Picture maker

STEPHEN ANDREWS FROM THE SHADOWS OF MASS MEDIA

by ALEXANDER NAGEL

LAST SUMMER, I WATCHED as Stephen Andrews made his first serious venture into painting. It may seem strange for an artist who recently turned 50 never to have tried his hand at it, but in fact this is typical of Andrews's generation. In the 1970s painting was anathematized as the fetish of an art market hungry for commodities and the mainstay of traditional art institutions such as the museum, the art academy and the catalogue raisonné. It was barely tolerated at NSCAD, where artists such as Eric Cameron and Jeff Spalding developed a "systemic" painting that eliminated painterly agency. In Vancouver it all but disappeared, and artistic practice gravitated to happenings and performance. Dematerialization was the order of the day. If artists worked on surfaces at all, they turned to the previously subordinated categories of drawing, printmaking and photography. In those early days Andrews made collages, drawings and photographs.

Given the current robust market for painting, it is easy enough to see why an artist would be tempted to take a stab at it about now. But Andrews is not a conceptualist who has finally decided he is going to make something sellable. He has always been a picture maker, and though the material supports (decaying rubber, pig intestine, etc.) have posed some installation challenges, his works have been by and large eminently buyable. His reasons for turning to painting have more to do with the specific challenges offered by the medium. Paint—essentially minerals ground up in a binding agent—has a peculiar inner activity that artists can conjure with but never fully control. Andrews calls it painting's alchemy. Paint doesn't take orders as obediently as ink, graphite or the burin. Lately, Andrews has been trying to use paint to make monotypes (unique impressions caused by pressing a coated surface against a receiving surface), and he has been both fascinated and surprised by all the slippage that occurs. The play is unavoidably there, even when the painter wields the brush; Jackson Pollock only exacerbated it by putting a certain amount of air and chance between loaded brush (or stick) and canvas. The gap that painting introduces between the artist and the pictorial result is the key to painting's mystique, as Leonardo da Vinci knew full well. All of this, and not merely market pressures, may explain why painting refuses to go away, and why even committed conceptualists keep a hand in it, secretly or not.

Andrews faced a similar crossroads a little more than ten years ago. At that time, he took the leap of introducing colour into his practice. Virtually all of the work he made prior to 1996 is in black-and-white or a subdued monochrome. The absence of strong colour announced that these images, made as they were in the shadow of the AIDS crisis, inhabited the sphere of memory: on the

OPPOSITE: *Crowd* 2002–03
Lacquer on Mylar
1.82 x 1.82 m

RIGHT: *Untitled (London Bombing)* 2006
Crayon rubbing on Mylar
1.95 x 3.3 m

Cartoon (animation cell) 2007
Crayon rubbing on Mylar
27.9 x 43.2 cm

one hand they are auratic, lifted above the incidental stream of history, and on the other hand they are vulnerable, etiolated through repeated transmission.

In 1995 Andrews was very ill due to AIDS when the first protease inhibitors were approved for use, just in time for him and many others. For Andrews it was nothing less than a resurrection: "We were like Lazarus called from the tomb."

Unlike his highly layered, largely monochrome earlier work, the "post-resurrection" work Andrews created in 1996 and 1997 is thin, light and colourful, and almost all of it has to do with the weather, or rather with our persistently metaphorical relationship to the weather. When the storm passes and everything suddenly clears, we feel that a different day or a different world—even a new life—has opened up. It's a cliché, but we all participate in it. For Andrews, there is no greater symbol of this effect than that moment in *The Wizard of Oz* when Dorothy is blown out of Kansas and before our eyes the film goes from black-and-white into Technicolour.

The largest works Andrews made during this period were silkscreens of landscapes featuring big skies: a puffy cloud bank (*Storm Front*), a seascape with waves rolling in (*Westwind*), a twister (*Tornado*). Usually unframed, they are printed on what looks at first like delicate, handmade tissue, but turns out to be pig intestine, the kind used to wrap sausage. (The works were pungent-smelling when I first encountered them in 1997 but have mellowed over time.) The imagery breaks up on the rough surface of the intestine, which becomes the real "figure" in the work—an allusion, perhaps, to the ancient practice of taking (often weather-related) auguries by looking at animal entrails, and also to the visceral nature of our relation to the weather.

