

# Internal and External

**RAINER ANDREESEN'S PORTRAITS  
CAPTURE THE LIKENESS AND SPIRIT  
OF THE PEOPLE DEPICTED.**

BY JOHN O'HERN

**R**ainer Andreesen grew up on Prince Rupert Island, a prosperous fishing community on the northern coast of British Columbia. He began drawing at the age of 5 but his parents urged him "to do other things." He would lock himself in his room, listen to music and draw. Fifty years later he sequesters himself in his studio, listens to music, enters a meditative state and paints—portraits, primarily, but portraits of friends and an elite clientele including Kathy Bates, J.J. Abrams, Martin Short, Alfred Molina and Jennifer Garner.

High up on the wall of his studio are reproductions of some of the most famous paintings by one of his favorite artists, John Singer Sargent. One is *The Daughters of Edward Darley Boit* in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. We both waxed poetic about the painting's composition and Sargent's ability to express so much with so little. The museum has installed the tall vases that appear in the painting next to it. We marveled at how Sargent captured the vases with very few brushstrokes—an inspiration for artist and writer alike.

Growing up in Prince Rupert, he was attracted to faces and drawing portraits and still is drawn by the "challenge of

capturing not only the likeness, but also the spirit." His high school art teachers encouraged him, "teaching me a few techniques but, mostly, I learned on my own." He also learned from listening to other artists, he says, "There were a few in Prince Rupert."

At the end of high school, "I didn't know what I wanted to do," he confesses. "I had no concept of making a living from other than advertising. I didn't know graphic design existed. The only designer I knew of in Prince Rupert was a sign painter. I was encouraged by my teachers to research art schools and then attended an intensive art program from Capilano University in Vancouver, British Columbia." The course was primarily design but he had courses in life drawing and anatomy.

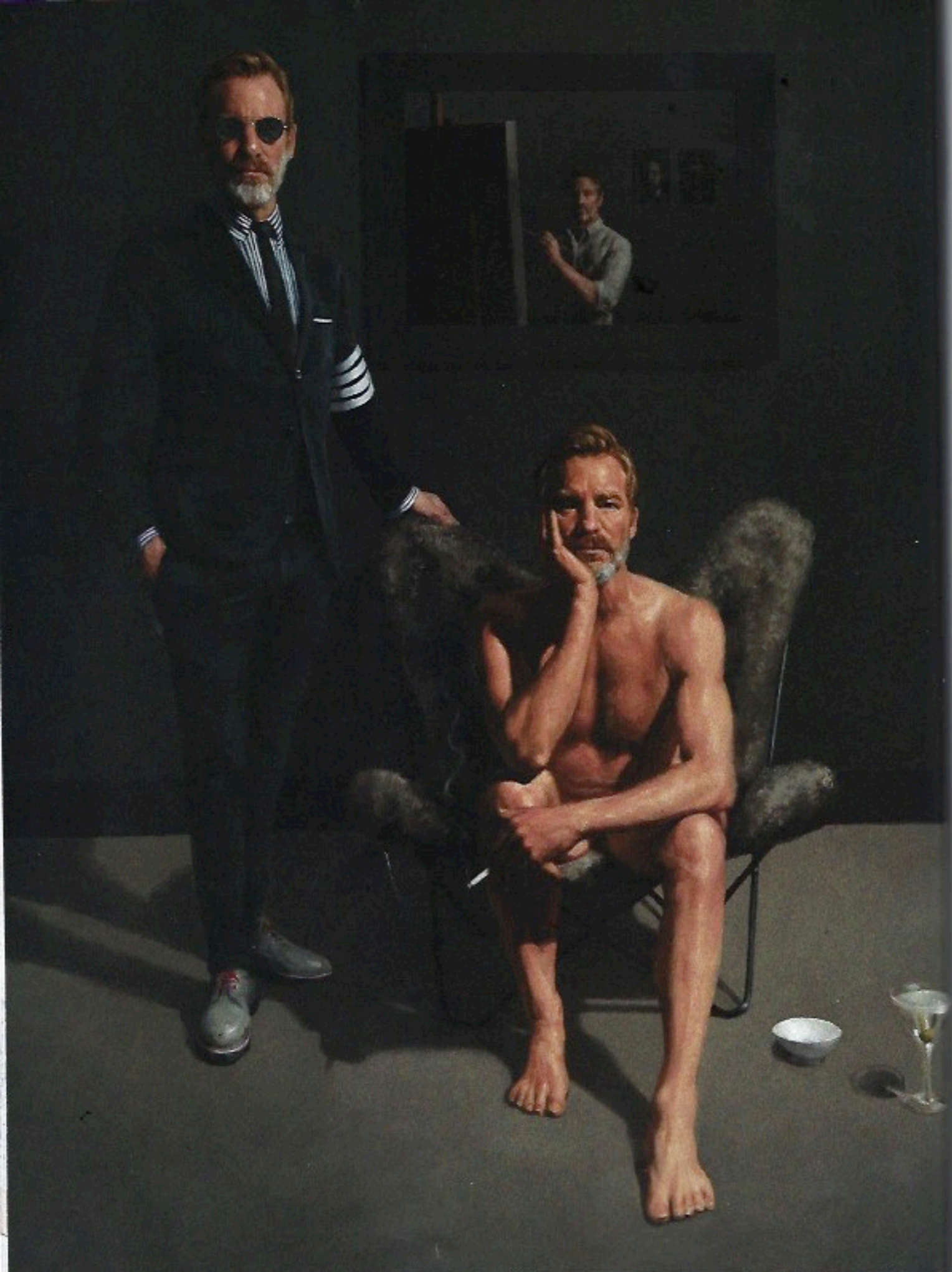
After graduating in 1986 he returned to Prince Rupert and was hired by an advertising agency. He moved later to a design studio in Vancouver where he was encouraged to take on his own clients. "After two years," he says, "I had enough clients to go it on my own and to hire a few freelance people."

