



Written by
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Photographed by
Zach Gross

Sean Landers has been called a lot of things: bad boy, narcissist, jokester, immature. If you take a surface glance at the artist's 20-plus-year career—from his breakthrough works, the stream-of-consciousness texts on yellow legal pad paper that he hung on the gallery wall, to his oil paint suite of seafaring clowns—it's kind of easy to see why.

His upcoming show—which runs from November 13th to December 20th at New York's Petzel Gallery—could, at first glance, be misconstrued as playful, immature, whatever. That is until you begin to unpack the show's conceptual content and discover a complex web of meaning, language, and references that have run throughout his entire career, a web that touches upon the core questions of what it means to be an artist.

The Petzel exhibition consists of three main sections, all executed in oil paint: animals with tartan-patterned fur, crowded bookshelves, and forests full of birch trees inscribed with the type of graffiti left behind by high school sweethearts—only here, the carvings are self-aware phrases: "This is fiction," "I suck right? Fuck you." In the gallery, the works speak in conversation between one another as the tartan animals, at once naturalistic and complete works of fantasy, reappear in their Earthly forms on the bookshelves: captured in tiny crystal balls.

"I've done a lot of art shows at this point and all of them have had underlying thoughts and themes," says Landers, sitting at a desk in his airy SoHo studio. "In fact, I almost think of them as movies in a way, big stories that I'm trying to tell." He's browsing through an online catalog of his works. "And almost never does it come up in the criticism of the thing. So it's probably just for myself." In some ways the entire series

is littered with things just for Landers, Easter-egg allusions to centuries of art history.

This time, Landers makes frank connections in his work: The spines of the painted books that fill his bookshelf pieces spell out complex philosophical texts written in the style of James Joyce on topics like narcissism, solipsism, sending art into the world, and the art's life beyond the artist's. Together, the essays in the nine paintings make up Landers' thesis on art. "I've never been as clear as this in the past," he says. "If I were a filmmaker, maybe with this show I'm being less of an experimental filmmaker that only my friends get the idea of the film, and maybe just anybody can get this one because it is seemingly clear."

At the center of the show is Landers' most overt message: a massive 30-foot-long painting of Moby Dick, his plaid flesh riddled with harpoons, a symbol of Landers' own monomaniacal artistic quest for his great white whale, immortality through art. "All the work I do is toward the end of trying to make better work, trying to make great work, trying to make lasting work, so that's like throwing a harpoon at this incredibly hard thing to get," he says. "This symbolizes the act of not only art-making, but being an artist with one's entire life."

Not to say the artist is completely free of irony. One painting in this new show depicts a blue tartan bear standing upright in a forest, flanked by two trees inscribed with the statements: "Somebody thought of that" and "And someone believed it." These words, which cut to the very heart of what Landers believes to be the central issue of art-making, aren't from some art text or philosophical essay. They're lyrics to the song "Rainbow Connection," by Kermit the Frog.



JACKET BY JOHN VARYATOS.
DENIM BUTTON-UP SHIRT BY
DIOR HOMME, AND JEANS BY
BURBERRY.

STYLIST: TOYO TSUCHIYA



"AROUND THE WORLD ALONE (THE HOLY HERMIT)," (2011). OIL ON LINEN. 68 X 52 INCHES. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND PETZEL, NEW YORK.



"THE URGENT NECESSITY OF NARCISSISM FOR THE ARTISTIC MIND," (2014). OIL ON LINEN. 50 X 65 INCHES. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND PETZEL, NEW YORK.



"YOU'RE LOST," (2014). OIL ON LINEN. 50 X 65 INCHES. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND PETZEL, NEW YORK.