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Schoolboy doodles? Hardly. Ben Quilty's cars are a glimpse into the male psyche

Ben Quilty's car paintings are not a childish obsession. They depict the self-destructive urges that lie at the heart of young men



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Torana 6, 2003, by Ben Quilty. Photograph: © Grantpirrie, Sydney

Six years ago, a reputable Sydney gallery put on a show of 14 portraits in oils on canvas of an old car. The pictures sold like hot cakes. The car, a white 1972 Holden LJ Torana, was in no way a triumph of design, but it had become an icon in its own right. The Holden, though by then almost entirely made in Japan, was Australia's car; and the Torana was Holden's raciest model, built for speed and boy racers. What was more, the pictures were wonderful, painted in what seemed to be a few strokes with a brush loaded with neat paint straight from the tube – blazing whites, midnight purples, throbbing golds. The unmistakable contours of the Torana leapt from the canvas. Some might have argued that it was just too easy to paint a model that never moved, that artist Ben Quilty was merely engaged in a grown-up form of schoolboy doodling. Others realised that that was exactly the point: the male human's obsessive, unending love affair with

his car.

It was the paint that should have silenced the doubters. Nothing about these works was banal. The whiteness of the car body was as telling as the whiteness of an animal skull in a drought landscape; its windows were as deep and unreflecting as the eyesockets of the same skulls. Sometimes the whiteness grinned from the navy-blue depth of an Australian night, sometimes it shone from the aching gold of a dirt track in the back of beyond. The artist sometimes calls these paintings landscapes. Cars are what most people see most of the time – not mountains or trees or churches or sunsets.

Ben Quilty was born a year after the Holden LJ Torana was built. The car was his darling, his ticket to ride, his way out of wherever. In *One for the Road* (the banal but ominous title is typical), the car is trapped by the picture edge, which cuts off the front end. It is violated, empty, front and rear doors open, and lit by a harsh overhead light, as if it were a crime scene. Behind it there is utter darkness. We cannot know what has happened, or if anything has happened.

Quilty has also drawn hundreds, perhaps thousands of skulls. One of his quests is to find a way of projecting the appeal of death for young men, the craziness of "hard driving", with or without the concomitant of hard drinking. He paints disturbing portraits of men dead drunk, bloated and sick, even portraits of himself unconscious and drooling.

All along Australia's country roads you will encounter works of sinister folk art, strangely exultant memorials to young men annihilated at speed. Some incorporate cans and bottles of beer, still full, as well as personal relics, tattered T-shirts quietly rotting, photographs, fading plastic flowers. Further afield, the cars themselves are the memorials. A broadcaster travelling the Sandover highway, which runs from the Northern Territory eastwards to Queensland, this week reported that in a day's journey she passed 19 "live" cars and 13 dead ones. In the outback, the phenomenon of white-boy self-destruction intersects with Aboriginal recklessness, suicide and parasuicide.

In 1996, in an attempt to understand his destiny as a white Australian, Quilty took a course in Aboriginal history at Monash University in Victoria. Whitefella artists have painted Aboriginal people, much as they might paint any other kind of wildlife; but they have not so far found common ground with indigenous artists, nor have they learned from Aboriginal ways of seeing. Any attempt to copy the stylistics of Aboriginal painting would be denounced as co-option.

In May, Quilty curated an exhibition in Brisbane called *On Rage*, showing a number of artists, including the Aboriginal artist Daniel Boyd. Quilty's own contribution was *Self*

Portrait Smashed No 4. Daniel Boyd painted a storybook lion, emblem of empire, and called it Once Upon a Time. Quilty took the title of the exhibition from an essay I wrote about the toxic rage that is destroying young Aboriginal men, which he saw as an element in the lives of all young men. He has been attacked for glorifying mindless machismo, but the phenomenon he is struggling with is real. Its appalling consequences are real, too. I want him to paint the burnt-out cars on the Sandover highway. He is one artist who could show you in a heartquake what they mean.

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