

Ben Quilty

The River

13 May – 06 June 2026

There is a particular kind of quiet that can be found in descent, in heading down to some place. Not up to a lookout or out toward a horizon, but down into the base of a valley, where the walls rise steeply on all sides and the world is made to recede. In this body of work, Quilty turns downward to such a place: a river set deep within the landscape, where the scale and weight of the terrain is both oppressive and assuring. Here, one has the sensation of being underneath everything, as though the weight of history, geological and otherwise, hangs just above and all around.

To arrive requires effort. The descent is deliberate, and the return requires a different kind of resolve. It is difficult not to think of mythic precedents, journeys into the underworld, spaces of retreat, reflection, or reckoning. Yet this is not a place of darkness, but one punctuated by moments of extraordinary light. Late in the afternoon and early in the morning, sunlight cuts across a vast rock shelf, illuminating the valley with a kind of theatrical precision. The space reveals itself as a stage, expansive, immersive, and strangely composed. It is this sense of both accident and intention that seems to hold Quilty's attention, as though the landscape itself is performing.

These works emerge from a desire to withdraw from the noise of the world, but they are not acts of denial. The river does not offer escape so much as opportunities for processing. In the absence of phone reception and other forms of contact, in the isolation of the valley is room to sit with difficult topics. In the case of this series: a quiet grief for the natural world. If Quilty's earlier paintings grappled with the immediacy of political and social violence, here that violence is slower, more diffuse, but no less pervasive. The environmental degradation that underpins these paintings is not always directly visible, and perhaps that is precisely the point. What is out of sight is easily displaced, deferred, or forgotten.

Within this landscape, figures appear, almost intrusively. Quilty's ongoing enquiry into masculinity finds a new articulation here, as men enter the scene not as passive observers, but as agents of disruption. Holding axes, they hack into the very environment that surrounds them. The gesture is both literal and symbolic, echoing broader cycles of extraction, consumption, and waste. Rendered as a commodity, timber becomes product, product becomes trend, trend becomes discard. The rhythm is familiar, even banal.

There is a clear sense of disquiet beneath the surface of these works. Yet their beauty is not diminished by this, but thickened and tangled by it. In the landscape, the threat is often imagined as something elemental or unknown, yet more often than not, it is human. These figures complicate the romanticism of place, unsettling any notion of it as purely restorative. Instead, the environment becomes a site of tension, where beauty and destruction coexist.

At intervals, an eye surfaces within the composition. It does not belong entirely to the landscape, nor to the figures that inhabit it, but operates as a point of consciousness within the work itself. This is not a simple inversion of the gaze, nor a gesture that returns the viewer to themselves in any resolved way. Rather, it unsettles the conditions of looking altogether. The painting begins to register the viewer as part of the same field it describes, collapsing distance and complicating the idea of spectatorship. One is no longer outside of the scene, but implicated within it, subject to the same forces of extraction, consumption, and quiet neglect.

In this sense, these works feel like a threshold. While they are grounded in a specific place, they extend toward a broader enquiry that is still unfolding within Quilty's practice. The concerns that gather here, environmental fragility, masculine agency, cycles of use and abandonment, form part of a body of work in development, leading toward a major institutional solo exhibition scheduled for 2027.

Throughout this exploration, Quilty returns to the river. It is not simply a site of refuge, but one of witness. It is a place that holds memory, of what has been, and what is at risk of being lost. In this sense, the landscape paintings function less as declarations and more as acts of remembrance. Not unlike a wake, they gather fragments of the world as it is, allowing space to reflect on what it has been, and what it might yet become.

— Milena Stojanovska