



# BEN QUILTY

## After Afghanistan



# Interpretive guide

This guide has been designed for secondary and senior secondary students and is intended to be used in conjunction with the exhibition *Ben Quilty: after Afghanistan*. The background information cited in this guide has been taken from the catalogue to this exhibition by Laura Webster.

This interpretive guide can be used as a pre- or post-activity or during your visit to the exhibition, or as a stand-alone study of contemporary art or official war art.

The activities are intended to support the achievement standards of the secondary Australian curriculum in visual arts, particularly the objectives of *Making and Responding*. They link to the secondary history curriculum by encouraging students to:

- comprehend and research artworks from the past to reinforce learning in history
- study artworks from a range of historical contexts, in order to understand perspectives of people from the past.
- undertake research with critical discernment and create texts that demonstrate historical understanding.

This interpretive guide also provides senior secondary students with the opportunity to:

- research and investigate the social, historical context of visual art and its impact on society
- reflect on their own views and the perceptions of others in order to further understand their own and others' work
- create their own response to social issues in order to further challenge themselves and others.

## OFFICIAL WAR ART SCHEME

The Australian **Official War Art Scheme** began in 1916, during the First World War. Under the scheme, Australian artists are commissioned to join Australian military forces in conflicts or peacekeeping missions with the aim of capturing the Australian experience of war.

### Investigate

Research the Official War Art Scheme. How has official war art changed since the scheme's inception in 1916? Give reasons for the changes, using the art of official war artists to support your answer.

### Reflect

As an official war artist, is it more important to record or interpret what you see?

The following websites may be helpful in your research:

[http://www.awm.gov.au/encyclopedia/war\\_artists/artists.asp](http://www.awm.gov.au/encyclopedia/war_artists/artists.asp)

<http://www.awm.gov.au/collection/art/>

<http://www.awm.gov.au/exhibitions/sharedexperience/>

## BEN QUILTY

Ben Quilty was commissioned as an official war artist for the war in Afghanistan in 2011 and spent three weeks in Kabul, Kandahar, and Tarin Kowt. There he observed and depicted his surroundings and the Australian service personnel deployed on operations in Afghanistan under Operation Slipper. Like earlier official war artists, including George Lambert, Arthur Streeton, and Ivor Hele, Quilty witnessed the harsh realities of the war and sought to portray and interpret the personal experiences and emotions of Australian servicemen and women.

### "This very wild place"

The time spent in Afghanistan was an intense experience for Quilty, one that has changed his life and outlook. As he later commented, "I never wanted to go there, to be quite honest with you. I didn't want to go and risk my life. I didn't feel like it was a risk that I felt was worth taking for me ... But I did feel strongly that there was a duty that I had to do for some reason."<sup>1</sup>

Quilty found Afghanistan to be full of danger, violence, and extreme situations, and referred to it as "this very wild place".<sup>2</sup> What to the soldiers seemed ordinary, must have been extraordinary for Quilty. Kandahar Airfield itself is a multinational base with approximately 35,000 people from the International Security Assistance Force, local civilian staff, and aid organisations.

<sup>1</sup> Ben Quilty, ABC Australian Story, ABC Interview, Tape 15, p. 5, 28 June 2012

<sup>2</sup> Quilty, Australian Story, Tape 4, p. 2, 28 June 2012

Weapons are carried at all times by both military and civilian personnel, creating a tense atmosphere with a violent undercurrent. Quilty described Kandahar as being a cross between the worlds of *Mad Max: Beyond Thunderdome* and *Catch 22*, a surreal, dusty, and violent place. As he recalled, "For the first week in Kandahar, I basically felt like I was dodging rockets. The first night we landed there, two or three rockets landed inside the compound."<sup>3</sup>

## ACTIVITIES

Quilty's response to Kandahar is illustrated in his painting of the same name.



**Kandahar**, 2011, oil on linen, 140 x 190 cm, acquired under the official art scheme in 2012 AWM ART94525

### Investigate

Read Quilty's comments regarding his experiences as an official war artist in Afghanistan in the transcript of "War Paint", Australian Story: <http://www.abc.net.au/austory/content/2012/s3581736.htm>

How are Quilty's emotions and reactions to Kandahar captured in his painting? What does his painting suggest about the environment in Afghanistan and nature of life for Australian service personnel there?

