

ARTFORUM

DECEMBER 1997

REVIEWS

NEW YORK

SEAN LANDERS

ANDREA ROSEN GALLERY

After an early career devoted, more or less, to an obsessive chronicling of the mindset that goes along with jerking off to MTV, Sean Landers has finally sucked it up and started working. He's produced a series of "bad" paintings, along with one sculpture (all works 1997), that feature some charmingly sad-sack riffing on the Masters, mixed with dispatches from the '70s, the decade that time forgot. This bizarre hybrid opens up a whole new arena of loserdom for this artist. *Zorkon* is a large canvas showing a group of space aliens on a sailboat, which manages to recall both Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa* and almost everything Winslow Homer ever did. In *Dance of Life*, a similarly large canvas, Landers pays homage to Matisse with a pack of naked hippies dancing in a ring, their genitals covered by strategically placed hands and feet.

Space Ape on Mars/Self Portrait has a space-suit-clad monkey standing at an easel on the surface of the Red Planet, brush clutched in his gauntleted fist; its predecessors will include, among others, Picabia's *Portrait of Picasso*. Elsewhere, *Bears* (whose cave setting echoes various Renaissance portraits of hermit saints) shows two bears humping, while *Robot and Bunny/Me and Michelle* features a robot proposing to a bunny endowed with an extravagantly large bosom (while making reference to Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'Herbe*, it's also a family portrait of sorts, presumably with Landers as the robot and his wife as the bunny Michelle). One of the show's strongest pieces, *Candles in the Wind*, portrays another couple: it's a not-quite-life-size pink wax sculpture



Sean Landers, *Zorkon*, 1997, oil on linen, 72 x 96".

of naked hippies, male and female, with wicks burning away at the tops of their heads (in light of Elton John's recent memorial rerecording of his '70s hit, it also seems kind of weirdly prescient).

All the references to his precursors seem to point toward Landers locating himself as a loser in a long line of more esteemed losers. He used to inhabit the artist's role while deflating its attendant myths with maddeningly solipsistic notes; now he's showing, instead of telling, how lame he is as an artist—stepping up to the plate for a calculated strike-out. But despite the art-historical longview, it's the connection to The Tacky Years that seems most key in this work. In addition to providing the sound track for the show—a tape of Landers doing karaoke to various '70s hits was piped into the gallery—it's also the real bedrock for the aesthetic at work here. *Space Ape* owes just as much to the TV show *Lance Link*, *Secret Chimp* and all those hideous chimp-dressed-up-like-a-human posters as it does to the tradition of self-portraiture. Likewise, Landers' hippies

are of the late-stage (circa '70-'72) variety, when the whiteman 'fro and dancing with exposed and pasty flesh gained ascendance, while the amorous animals recall groovy sex comix, as well as various art-historical precedents. The space aliens on the good ship *Zorkon* are definitely '90s, but they're '90s-as-'70s—now that, as symbols go, the little alien head has become the contemporary version of the earlier decade's ubiquitous smiley face.

It's one thing that Landers has over a lot of other self-consciously "bad" painters (John Currin being a good example) around at the moment: he's realized where to look for imagery. The '70s are certainly the most embarrassing time period in recent memory on just about every level—from clothes to music to television, the entire decade is made up of things that fall into the category of "so bad, they're good." So if Landers is really making a bid to expand his horizons as a loser, he's found an excellent place to start.

—Mark Van de Walle