

## JOE ANDOE: JUBILEE CITY

ALMINE RECH

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BY ELEANOR HEARTNEY

Since the election of President Trump, there has been a fascination with anything that might explain flyover America to the urban elite. J.D. Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy* and Tara Westover's *Educated* are best selling memoirs of escape from Middletown, Ohio, and southeastern Idaho, respectively, each author detailing the dysfunction of families and communities clinging, in the infamous words of Barak Obama, to their guns and religion.

Painter and writer Joe Andoe offers another glimpse into this alternate reality. In his 2007 memoir *Jubilee City: A Memoir at Full Speed*, Andoe draws on memories of an unsupervised childhood and drug-fueled adolescence in Tulsa, Oklahoma filled with car wrecks, petty crimes, and maniacal substance abuse. One senses that Andoe was lucky, as many of his childhood friends were not, to get out alive. The memoir also chronicles his improbable evolution from irresponsible redneck into a successful New York-based painter.

Andoe's current exhibition at Almine Rech is also titled *Jubilee City* and presents a selection of his works ranging in date from 1995 to 2010. These too are inspired by the world he left behind. Two paintings depict the same empty dirt road. It is punctuated by a receding line of telephone poles as it is swallowed up into the vanishing point of a flat landscape. In *Double Fleeper* (2009) the boxy cab of a semi rolls through the night, the only touch of color a row of red lights on its roof. There are two paintings of women. *Kay* (2008), as readers of the memoir will know, was Andoe's first and early deceased love. She is shown in profile, pensively looking down through half closed eyes. *Mary* (2004) is more hard-bitten, an icy blond clenching a handrolled cigarette in her teeth. Most affecting are his portraits of animals. In one painting, a mare gently nuzzles her foal. In another, a cow stands attentively under a night sky surrounded by her recently born calves. One, standing awkwardly in the middle of the painting is pure white, like a spectral visitation. In *Untitled (Wolf)* (1997) the head of a white wolf fills the canvas, its gentle eyes and peaceful demeanor belying the ferocity more commonly associated with this species. One senses a tenderness in the animal kingdom that seems in short

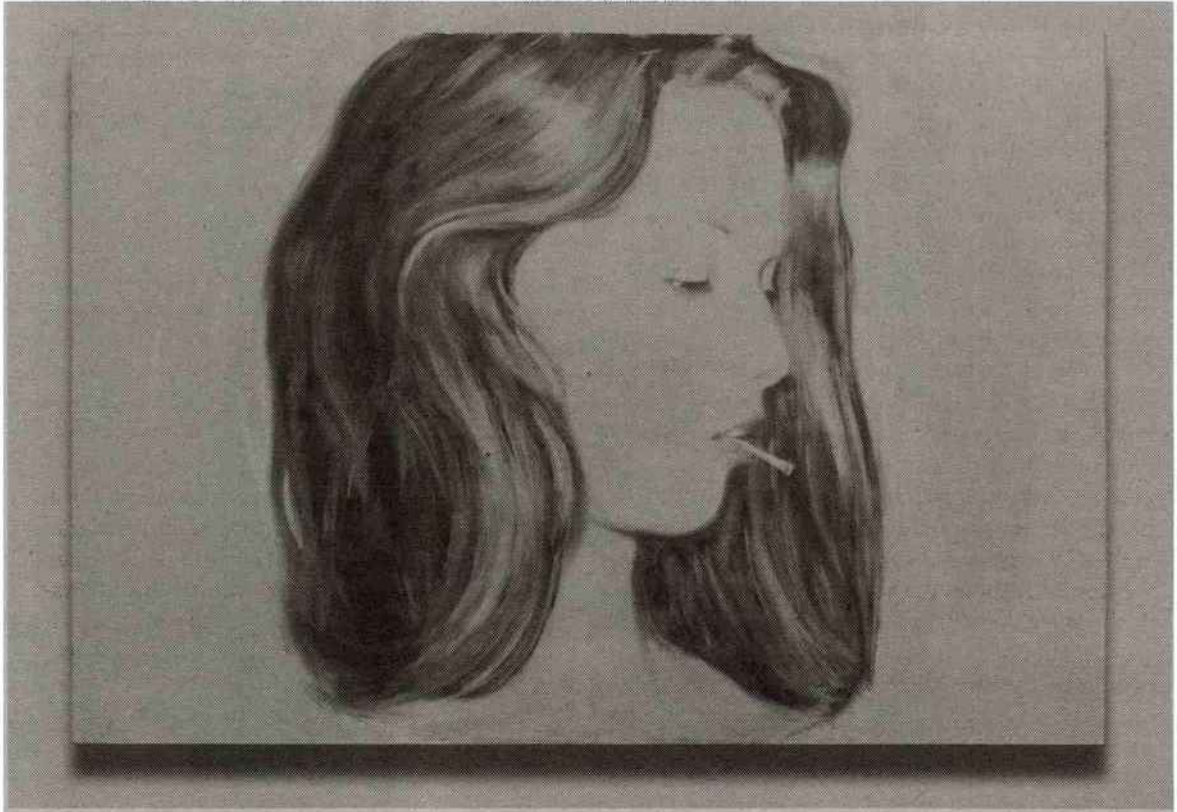
supply in the human world.

Reviewers of Andoe's paintings often invoke the photographs of Larry Clark, another Tulsa native. But while Clark's over-sexed and over-dosed teenagers have a lot in common with the vignettes Andoe describes in his memoir, his paintings exhibit a quiet calm and yawning emptiness that is entirely different in spirit. Andoe keeps color to a minimum. Most of the paintings are monochromatic, realized in shades of sepia, olive green, or faded blue. (An exception, *Kay* (2008) is set off against a deep red ground). Andoe creates these works by painting in oil and then wiping the surface down so that the striations of the canvas are visible. This gives the images a fugitive quality—like memories on the verge of dissolution. In the memoir Andoe describes his desire to create paintings whose effect is "psychedelic but real. . . Like the stillness of twilight when animals come out into the open."

In his memoir Andoe tells the story of his big break. Swiss dealer Thomas Ammann glimpses several paintings that have been grudgingly hung in the back room of a New York gallery and immediately buys them all. This ignites Andoe's international career. One can understand Ammann's interest. While the paintings are rooted in authentic Americana, their style is extremely restrained, even minimal. They bring to mind Gerhard Richter's photobased paintings and Luc Tuymans's nearly illegible depictions of interiors and landscapes. Like the works of those European stars, Andoe's paintings dance between representation and abstraction, flirting with the deadpan effect of poorly exposed photographs in a way that suggests the instability of any visual regime.

In the end, both memoir and paintings are suffused with melancholy. However, their ennui is not the stuff of rightwing nostalgia and its dreams of the lost social cohesion of an imaginary past. But neither do these works reflect a left-leaning urban horror at the pathologies of rural America. Instead, they seem intentionally opaque—standing outside the ideological silos into which art and literature are usually relegated. Andoe's oddly uninflected voice is a reminder that even in this omnivorous image world, some things and some people will remain strange and unassimilated. ☞

**ELEANOR HEARTNEY** is a New York-based art critic and the author of numerous books about contemporary art. Eleanor Heartney's *Postmodern Heretics: The Catholic Imagination in Contemporary Art* has just been reissued by Silver Hollow Press.



Joe Andoe, *Mary*, 2004. Oil on linen, 57 5/8 x 82 1/8 inches. © Joe Andoe. Photo: Matt Kroening. Courtesy the artist and [Almine Rech](#).