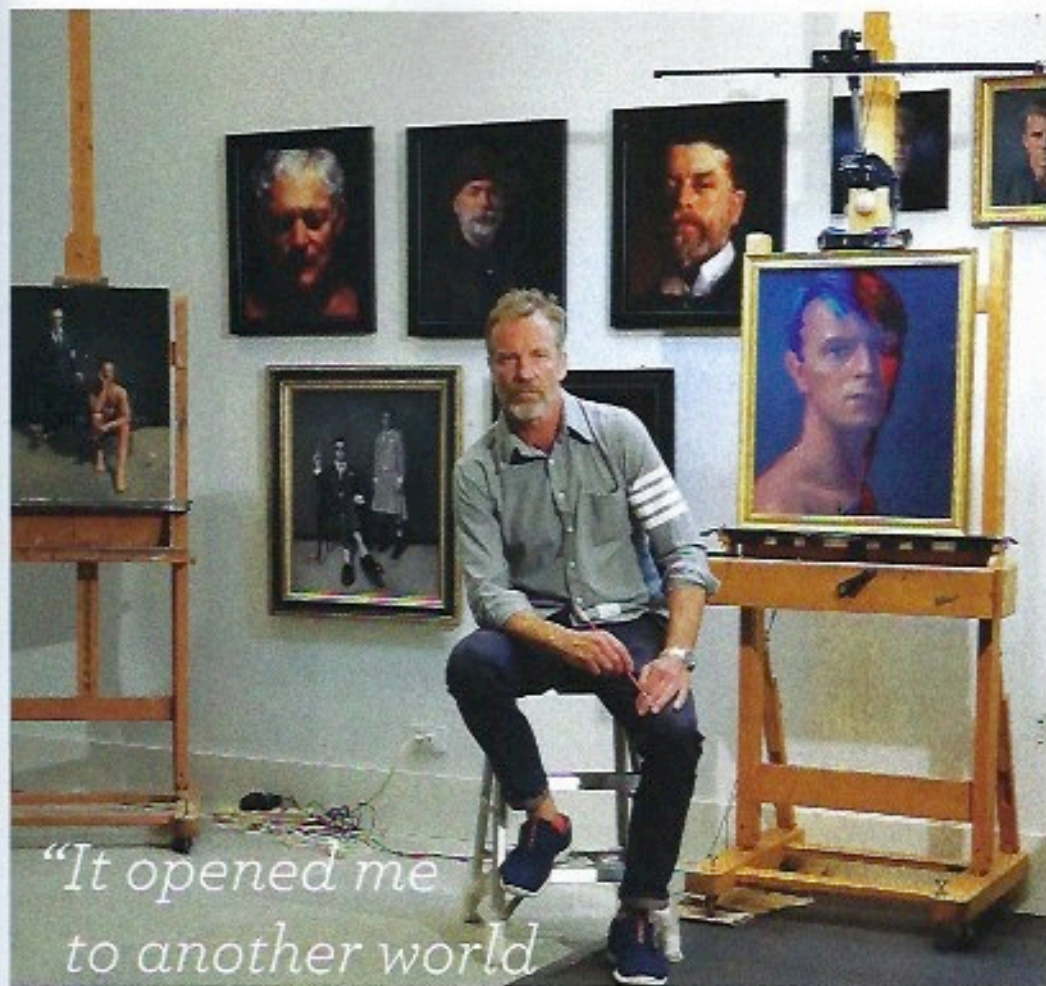
One of his clients was a fashion photographer who asked him if wanted to model for a promotion for Eaton's, then Canada's