### Create

Research military life for Australians in Afghanistan. Paint, draw or sculpt your own response to the war.

Show your work of art to a friend and ask them to explain what they can see and sense in your work. Discuss with them your response to the war in Afghanistan.

### Reflect

If you could interview Ben Quilty about his experiences as an official war artist in Afghanistan, what would you want to know?

The following websites may assist in your research:  
<http://www.awm.gov.au/blog/category/personal-stories/page/2/>;  
<http://www.awm.gov.au/blog/2011/08/01/outside-the-wire-photographs-from-afghanistan/>

## QUILTY THE ARTIST

Quilty's work often alludes to his own personal history and he employs a wide range of genres, including portraiture, still life, and landscape. As a young art student, Quilty was influenced by the possibilities implicit in the works of the artists Frank Auerbach and Nicholas Harding. He was drawn to the thick impasto painting style of their works and these helped him find his own painting language.<sup>4</sup> As Quilty developed this language, his work took on more gestural, organic forms; he began to apply huge swathes of paint using large palette knives. However, while his application is lush and the colours are beautiful, his subject matter is often dark and confronting.

## ACTIVITIES

### Create

Use Quilty's impasto painting style and gestural forms to portray an aspect of your own personal history.

### Investigate

Use the websites below and your own research to investigate the official war art of Arthur Streeton and Ivor Hele:

<http://www.awm.gov.au/people/8350.asp>;  
[http://www.awm.gov.au/exhibitions/ivor\\_hele/ivor\\_hele.asp#intro](http://www.awm.gov.au/exhibitions/ivor_hele/ivor_hele.asp#intro)  
<http://www.awm.gov.au/atwar/ww1.asp>  
<http://www.awm.gov.au/atwar/ww2.asp>

Examine the paintings below:



Arthur Streeton, **Amiens, the key of the west**, 1918, oil on canvas, overall 135.5 x 194.5 cm, AWM ART12436

<sup>3</sup> Quilty, Australian Story, Tape 3, p. 9, 28 June 2012

<sup>4</sup> Quilty, Australian Story, Tape 1, p. 13, 28 June 2012



Ivor Hele, **Walking wounded, Missim Trail**, 1944, oil on canvas, overall 101.1 x 116cm, AWM ART22561

Select one of these works of art and, paying attention to technique, subject, and use of colour, compare the artist's depiction of war with Quilty's *Kandahar* (2011). How are they similar/different? Suggest reasons why.

## THEMES IN QUILTY'S ART

In the past Quilty's work has often examined ideas of masculinity and how young men in particular are initiated into contemporary Australian society.<sup>5</sup> Notions of mortality, masculinity, and the often painful national history of Australia are also explored in relation to his own personal experiences. Much of his work has been about what Quilty calls the "glorification of decline" that is prevalent in Australian history and culture.<sup>6</sup> He often created images that demonstrated the self-destructive nature of Australian males. Accepting the Australian War Memorial's official war artist commission thus seemed like a logical step in the progression of his career. As Quilty commented, "The opportunity to go and work with these young men in Afghanistan was almost the height of my exploration of the way masculinity plays itself out in our culture."<sup>7</sup>

### Investigate

Explore the themes of masculinity and mortality in Quilty's war art paintings. Use examples.

### Reflect

Air Commodore John Oddie, the former Deputy Commander, Joint Forces in the Middle East, said: "Ben is stunning in his insight, and so able to express those things which we either don't see or we're not prepared to admit in what we observe in our military minds."<sup>8</sup>

What does Air Commodore Oddie mean by the term "military minds"? How do you think Quilty is able to see more than his subjects can?

## THE ARTIST AND HIS SUBJECTS

During his three-week deployment to Afghanistan, Quilty decided to engage socially with the Australians rather than merely observe their activities. Sitting and talking with them, he became intrigued by their experiences and came to feel responsible for telling the stories of these young men and women.

