

ANIMAL MAGNETISM

Contemplating mortality through absurdity

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"IS IT POSSIBLE to do a porcupine?" ponders Sean Landers, enumerating the North American mammals that he has yet to immortalize in a painting. "Beaver. Raccoon. Possum. Elk. Woolly mammoth—that would be great." So far, he's assembled a veritable menagerie of mostly four-legged subjects, including several deer, a bison, and two violent rams. But, this being Sean Landers we're talking about, they're not straightforward depictions of wild beasts in their natural environments; all of them sport tartan-patterned fur or skin, their natural camouflage replaced by lovingly rendered Scottish designs. In his SoHo studio there's a seal happily cavorting beneath the waves, as well as a half-finished fox. Landers is surprisingly earnest about the works, which, while absurd and funny, are much more than visual puns. "I generally want to paint cute animals, I guess," he says. And this helps me be able to do it. It's just weird enough to get me a little purchase on this tenuous slope."

These animals—the subject of this month's exhibition at Petzel gallery in New York—have their genesis in a stew of inspirations, from 1940s paintings by René Magritte to Landers's own ruminations on mortality and artistic legacy. The Magrittes in question are a series of works known as the "Vache" paintings, completed in 1948 for a show in France; tartan and tartanlike patterns played a significant part in many of the compositions. "Magritte was invited to do a show in Paris," Landers explains. "He'd been ignored there his whole career, yet he was the world's leading Surrealist. He had an ax to grind; he wanted to do a 'fuck you' show to Paris, so he made purposefully 'bad' paintings. They weren't valued at all until people of my generation—me and a couple others—started to champion them." His altered animals, the artist says, are "an homage to what I admire about that series, but also a way to remind myself that to be free, to discover new things, is the best way to make work that will last and be interesting for a long time."

Landers is quite conscious of artistic longevity, about how paintings can become "arrows across time," striking future generations long after their creator is dead. He sounds borderline doleful when imagining the existence his creatures could have, if discovered by curious humans several hundred years from now. He's equally sincere when talking about certain inclusions of text in the paintings—like "Some Choose to Believe It," a lyric from *The Rainbow Connection*, performed by Kermit the Frog, which Landers has adopted as a sort of anthem about how artists forge connections with audiences. This gives a certain pathos to the tartan series itself, especially when







A tartan deer in Landers's SoHo studio.

Landers explains that he incorporated his own irises into the painting of a polar bear adrift on a chunk of iceberg. (That polar bear refers back to a similarly lonely clown in a rowboat that was included in the artist's last, clown-centric exhibition at Petzel.) Another autobiographical reference is embedded in a portrait of a howler monkey holding a bottle that contains a furled sheet of yellow legal paper, a nod to the "shockingly honest things" that Landers would write down and then exhibit in the 1990s.

Several of the tartan animal paintings have partners: canvases depicting rows of books, with a small version of the animal itself captured in a crystal ball on the shelf. The spines of those books are covered with words spelling out a sort of exegesis of the original painting it refers to. "As paintings age and artists die off, their stories about why they made things disappear," Landers says, perhaps suggesting that the bookshelves are a way to carry those origin stories into posterity.

One of the biggest mammals Landers has portrayed—and the subject of the largest painting he's ever made, some 30 feet—is a massive Moby Dick, his skin battle-scarred beneath its tartan ornamentation. That painting will most likely reside on one wall in the back room of Petzel (this has a nice resonance with another very American picture, Robert Longo's huge charcoal drawing of the Capitol Building, which hung in the same place). The whale might be paired with some underwater scenes of shipwrecks (one of Landers's unofficial maxims is "Whenever you're given the opportunity to paint a sunken ship, you should take it"), moody, murky scenes featuring rocks etched with slogans like "Is Art Humanity's Best Answer To Death?" At one point he had painted in an octopus with a chisel, a character that he erased from the composition but who might well resurface on his canvas at a later date. "You can't do all your ideas at one time," Landers says, sounding perhaps a bit disappointed that this is the case.

When you get down to it, are these tartan-clad animals—from the lithe, pinkish lynx to the horse galloping across a beach—just different versions of the artist? "Are they all me? In a sense, yeah," Landers replies. "If you think of a painting as a time capsule, they're wrapping a bit of me into the medium. It's a little piece of myself, going forward." MP

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CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: An in-progress tartan fox hangs next to photographic references in the studio.

The artist's proof of *Around the World Alone* (*Lord of the Seas, Holy Hermit, Slocum*), 2011.

Landers modeled this polar bear's eye after his own, seen here on his cell phone.

Two small studies for a massive painting of Moby Dick hang above an encaustic study for the bust of a monk.

A detail of *Shipwreck I*, 2014.

Brainstorming notes on the type of legal pad the artist favors.