For me, the epitome of this series and the emblem of this turning point in Andrews's work is *Parenthesis (No Gold)*. A rainbow occurs when light penetrates millions of drops of water in the air, refracting on its way in, reflecting off the drops' rear inside surfaces and refracting again on its way back out to the viewer. The overall effect appears as an arc, the visual array being the wide end of a cone whose point is in our pupils. Rainbows are only ever for us personally, and yet they are not quite a mirage. They are both inside and outside us, and thus are a sort of emblem of art itself.

Andrews's diptych presents what looks like the two ends of a rainbow, but is in fact a single image that has been duplicated and flipped. It is like seeing the rainbow from the reverse side, something we could never do in life. In fact, the left-hand image is not only printed backwards but also printed on the flipped "underside" of the skin. It is as if we are seeing the same skin both receiving the impression from the outside and registering it on the inside.

As befits an artist coming to colour for the first time, the image is not simply in colour but is about colour. The work Andrews has produced since the *Weather* series has continued investigating the processes of colour generation and has threaded that investigation into its various themes. *Crowd* (2002–03) is a linoleum-cut print composed of nine Mylar sheets. The title encourages us to see the sea of figures within the work's dotted field, but even as we see them they are on the brink of dissolving: one step too close and they become again a field of coloured dots. As the process of colour separation is central both to the technique and to the meaning of much of Andrews's recent work, a review may be in order.

Every photo in this magazine (and in most magazines) is produced through colour reprography, a system that composes each colour image out of dots of three colours—cyan, magenta and yellow—with the addition of dots in black. There are computer programs that will convert any image file into a composition of dots in those four colours—a CMYK file (K stands for key, the function of the black). Our eyes are actively mixing these colours every time we look at a photo in a magazine.

Undoing the mechanism of colour separation and reproducing it by hand is an arduous task. For *Crowd*, Andrews took a photo, scanned it, converted the file to CMYK and then separated the

picture into its component colours, which he then printed in black-and-white so that he could see the tonal values for each colour. Using grids, he enlarged the image, then played around with the dot size to determine the distance at which the image would hover at legibility. He divided the piece into nine square components—for ease of printing and as a recapitulation of the mosaic theme that runs through the piece. He then cut linoleum plates for each of the nine pieces, one for each colour. (It took six months to cut the 36 plates.) After some tests to determine the correct degree of transparency for each of the colours, the plates were printed on wettable Mylar using oil-and-lacquer inks applied in the following order: yellow, magenta, cyan and then black.

The crowd-related work that Andrews produced in the late 1990s and the early years of this decade—pieces like *Crowd*, *hoi polloi* and *The 1st part of the 2nd half*—is a logical extension of his long-standing interest in portraiture and the problem of likeness. When we look at a portrait, Andrews points out, we are engaged in a form of time travel. The portrayed person looks out of the frame, asking to be acknowledged by future viewers; the portrait puts the past suddenly into dialogue with the present. If works like *Facsimile* and *Fingerprints* (from the early and mid-1990s) presented portraits in series, the later series of crowd scenes offered the group all at once. Made in response to the Days of Action protests opposing the Ontario Progressive Conservatives' "Common Sense Revolution," these crowd scenes turn the tables on the viewer, as if the crowd is the audience and we are the real subject. As we confront the mass, the onus is on us to try to discern a face in the crowd. For example, *The 1st part of the 2nd half* teases apart a crowd shot into hundreds of component pictures, bringing us to a point where we look into the eyes of someone in the crowd and find there a reflected figure, someone who could be us.

The 1st part of the 2nd half is a series of drawings and photocopies transferred onto Mylar and arranged to look like a film strip. Films typically come with promotional materials; Andrews accordingly provided blown-up stills that "advertised" the film. They look like billboards but are in fact paintings, though paintings that insistently point to a process of mechanical reproduction. They are, so to speak, paintings in nothing but name. (As Max Ernst said, "Ce n'est pas la colle qui fait le collage.") In retrospect, one might say that this was Andrews's way of backing into painting, adopting the medium without taking on its burdens. One of these "stills," *A small part of something larger, #1 (John)* (2002), also uses the logic of four-colour reprography according to the system Andrews developed for *Crowd*. Here, however, it is executed entirely by hand, in paint, with each dot manually "printed" with a cylindrical stamp. Each of the four colours required about 25,000 stamp imprints—extreme manual labour and yet not quite what we think of as the work of the artist's hand. Paul P., a painter with a well-known signature style, was Andrews's assistant at the time and did his share of dipping and stamping, but try and tell which dots are his.

