 Grey St, South Bank
WHEN: April 11 - June 7
COST: Free entry
MORE INFO: griffith.edu.au
FROM THE FRONT LINE: Ben Quilty in front of one of his portraits of Air Commodore John Oddie. and (below) Captain S, which features in Quilty’s exhibition After Afghanistan.