

Ben Quilty

The Last Supper

27 May – 17 June 2011

Gus Speth, an American environmental lawyer and advocate said, “I used to think the top global environmental problems were biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse and climate change. I thought with thirty years of good science we could address those problems, but I was wrong. The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed and apathy – and to deal with these we need a spiritual and cultural transformation and we scientists don’t know how to do that.”

It is not usual to look to the artist for moral guidance. More often, the role of the artist, particularly the artist of the twentieth century, is to permit a transgressive impulse that promises to liberate the social order from the prejudicial governance of class, gender, sexual, racial and religious strictures. Now it seems that the contemporary artist is increasingly being called upon to navigate collapsed social orders and terrains of failed governance, to provide an authentic voice in an increasingly market-penetrated social discourse where value systems are interchangeable in ever-lengthening chains of equivalence. Artists are being asked to provide an (ultimate) refuge for social trust and subjective interiority.

Ben Quilty can be found and felt at this moral moment which he describes, through the exhibition title, as a Last Supper – producing a series of paintings that are certainly part of his ongoing, prescient anticipations of betrayals and crucifixions. Quilty's work has evolved as a witness-bearing practice, offering portrayals of the front line of the Australian State, its citizens and its others, territorialisations past and present. Standing now in a media spotlight, Quilty is living at the intersection of his vantage point within the post and neo colonial world wide war machine, and generating a series of meta portraits of a grotesque collective consciousness.

Like the scenes of human debauchery and divine retribution depicted by Hieronymous Bosch or the moral decline of *A Rake's Progress* by William Hogarth, these works offer allegory and fateful foretelling. Subjects are sites for the inscriptions of power, written in and over the body, the body becoming an armature for a kaleidoscopic world view, an indigestible meal regurgitated with bile and venom. These paintings have been turned, worked on from all sides, their robust compositional logic perhaps promising an underlying moral compass for a world turned on its head. Paint is pushed around indulgently as a cocktail of organic excess and toxic waste. Not even Atlas can hold up a planet whose boundaries are broken.

The Last Supper is an allegory of knowledge and ignorance: the eleven parts in twelve of ourselves that blindly follow and refuse to account for the collective cost; and the twelfth all-seeing part, a political intelligence that will sacrifice what we most cherish for immediate reward. Leadership, the ability to hold the world and the self in a compassionate embrace, if not a straw dog or an empty immolation, is bound up as an impossible ideal in promised resurrection.

These paintings bear witness to the failure of contemporary leadership and the triumph of ignorance in an age of hyper intelligence. They foretell the continued collapse of our own social systems with those of the earth's eco-systems. They are portraits of subjects suffering with mad cow disease, the results of industrialised farming, famine, contaminated water tables, plastic-wrapped consumption, genetically modified and broken food chains... our last suppers.

Psychoanalysts tell us that, as children, we feel betrayed during developmental milestones – weaning, the birth of a sibling, puberty... though of course that was not our parents' intention. As adults, when we betray someone (or something), we are protecting someone (or something) else. That something is likely to be of real value and may be startlingly new. Betrayal may be a form of renewal. Quilty asks us to reflect on the values we are serving, promoting, protecting. These works must also be seen as radical self-portraits, digging deep for sanguine courage within fields of instability. He may be deeply nauseated by his world view but Quilty can still remake the world in his bare hands, allow us to feel the redemptive power of art, and give us permission to hope.

Beth Jackson, 2017