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The suspended gaze: Stephen Andrews: Selected works from the Salah J. Bachir Collection

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The Suspended Gaze: Stephen Andrews: *Selected Works from the Salah J. Bachir Collection*

6 September – 9 October 2006

Justina M. Barnicke Gallery

Curated by Sarah Stanners

review by Amish Morrell

Arranged in a vast grid across one of the walls of the gallery was *The Quick and the Dead*, 192 of Stephen Andrews' crayon rubbings carefully rendered from video stills. Each image in this series is made up of a soft array of cyan, magenta, yellow and black dots, made by rubbing water-color pencil crayons on parchment paper that has been placed over the surface of a window screen, mirroring the four-color separation process of mechanical printing. Subtly and beautifully rendered, *The Quick and the Dead* foregrounds the formal qualities of each piece, inviting the viewer to consider the artist's technical process, as well as the narrative sequence of the images. And though one can identify vague elements of a landscape, and a man laying on the ground, the subject matter is initially ambiguous.

It is this very ambiguity, opened up by Andrews' material process, that complicates the nature of the viewer's relationship with the subject matter. This installation depicts a scene that has become all too familiar during the American occupation of Iraq. *The Quick and the Dead* was made from video footage shown on CBC, depicting the bombing of an Iraqi convoy. The man whose body appears in the images was an Iraqi soldier who had been washing himself in a basin by the roadside when a passing American soldier heard a rustling in the bushes. The soldier fired a grenade and we see the Iraqi victim's wounded body, the resulting fire, and the soldier who had shot the grenade, sent afterwards to clean up the man's remains. Because this sequence of events is not readily

apparent, the installation requires that the viewer piece together the unfolding event in their imagination, translating the singular images back into a facsimile of the video clip from which they were culled. This event is recreated again, where each of a larger group of 600 stills appear in a short video animation. In motion this event becomes easier to read. One can see the flames licking the man's legs, notice the soldier's failed efforts to extinguish the fire, and see the turn of the soldier's head as he surveys the landscape and then looks back at the viewer.

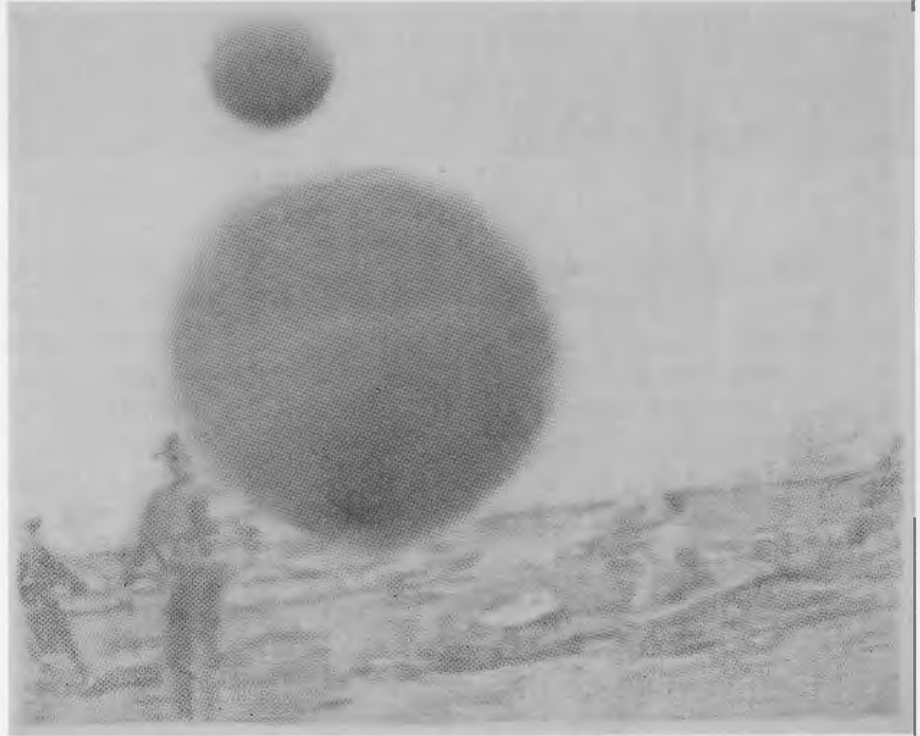
Here the viewer pieces together the disparate visual elements of the installation to make the scene legible, drawing out a process that is normally done unconsciously. While it depicts a scene to which we have arguably become inured through the repetition of images of war, here the event appears slowly. In this rendering of a moment of death, time slows down. Paradoxically, the beauty of these images is also what evokes their horror. If this work depicts violence in a manner that is aesthetic, it does so in order to make us look more closely at how war is mediated. These images work as an antidote to the proliferation of journalistic and documentary images that come ready to be dismissed, without asking anything of us. These artistic renderings in the *Quick and the Dead* accomplish something different:



Stephen Andrews, *The Quick and the Dead*, crayon rubbings on parchment, 2004.
Courtesy: the artist.

