

## VISUAL ARTS » REVIEW

## Pressure points, pivot points, tipping points



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GALLERY GOING

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**STEPHEN ANDREWS AT PAUL PETRO CONTEMPORARY ART**  
\$4,000-\$80,000. Until Dec. 19, 980 Queen St. W., Toronto; 416-979-7874, www.paulpetro.com

A great deal of the power of Stephen Andrews's pictures stems from his having positioned them at thresholds – at the pressure points, the pivot points, the tipping places of public culture.

It is at these informational razor's edges, where the apparent impersonality of public media (newspapers, magazines, TV, the Internet) can suddenly become a matter of acute subjectivity. It is here that the big picture can suddenly rub up close and become agonizingly abrasive and distressing: the agonies of AIDS, surges of public protest (Andrew's *Crowd* from 2002-2003 was a response to the Days of Action protests against Mike Harris's "Common Sense Revolution"), the inexplicabilities and the exhaustion of war in Iraq.

"Like all pornographic and violent pictures," Andrews wrote for a New York exhibition in 2004, "they tap into something instinctual, eliciting some gesture in response." (He is here referring to news images of the Abu Ghraib prison.)

Many of Andrews's gestures in response to political enormity have been delivered by his own homemade facsimile of the blandly mechanical dot-matrix process used in commercial printing. By meeting media mechanism on its own ground, but by doing so in as low-tech a way as possible (colour separations made by rubbing pastel-coloured crayons through screening onto sheets of Mylar), Andrews has been able to make pictures just as pixilated as any newspaper's. But he has been able to shape them his own way, giving his images a kind of faux-objectivity. War imagery with a pastel colour scheme, Andrews has noted, "brings to mind the moral tales of the Brothers Grimm. Gruesome lessons in candy-coating."

The graphic softness and studied imprecision of his images locates them at another of his generative thresholds:



**Barbara Astman's Wonderland exhibit riffs with originality and charm upon the current preoccupation in the visual arts with the collection, the archive.**

the one where visual illegibility suddenly clears up and becomes readable. Or, more often, flickers in and out of readability.

Such is the case with Andrews's exhibition *As Above So Below*, now at Toronto's Paul Petro Contemporary Art.

There are no war images here, and the pictures are now paintings – in oil on canvas, rather than crayon on paper. And the scale of his concerns is here markedly different from before. As the show's title would indicate, the new work embraces a kind of cosmic scale (built up from pressed layers of imagery and pigment), moving back from the freneticism of the human condition as viewed in the heat of media scrutiny – to a larger, more detached observation of the universe we live in and try to make sense of.

Crowds still figure in all this, but in a different way. The exhibition's centrepiece is the artist's gigantic, mural-scaled *The View from Here*, where a tapestry of surging faces (based on a photo taken at the Toronto's Air Canada Centre) flickers like news coverage, the camera (your own eye) passing over the human tumult, pausing here and there to make sense of it, coming into focus, then moving on again. As human beings we need fo-

cus, because we see it as an aid to understanding. But Andrews reels it in and reels it out again. "The work," he says, "is about looking at ourselves looking."

Sharon Switzer's delightful exhibition, *I Should Be Dreaming of Butterflies*, is made up of six videos (Media players with flash drive) by means of which Switzer manages – employing one of the deftest touches in New Media art – to force out of electronic sophistication a genuine sense of the personal, the poignant, the tragic (or at least the tragicomic). Against deceptively sweet animated backgrounds, the artist superimposes touching, heartening little homilies for her own benefit: "Imagine what you could do if you were the Amazing Kreskin..."; "Experience Hope. Expect Disaster..."; "I spend my time lost in other people..." It's pretty hard to make video animation

as pseudo-touching as a Hallmark card, but Switzer manages it brilliantly.

**ROSS BELL AT GEORGIA SCHERMAN PROJECTS**  
\$750-\$15,000. Until Dec. 19, 133 Tecumseh St., Toronto; 416-554-4712, www.georgiascherman.com

Given the likelihood that Googling "hypercube" will make your head hurt (so much high algebra, so many runic equations), it's a relief to see sculptor Ross Bell's wonderfully authoritative and almost offhand dalliance with this perplexing and engaging form. Central to his wittily titled exhibition, *Strip Cube*, is an eight-foot hypercube made of plywood, the interior edges of its axial beams lined with mirrored stainless steel. To enter this cunningly wrought geometric environment is thus to be endlessly duplicated and appropriately dazzled. Adjacent to this giant hypercube are other, smaller floor models of it – all oddly evocative of the work of certain minimalist sculptors of the 1960s (Donald Judd, Robert Smithson). Of almost equal interest are Bell's series of wall-mounted "paintings" using carpet strips, assemblages of materials harvested from art packers; packing cases and, sometimes, cast-off museum frames: deadpan beauty so abstract it shoulders its way into pictorial significance.

**BARBARA ASTMAN AND SHARON SWITZER AT THE CORKIN GALLERY**

The Astman photos are \$17,000 each. The Switzers are \$800-\$2,300. Until Dec. 22, 55 Mill St., Building 61, Toronto; 416-979-1980, www.corkingallery.com

For her exhibition, *Wonderland*, Toronto-based photographer Barbara Astman riffs with considerable originality and charm upon the current preoccupation in the visual arts with the collection, the archive.

Working with digital presentations of pre-digital images – her own stupendous collection