The fact that a mechanical process has been put through a human/manual filter reverberates throughout the work, underlining the encounter of the personal and the impersonal. All those local, manual decisions—how much paint to load onto the stamp, how hard to press it against the canvas—are subtle but powerful encouragements to seek something out in this abstract field. *A small part of something larger, #1 (John)* is, in fact, a portrait of the artist and filmmaker John Greyson, Andrews's longtime partner, but the painting hardly delivers his likeness. At a basic structural level, it is, strictly speaking, not a portrait at all, as Greyson here is merely an "actor" in a "film": the portrait is nothing more than a close-up of a nameless person in a crowd, a close-up so extreme that likeness is nearly eliminated and what we are given is almost a black painting. We are at the threshold where the portrait-icon crosses over into the black square—the beginning and the end of painting. A painting/non-painting as well as a portrait/non-portrait, *A small part* thrives on paradoxes: the painter's hand is both present in the dots and submerged by them, the close-up promises likeness but then swallows it, the painting is black but is quite literally resonating with colour. It is a sort of mystical reduction, a small part of something larger but also a suggestion of the infinity that lies in the detail.

In the aftermath of the invasion of Iraq in 2003, Andrews translated photojournalistic images of the war into crayon drawings by rubbing his four colours separately onto paper backed by

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a wire mesh—another manual means of producing the dot-matrix effect. The method is again foregrounded and one's eye is constantly directed back to the surface, forcing a slowing-down of the viewer's reading of the work. Andrews tends to choose images that reiterate this surface interference even at the level of content: shots taken through a chain-link fence, or through blood on the camera lens, or through a screen of smoke or fire.

The Quick and the Dead (2004) is a series of drawings Andrews made by reproducing stills derived from a piece of Iraq-war video footage. These drawings became the source material for an animated film of the same title. Animation is yet another application of the "small part of something larger" principle, only now the distinction is temporal: 600 drawings that took months to make go into a one-minute film. In New York at the CUE Art Foundation in 2004 and at the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery at the University of Toronto in 2006, Andrews mounted the drawings on a large wall near the video.

The original clip shows an American soldier putting out the fire caused by a grenade that has blasted apart a motorcycle and its Iraqi rider, who lies half-naked on the ground. In a real sense, Andrews had to approach his source material in abstract terms to make his drawings. Squinting at each frame, he decided which yellows he would transfer into the drawing, then mentally extracted them and subsequently rubbed them onto paper in the appropriate quantities, repeating the process for each colour of each frame. The process is highly formal, but when the drawings are recomposed and then reconstituted as a film, the results are uncanny. It is as if the scene has assumed a new and ambiguous life—animation is exactly the word for the effect. For Andrews, the process is not far from a sort of conjuring. After one ten-hour session of this mind-altering colour rubbing, he reports, "I just stopped and sort of came to and there it was in front of me. And I started weeping because it was like I finally saw it. I had rubbed and rubbed and out of the bottle came the genie and the first thing I thought was, 'Oh god, get back in…'"

A living person comes upon a dead person whose death he has caused, and he is controlling the damage. The source material is one disposable clip among thousands one comes across; we might view the original footage once and then go on with our day. But when we confront it in the Andrews version, things slow down and become strange. The art process introduces a remove from reality, but that detour allows something in the material to come through more powerfully. As one viewer put it, "That's the first time I felt any kind of pathos for one of the American soldiers." Converted into art, the footage assumes something like the force of allegory. The confrontation of the two men, the living and the dead, brings us right back to Cain and Abel, the template for all subsequent murder scenes. The minor incident becomes an emblem for the war as a whole: you start a fire and then you try to put it out, and you find that it is not easy.

Andrews experimented with variations of this process right through 2006, in works such as *Untitled (London Bombing)*, in which the interference on the surface of the drawing no longer takes the form of the dot matrix of colour reprography but features the square pixellation of digital imagery. His recent move to painting is a departure from all this. "I don't want to dwell on the process and explain it any more," Andrews says. "It is time to embrace the given." ■

The Quick and the Dead (animation cells) 2004 Crayon rubbings on Mylar 18 x 26 cm each; DVD 1 min 14 sec