Portrait of the Artist as....

Stephen Andrews' "Fingerprints" touch something special

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Portraiture is at the core of Canadian artist Stephen Andrews' work. It is the basis of "Fingerprints," a series of works in which the artist used his own thumb to stamp little pictures of people onto paper smudged with oilstick. It is there in "Personals," a series in which Andrews paired dozens of personal ads with small, informally wrought origami boxes created from pictures of faces and body parts taken from magazines.

Portraiture was the starting point that brought Andrews wide attention five years ago with the series, "Facsimiles," created with pictures of members of Toronto and Montreal gay communities who had died of AIDS. Andrews took faxed portraits and reprinted them in graphite on sheets of bleached beeswax, a technique which provides a metaphor for the way our own memory functions—fading out details, reducing elements to essentials.

For a self-portrait, picture a man around 40 years old, after some rough times, restored to health thanks to a drug cocktail. He sits in the large garden of a house in Toronto, surrounded by family and friends, including a new boyfriend. Add some background—decades of gay political activism, a partner of 15 years who died in 1993—and light the scene optimism.

There is a memorial aspect to many of Andrews' series, but especially in "Facsimiles" one can feel the artist stopping short of manipulating the viewer's response. Except for the AIDS Quilt, there were few AIDS memorials for Canadians at the time he made "Facsimiles."

"For me, the Quilt is so full of pathos that it anticipates people's reactions," says Andrews. "I really wanted to pull my punches, because I know that you cannot assume the breadth of depth of someone else's grief."

To put "Facsimiles" in context, it pays to remember that the response to AIDS in Canada was somewhat different from what it was in the United States. The reason was socialized medicine, and one result was that the artistic response to AIDS was freer to be more emotional than political.

"There was political work to be done here, but it didn't have to be as radical, because the situation wasn't extreme," Andrews says. "Groups like ACT UP, Group Material and Gran Fury—they really had to do major work [in the United States], because people were dying and no one was doing anything about it. Here, if you get sick, at least you can go to the hospital and you don't even have

to think about it. There, you have to mortgage your life just to get a shot."

Andrews stopped making "Facsimiles" in 1993.

"Things started changing, and now things have changed yet again," Andrews says. "You've got people living longer, and coping with different sets of problems: They're still somewhat disabled, yet they have to cope with a future that at one point seemed so certain and now is so not certain."

Uncertainty—the artist's own—was portrayed in Andrews' most recent show, "The Weather," at the Lombard-Freid Gallery in New York City's Soho. One group of works in the show featured big-sky landscapes printed on thin sheets of pig intestine; another group had names of hurricanes printed like autographs on canvas.

"In a way, those weather portraits are self-portraits," Andrews notes. "The landscape itself stands for my emotional state. When my partner died, I became museless. I've always looked to my own experience for the subject of my work, and it was great having someone there, because you could project it onto them. When Alex died, my gaze was turned and thrown onto myself."

The weather pictures look so calm, so optimistic and confident about the future. Meteorology aside, is this Andrews himself? "Oh, for sure," he says, "if only for tomorrow."

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