

Sean Landers

greengrassi, London

As a literary portrait of an artist, Emile Zola's novel *The Masterpiece* (1886) fulfils all the necessary romantic stereotypes. Set in 19th-century Paris, the doomed protagonist, Claude Lantier, is a violently original painter who dies penniless and unknown while lesser artists find success by plagiarizing his unique style. Contained within the tale is the classic association between brilliance and insanity, exacer-

bated by the loneliness of a god-like task and the daily torment of being all too human. These are both qualities that Sean Landers would appear to be very familiar with. Casting himself in a similarly heroic mould, Landers is fascinated by the struggle for artistic perfection. It's one that has previously taken him, especially in his text-based works, from the depths of creative torment and self-flagellation to dizzy egotistical heights. More recently he has attempted to enter the mind of a 'genius', in a set of Picasso pastiches.

This time around, the main gallery space was filled with a series of dark portraits of some of the heroes of mod-

ern art. Some of these artists are depicted with the facial features of clowns and dressed like figures from historical novels or fairy tales, while others resemble ghosts. The subject matter would seem to be something of a personal top ten, an impression that is backed up by the exhibition card; a handwritten work schedule in the form of a list of artists, all crossed out but for Matisse, who never made it into the exhibition.

In the thickly painted *Elf (Braque)*, (all works 2003) Georges Braque is portrayed as an elf-like creature. Resplendent with a nose that curls at the end and finishes in a garish green pom-pom, he sports the classic clown look: painted white face and exaggerated down-turned mouth. Elsewhere the heavy figure of De Chirico, that purveyor of melancholic Surrealism, is transformed into a mournful-looking Viking-clown in *Viking (De Chirico)*; while Magritte, a rather sartorial clown, has been given bouffant red hair, horns and a tail to become *Devil (Magritte)*. Providing visual relief to this horror show of brightly coloured oddities, the sombre grey ghost paintings look, in turn, wistful, *Ghost 1 (Ernst)*; intellectual, *Ghost 2 (Duchamp)*; anxious, *Ghost 3 (Picabia)*; and stern *Ghost 4 (Beckmann)*. They are more like conventional portraits, with only a few well-painted peculiarities – such as the hysterical look in Picabia's eye and Duchamp's artificially elongated brow.

The fact that the Surrealists are over-represented numerically indicates that this is perhaps where Landers gets his penchant for hallucinatory imagery. And despite the fact that the all-male cast could have come straight out of a school art history textbook, neither of the heavyweight contenders for 'most important artist of the 20th century' title occupies centre stage. Duchamp, whose elongated forehead seems like a joke about the fact that it was from here that Conceptual art sprang, sits to one side; while Picasso, Landers' old

favourite, who (arguably) did more to revolutionize the picture plane than any other artist of the time, becomes a mere clown soldier in *Confederate (Picasso)*, eclipsed by *King (Dali)*. Dali's crowned head, joke moustache and maniacal red-eyed stare would seem to be testaments to the fact that it was he, more than any of the others, who was willing to play the part of genius and madman to the full.

Meanwhile the upstairs gallery space contained some worryingly cute paintings of a happy beaver chewing logs and of two Bambi-like fawns in a clearing. Though seemingly startlingly out of place, the Disney-like excesses of these images appear sinister next to *Ace*, a joker-like character from a pack of cards, that, depending on whether you see Landers as satirical or deluded, could be the artist's self-portrait. The other candidate is *Buffalo*, a painting of a man in profile with horns, floppy cow-like ear, brooding eye and shaggy fur instead of a face; a kind of American Minotaur, which would make the artist a monstrous god different from the rest of his race.

When *The Masterpiece* was first published, the Impressionists were worried that the novel would be used to attack the new style of painting. But to the contemporary eye the hackneyed sufferings of the book's 'genius' seem ridiculous. Lantier thinks he suffers more than others, but laughs at people who have to work for a living, apparently unaware that it is not dedication, but a small private income, that enables him to devote himself to his brilliant task. Rifling through the rubbish bin of high culture, Sean Landers seems to revel in a cast of culturally devalued and cliché-ridden characters. The result is a genuinely bizarre and funny set of works in which, to resort to the old truism that all portraits are self-portraits of the artist, he plays the clown-like role of tortured genius to perfection – thereby exorcizing the ever-present spectre of failure.

Olivia Plender

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Sean Landers
Buffalo
2003
Oil on linen
99 x 84 cm