Budgerigars ('budgies') are native Australian birds. Those in the wild are green and gold in colour; however, those bred in captivity come in a range of blues, greys, whites and yellows. Quilty’s budgies are the latter, plump pet birds far removed from their native form.

Albert 2004 is part of a series of works that pairs portraits of famous Australian artists with budgies.

By using a diptych, Quilty invites the viewer to compare and contrast these two seemingly unrelated images, and in doing so, find a third image, one that resolves the meaning of the work.

Albert Namatjira (1902–59) was a Western Arrernte man and a pioneer of contemporary Aboriginal art. His style was appreciated by Europeans because it conformed more closely to the aesthetics of Western art.

Here, Quilty has referenced a portrait of Albert Namatjira by William Dargie that won the Archibald Prize in 1956. Dargie’s portrait is accepted as the most iconic image of the artist, and you can find it on display in ‘Namatjira Story’ in QAG Gallery 2.

Budgerigars ('budgies') are native Australian birds. Those in the wild are green and gold in colour; however, those bred in captivity come in a range of blues, greys, whites and yellows. Quilty’s budgies are the latter, plump pet birds far removed from their native form.

What do you think is the final resolved meaning here? What does Quilty say about Australian identity? How has Quilty approached the question of what is Australian art?
'I've never met another person like her. She would speak her mind, she really didn't care what anyone else thought of her. She had just grown into this unbelievably well-rounded person.' — Ben Quilty

'She was an extraordinary human. A powerful, powerful lady . . . she was just innately, intuitively self-confident.' — Ben Quilty

How does Quilty’s Archibald Prize-winning portrait of Margaret Olley compare with his other works? What is the dominant colour in the portrait?

What impression does the portrait give us of Olley?

What does it tell us about the relationship between Olley and Quilty?

Cook Rorschach 2009

Cook Rorschach 2009 is based on a famous portrait of Captain James Cook by Nathaniel Dance from 1776. What differences can you see between Dance’s portrait and Quilty’s? Why do you think Quilty has chosen to reproduce only the head of the portrait?

Now, at the end of his life, Cook was accused of being very violent to his men and many historians speculated that he suffered from syphilis. But there is another reading of it, which is an idealistic artist version: that Cook saw how, through his profession of discovering the world, he was destroying the world at the same time . . . that transformation — from being a worldly young man to being a broken, violent older man — could just as easily have happened from seeing the complete destruction he had cast.¹

How has Quilty used the Rorschach technique to communicate this reading of Captain Cook? Thinking back on the process of creating a Rorschach and the resulting image, can we also see Cook Rorschach as a broader comment on Australian history?

You can find Quilty’s portrait of Margaret Olley on display in ‘Margaret Olley: A Generous Life’ in GOMA Gallery 1.1 (The Fairfax Gallery).
Compare Sergeant P, after Afghanistan to this portrait of Jack Longstaff, which was painted by his father, Sir John Campbell Longstaff (official war artist and five-time winner of the Archibald Prize) after Jack’s death in 1916. What are some of the similarities and differences between the two? Do you think the depiction of war and soldiers in Australia has evolved over time?

In 2011, Quilty served as an official war artist for the Australian War Memorial, spending nearly a month in military bases in Afghanistan getting to know Australian servicemen and women and learning about their experiences of war. It was an intense and life-changing experience for Quilty.

I wanted to know what they were feeling, how they were surviving, emotionally and physically . . . really the basics of humanity, life and death, and right there in your face, the biggest themes an artist could ever imagine, right there. It became pretty obvious that the best way for me to do that would be to get them to sit for me and to make work about them as they tell their story to me of these incredible experiences.

Quilty explains that Sergeant P was involved in a helicopter crash that killed some of his mates and left him with serious injuries to his legs and back. Despite this, Sergeant P chose to stand for his portrait.

How has Quilty used abstraction to represent the trauma experienced by Sergeant P? How does he balance the physical and psychological dimensions of his subject?

