

Sean Landers: Onwards!

What am I looking forward to in 2009? Hmm ... As I write this in late October 2008, the art market is on the brink of collapse. Which reminds me. Haven't we all been through this before? Please allow me to digress a bit and I'll answer the question by the end of this.

I was lucky enough to have been one of the '1990s artists' who suddenly emerged after the irrationally exuberant New York art scene of the 1980s crashed. I felt like a singer/songwriter wearing thrift-store clothing and playing a worn-out acoustic guitar, thrust on stage directly after a spandex-wearing, hair-sprayed, heavy metal band with their double-necked electric guitars just exited in a blazing pyrotechnics display. I sang from the heart, so to speak, and I reduced art to its most basic content. I wrote slightly twisted yet honest things on a yellow legal pad and taped them to gallery walls (a cry for attention). I sculpted and exhibited wet clay sculptures and had gallerinas mist them to keep them alive (a cry for love). I made videos about doing nothing and jerking off in my studio (a cry for help). Things went along swimmingly like this for me for five or six years. Since I was so in the middle of it all, I didn't notice the landscape changing around me. By 1996 the whole '90s thing wasn't really welcome anymore. The no-frills 'anything goes' looseness that had defined me and the time in which I'd emerged had seemingly rendered me an uninvited guest at a party of familiar people who suddenly seemed way more fabulous than me.

I can boil it all down to an instant that sort of says it all. In 1996 I was asked to do a second solo show with Regen Projects in Los Angeles. When Stuart Regen initially invited me to show with him he told me that he had named his space 'projects'

instead of 'gallery' because he really wanted it to be a place where artists were free to experiment. Sounded great to me: that's what I was good at! So in my first show with him in 1994, I truly experimented and I made a show that set many personal precedents that I'm still exploring today. Stuart's openness worked; I experienced actual discovery. And Stuart, God bless him, had my back.

Emboldened by my first experience, I wanted to make my 1996 show at Regen Projects completely strange and unexpected. I can't even tell when I look at these pictures today whether they are successful or not. I made a whole show of image paintings (new for me at the time) featuring hallucinating colonial tavern drunks based on a William Hogarth painting called *A Midnight Modern Conversation* (1733). They are terrible or magnificent depending on which side of the international so-bad-it's-good line you are on.

The end of the '90s for me was the instant that the crate containing these paintings was pried open and Shaun Caley Regen got her first glimpse of them. In a fraction of a second, her big pretty brown eyes shot me a look that said, 'Your career is over honey!' I'm not saying that it wasn't a sympathetic look but it was like buckshot through the heart just the same. What I didn't realize was that 'playtime' was officially over and 'business', which had been suspended since the late 1980s, was back on.

I was naive and thought that if you just put on blinders and made art to entertain yourself that everything would be OK. Well, in the end it was, but I'm not going to lie to you, it really sucked for me for a while there. I guess the lesson is that sometimes you have to stand for something and resist the urge to mass-produce your greatest hits solely for the sake of cashing in.

Now before I become too sanctimonious, let me just say that I think making money is fucking great, and I don't blame any artist for making lots of it. But the truth is that it's not everything. One huge thing that it's not is ART. Art is not money, and when the two get too close together money takes over and makes art into itself. It's kind of like God supposedly making man in his own image. Well, money makes art into its own image. If you let it.

So, now what? Well, now I get to answer the question: What am I looking forward to in 2009? With another art market crash seemingly inevitable, I'm looking forward to seeing some art. Art unfettered by the market frankly. I'm looking forward to visiting a few art colleges and not seeing blatant careerism in each studio and art dealers stalking every hallway. I'm looking forward to seeing young and established galleries showing weird young artists with nothing to lose, making art that they know no one will ever buy, and in the process fearlessly stumbling onto the next big thing, whatever the hell that turns out to be.

Most of all, I'm looking forward to leaping into the void again myself, like in the famous 1960 Harry Shunk photograph of Yves Klein (figuratively if not literally). I have never shown reluctance to *saut dans le vide*. The truth is, however, that I do have something to lose now. This is a major mixed blessing for all artists as they grow older and more bourgeois. So, please promise me something art world. In the future, when I risk everything and do something totally *non compos mentis*, like the aforementioned Hogarth show, could you please, please, please, still love me tomorrow?

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