

Art

Superconscious Powers

This CAMH exhibition exudes heightened awareness

BY TROY SCHULZE

Superconscious” deftly describes the entertaining show currently on view at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston’s Zilkha Gallery. While the word is generally used to describe a spiritual plane or a realm of altruistic joy, here it accurately captures the feeling of heightened awareness the exhibit exudes. “**Perspectives 159: Superconscious, Automatism Now**” is comprised of paintings, sculptures, drawings, photography and video by five artists who employ free association in their work. Many of the pieces display an obsessive degree of self-alertness.

Sean Landers’s outrageous text paintings are dubiously enticing as one first enters the downstairs gallery. It’s strange to consider that one is instantly drawn to a work called *Fart*, but it’s a good way to jump right into this exhibit and kind of wallow in the confessional explicitness of it. The 1993 painting is a large white canvas with little patches of black text that convey pretty much whatever was on Landers’s mind while he was creating it. It’s difficult to walk away from; it’s so magnetically honest.

But there’s no sense in attempting to read every statement. In fact, part of the joy lies in knowing that as much as you think you’ll know about Landers from looking at *Fart*, there’s still something about him you’ll never know, because Landers designed it to be so overwhelming, you’ll eventually become frustrated and walk away laughing and shaking your head, kind of like a reaction to flatulence. For me, it was the question “IS JERKING OFF IN THE MIRROR REPREHENSIBLE?” that snapped me out of hypnosis and sent me across the gallery toward Landers’s other piece on display.

If *Fart* exhibits stream of consciousness, this one has a Mississippi River of consciousness. About three times as big as *Fart*, *Dumb Dumb* (also from ‘93) is a vast horizontal canvas with lines and lines of writing that can be literally tiring to read because of the walking required. And even then, there’s just no use. It’s more fun to just pick out random snippets. Much of it is boring and repetitive; Landers vacillates between declaring himself the greatest artist on Earth and lamenting his worthlessness. Peppered with sex, *Dumb Dumb* will occasionally reveal a line like “JOHN, KEVIN AND I JUST FINISHED A BIG DISCUSSION ON ‘70S NIPPLES.” A good idea of the painting’s content is represented by a passage like, “I HAPPEN TO THINK I’M REALLY VERY SMART, A GREAT ARTIST AND TERRIBLY

GOOD LOOKING. I’VE EVEN GOT A BIG DICK. NOT THAT I CAN USE IT WELL THOUGH. I’M A TERRIBLE PREMATURE EJACULATOR. I’M ALSO KIND OF WEAK. I CAN’T SPELL WORTH SHIT. I LIKE WOMEN TO FINGER MY ASS. IS THAT A PLUS OR A FAULT? I DON’T KNOW EITHER. ALL I KNOW IS THAT I’M BEING RIDICULOUS.”

Landers is still fascinated with his own penis, by the way. A 2006 painting, *You’re an Idiot* (not on exhibit here), is an image of a headless Greek statue with a gigantic member, which the figure is holding, slung over his shoulder. The words “YOU’RE AN IDIOT” hover over the neck, and the words “BUT YOU DO KNOW WHAT YOU’RE DOING” are written over about the first foot of penis length.

Of course, Landers doesn’t really believe his own bullshit (he explicitly states that); it’s all just part of the joke. What’s both funny and uncomfortable about the two works is their ability to reveal prickly truths about ourselves with moments of self-doubt followed by incredible delusions of grandeur — moments we rarely take notice of because we aren’t closely following the run-on scripts in our brains. Imagine a court stenographer endlessly, frantically recording all of your thoughts. Now imagine your embarrassment when the stenographer is called upon to repeat a portion of it publicly in front of the whole world.

Danica Phelps’s drawings carry a similar confessional vibe, but with a filter. Her meticulous vertical calendars document weeks of her life in 2006 down to the minute. They also track her financial situation by designating her spending and earning with watercolor tally marks. Money spent is represented in red and pink (credit in pale orange), earned in shades of green. Quickly glanced, the works feel numbingly banal; Phelps’s days follow a predictable pattern: Lie in bed, wake, walk in the park with the dogs, laundry, yoga. There are the hallmarks of an artist’s life: time spent in the studio, crit sessions, lectures. But look closer at Phelps’s thin, spidery handwriting, and the narrative

begins to emerge. Large chunks of red denote money spent on sperm and insemination.

Phelps and her girlfriend, referred to here as “D,” are trying to have a child, and they’re not exactly on the same page about it. They argue, make love, go to therapy and have the occasional knock-down-drag-out. In one entry, Phelps gets punched in the face. Obviously, the calendars were created after the fact (who makes plans to get punched?). But the way Phelps analogizes her financial record with emotional gains and losses is genius. A horrible fight with D. is countered by a cha-ching day of art sales. Anytime we see a patch of green, it’s a celebratory moment; long, stressful stretches are rewarded with a payoff, like hitting the jackpot on a slot machine. Phelps’s *Cruising with D.*, a long, horizontal drawing that spans an entire wall, documents a cruise she took with her girlfriend (Debi). No fights here; just a good time. It idealizes the couple’s relationship, almost like an advertisement for the cruise line or photos in an album. Knowing the details gives the drawing an intriguing depth.

The exhibit includes sculpture and photography by Rachel Harrison and a 23-minute film by Oliver Payne and Nick Relph. Big surprise, though: The free-associative elements of imagery just aren’t as powerfully communicated as they are in words. It’s no knock on CAMH senior curator Paola Morsiani, delivering her final show in Houston (she’s taking a job at the Cleveland Museum of Art). Morsiani has expertly achieved her mission here. In imagery, the automatism is well-oiled, as in Payne and Relph’s repetitive film *Mixtape* or Harrison’s photo series *Voyage of the Beagle* (Set 2). Their machination works faster, whereas the act of reading requires more processing and participation. In the context of this exhibit, Landers and Phelps fare better, which is something rare for visual art. How often do you leave a museum reeling from something you read, rather than what you “saw”?



Don’t even try to read all of *Dumb Dumb*