

Pop, Popular, Populist

Posters is the unassuming title of a series of works that Toronto artist Andrew Reyes has been producing since 1999. Now numbering over 120, these works use text, typography and image in a manner that mimes the most stylish graphic design, effortlessly replicating the look of advertising, cd covers, fashion spreads, or movie posters. Using these forms as a contemporary vernacular¹, *Posters* have a convincingly mainstream look. Reyes began making the posters as "a way to escape the oppressive orthodoxies of photography." Using photography within the graphic genre of the poster allowed him to continue to play with the historical and stylistic issues proper to photography, while opening a channel to subject matter that was both political and personal. "With each poster I could engage in a genre and twist it into my very own idiom."²

Some of these posters could easily be mistaken for conventional promotion for exhibitions or books, but the products are entirely fictional. Many of them feature "Andrew Reyes," as though the artist himself were a product or brand. An image of a store dummy with a disheveled wig, overlaid with "Reyes" in boldface and a block of narrative text, gives only the most oblique clues to the product identity. Other posters point to moments of recent art history or to signature gestures of international art stars, served up with generous portions of comic self-regard. "My friend is an artist" is the tag line for a group of images of the artist in his home and studio, but his face and other identifying features have been obliterated

with the iconic coloured dots found in photo works by John Baldessari. Another shows the artist in mid-air, recalling Yves Klein's famous leap into the void³, but here the gesture is deflated by a small inset image of the "after" shot, the artist crumpled in a heap on the ground. An image of perfectly ripe cherries or a worm's - eye view of a field of grass evoke other sensations and feelings of sensuality, joy, or whatever you like. As references accumulate the posters become a compendium of the artist's pleasures and fascinations, complete with adept signifiers of their market value.

In an age of lifestyle marketing and "experience" commodities, it is as though the posters are Reyes's chosen means to negotiate his identity, as an artist and as an individual, amidst a commercial arena that lays claim to the most intimate realms of sensibility and feeling. They may also serve as a sort of journal or notebook, where the artist records his impressions and works through their artistic implications. But above all, *Posters* remind us of the long and varied entanglement that has existed between art and popular culture. As provocation of middle-class sensibilities, or as affirmation of democratic social goals, artists have used the consumer products and fleeting obsessions of the modern urban world, either as inspiration, diagnosis or polemic, since the onset of modernity. Globalization has expanded and accelerated the reach of pop culture products, fuelling fears of large-scale alienation of people and loss of indigenous cultures, but art like *Posters* can still champion the diverse and subjective perspectives of

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individuals. At this intersection, Reyes's strategy is both Pop and populist. It is an affirmation of the positive meanings and values he finds in the products of popular culture, and a grassroots action against domination by a corporatist agenda. It is a pragmatic adoption of the pervasive structures of mediation, and it is a demonstration of the function of taste, or of how products can be adapted to suit his needs. With self-conscious regard for his own position as a producer of mediated experiences, Reyes has contaminated the structures of publicity and promotion, positioning his own subjectivity as the claim of value.

The question here seems to be one of authenticity or sincerity. Reyes has been described as an "emcee promoting the mysterious wonders of daily life."⁴ There is ample evidence in the work that Reyes starts from a position of agency and vitality, but there is also evidence that the image of himself projected through this work is as much fantasy as reality. Working through the promotional rhetoric of transparent signs by which the authentic experience is invoked, Reyes reveals an identity that is hybrid, unfixed, open to an endless process of adaptation and revision. The experience is the hot property, and the pitchman is as sincere as possible under the circumstances.

Christina Ritchie

¹ Roe, Brent, "Andrew Reyes," *Lola*, Fall 2000, p. 62.

² Unpublished artist's statement, August, 2005.

³ "The Painter of Space Casts Himself into the Void" was the caption of a photo-montage that appeared in a newsprint publication for the Festival of Avant-Garde Art in Paris in 1960. It showed Klein in a swan dive from a roof, as if flying. The newspaper was designed to replicate the Sunday edition of *France-Soir* and in his "editorial" Klein wrote "the theatre should be . . . the pleasure of being, of living, of spending wonderful moments. . . "

⁴ Roe, Brent, *ibid.*