Andrews' images, whether they evoke pleasure or horror or uncertainty, produce in the viewer an unsettling vulnerability.

Other works in this show, *P.O.V.* and *Tear Gas at Bidhu, West Bank* similarly reduce the formal expression of a global image-making apparatus — the infinitely reproducible news photograph or satellite broadcast footage — to formal elements through artistic rendering. In *Friendly Fire* (a BBC cameraman also received minor injuries but continued to film with his blood dripping on the lens) two globular droplets of blood, like the dots of pencil crayon that make up the image, float in the foreground, making visible the shift in scale between the camera operator and the scene he was documenting. Andrews' technical process not only draws the viewer's attention to processes of visual mediation but also depicts a corporeal wounding suffered by the witness.



Stephen Andrews, *Friendly Fire*, crayon rubbing on parchment, 2003. Courtesy: the artist.

In Andrews' earlier work amidst the AIDS crisis of the 1980s and 1990s he developed an aesthetic approach to representing questions of death and mortality that informs his current work incorporating images of war and violence. In *365 Sunsets*, a stock photo image of one sunset is silkscreened 365 times onto a long piece of pig intestine. This repeated ending becomes a recurring moment, hidden away within the overlapping folds. *365 Sunsets* allows the viewer to behold a year, compressing time and repeating a series of sequential moments onto this corporeal surface. Installed in several vitrines are works from the series *Safe*, where he has photocopied images from porn onto latex, a material intended to protect us from the risks suggested by these images of sexual intimacy. On another wall, two framed rainbows,

Parenthesis (No Gold), silkscreened onto pig intestines quote the space of the room. In these works temporality figures into the work in yet another way: Curator Sarah Stanners notes that the intestines of animals were once used to divine the future. The title of the curatorial essay is *Forecast*, though it is clear that this is neither simply about forecasting weather nor about forecasting the outcome of war.

Instead this work denies viewers their ability to readily forecast the meaning of, and their response to these images. Sampled from television newscasts, weekly magazines, and pornography, Andrews' works facilitate an encounter that evades the foreclosure that these mediums impose. Through his laborious

reworkings of these consumable and disposable images he creates an opening for the viewer's projections. The works enable us to apprehend the distance between points of color and the total image, between the event and its representation, between corporeality and the miniscule drops of blood that make it up, between a moment and those that come after. These images thus describe not information, but relation and mediation.

With thanks to Sarah Stanners, Stephen Andrews, and the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery.

Amish Morrell writes about temporality in contemporary art and photography. He also teaches at the University of Toronto and the Ontario College of Art and Design.

Bold New Contrarians or Same Old Whiners?: Andrew Potter and Joseph Heath's *The Rebel Sell*

Harper Collins, 2004

review by Vaughn Barch

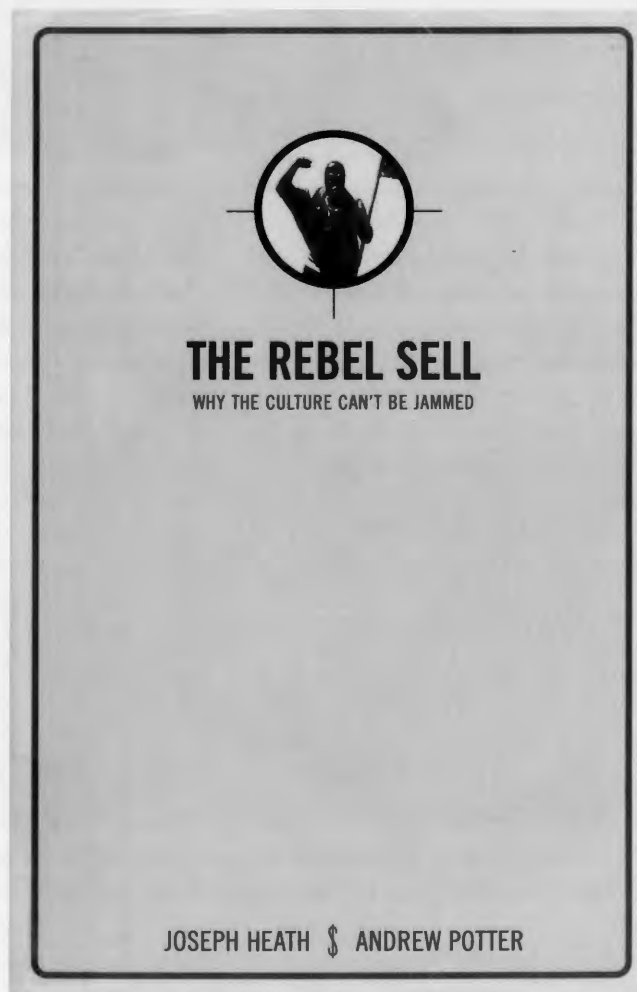
Andrew Potter and Joseph Heath have an image, a myth and a product to sell to us: the image is their roles as curmudgeonly and contrarian media pundits, the myth is their belief that they hold the magic keys to revitalizing the spirit of dissent in our society and their product is their cute little book, *The Rebel Sell*.

