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Michael Andrews

London

by DEXTER DALWOOD

THE EXHIBITION *Earth Air Water* at **Gagosian Gallery Grosvenor Hill, London** (closed 25th March) set out to reposition Michael Andrews (1928–95) as a major British painter. This ambitious and thorough chronological survey of his work was a straightforward task since Andrews was not a prolific painter. The retrospective at Tate Britain in 2001 was a comprehensive representation of his output.¹

One of the first images to greet the visitor was *The Colony Room I* (1962; cat. no.9), a depiction of the cast of characters identified collectively as the ‘School of London’ (Francis Bacon and Lucian Freud among them) at the eponymous Soho drinking club. Amid flourishes of bravado brushwork there are fairly detailed portraits, but the painterly gesture is perhaps unconvincing. Andrews at this point in his career was still somewhat haunted by the shadow of William Coldstream and the Slade School of Art, a doctrine of gentlemanly painting employing subtle half-tones and muted earth colours. To this reviewer, Andrews’s forays into bolder, more direct colour are not fully convincing, and his attempts to find a more expressive way of painting seem somewhat strained.

The catalogue,² written by the exhibition’s curator, Richard Calvocoressi, provides a detailed analysis of Andrew’s intention in his paintings. Calvocoressi deftly describes the artist’s position on the edges of the ‘School of London’, but he does not say much about where Andrews’s work sat in the wider context of contemporary painting in the 1960s to the 1990s.

The painter with whom Andrews has the closest affinity, and this was especially so in the early 1970s, is in fact not one of the usual suspects, but the British artist Malcolm Morley (not mentioned in the catalogue), who was then living in New York and working, like Andrews, with both found and personal photographs, trying to forge a language that went beyond straight photorealism.

The exhibition’s main space has several works belonging to a cycle of seven paintings titled *Lights* (1970–74). These are quite simply the most brilliant paintings of Andrews’s career. They represent a remarkable departure from the artist’s previous work and stemmed from his very material re-evaluation of how to paint. With *Lights* he stopped using oil paint altogether, and began spraying acrylic water-based paint onto unprimed canvas. Technically this liberated him, for he then began to supplement his customary use of the camera in his practice with found photographs, assembling ‘moodboards’ of images that he would use either directly or as references. Calvocoressi has delved into the Andrews archive at the Tate to find both this photographic source material and references to the literature the artist was interested in at the time. He quotes Andrews’s own musings on Zen Buddhism and the idea of freeing oneself from ego, thus ‘seeing things just as they are’. Calvocoressi’s mention of the cult novel *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (1974) lends context to Andrews’s work – a nostalgic whiff of a world of patchouli and casual drug use.

A newly liberated stylistic ego genuinely emanates from the *Lights* cycle. Andrews can be seen to have freed himself from the conventional problematic foreground / middle-ground / background dynamic of figurative painting. He constructs his compositions from an elevated perspective,



62. *SAX A.D. 832 – Second Painting*, by Michael Andrews. 1983. Canvas, 152.4 by 152.4 cm. (Estate of Michael Andrews; exh. Gagosian, London).



63. *Lights VII: A Shadow*, by Michael Andrews. 1974. Acrylic on canvas, 182.9 by 182.9 cm. (Estate of Michael Andrews; exh. Gagosian, London).

the best example of which occupied prime position in this exhibition: *Lights VII: A Shadow* (no.26; Fig.63). Depicting the grey shadow of a hot-air balloon hovering above a beach, this painting is divided into three horizontal bands – sky, sea and sand. A gentle wave breaks at the border of land and water, but what holds the whole image together is a trailed, spilled, spindly (Jackson Pollock-like) green line on the sand. It could be a line of seaweed, but most importantly it does the job of pinning the image – like a moth to a board – to a palpable reality.

The saturated colour and atmosphere of the *Lights* series – the combination of a soft, out-of-focus gradation of colour offset against delineated detail – created a new vocabulary of painting techniques. Andrews's 'up, up and away' viewpoint and the sensation of looking down has very few precedents in painting – it made this visitor think of both Wenceslaus Hollar's engraved imaginary views across London and the animated film based on Raymond Briggs's *The Snowman*.

The *Cathedral* series, painted in the 1980s after a trip to Australia, are grand in scale and subject. They depict the alarmingly red natural feature that is Australia's Ayers Rock, looming up from the scrubland surrounding it. No longer looking down, the viewer is dwarfed by topography of phenomenal scale. They were first shown in 1986 at the Anthony

d'Offay Gallery, London,³ when they seemed to be tipping Andrews towards illustration rather than building on his achievements. Revisiting them now, their reliance on conservative photographic verisimilitude is even more problematic: how many decisions in a painting are made to resolve the painting alone rather than to make the painting look more like the photograph? With the *Lights* series Andrews had vastly extended his visual vocabulary, creating images from an amalgam of photographic references that were both conceptually and imaginatively original. These paintings are much more than the sum of their source photographs, but his later work, including the aquarium paintings in this show, somehow lack the same inventiveness. As Andrews became more technically adept at using spraypaint and stencils and projecting photographs onto the canvas, his paintings veered towards well-executed illustration.

SAX A.D. 832 – Second Painting (Fig.62) depicts an empty road in Norfolk, where the artist lived for fifteen years. Here Andrews returned to oil paint, and apart from the very limited use of a spray gun it could have been made any time from about 1930 onwards. In fact, a red-coated huntsman trotting onto this road from an Alfred Munnings painting would not look out of place stylistically or metaphorically. The painting conveys some-

thing of the effect of Norfolk light, and its half-tones contribute to a heightened sense of provincial misery. It is a very British light – misty, with an existential glumness – that resides in Andrews's paintings. It is paradoxical that for the viewer the works in this exhibition can produce an atmosphere of enforced ennui that is sometimes disembodied and exhilarating while at others turgid and slightly depressing. Andrews's deer-stalking paintings shown close by, which occupied him from the mid-1970s until the 1990s, are happily under-represented in this show. This subject-matter introduced the element of class and perhaps alienated some of his admirers.

On his return to London from Norfolk in the early 1990s, Andrews's subject-matter became the capital's river. *Thames Painting: The Estuary* (Fig.64) is unnerving. Once again the viewer is hoisted to a remarkable angle, up and above the exposed mud on the Thames at low tide. Here skeins of paint are propelled in swirls (mostly painted flat, the wet paint was moved about by means of a hairdryer), creating atmosphere through artifice. As one approaches, the surface texture reveals sand and gobbets of oil paint. Softly painted wooden boats and what appear to be nineteenth-century figures emerge at the tidemark. In many ways this painting should not work, but there is something so deft in its touch and restraint and yet so bold in its intent. The inherent magic of the *Lights* series comes flooding back in this work, but this time the light is harsher and more bleaching. In fact this painting turns out to have been his very last.

¹ Reviewed by Richard Calvocoressi in this Magazine, 143 (2001), pp.709–11.

² Catalogue: *Michael Andrews: Earth Air Water*. By Richard Calvocoressi. 160 pp. incl. 74 col. ills. (Gagosian, London, 2017), £60. ISBN 979-10-94966-04-4.

³ Reviewed by Peter Fuller in this Magazine, 128 (1986), pp.530–32.



64. *Thames Painting: The Estuary*, by Michael Andrews. 1994–95. Canvas, 219.8 by 189.1 cm. (Pallant House Gallery, Chichester; exh. Gagosian, London).