The artist was able to win the soldiers' trust in Afghanistan, and several even sat for larger portraits in his studio after they returned to Australia. As part of his initial idea for the war artist commission, Quilty photographed soldiers of the Special Operations Task Group in Afghanistan in the same pose. He asked each of them to face the sun with their eyes closed, then open them and stare into the blinding light, at which point he would take the photograph. As he explained, "To me, this symbolises what they're facing, something immense, overwhelming."<sup>9</sup> After returning to Australia, Quilty began making portraits from these photographs.

After painting several portraits from these photographs, Quilty found that they failed to capture the experience of sitting with the soldiers, talking to them, and making drawings of them. Instead, Quilty wanted to create portraits from live sittings, so he asked some of the soldiers he had met to come to his studio in the Southern Highlands of New South Wales.

When the soldiers arrived in his studio, Quilty suggested that they sit for their portraits naked. He was not interested in creating a traditional heroic male nude, a style that had often attributed semi-divine status to the sitter. Instead, he wanted to capture the sheer physicality and presence of these men and women. Quilty needed to see the skin, the body, removed from its protective layers of uniform and body armour.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Desmond, "Ben Quilty: God's middle children", 2007. [www.benquilty.com/text.php?text=20120316135303](http://www.benquilty.com/text.php?text=20120316135303) (accessed 13 October 2011)

<sup>6</sup> Talk by Ben Quilty, School of Art, Australian National University, Canberra, 22 August 2012

<sup>7</sup> Quilty, Australian Story, Tape 3, pp. 3–4, 28 June 2012

<sup>8</sup> Air Commodore John Oddie, Australian Story transcript, p. 1, 3 September 2012

<sup>9</sup> Ben Quilty, quoted in Janet Hawley, "Tour of duty", Good Weekend, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 February 2012



Each soldier was asked to select a pose that reflected an aspect of his or her experience. Some of them drew on an actual event from their deployment, such as taking cover to engage insurgents, others on the tiredness or emotions they felt after their return to Australia.

“Trooper M” in the painting below, was in the Special Operations Task Group (SOTG) as a medic before leaving the Australian Defence Force. The mission for members of the SOTG is to find and destroy the enemy and secure the Uruzgan province, which means they have one of the most dangerous military jobs in Afghanistan. SOTG members place themselves in danger almost every time they leave the security of their base in long-range patrol vehicles or on Chinook or Black Hawk helicopters.<sup>10</sup>



**Trooper M, after Afganistan no. 2**, 2012, oil on linen, 170 x 180 cm, collection of the artist, OL00628.012

### Investigate

Examine the painting. What does Trooper M's chosen pose suggest about his experiences in Afghanistan?

How could Quilty's studio painting methods have assisted Australian soldiers in dealing with their memories and emotions when they returned home?

### Reflect

The male nude has been a dominant and accepted theme in the history of art since classical times. These nudes often depict heroic, largely idealised figures. From the nineteenth century onwards, however, the focus has shifted largely to the female form in various guises. In the nudes, both male and female, of contemporary artists such as Lucien Freud or Marc Quinn, the intention is to convey a more truthful, even sometimes unflattering, view of the human form.

Discuss the impact of Quilty's nude portraits of Australian servicemen, in light of these different traditions.

## PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF WAR

The soldiers' experience of war and the emotional fatigue and stress that can affect them have long been themes in war art and histories of war. General Douglas MacArthur, Supreme Commander of Allied Forces in the South-West Pacific Area during the Second World War, acknowledged the emotional toll war could have upon those who fight: “The soldier above all others prays for peace, for it is the soldier who must suffer and bear the deepest wounds and scars of war.”<sup>11</sup>

Observe the stress and exhaustion captured in Will Dyson's *Coming out on the Somme* (1916), and the psychological distress displayed in Albert Tucker's portrait *Psycho, Heidelberg Military Hospital* (1942).



