

# Art in America

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## Sean Landers at Andrea Rosen

Sean Landers is a clever artist, some would say too clever for his own good. His early self-reflexive text paintings, chock-full of misspellings, grammatical errors and rambling thoughts, are brilliant and often hilarious. They were followed by a string of uneven shows, some okay, some just disappointing. But Landers has hit his stride again. While some artists use their bodies, sexual orientation or personal politics as fodder for their work, leaving us to wonder at the size of their egos and why we should care, Landers reveals himself in such an engaging, humorous way that his works do pique viewer curiosity, not just about the banal details of his life, but about the phenomenon of exhibitionism itself. With his own peculiar mix of self-aggrandizement and self-deprecation, he seems to fashion a tongue-in-cheek critique of artists who take themselves too seriously, himself preeminent among them.

In his most recent show, Landers's artistic arrogance came packaged as hero worship for Picasso, along with the expressed desire to follow in his footsteps. Accompanied by a soundtrack of Landers reading a letter to the master, the show consisted of six large paintings

that borrow heavily from canvases by Picasso, mainly those from the '30s. Frequently, Landers takes bits from various paintings to make his own new (dare he say improved?) compositions. One 22-foot-long work, *War and Peace*, is a chaotic, pastel-hued work, mostly picking up motifs from *Guernica*. A smaller painting is almost an exact copy of *Women in an Interior*. In *Sean*, Landers sneaks into art history by camouflaging his name, writ very large, amid a pastiche of colorful forms from *Woman with a Flower* and other works. Another large-scale canvas depicts a roomful of quirky wooden furniture and distorted figures; the elements are familiar from various depictions of Picasso's studio and from such works as *Girl Drawing in an Interior* and *The Straw Hat with Blue Leaves*. Look closer, however, and you see that the furniture spells out "genius."

In case the referent isn't clear, the soundtrack leaves no doubt. Reading in an earnest and cloying manner, Landers mixes bold statements with verbose sentimental hokum. He asks, "Who will this century's Picasso be?" and answers "Ladies and gentlemen, it is I." He addresses Picasso as if praying: "I ask that you be with me . . . Give me the power and the strength to lead. . . . Let every art work I ever

made embody the abject tragedy of my father's death, the joy of my daughter's life and the beauty of my wife." His words are accompanied by the occasional swell of violins from Samuel Barber's "Adagio for Strings," the kind of music often used in tearjerkers.

Ironically, Landers has already achieved a degree of success that many artists yearn for. And who doesn't dream about being his generation's leader? In appropriating from Picasso, Landers could be accused of being an unoriginal hack. But Picasso himself based numerous paintings on works by Rembrandt, Velázquez and Delacroix. Somehow, as Landers wistfully states his determination to be in the master's company, his admiration of Picasso is believable. They're not bad paintings either. They're certainly fun to look at, and perhaps they make Picasso newly relevant.

But in the end, the most interesting thing about the show is not Landers's skill with a brush or eye for composition, but the surrounding discourse on artistic legacy and self-promotion. Though Landers's narcissism seems profound and his humility skin-deep, he struggles with the same insecurities as every other artist, even the successful ones. He's just turned his neuroses into a career. —Stephanie Cash

Sean Landers: *Genius*, 2001, oil on linen, approx. 7 1/2 by 17 1/2 feet; at Andrea Rosen.

