

Ben Quilty

Still life after the virus

27 October – 21 November 2020

Quilty makes no fuss in selecting his objects, leaving the studio in search of ‘beauty’ was neither responsible, or, as it turns out, necessary. Multi-vitamins, disinfectant, clamps, wine glasses and pumpkins are gathered to create disjointed clusters. These commonplace markers connect his experience of isolation with many of our own. Quilty creates amusing rhythms in these undulating compositions, with characteristic blocks of colour.

In a work titled *The Last Supper*, 2016, Quilty painted a feverish image in the aftermath of the US presidential election. The human subjects here, dead or dying, are centrepiece in the newest iterations of what we might call the banquet series. Is this a pseudo-cannibalistic feast, autopsy or vivisection? These are an unsettling yet fine reimagining of 14th century deathbed scenes come Jan van Calcar’s eccentric human anatomies.

Beginning in the 16th century, in a time of great mercantile wealth and constant military conflict, a dark style of still-life painting emerged in Europe. Known as *vanitas*, the paintings were lush with symbolism and sought to emphasise the impermanence of life, the futility of earthly pleasure, and the pointlessness of pursuing power and wealth. It was the human skull which most famously came to embody the central themes of this style. Quilty places skulls with mass produced, mundane products of modernity. Glen 20 and multi-vitamins are particularly emotive, reflecting the highly commercialised, sensationalistic ideas of human health and urban sanitation in the modern world. Depicted in such a manner, they are gifted novel symbolic power.

Words by Milena Stojanovska, 2020

ABOUT THE ARTIST

In 2019 the first major survey exhibition of Quilty's work was presented by the Art Gallery of South Australia. Curated by Lisa Slade, the exhibition QUILTY toured to the Art Gallery of NSW and QAGOMA. Quilty has been a finalist in the prestigious Wynne and Archibald prizes and won the Doug Moran National Portrait Prize in 2009 and the Archibald Prize in 2011 with his portrait of artist, Margaret Olley. Also in 2011, Quilty travelled to Afghanistan as an official war artist with The Australian War Memorial. He was invited by World Vision Australia to travel to Greece, Serbia and Lebanon with author, Richard Flanagan, to witness firsthand the international refugee crisis in 2016. His work is represented in numerous major public, corporate and private collections including the National Gallery of Australia, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Art Gallery of South Australia, National Gallery of Victoria and QAGOMA.