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Artist Ben Quilty on Bearing Witness to the Children of the Refugee Crisis

Ben Davis, Tuesday, March 29, 2016

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Ben Quilty with young Syrian boy in Beqaa Valley, Lebanon.
Image: Richard Flanagan.

How do you conceive of the human cost of the largest refugee crisis since World War II? Though images of the overcrowded boats crossing the Mediterranean have made the news, and the diplomatic fallout from the exodus has riven Europe, the sheer magnitude of the crisis remains difficult to grasp from the outside.

In January, Australian artist Ben Quilty voyaged to the refugee camps, accompanying novelist Richard Flanagan, whose novel *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* won the Booker Prize in 2014. Both went at the invitation of the Christian charity World Vision International, which was hoping to raise awareness about the increasingly dire state of affairs.

As a painter, Quilty shows at Jan Murphy and Tolarno galleries in Australia, and Pearl Lam galleries in Asia. He is already widely known for mixing painting and reportage: In 2012, he embedded with the Australian military in Kabul, Kandahar, and Tarin Kot, and the works that came out of that experience, dubbed "After Afghanistan," have been touring the nation since.

Flanagan's heart-rending account of their voyage through Lebanon's

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Beqaa Valley to the Greek island of Lesbos appeared in the *Guardian* earlier this month. A small selection of Quilty's drawings of the people they encountered accompany that story (and are reproduced below), though the artist says that he is still processing the experience.

Speaking by Skype from Australia, Quilty explained that he and his wife are currently planning an installation and film in collaboration with a dressmaker, Raghda, who fled Isis and currently lives in a tent city in Lebanon. Quilty has also dedicated himself to several other projects aimed at confronting his own country's treatment of refugees.

Richard Flanagan [left], with Ralph Baydoun, film-maker for World Vision, and Fiad, a truck driver from Deir ez-Zor, Syria.
Image: Ben Quilty.

With last week's terrorist attacks in Brussels whipping up further xenophobic sentiment, and the European Union's recent deal with Turkey worsening conditions on the island of Lesbos, the artist's experience seems all the more important to reflect on in this moment.

Ben Davis: To start at the beginning: How did your time in Afghanistan prepare you for this kind of trip?

Ben Quilty: The Beqaa Valley and the most gruesome of the refugee camps are much safer than anywhere I went in Afghanistan. There's not the sense of overwhelming threat. That's the thing that really blew me away: The people I met throughout the Beqaa Valley and on our trip were making their home there. Even though these were pretty sordid, ugly tents, they were at least safe; the parents had their children with them.

A child looks out a window in a refugee camp in the Beqaa Valley.
Image: Ben Quilty.

What was your itinerary?

We flew into Beirut, then went out through the Beqaa Valley and down through the southern border with Syria, then followed the border up through the Beqaa Valley to the north towards Turkey, then back through Beirut to Bosnia and Serbia to the transit camps.

A refugee camp in the Beqaa Valley.
Image: Ben Quilty.

At that point, the ferries went on strike in Greece, meaning the refugees couldn't leave Lesbos, and we couldn't go in. So we then flew to Lesbos, and met the people as they came across from Turkey. Out of extraordinary coincidence, we actually ran into Ai Weiwei and his assistants. They are setting up studio on Lesbos in an attempt to turn the world's eyes back to the crisis.

On Lesbos, we spent a few days watching people come in by boat. Every day, people coming in. The greatest human trauma that I have ever seen, so profoundly graphic, just a devastating thing to witness.

Ben Quilty, *Yasmin, Lesbos* (2016).
Image: Ben Quilty.

How long were you there?

I was there for two and a half days. The people at World Vision have a network of people up and down the coast watching, to signal when there is a boat coming in and give coordinates so that people can go and help them off the boat.

Artists and journalists are free to go and record it, and yet the lack of journalists there was overwhelming. Where is the world's media? Are they bored of this story already? This crisis has been going on for years, but every single day, all day, literally, whether the weather is fair or not, the boats just keep coming. A body washed up the day we were there.

Going into it, what was the goal of the journey for you?

I wanted to respond, obviously, to find a way to respond. I guess just to make people aware of what is going on—that's often what drives me. I'm interested in the human drama of those experiences, and I have always been driven by injustice as an artist. Having a visual language is a

powerful way to tell a story other people can't.

Ben Quilty, *Ibrahim, Serbia, Transit Station* (2016).
Image: Ben Quilty.

