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TO EVERYONE'S CHAGRIN

On Sean Landers at Galerie Giti Nourbakhsch, Berlin

Sean Landers' paintings have always been circling around his own person or persona – be it that he relates precarious to embarrassing confessions about his qualities as a lover or that he gives free rein to his nagging self-doubts. At the same time, these works not only testify to a manic will to personal revelations, they are always also laced with black humour and insights into the abysmal depths of the social. You simply cannot trust “Sean”.

The painter's recent exhibition at Galerie Giti Nourbakhsch once again skillfully led the viewer into the tricky territory of seemingly authentic expressions – in doing so, however, it opened up the possibility to examine Landers' word cascades with respect to their conceptual as well as their romantic implications.

If you feel like trusting Sean Landers, go for it. Why not? He's a nice enough guy — at least the “Sean” in the paintings (Landers emerged in the early 1990s as a monologist, a maker of giant rambling text paintings, a form that recurs still in his work) — this nervous narrator who for more than fifteen years has generously spooled out his anxieties and digressions in scratchy block letters. He lets us know that he's nice — nice enough even to reveal his dark side, and good enough to share his thoughts, whether deep, nervous or vain. (From 1999: “I HAVE TO CONFESS THAT I THINK I'M FUCKING GREAT. SORRY IF THAT RUBBS [sic] YOU THE WRONG WAY”) Now he's older and willing to share his hard-earned wisdom. “DON'T BE ORIGINAL. BE GOOD LOOKING”, read two adjacent passages on a painting in his recent show at Galerie Giti Nourbakhsch. “WHORE YOURSELF”. “PRETEND”.

So what are we trusting in? As Landers paints it: “SINCERITY IS OVERRATED. IRONY HAS NO OPPOSITE.” Sincerity is indeed a black hole for criticism to handle. Earnestness is hard to theorize. It's almost impossible to prove, and often plain embarrassing when we sniff it. Yet Landers' work deals chiefly in sincerity — or postures of sincerity — and invites us to tumble into a rabbit hole attempting to unravel it. To try seriously to parse the mode of address in Lander's work is like turning a Rubik's cube: what's really meant, what's not meant, what's true, what's funny, what's useful? The problem is, you know Sean's the guy who will rearrange the stickers on the face to win. Straight-laced discussions risk ridicule, seeming to just “not get it” in the face of Landers' disarming bursts of petulance, grim humor or sheer stupidity. He basically dares the critic to belly-flop.

So here's my first belly-flop: an indulgent digression. Landers was my teacher, for a while, in the States. Somehow he ended up in contract for a plein-air landscape painting course at Yale. When the weather was bad, the class moved indoors and embarked on other Landers-like projects. Karaoke, for instance. One afternoon Landers hired a nude model, but rather than drawing we had to sit and write — candidly, he demanded — about our thoughts, our reactions and our presumed embarrassment. Then, the texts were read aloud. The criteria Landers called for was honesty, the rawest sincerity. Yet, the readings that played best were those that, to my ears, were most implausibly heartfelt, those laden with nervous ticks, self-loathing and heavy sweating — in short, those which,



Sean Landers, "Chagrins of the New Episteme", Galerie Giti Nourbakhsh, Berlin, 2008, Installation View

stylistically, ventriloquized a “voice” recognizable from Landers’ own paintings. The moral, then, was somehow amoral: Signs of honesty and of affect are probably most effective if we know them already — even if that makes them received, stylized, adopted — and the keenest signals of sincerity are the trappings of struggle, performed in works which seem to fret and search. Even as we, perhaps unconsciously, absorbed and copied his rhetoric, we were getting in on some sleights of hand.

This is no great revelation. It was something implicit in Landers’ work from the beginning. Misspellings and false-starts... who doubted how much Landers fostered them? But neither was he faking it. This simultaneous contrivance and straight-forwardness is evident, just as much, though perhaps less patently, in his text-free paintings: the jokey portraits of adventuring clowns or of odd beast-like figures, which populated his 2004 show at the Kunsthalle Zürich and his last Berlin gallery outing at Nourbakhsh’s former Rosenthaler Straße location in 2005. It’s because of the kind of painter he is. Teaching his landscape class, Landers never said: *Look closely for the colors you’re seeing*. Instead he offered: *mix that much of this with this much of that. [...] it’s the perfect sky color [...] Bob Ross has good*

tricks. A cheeky inversion of the “usual” means, this approach takes glee in the simple effectiveness of effect. On the one hand, Landers’ cartoonish pictures bear the look of high-minded, oil-on-linen painting (perhaps poorly painted, perhaps beautifully, depending on who’s judging); on the other they revel in tiny tricks — short-cuts learned and loved — which meld with his preference for sad-sack protagonists (the afore mentioned clowns) to give us a guy, who, joking aside, wants to make paintings which look like paintings. The jokes in Sean’s paintings fall more or less flat, but the idiosyncrasies are often quite funny: the weird wounded eyes of a man made of planks wandering in a leafless forest, or the sly, crowned Poseidon, breasted and dick-nosed, beard blowing in the wind. All this to note that Landers’ work has consistently peddled a defiant subjectiveness, at first in self-humiliating performance and direct monologue, later in bizarre pictorial concoctions.