Curator Lisa Slade writes that ‘it is Quilty’s anxiety that is the true subject of the portrait’. Do you agree? Does this portrait reveal as much about the artist as it does about the subject?
’It’s funny how many artists I reference in those paintings. I really wanted each painting to work as a painting in its own right, but also collectively so as to form a kind of animation that dynamically links concept with form. On the one end, I looked at Francis Bacon, and I really felt like I was channelling that visual language. On the other end, I thought a lot about Ken Wisson . . . So this work is definitely about the practice of painting while making direct observations of the colonial nature of our own existence, and how brief our history really is.’ — Ben Quilty

In Inhabit 2010, Quilty lays out the stages of a visual metamorphosis that creates a link between a devil, Captain Cook, a skull and the artist himself. Consider each painting and the transitions between them. How would you describe the form of the face — is it being deconstructed or reconstructed?

Captain Cook is an iconic historical figure, but, for Quilty, what is often overlooked is the traumatic impact that Cook’s expeditions had on Indigenous Australians: ‘Captain Cook symbolised the end of their community . . . their Dreamtime . . . their culture, and quite often a very destructive and violent death.’

Quilty references two famous eighteenth-century portraits of Captain Cook in Inhabit 2010. By appropriating these images and recontextualising them within this work, he invites the viewer to consider them from a different perspective. ‘Humans are very good at readapting, reordering history to suit their sense of national pride and social identity.’

What do you think Quilty wants us to take away from this work about Australian history, identity and place? Where does he see himself in that heritage?
Write a list of words to describe your first impression of the faces. Then write another list of words that are the opposites of the words in your first list. For example:

List 1
- Humorous
- Strange
- Ugly
...

List 2
- Tragic
- Familiar
- Beautiful
...

By experimenting with different materials and media, Quilty takes the sculptural qualities of his paintings to another dimension, building up faces on old washstand jugs found in antique shops and then re-forming them in porcelain.

Quilty has applied this technique to some of his own portraits as well as Leonardo Da Vinci’s caricatures, which share a similar grotesque appeal. Da Vinci’s drawings can be seen as ‘a playful, visual frolic, an abandonment of reason, taking a pleasure in chaos, in the destruction of form and meaning’.

Could the same be said of Quilty’s portrait jugs? Are the faces realistic or absurd?
CAPTIONS
Ben Quilty
Australia b.1973
Albert 2004 / Oil on canvas / 121.9 x 76.6 cm / Purchased 2004 / Collection: National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Margaret Olley 2011 / Oil on linen / 170 x 150cm / Private collection / Photograph: Min Stirling

Sergeant P, after Afghanistan 2011 / Oil on linen / 180 x 140cm / Purchased 2014 with funds from the Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art Foundation Appeal and Returned & Services League of Australia (Queensland Branch) / Collection: Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art

Scream after Leonardo da Vinci 2014 / Porcelain / 18 x 20 x 17cm / Collection: Shepparton Art Museum, Victoria / Photograph: Min Stirling

© Ben Quilty
All works © Ben Quilty
Courtesy: The artist, Jan Murphy Gallery and Tolarno Galleries

E Phillips Fox / Australia 1885–1945 / Portrait of Captain James Cook (copy of Nathaniel Dance original in the Greenwich Hospital Library) 1891 / Oil on canvas / 126 x 102.8 cm / Felton Bequest, 1956 / Collection: National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

John Longstaff / Australia 1831–1916 / Portrait of my son (Lieutenant: John Campbell 'Jack' Longstaff) 1916 / Oil on canvas / 61.6 x 51.3 cm / Collection: Australian War Memorial, Canberra

John Webber / England 1753–1793 / Portrait of Captain James Cook 1788 / Oil on canvas / 140 x 115.8 x 9.6 cm (framed) / Purchased 2000 by the Commonwealth Government with the generous assistance of Robert Oatley AO and John Schaeffer AO / Collection: National Portrait Gallery, Canberra

Leonardo da Vinci / Italy 1452–1519 / The Battle of Anghiari 1504–05 / Oil on canvas / 150.4 x 290.8 cm / Collection: Museo delle Opere di Arte, Lucca / Photograph: © Scala, Florence

ENDNOTES

The Last Supper (Bottom Feeder) 2018 combines two of Quilty’s most recent bodies of work. ‘The Last Supper’ series developed as a response to the political turbulence and uncertainty that followed the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States of America, while his ‘Bottom Feeder’ paintings use a group of Bad Santas to take aim at ‘the way straight white men are behaving — or failing to behave — in the western world at the moment’ and the lack of positive male role models.  

Consider the role and expectations we have of leaders in our society. Why do you think Quilty has chosen a Bad Santa to explore these ideas? Does the mix of abstraction and figuration help communicate this meaning?