Ben Quilty paints against the clock, furiously transforming familiar imagery from popular culture into massive, muscular paintings. In 2005 he made a series of paintings for an exhibition called Life’s what you do while you’re waiting to die. Inspired by Heavy Metal T-shirt and album designs, these gruesome paintings were, according to the artist, ‘the ugliest pictures he had ever made’. Trowelling paint onto the surface using cake-decorating tools, grimacing skulls loomed from large glimmering canvases. The occult and macabre face of Heavy Metal culture is revisited in Quilty’s recent series of Rorschach paintings. In Rorschach – the Butterfly Effect 2008, a massive two-faced skull is set against a dark, murky backdrop. A garland of pythons writhe around the skull, their fangs an echo of the vampire-like fangs adorning the skull. These fangs hark back to late-night B-grade vampire films and they mix tingling fear with humour. For Quilty, this Gothic subject matter is never divested of humour and never far from self-mockery.

Quilty painted his first conjoined skull, a small watercolour, while in Barcelona in 2007. It was in Spain that he also became interested in altar adornments and icons found in Gothic churches. The decorative symmetrical flourishes in Rorschach – the Butterfly Effect were inspired by these Gothic church decorations. To make this work, Quilty has sketched the composition in aerosol paint across two large connected canvases (known as a dipthych). These aerosol lines operate as a means of registering where the paint will end up. He has then trowelled paint onto each canvas to paint the skull on the left and the python on the right. Quilty then ‘kills’ the image by pressing each wet canvas against the other, folding the two sides together like butterfly wings. However, rather than dying, a new painting is born and when the two canvases are placed side by side they become a single painting and a Rorschach is formed.

Swiss psychiatrist Hermann Rorschach invented and gave his name to the famous Rorschach Test (also known as the Ink Blot Test) – a psychological test used to divine a patient’s personality and compulsions. Ink-blot experiments are also referred to as butterfly prints, a popular pre-school craft activity. Quilty’s title refers to the infantile origin of the butterfly print, but the term the Butterfly Effect is also a phrase used to describe Chaos Theory. The phrase refers to the idea that a butterfly’s wings might create tiny changes in the atmosphere that may ultimately alter the environment. Hence the Butterfly Effect is an excellent metaphor for the chaos inherent in making a Rorschach ink blot. Quilty’s Rorschach – the Butterfly Effect is not an official Rorschach, which consisted of just ten standardised ink-blot designs. Unlike the completely anarchic ink-blot process, Quilty controls his initial image and subject matter. Chance, however, often intervenes in creating visual effects and illusions, which make the image more abstract or suggestive. These accidents and abstractions invite the viewer to reflect on their own perceptions, desires and experiences. Gilda Williams, in her book The Gothic, argues that the Gothic is as much about the viewers’ experience and associations as it is about the artist’s intent. Hence, Quilty’s urgent visions, like the original Rorschach’s, invite the viewer to make infinite associations.

Activities

- Create your own Rorschach by applying a generous amount of paint to a large sheet of heavy paper and then folding the paper in half. What image has formed along the fold? Show the image to your classmates and devise a title based on what you ‘see’ in the ink blot. Experiment with using different colours and differing amounts of paint. Try controlling how much paint you apply to create a specific image or use a software program to create a digital Rorschach. Compare the two processes.
- Make a list of all of the objects and symbols found in Heavy Metal imagery. Design an album cover for an imaginary Heavy Metal band using all of these symbols. Devise an appropriately Gothic name for the band and the album.
- Imagine you are Ben Quilty and write an artist’s statement that describes your art-making process. Locate other artworks in neo goth: back in black that make reference to butterflies. Compare these artworks to Quilty’s and speculate as to why the butterfly might be a Gothic symbol or metaphor.
- Visit Ben Quilty’s website www.benquilty.com.au. How does his work included in neo goth: back in black compare with his other work? What are the key ideas that link each body of work? Select your favourite body of work and compose an essay where you discuss his work in detail.

Ben Quilty
Rorschach – the Butterfly Effect 2008
synthetic polymer paint, aerosol and oil on two panels, 214.5 x 366.0 cm overall
Courtesy of the artist, GRANTPIRRIE, Sydney and Jan Murphy Gallery, Brisbane

Ben Quilty
Born 1973, Sydney. Lives and works in the Southern Highlands, NSW