On a Saturday morning in Brisbane one doesn’t expect to find a long queue extending from the entrance of the Gallery of Modern Art. It was the sort of queue that forms when people are waiting to buy tickets for rock concerts or be first into the Boxing Day sales. The goal this time was a seat in the gallery theatre for a conversation between Ben Quilty and curator, Lisa Slade.

It was a graphic demonstration of the high public profile Quilty enjoys, partly as a result of his willingness to speak out about politics and human rights. The only worry for the artist is that people may be drawn by the lure of celebrity rather than his work.

This might also be the case with the other half of GOMA’s double bill: the one-and-only Margaret Olley (1923-2011). In Queensland, the adulation of The Oll has reached outlandish proportions. Even Christine France, who curated Olley’s first retrospective in 1990, said: ‘It’s a cult!’ While part of the masses were queueing to hear the prophet, Ben, the rest were swarming through the shrine of St. Margaret, A.K.A the retrospective exhibition, *Margaret Olley: A Generous Life*.

As a double act Ben and Margaret seem to be right up there with other legendary Aussie duos such as Burke and Wills or Kath and Kim. In a city where exhibitions by international stars such as Cindy Sherman or Gerhard Richter held few
attractions for the locals, QAGOMA looks set to have their biggest attendances this year with the homegrown product.

I've already written about the Quilty show in Adelaide so I won't dwell upon it here. The GOMA hang is distinctly different, although not necessarily an improvement. This time the display feels more crowded and the lighting a bit dimmer, meaning that Quilty's big, expressionist canvases loom aggressively on all sides. The impact is undeniable, but the concentrated arrangement pushes the drama of the work closer to melodrama.

Quilty is easily the most polarising artist in Australia today, although his admirers tend to be members of the public while the detractors are usually fellow artists. It's a more objective measure of Quilty's achievements that he has generated a huge following with paintings that are the furthest thing from the “comfortable armchair” Matisse saw as the model for a work of art. Quilty's pictures can be horror shows - dark, grotesque and challenging, preoccupied with social injustice.

\[Image\]

Myuran by Ben Quilty (2012). MIM STIRLING/PRIVATE COLLECTION

Is it possible to admire the politics but dislike the paintings? This is the real problem Quilty poses for many viewers, as he makes it difficult to dissociate the issue from the expression. To reject his painted lifejackets is to show no compassion for refugees. To denigrate his portraits of soldiers back from Afghanistan is to be indifferent to their traumas. Like it or loathe it, Quilty treats each subject with an urgency that forces a personal response.

The story with Olley could hardly be more different. Olley was a lifelong devotee of the Matissean ideal, who believed it was the artist's task to bring a thing of beauty into the world. As a consequence, her oeuvre consists of landscapes, interiors and signature still lifes, along with the odd portrait or self-portrait.

\[Image\]
Olley had her share of dark times including struggles with alcoholism and depression that she made no attempt to conceal. She knew the world could be a vicious place but saw no reason to enshrine this image in her paintings. Art was a small piece of paradise that stood in opposition to mundane ugliness. If Quilty is a crusader for justice, Olley was the Red Cross, the Salvos, a maker of shelters.

She did her best to dissuade young Ben from his predilections, but to no avail. It didn’t mean she was any less warm in her support of him, or any other artist in whom she saw talent and integrity – most notably, Cressida Campbell, whose subject matter is much closer to Olley’s, although the resemblance ends there.

The final room of A Generous Life includes works Olley purchased for public collections, including pieces by Degas, Bonnard and Morandi. It also contains works by her younger proteges and a range of portraits of Olley, notably the Archibald Prize winning portraits by William Dobell in 1948 and Quilty in 2011.

The bulk of the show presents the most comprehensive survey of Olley’s work ever assembled, including paintings, drawings and even a couple of terracotta roosters. The selection is dominated by her still lifes, although it begins with urban scenes painted in a manner reminiscent of Drysdale or Sali Herman. The other anomaly is a series of nude portraits of young Aboriginal women. The nudes were considered controversial when shown at Brisbane’s Johnstone Gallery in 1962, but that was due to the time and place, not the works themselves, which are serene compositions with no erotic overtones or “exotic” touches. I doubt that a male artist could have achieved such detachment. The catalogue reproduces the reclining nude, Dina (1962) alongside Manet’s Olympia (1863) but there is none of the provocation that scandalised Parisian audiences.

Olley had a distaste for showing her work on white walls, which she saw as dull and clinical. She also believed that paintings were seen to best advantage in
juxtaposition with furniture. In this respect, GOMA’s presentation is exemplary. Not only are the walls coloured green, grey and salmon pink, some of them are made from thin vertical boards in the manner of a classic Queensland interior. The height of the ceilings has been tamed by wooden rails that run along the top of panels, and by discreet architectural decorations in the doorways. It’s a brilliant design, and one only wishes Olley were still around to see it.

In the choice of wall colours, and by creating clusters of related works, the curators have given Olley’s pictures the most sympathetic airing they have ever enjoyed. This is important because, whatever her virtues as a painter, Olley was no innovator. She was, by inclination, a disciple of the masters she admired, from Chardin to Cézanne to Matisse. She put no premium on originality and never set out to add anything to the language of art.

Her paintings are essentially decorations in the positive sense that Bonnard and the Nabis used the word, not in its contemporary connotation as a put-down for art that lacks a political stance. Their honesty and lack of pretension makes these works more accessible to the general public but less significant to art historians, who look for artists that changed the game for everyone.

Olley was a painter – and a person – who only played her own game. Her character may be felt in all her best pictures, from the youthful Portrait in the Mirror (1948) to the resplendent White Still Life (1977), in which the pale blue sheen of porcelain is set against a vivid red backdrop, to the Yellow Room Triptych (2007), painted with ragged brushwork and sheer determination.

When I look at Olley’s paintings, it’s hard not to think of her, and her bluff, straightforward personality. She may have felt that creating beauty was the highest goal to which any artist might aspire, but she was a worker rather than an aesthete. A natural democrat who had time for everyone, Olley embodied those virtues we like to think of (despairingly) as typically Australian. As an artist she might have disdained the search for novelty, but as a human being she was utterly unique.

Margaret Olley: A Generous Life

Quilty

Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane

Until October 15.

John McDonald flew to Brisbane courtesy of QAGOMA