It is not a bad book. It is interesting, witty, full of fascinating facts and anecdotes, and displaying enough solid references to classic philosophy and current popular media studies to comfortably establish their credentials as critical commentators. The first section of the book is a detailed description of the spirit of rebellion and

anti-consumerism, as manifested in music and clothes, and how these feeble gestures ultimately feed back into consumerism. The second section ties these themes into society, marketing and political activism. For the most part, their essential theories, suggestions and conclusions are ones that I agree with. Unfortunately, the weakness running through this book is an annoying tendency to vaguely accentuate the negative, and a perverse sensibility in myself as a critic feels compelled to respond to them in the same tone.

Their main argument is simple: global corporations controlling the mass-media have adopted, co-opted and corrupted the methods and expressions of political dissent and resistance in our culture. While this is essentially true, very importantly missing from the author's arguments are the many significant caveats and exceptions from this truth. It is from this premise that they imply, in tone, that therefore resistance is futile.

Potter and Heath approach their arguments within the format of a classic tag-team wrestling match: at the outset, they declare that they do not identify themselves individually within the context of any particular argument in the book, which comes across a bit awkwardly when the text goes into personal narra-



tives about one of the author's experiences in young punk rebellion. They then proceed to set up and knock down a series of rather floppy punching bags in a smooth but evasive style that strives to deflect any concrete criticisms of their particular arguments.

They use the logic theory game of The Prisoner's Dilemma (which frames competition and consumerism into a sort of unavoidable arms-race) as a philosophical metaphor in order to explain, or perhaps somewhat halfheartedly justify, the prevalence of obvious transgressions against common-sense existence such as McDonald's hamburgers, big-box stores, ugly suburban tract housing sprawl and sport-utility vehicles. Their explanation is that these are the things that are desired by our teeming masses of human citizens, and by this quasi-democratic argument, they are forgivable. They ask innocently why McDonald's fast food is the object of alt-activists' scorn when the comparably ubiquitous Subway chain escapes notice (the unstated answer is that Subway does not coerce its clientele into embracing fealty to the ideology of a satanic clown). They sneer at livable neighbourhoods with tree-lined streets and health food stores as luxuries only enjoyed by affluent university professors, elitist by nature and ideologically suspect. They play the populist card when it suits them. Ultimately, their tone reflects the same sort of pretensions they are denigrating.

Potter and Heath focus their main attacks on Kalle Lasn and Naomi Klein, the *Adbusters* and *No-Logo* tangent of their thesis. "Books like *No Logo*, magazines like *Adbusters* and movies like *American Beauty* do not undermine consumerism; they reinforce it. This isn't because the authors,

They sneer at livable neighbourhoods with tree-lined streets and health food stores as luxuries only enjoyed by affluent university professors, elitist by nature and ideologically suspect.

editors or directors are hypocrites. It's because they fail to understand the true nature of consumer society ..."¹ We might presume that *Adbusters* is in some sense merely a form of penance for a coterie of morally conflicted advert-designer-media whores, but their critique of its situationalist roots is overly dismissive. Their sniping at Naomi Klein is ill-called for; she remains an eloquent critic of the mass delusions driving consumerism. Potter and Heath cannot tackle her head-on and instead delight in nipping at her heels. When she speaks to the effects of urban gentrification, they accuse her of being pretentious, which might be true, but it does not really invalidate her premise.