At Nourbakhsh, Landers showed only text paintings, in which his old-style rambling-monologues have been replaced by a cacophony of short phrases, advice or slogans. The “voice” ranges from the familiar Landers first-person (“I’M 45” or “IT’S OFFICIAL I’M A DOUCHE BAG”) to the utterly

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generic (“OOPS I DID IT AGAIN”), from familiar platitudes to real weirdness (“FELLATE A TRAN-NY”). Various, they could be read as criticizing today’s art market (“PERFECT PRODUCT”), or maybe giving advice to a young artist, or simply recording Landers’ usual soliloquy. “POOR SEAN’S ALMANAC” interjects one canvas. That’s “Poor Sean” as in *Poor Richard’s Almanack*, the famous collections of facts, epigrams and small wisdoms published by Benjamin Franklin. “WE ALL MISS BEN FRANKLIN” writes Sean. We do! Simple advice for farmers about the sun and the moon have been replaced by Lander’s scribbling on such topics as “The Money Shot” or “Chagrins of the New Episteme”, which was also the title of the exhibition.

And which leads me now to a second belly-flop. I looked up “chagrin” in the thesaurus and found the example sentence quite appropriate: “Sean showed up at the party, to everyone’s chagrin.” According to the editors of Oxford, if you want to swap out “chagrin”, you could choose one of these alternatives: “annoyance, irritation, vexation, exasperation [...] mortification, humiliation, shame”. Fellow artist, Mel Bochner might add: “torment... get under your skin... be a pain in the ass... piss you off... be a prick”. These phrases come from

one of Bochner’s recent “thesaurus” paintings: painted lists of synonyms, hand-lettered in rows over colored backgrounds. And I don’t call up this association idly. The elephant in the room for these new Landers is that they look like Bochners, or the other way around.

Since I’ve followed Sean’s lead in over-personalizing this writing, I should confess: I was also a student of Bochner’s. So, I may have an overly dramatic view of their differences: on the one hand, Bochner, pursuing the systematic and objective, questioning the presuppositions of language, both in words and materials; on the other, Landers, using every expressive tool at hand to place himself on center stage. The video camera simply captured his self-humiliations; the language in his earlier paintings claimed, unlike Bochner’s writings, to be transparent. It seems implausible that they would end up in any proximity.

Bochner’s new paintings are peculiar too, their implied rigor spotted with blemishes of intentional irrationality. If the basic set up — a list of words that should mean the same — is straightforward, the decision making is not, and time and again, a strong voice emerges, unexpectedly. (What speaker is choosing the words “tough titty”?) By contrast,

Lander's new works complicate his usually personal and indulgent voice by firing off a huge number of generic phrases, like epigrams on auto-pilot. The primary way Bochner might talk about his own paintings, I suspect, is more structural — about writing versus drawing, reading versus looking — but I'm interested in an alternate direction, suggested by a recent project of his in which he sent a lecture to be read alongside slides of several of these paintings. The text — “Notes on Romanticism” — was a distillation from Bochner's teaching days, sketching a basic line from Kant through Schelling, with the emphasis on the place of the artist — both the idea of valuing sincerity over final form, and the invention of the subject-figure, who creates values and criteria from within. As M. H. Abrams phrased it, back in 1953, that's the paradigm shift to thinking of art as a “lamp”, not the “mirror” of the world. To see these paintings in this light, is to see the emergence of subjectivity, both socially rendered (reading Bochner's synonyms one often identifies different expressions with different milieu) and arbitrarily self-generated.

That long digression (with its over-reaching claims) seems like an odd way to spin Landers, but it's also one way to approach the common ground that these two artists have reached. It's a ground that insidiously underlies where we stand, because no matter how much this romantic subject has been de-centered or re-cast, most artists maintain it. (I implicate myself here too.) From the figure of the dandy, to the neo-neo-Expressionist, even to the recent resurgence of collaborative work — and whether the conversation is post-Fordist or Facebook — the basic vector is still expression or disruption from within.

It's a crisis for young artists: how to define the role of the artist — and of the personal — within practice. Even artists like Bochner and others of his generation who pursued strategies to depersonalize art-making, have now been lionized and stand as generative, essentially romantic figures. What majority of art students now dreams of playing such

a role? This is where Landers' work began — with the early text paintings and cartoon drawings he made and exhibited soon after moving to New York — and he continues to perform the (potentially) quite personal as it *functions* in the art world. If this subjectiveness seems indulgent, its underpinnings are certainly under most of us.

To some extent, Landers is the shaming guest at the party. He also must be an “artists' artist” — whether you like him or not — for the way he distills the general status quo of art students and of the professionalized moment we're in. If there is truth among the chaff in his musings on the “New Episteme”, it's actually the chaff which does the most to irritate and draws us towards considering the world this speaker inhabits and the world-view he inherits. The exhibition at Galerie Nourbaksch may not be Sean's strongest (though it may be among his more handsome and austere ones.) It's confusing and retiring. One suspects if Sean could choose he wouldn't be in the gallery with the paintings, but out in Nourbaksch's garden, where he sited a rather randy life-sized bronze sculpture of Pan, with hooves for hands and a bushy brow. It's an uncertain and provocative place to stand.

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Sean Landers, “Chagrins of the New Episteme”, Galerie Giti Nourbaksch, Berlin, May 2–June 14, 2008.