How were children involved in this drawing project?

Going on this trip, the one thing I knew that I would want to do was to work with the kids and let them draw, because drawing can be a very therapeutic thing, particularly for children. I also wanted to let them tell their story.

Ben Quilty, *Heba, Serbia Transit Station* (2016).
Image: Courtesy Ben Quilty.

Some come to it and some don't—but one little girl in a Serbian transit camp, Heba, she did not stop. This is the drawing she made of her home [below]. It's a helicopter with barrel bombs falling on her home, with the neighbors around her dead.

Drawing by Heba, collected by Ben Quilty (2016).
Image: Courtesy Ben Quilty.

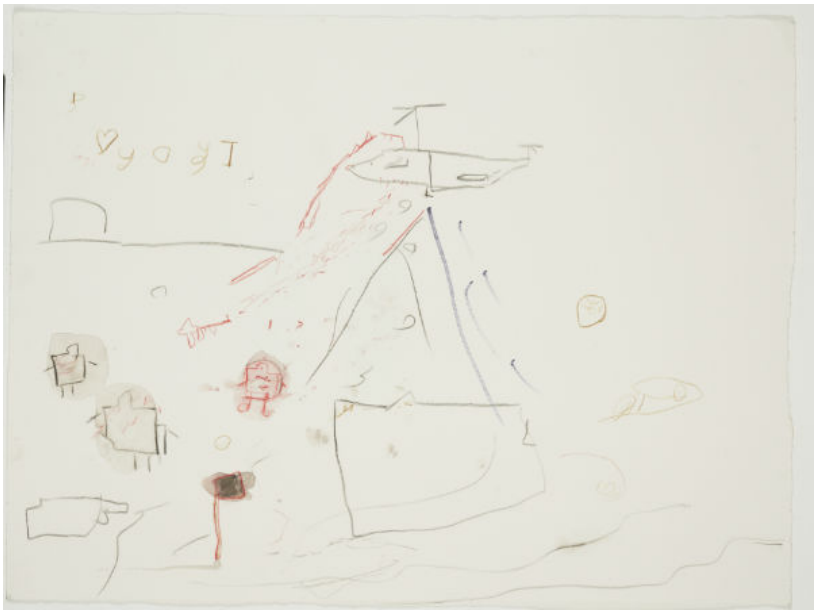
To have that opportunity to meet this girl who's the same age as my daughter was incredibly powerful for me. I tried to explain to these kids that I wanted other people in my country to know what had happened to them, that their story was not normal, that I thought the world needed to know their story.

Are there other drawings that stand out to you?

Many. Here, for example, is a drawing of a boat made by a child in the camp in Serbia, a few day after he had crossed. We hadn't yet been to Lesbos, but when you see the boats, this drawing is such an incredible rendering of exactly what the boats look like: the colors, the floorboards.

Drawing by Muhamad, collected by Ben Quilty.
Image: Courtesy Ben Quilty.

There are a lot of other drawings, like this one by a 12-year-old of an attack helicopter. It is done with such incredible detail. He'd left Syria three weeks before, and that [Quilty points] is the flag of ISIS. These characters here are ISIS people, and that's his home. Again, we just asked him to draw his home, and he did—and his home is just surrounded by this horror.



Drawing by Ibrahim, collected by Ben Quilty (2016).
Image: Courtesy Ben Quilty.

I also collected a lot of stuff on the trip, like this set of child's pajamas found on the beach. They would be for a child, the same age as my daughter. The people have to take their clothes off when they get off the boat, because they are freezing. It is so cold, incredibly cold. As soon as

they get there they try to light a fire to warm them back up, because after three hours of the crossing, hypothermia is well and truly setting in.

What did you learn from this trip?

What strikes me the most is that my government is doing absolutely nothing. As an artist, and particularly as an Australian artist, the thing I think of is that the government here has spent an exorbitant amount of money to implement their policy of keeping boat people away from our borders. They are turning people away, or putting them in prison on Nauru island.

So they have prevented the humanization of these people, by preventing media from going anywhere near Nauru, preventing any photographs of people on the water, and particularly preventing the names from coming out. It's hard to empathize with a person if there is no sense of that person's humanity.

The ocean is a natural wall for Australia. Building walls will stop people now. But the Syrian crisis has provided the first real insight into what will become a movement of oceans of people. The population grows, instability increases, people move. Walls are not a policy that will succeed.

The same refugee stream from the Middle East reaches Australia.

