

# The Canberra Times

## Art review: Ben Quilty and Alex Seton exhibitions at Australian War Memorial

*The work of two leading new artists has been brought together in moving commentary on the scars of war, writes Sasha Grishin*

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Ben Quilty: *After Afghanistan* and Alex Seton: *As of today ...*  
Australian War Memorial  
Closes May 27



Alexander Seton, *As of today...*, May 2011, Marble, *Photo: Supplied*

Ben Quilty, the painter, and Alex Seton, the sculptor, have both been frequently cited as the n.b.t. (next big thing) in Australian art, with art prizes and commissions, sell-out exhibitions and generous amounts media exposure. Now they have been brought together in two interrelated exhibitions dealing with Australia's involvement in the war in Afghanistan.

Quilty was an Australian War Memorial appointed official war artist in Afghanistan for about three weeks in October 2011, where he took many photographs, made sketches and spent a lot of time chatting with his subjects at the Australian base in Tarin Kowt and at other locations. He then returned to the tranquillity of his studio in Robertson in the Southern Tablelands and completed the series of Afghanistan paintings, which were subsequently toured around Australia and which have now returned to the Australian War Memorial in Canberra for their final public viewing.

Quilty is roughly as we have come to expect – large in scale, loud in his vibrant colour use and personal and quirky in his invention of imagery. A couple of strategies which he devised in this project was asking his subjects, the soldiers, to pose naked and vulnerable after their masking layers of protective clothing and body armour had been removed, the other, was asking his subjects to pose outside, with their eyes closed, and then observing them when they opened their eyes while facing the sun. Fortunately he did not proceed to simply illustrate, what could be perceived as gimmicks, but has gone on to reinvent his subjects.

As portraits, I find them strangely depersonalised, shared stories, rather than unique experiences, even though I hasten to point out I know none of the subjects personally and quoted testimony from some of the sitters assert their unique properties. The boldness of the brushwork and the over life-size scale of the paintings project them into a banner-like or billboard status. It is impossible not to be impressed by the work, the scale alone achieves this, but the explosive exuberance also prevents one from forming an intimate relationship with the paintings. In this sense, the smaller sketches on display are more effective. It is a contrast between shouting and whispering and sometimes when paintings shout at you with an expression of force and violence, it does become a little difficult to hear what is being said. Of the portraits, possibly those of Trooper Luke Korman, Trooper M and Tory Park are the most memorable.

The images which left the strongest impression on me were those of burnt-out military vehicles, which seemed to possess anthropomorphic properties. They speak of fractured lives with a strong emotional bond created between the animate and the inanimate elements. In some ways they did remind me of some of the earliest Quilty paintings of cars which I had seen, more than a dozen years ago in Sydney. In this instance, these are the vehicles of Afghanistan, which had been violently distorted in a country which the artist describes as "this very wild place."



Alexander Seton, *As of today...*, May 2011, Marble, *Photo: Supplied*

In contrast, Alex Seton's work is much more contemplative and philosophical in nature. Although he hates to be called a "commemorative sculptor", this is precisely what this body of work is about – commemorating the Australian losses in Afghanistan. Seton is frequently concerned with questions of identity, symbols and emblems, whether this be a *Doctor Who* Tardis or a nation's flag. The title, *As of today...* seems to imply a final countdown, in this instance, the number of Australian soldiers killed in Afghanistan. The 41 Australian soldiers thus far sacrificed in the war in Afghanistan are each commemorated with an anonymous folded flag carved out of Australian marble, with halyards tied around the centre.

However, anything but the most cursory glance reveals a great deal of individualism in each flag. Although presented in the Australian ceremonial manner, square and concertinaed, with halyards tied on top, each form is different and the warm pearl marble, with its pink glow, from Far North Queensland, seems to connect it more with human flesh than with cold stone.

Although the sacrifice may be collective, each loss is also individual and deeply personal. Seton manages to unite these two properties in a manner that is very difficult to achieve in commemorative sculpture.

When Seton first exhibited the piece in Brisbane, there were 23 folded flags, but the day before the opening news was released that another fatality had occurred and the installation was exhibited with an extra empty plinth. Now the number has climbed to 41 and hence the title *As of today ...*

In Seton's art there is a combination of exceptional technical virtuosity and I found myself constantly glancing to reassure myself that the flags were indeed of marble and the halyards of rope – plus a continuing engagement with philosophical questions of identity. In this installation they are brilliantly brought together.

Afghanistan, Australia's longest military engagement on foreign soil, hopefully may be drawing to a close after a dozen years, but the scars remain and run deep. Ben Quilty and Alex Seton comment in two very different ways on our scars from this war.

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