Potter and Heath's indulgence in barbed digs at Hal Niedzviecki's cultural observations in such a manner that I am not entirely certain whether they are critiquing, dismissing, endorsing, referencing or merely addressing Niedzviecki's arguments in his book of cultural analysis *Hello I'm Special*. Niedzviecki's disgruntlement at the mass-media's appropriation of the spirit of individuality seems to mirror Potter and Heath's problems addressing these issues, and my personal suspicion is that Niedzviecki seems to be wrestling with many of the same arguments as the authors. Perhaps they are merely a bit miffed that he appears to be working the same side of the street.

The authors go on at disapproving length about those annoying uncouth youths who kicked over mailboxes and broke fast food restaurant windows at the Seattle WTO protest rallies and riots. Potter and Heath claim that the World Trade Organization and the International Monetary Fund sincerely have the welfare of Third World peasants foremost in mind when they make their decisions, "Antiglobalization activists have taken to protesting every major gathering of the WTO ...in doing so they put themselves in direct conflict with representatives of precisely those Third World interests they claim to protect."²

The authors invoke the rave sequence in the movie *Matrix2* as an illustration for their point that young activists often indulge in street parties and music festivals as a substitute for concrete political action, "The Beastie Boys called everyone's bluff a long time ago, when they recorded a "protest" song with the anthemic title: "You Gotta Fight for Your Right (to Party)." In the end, this is what most counter-cultural rebellion comes down to."³ While this argument is valid, they miss a significant part of the big picture: a utilitarian perspective on society must include "quality of life" in the equation, and our collective quality of life realistically includes relaxation and socializing. Potter and Heath decry the left-alt-activist obsession with these colourful

diversions as a tangent away from the boring, nitty-gritty, nuts'n'bolts, day-to-day, hard labour of real political activism, that which is not celebrated or flaunted in our society. Regrettably, they make absolutely no effort whatsoever to describe or celebrate this cornerstone of social change that they claim to cherish so much: the exhausting effort of political activism required to eventually lead to legislative change.

Their essential final argument is that there is no substitute for plain ordinary dull legislative change in our parliaments. Well, of course there isn't! Who could disagree with this? The authors point to the abolition of slavery and the suffrage movement as social changes that were affected by the process of legislation. While this is true, they ignore the fact that legislative change is the final step in a long series of processes, including the music, parties, riots and demonstrations that make the final groaning shifts of political will possible.

We can confidently acknowledge that the mass-media tentacles of the corporate system continually appropriate and pervert popular expressions of resistance. The endless cycle of the apportion of radical thought by the powers that be extends way back to before the career of Jesus Christ. A somewhat more thoughtful and nuanced approach to this phenomenon might be appreciated. One of my favorite books on this subject is: *Bohemian Paris 1830 – 1930* by Jerrold Seigal. He describes the cultural conflict between the staid bourgeoisie band and those kooky bohemians, but he concludes that their mutual antagonism actually functions as a subtle symbiotic system, each feeding the other, intentionally or unintentionally, as a thriving cultural Petri dish.

While Potter and Heath have admirable aspirations — they seek to achieve the sublime astrigent insights of classic American cultural vivisectioners of the early 20th century like H. L. Mencken (known for his sharp criticisms of the follies and contradictions of American society) — they fall short of their target, unwittingly duped into mere wrong-side messenger-shooting in this neo-con era.

It is far too easy to play at being a curmudgeon. In order to fully assume the curmudgeon's mantle, one must have lived and suffered the degradations of progress. In order to claim the mantle of the contrarian, one must open the next door down the hall past Monty Python's argument clinic, the one that takes a step past mere contra-diction, into true argument: the final element required to make a resonant argument is the one lacking in Potter and Heath presentation: heart-felt inspired insight. The exquisite *schadenfreude* of the elderly theatre-box dwellers of *The Muppet Show*, flinging their grapes of disgruntlement and their running critique upon the poor best efforts of frogs and mortals, is temporarily amusing, but ultimately unsatisfying.

Grumblers and whiners: our planet is chock full o'them, and regrettably Potter and Heath are planted in the midst of this dull chorus: we the voters, who hate cynical politicians, and keep on re-electing the same ones. They have the talent and intent to act as a positive force for social change, but instead they sit in the bleachers, sniggering and snarking at anyone who has the guts to try to do anything about it, however imperfectly.

Vaughn Barch is a Toronto-based artist, critic and construction labourer. He is fascinated by animal behaviour (cats) and human history (*The Peloponnesian Wars*).

Notes:

1. p.99.
2. p.249.
3. p.64.