1  
W. 4<sup>th</sup> Street, oil on  
linen, 30 x 24"

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2  
The Ashtray, oil on  
canvas, 48 x 36"

3  
Rainer Andreesen in his  
New York City studio.

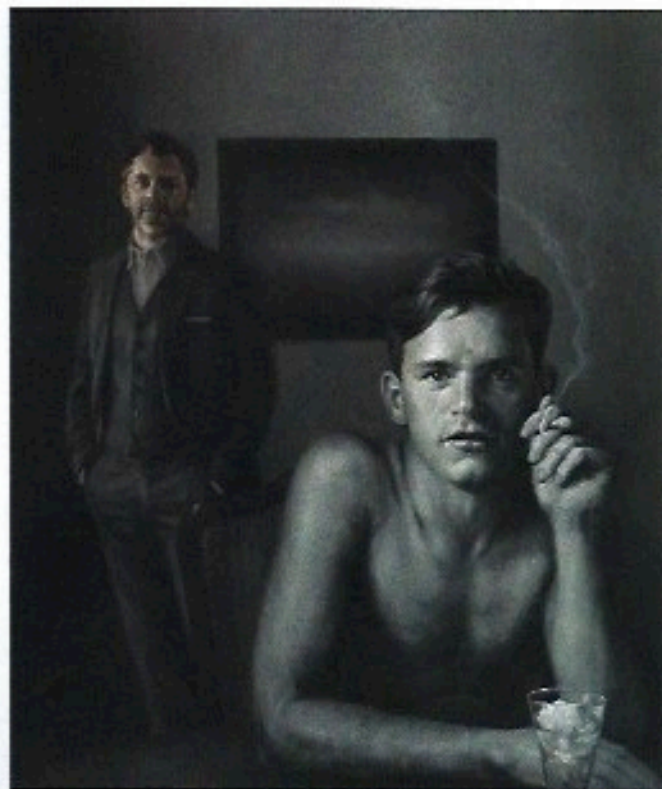
4  
Grey Matter, oil on  
canvas, 72 x 60"

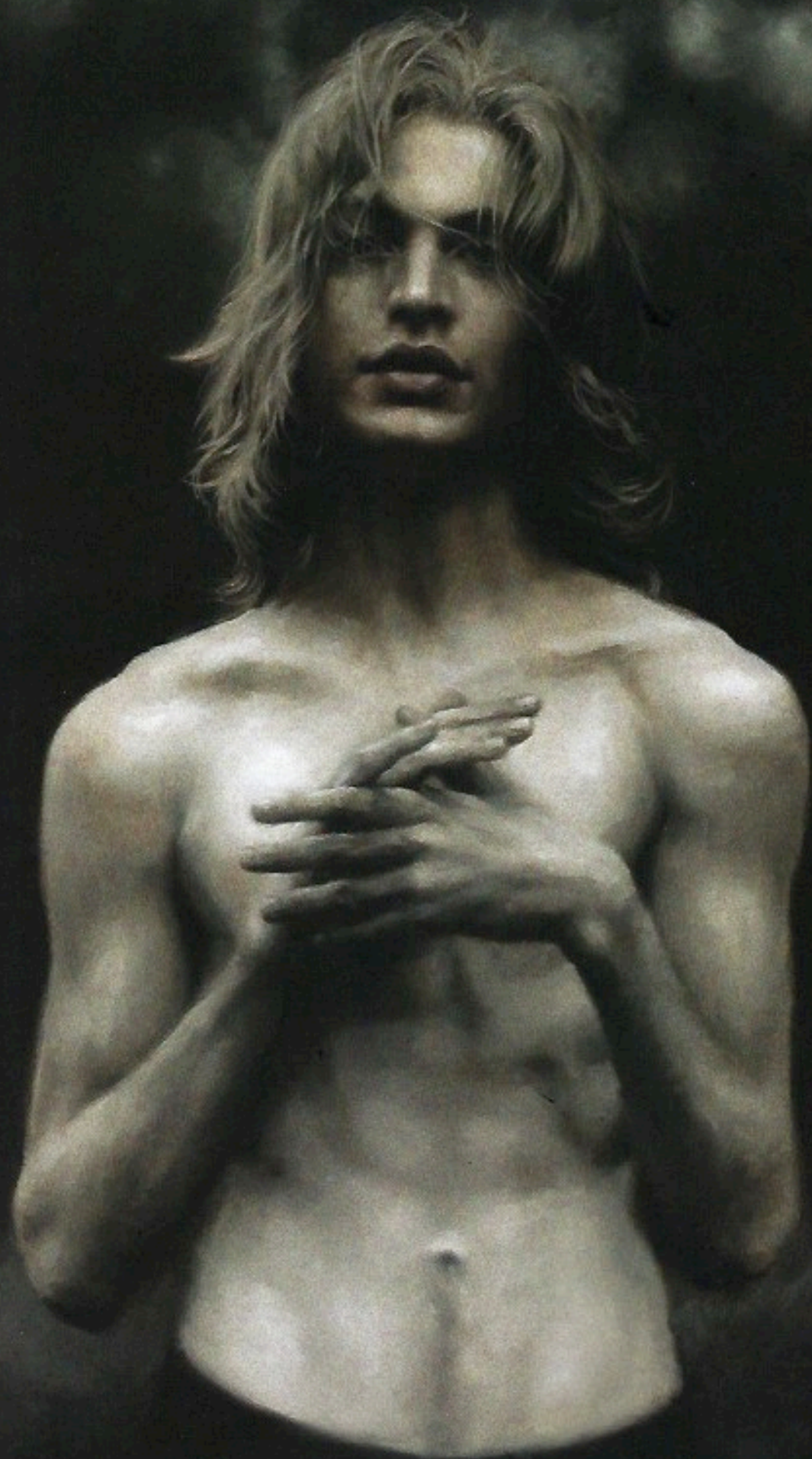
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largest department store chain. He agreed, enjoyed it and his image began appearing on billboards around Vancouver. One of the myriad of people who saw the billboards was a scout from an exclusive agency in Milan who recruited him to move there. He was chosen by the likes of Giorgio Armani, Gucci, Valentino, Hugo Boss and Ermenegildo Zegna. The rest, as they say, is history.