It has been for years, yes. There was a real spike in Afghan refugees coming all the way down, often flying into Jakarta and then crossing by boat. But the government stopped it. The refugee stream pretty much dried up, because word has gone back up the chain that you will be imprisoned.

There are people who have been on Nauru Island for four, five years...The whole thing is beyond belief.

Richard Flanagan is a very prominent local critic of that system. [He] said that politicians one day will be apologizing as they did to the Aboriginal Stolen Generation; they will be apologizing for what's going on now in this country right now with refugees.

Ben Quilty, *Muhanad* (2016).

Image: Ben Quilty.

It seems as if this trip was pretty harrowing.

We shared a lot of tears. In a way, Richard knew it was going to be harrowing. We'd been wanting to do something together, but I think he just wanted someone to share the experience with; he just didn't want to be there on his own.

We saw some horrific things, culminating in the end with meeting this family that had just buried their four-year-old child. They told us in great detail—through an interpreter, so it becomes quite clinical—exactly how this little child had died.

What had happened?

These boats have no hull. They are just timber slats between two rubber pontoons. They have a 50-horsepower motor, and they carry up to 50 people. If people move to the middle, then the boat starts to sink...

This particular family's boat came in the middle of the night, the day before we arrived on Lesbos. It's very windy, and not far to Turkey—you can see it clearly. But it's open water. And those people are coming from Syria: it's landlocked, so they have no idea what they are in for. They can't swim. They're wearing life jackets; they're terrified; and they're covered in clothing to try to stay warm. And the boat was overcrowded to begin with because they couldn't afford to pay more to have less people per boat.

Discardedjackets on a beach in Lesbos.
Image: Ben Quilty.

As they were crossing, all that clothing got wet and made the boat heavier, starting to drag it down. They began to sink, but the boat was still going; the motor was above water, but the entire boat was up to their waists in water. And amid the madness, in the night, that little boy was dragged off the boat.

A Spanish Coast Guard vessel came to rescue them, and as the flood lights come up, they saw his little body floating in the water. In his life

jacket, face down in the water. And they could not resuscitate him.

In November of last year, 450 people drowned in that crossing; over 100 of them were children. It's just this enormous, ongoing tragedy.

Do you think that there is anything that can be done immediately to put a stop to it?

In November last year, when 100 children drowned, 135,000 people crossed from Turkey to Greece, and every single person is paying $1,000 a head to cross. So that's $135 million in one month. That much money means there's a whole economy in life vests, in rubber boats, in people smuggling.

From everything we hear, the people we met said they were very relieved to be in Greece because people have at least been kind to them, and in Turkey they were really brutal.

What has the reaction of the people on Lesbos when you were there?

I made it very clear to the mayor's department that I was blown away, so blown away, by the hospitality the Greek people are showing. I mean, Lesbos was a beautiful tourist destination; now it's death island. It is horrific.

We went in to get a hot chocolate at this little café right after we watched this boat come in, on this very cold morning. Connie Lenneburg from World Vision said to the owner, “All this must have changed the feeling of your village." And [the woman] broke down in tears, said that no one had ever asked her that question. She told us that she had sent her two teenage girls off the island to the mainland a year ago because she could not have them seeing the bodies and horror and sadness anymore.

And yet the Greeks continue to allow this passage. They need to be praised for that, and I have never heard them praised. As we all know, Greece is in a dire financial situation, and yet they continue to help. Once the refugees are on Lesbos, there are huge ferries every day taking all these people across to the mainland and then allowing them to continue their passage.

Richard Flanagan says in the *Guardian* piece that the crisis is “inconceivable until you witness it." How do you capture the inconceivable as an artist?

I try my best, mate, I try my best. It's nice to have respite to do work that is just about the practice of being an artist. But when you have a cause, when I think to myself that everything I am doing is for that little girl Heba, who is my daughter's age, nothing seems more important.

There's a lot to be said, and it's important that it gets said.

Drawing by Heba, collected by Ben Quilty (2016).
Image: Courtesy Ben Quilty.

What is the message you take back?

As Richard says in his piece, that we're all human, and we share something in common. Quite often in my country and in countries where we are lucky enough to have our freedom and safety and prosperity, we forget about everyone else. I think we all just need to spend 30 seconds with little Heba in that transit camp in Serbia, to be confronted with the shared sadness of what is happening.

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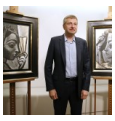

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