



REVIEWS

TORONTO
ART GALLERY OF ONTARIO

STEPHEN ANDREWS

by Jon Davies

Over the past three decades, artist Stephen Andrews has wrestled with mass-media representations, always innovating with materials in order to look anew at difficult, often traumatic, images. His work extends the life and impact of quickly recorded and disseminated photographs that risk vacating the *gravitas* from the events they depict—whether it be a friend's death from AIDS or a stranger's in a distant war. With forensic intimacy, he meticulously interprets mechanically reproduced images by hand. The closer he delves into these



Stephen Andrews *Self*
portrait as an after-image 2
2009 Oil on canvas 40.6 x
30.5 cm COLLECTION PAUL
CONWAY AND HEATHER LAWSON

OPPOSITE: **Stephen Andrews**
Auditorium 2009–15 Oil on
canvas 1.82 x 2.43 m
COLLECTION NATIONAL GALLERY OF
CANADA PHOTO TONI HAFKENSCHIED

images—taking care to render every pixel—the more meaning and emotion he mines from what could have once been disposable. I find it compelling to regard Andrews's acts of critical recuperation in light of his status as a long-term AIDS survivor. At the vernissage of "Stephen Andrews POV," it struck me that there was a time when it would have been impossible for Andrews to imagine himself here, alive, in his late 50s, at the opening of an ambitious and thoughtful survey of his work at the Art Gallery of Ontario.

"POV" focused on Andrews's painting practice, which he initiated in the early 2000s. The exhibition occupied the entire fourth floor of the museum, where the gal-

lery spaces can be tricky. However, the layout worked very well for structuring Andrews's show: the spacious galleries to the east and west contained large-scale paintings while the smaller galleries and walls drew our attention primarily to contextualizing works in drawing, animation, photography, ephemera and ceramics (which also peeked out at us mischievously from corners and ledges). We found ourselves surrounded by diaphanous images of conflict, flows of capital and labour, the urban environment and obscured apparitions of human beings both alone and *en masse*.

Andrews's works demand that one be able to scrutinize them both from afar and up close, in order to see how individual parts resolve into a potent whole. For example, the drop of blood in the crayon-on-Mylar drawing *Yesterday's news remembered today* (2005) is magnified to an enormous scale, and composed of thousands of coloured dots. For the show's earlier work, Andrews built images cumulatively from dots and swaths of colour—summoning form from the murky depths—which mirrors the way we

cognitively assemble memories. Andrews is highly skilled at simulating image-reproduction methods like CMYK printing, but his hand's imperfections—the inevitable failure to mimic the mechanical with any verisimilitude—are what make the works so moving.

Andrews's paintings have a succulent, liquid quality—they still seem wet—and he is unparalleled in translating the effects of light from photography to canvas. After seeing so many of his paintings in the modestly scaled space of Paul Petro Contemporary Art over the years, it was glorious to be able to dive into them in the large, high-ceilinged galleries at the AGO, where they were given ample room to breathe. His most recent series, *Mirror* (2015) and *Butterfly Effect* (2014–15), are, quite simply, stunning. These luminous abstract masterworks are also well earned: placed at the end of the show, they suggested an artist who has been to hell and back facing a towering blank canvas alive with possibility. Eschewing brushstrokes, Andrews uses sheets of Mylar to layer saturated rectangular washes of intense colour. The layering creates ever-deepening fields in an infinite variety of colour combinations, juxtaposed with expanses of white canvas. Here, Andrews's direct touch is absent and paint responds to the embrace of Mylar and canvas. Nearby to these engrossing works was the astounding *Heaven* (2012), depicting a night sky.

"POV" put forth the premise that Andrews is forcefully present in all the work he undertakes, regardless of medium. We are encouraged to look for his engaged, curious perspective in the iPad photos he shot while travelling around the world, or in the ceramics he has been crafting in recent years, which were mostly installed next to some of his sketches and notes. We can glimpse Andrews's reflection in paintings and photographs as he implicates himself in the fraught situations and structures he depicts. Andrews is a beloved figure in Toronto, and curator Kitty Scott has made his generous presence felt throughout the show; it chronicled an artist's life, not merely his work. In this way it stood as a model for the kind of serious and considered solo exhibitions that the AGO is capable of organizing for artists from Toronto and beyond.