"It opened me to another world that I wanted to explore," he says. "I went back to Vancouver, gave the business to the guys who did my computer work and returned to Milan. Modeling took over. It was all-encompassing and I was traveling constantly. But I always had a sketchpad and visited every church and museum, drawing as I had time traveling around Europe. I always had a desire to end up painting, doing my own stuff. It was a goal I looked forward to. I arrived back in New York in 1994 and made a studio in my apartment where I pursued painting in watercolor and gouache. A hair and makeup artist encouraged me to try oils. I did and fell in love.

"Oils allow me to work more with values, which are important in my work," he continues. "Sargent was a master of values. I always go back to him and have done a few studies of paintings of his. I try to get that feel in my hand of how he painted. Sargent also painted the clothing of his time in his portraits and I want to document that in my paintings."





*"I don't like to make paintings that will hit you over the head with a subject matter..."*

He was introduced to the feel of wearing well-designed and well-made clothes in Milan and, even in his studio, wears designer clothing. Often, as in his triple self-portrait, *The Ashtray*, he will wear clothes inspired by one of his favorite designers, Thom Browne. His idea was to make the portrait of another person but the potential model didn't get back to him. Driving in his car he was listening to a program, Marc Myers' *Anatomy of a Song*, which that day was devoted to *Bang a Gong (Get It On)* by T. Rex. Andreesen says, "I realized it was OK for me to do this painting of myself. I thought I'd call it *Anatomy of a Song* or *Anatomy of Solitude* because painting is complete solitude for 13 to 14 hours a day with few breaks." When his friends saw the complex portrait they were captivated by the ashtray and urged him to use it as the title. I asked, and the martini is vodka.

Previous to painting *The Ashtray*, Andreesen had taken a hiatus from modeling and concentrated on painting portraits for an exhibition, *Gray Matter*. "I did a small study of a friend's face in black-and-white, cropped tightly," he explains. "I went to dinner and showed him that image and he said, 'You need to do this large scale and do a whole show!' All the paintings in *Gray Matter* were 5 by 4 feet. The series explored the humanity of a portrait and its perception by the viewer. The series was inspired by Pink Floyd's *The Dark Side of the Moon*. I started each morning by listening to the entire album as I set up the day for painting and proceeded to listen to their music while I worked on each piece. It was one of the best and deepest experiences I have ever had while painting."

He continues, "I don't like to make paintings that will hit you over the head with a subject matter. I want people to bring their own interpretation of how they feel when they look at it. In the process of painting a portrait, I need to have a feeling in my heart that I know when I have captured the subject. Not just their aesthetic. I have to have the feeling that I've captured the spirit of that person."



5  
*Andrew*, oil on canvas,  
40 x 30"

6  
*Man in Chair*, oil on  
linen, 30 x 24"

7  
*Untitled (Swf)*, oil on  
panel, 27 x 19½"

Images courtesy  
MM Fine Art,  
Southampton, NY.