Will Dyson, **Coming out on the Somme**, 1916, charcoal, pencil, brush and wash on paper, 56 x 47.2 cm, AWM ART02276



Albert Tucker, **Psycho, Heidelberg Military Hospital**, 1942, carbon pencil, coloured wax crayons, brown pastel, gouache on paper, overall 25 x 17.9 cm, AWM ART28305

<sup>10</sup> Ian McPhedran, “Feats of Australian Special Operations Task Group's heroism remain top secret”, *The Daily Telegraph*, 4 July 2012: <http://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/news/feats-of-australian-special-operations-task-groups-heroism-remain-top-secret/story-e6freuy9-1226416177932>

<sup>11</sup> Taken from General MacArthur's Thayer Award speech, “Duty, honour, country”, 12 May 1962. [www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/au-24-352mac.htm](http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/au-24-352mac.htm) (accessed 12 October 2012)



**Air Commodore John Oddie, after Afghanistan, no. 2**, 2012, oil on linen, 170 x 150 cm, collection of Kate Smith Art Consultant, OL00633.001

## ACTIVITIES

### Research

Select either Will Dyson, *Coming out of the Somme*, or Albert Tucker, *Psycho, Heidelberg Military Hospital*, and compare the artist's treatment of stress and emotion with Quilty's painting of Air Commodore John Oddie.

### Create

Read Air Commodore Oddie's comments in the transcript of "War Paint", which explores Ben Quilty's experience as an official war artist on Australian Story: <http://abc.net.au/austory/content/2012/s3581736.htm>

Write a letter, diary entry or other creative response, explaining the effects of Oddie's personal memories and feelings from his time as Deputy Commander of Joint Forces in the Middle East.

### Investigate

A true portrait is one that captures a "true likeness" to the sitter. Discuss this statement in relation to Quilty's portraits of military personnel.

For more information, read:

Michael Desmond, "Is the Truth of Portraiture Vested Exclusively in Likeness?" [www.portrait.gov.au/UserFiles/file/Portrait21.pdf](http://www.portrait.gov.au/UserFiles/file/Portrait21.pdf)

### Reflect

Air Commodore Oddie said, "In a human sense I had to actually accept the fact that there's an apparent truth there. I wasn't always admitting the truth to myself about my life. And so he really took that out and put it on a table in front of me like a three course dinner, and said 'well how about that?' And you know, I sort of thought 'well I'm not going to come to this restaurant again in a hurry!'"<sup>12</sup>

What "truth" is Air Commodore Oddie referring to? How does this relate the notion of "true likeness" discussed in Michael Desmond's article?

<sup>12</sup> Oddie, Australian Story, Tape 9, p. 2, 29 June 2012

## READING LIST

Ben Quilty. [www.benquilty.com](http://www.benquilty.com)

"Ben Quilty" *Current: contemporary art from Australia and New Zealand*. Art and Australia. Paddington, NSW: Dott Publishing, 2008. pp. 260–263.

Rex Butler, *Painting after the end of art* (Melbourne Art Fair). Brisbane: Jan Murphy Gallery, 2006. [www.benquilty.com/Essays/Butler.html](http://www.benquilty.com/Essays/Butler.html)

Tracey Clement, "The fast and furious world of Ben Quilty." *Australian Art Collector* 45 (July–September 2008).

Michael Desmond, "Ben Quilty: God's Middle Children." *Pride and Patriotism*. Exhibition catalogue. Redfern, NSW: GRANTPIRRIE. [www.benquilty.com/Essays/Desmond1.html](http://www.benquilty.com/Essays/Desmond1.html)

Michael Desmond, "Is the Truth of Portraiture Vested Exclusivity in Likeness?" *Portrait 21* (2006): pp. 8–13. [www.portrait.gov.au/UserFiles/file/Portrait21.pdf](http://www.portrait.gov.au/UserFiles/file/Portrait21.pdf)

David Lebbick, *Nude Male: 21st Century Visions*, ...

Clare Lewis, *Ben Quilty: ache*. Exhibition catalogue. Redfern, NSW: GRANTPIRRIE, 2006. [www.benquilty.com/Essays/Lewis.html](http://www.benquilty.com/Essays/Lewis.html)

Jacqueline Millner, *Ben Quilty: life's what you're doing while you're waiting to die*. Exhibition catalogue. Sydney: Maunsell Wickes, 2005.

Lisa Slade, *Ben Quilty live!*, Brisbane, University of Queensland Art Museum, 2009, p. 14

"War Paint" transcript, Australian Story, Monday 3 September 2012 (accessed 23 January 2013). <http://abc.net.au/austory/content/2012/s3581736.htm>

Laura Webster, *Ben Quilty: after Afghanistan*, Exhibition catalogue. Australian War Memorial, Canberra, ACT, 2013