

# Interview with Sean Landers

CAOIMHÍN MAC GIOLLA LEÍTH & BEATRIX RUF

CAOIMHÍN & BEATRIX *Let's start by discussing your earliest works and then talk about how what you do has changed over the years and what the reasons were for those changes.*

SEAN In graduate school (1984–1986) I was making huge figurative wooden sculptures of fighting animals based on things like Goya's bullfight etchings and scenes from literature. To make figurative art in art school was the 'wrong' thing to do back then at a time when Minimalism and Conceptual art were taught. It was thought preposterous, laughable, so of course how could I resist?

CAOIMHÍN *Despite the fact that Neo-Expressionist painting – Schnabel, Basquiat, Clemente, Kiefer, and the like – had swept the globe over the previous five years or so?*

SEAN Yes. They were on the radar but not taught or discussed very much, like contemporary artists today are not 'taught' in schools, but discussed privately by students on their own. I also made large minimalist sculptures à la Ronald Bladen but I subverted them by having them double as skateboard ramps. I would exhibit these things in the center of my studio. On the walls surrounding them were a torrent of words, confessional writings and cartoons in graphite and marker along with huge action oil paintings splashed directly on the wall. When students and faculty would come for critiques they would read the walls with their backs to my giant sculptures. It never dawned on me that writing and painting would become the center of my art. Because I was a sculpture major I thought I would become a sculptor.

I moved to New York in the fall of 1986 when the East Village gallery scene was thriving and Jeff Koons was the Master of the Universe. I was impressed by his art and created a body of work that in retrospect was probably influenced by it. Store-bought plaster busts of famous writers, composers, and mythological characters were set in cylinders of clear polyester resin and displayed upon wooden pedestals that I designed and turned at a lathe shop. I had two exhibits of this work, one in Tommy Solomon's Garage in Los Angeles in 1989, and one in Postmasters Gallery in New York in 1990. They were reviewed well but the work didn't feel right. I didn't trust it or the small success it had. It wasn't the real me. At the same time I lost a girlfriend who I was crazy for. Whenever my love life is imperiled, I become... well, basically the truth comes out.

It wasn't a strategy to begin writing again – I was heartsick and needed to vent. Later on while re-reading some of this stuff I realized its potential as art and I started writing with this notion. I began with a screenplay of a struggling artist in 90s New York City based on Knut Hamsun's novel HUNGER. I was greatly impressed by the type of writing in it and in Dostoyevsky's CRIME AND PUNISHMENT – the way in which the authors gave voice to the inside of the anti-hero's head. It hit me like a ton of bricks when I first read these books. This was how I thought, this was how I wrote, this was my thing. I wanted my work to be a sort of 90s version of HUNGER and I wanted to operate as the anti-hero within it.

CAOIMHÍN *But, HUNGER is, after all, a novel rather than a work of visual art.*

SEAN Right. But what I was doing was also a reaction against 'text art' in New York at that time, by artists like Hans Haacke or Mary Kelly. I thought that if text is going to be on a gallery wall, then it should damn well be... well, I just wanted to do my own version of it, one that ended up being intensely personal. I quickly learned to use the power of giving away little bits of myself to feed other people's voyeuristic tendencies.

CAOIMHÍN *Which meant turning yourself into an exhibitionist.*

SEAN Partly, but with a considerable amount of control as well. Also at this time (1990) I saw something on television that influenced me. It was called AN AMERICAN FAMILY. It originally aired in 1973 and was the first example of reality television, following a dysfunctional family for a year. They learned to live with a film crew, and began performing their lives for the camera. One son decided to announce to his family that he was gay. The father began having an affair on camera and actually used his stardom from the program to get chicks. So there was a reverb in it that I found very interesting. That's one of the reasons why I decided to use my life as a subject in my work. What I was after was reality, as honestly as I could do it and as entertaining as I could make it.

BEATRIX *So what form did this reaction against your two earliest exhibitions take and what year was this?*

SEAN It was 1991. This was my second show at Postmasters and it was a direct reaction to my first show. There were sculptures in the middle of the gallery and written works taped onto the walls. The written works were scenes from the screenplay ART, LIFE AND GOD (1990) which was handwritten on yellow legal pads of paper.

The scenes, although fairly autobiographical, were not just from my life. Some were real, others were fiction, and some were things that had happened to my brother Kevin or to my friends Richard Phillips, Carl Ostendarp, John Currin, or other people from Yale with whom I moved to New York City. They were written up in this screenplay and attributed to Chris Hamson, so it wasn't all me. That's why I didn't feel it was a true alter ego, although that's how it was taken at the time.

The sculptures were very close to what I do now, but rather than exhibit them openly, I showed them with black plastic bags over them because they were supposedly made by my fictional character and 'so bad' that he felt too ashamed to show them. They were arranged in the exact positions as my previous exhibit, the resin head show, which reinforced for some people that this show was only autobiographical.

CAOIMHÍN *Did you then get rid of this alter ego in order to focus exclusively on your own life or because the misreading was irritating you?*

SEAN Neither. I think it was just a natural progression. What got me going, in truth, were letters that were coming in from the student loan agency saying that I was in default. I had to write them a letter and I couldn't get halfway down on a piece of yellow legal pad paper before 'craziness' just started happening. I would go from 'straight' to, "oh, wouldn't it be funny if I take it this way?" I couldn't stop entertaining an audience with what I wrote. It was performance. They were very entertaining, and they were from me. So, no more Chris Hamson.

CAOIMHÍN *Did it occur to you early on to combine forms of picture making with forms of language production?*

SEAN Within a year that began happening in my drawings. In a typical exhibition of mine from this time period (the post Chris Hamson time period, 1991–1994) there would have been sculptures which were heads rendered in wet clay on top of long slender poles depicting people from my home town (witnesses of my 'shame') and arranged in the center of the room. Among them would be a video monitor on a sculpture pedestal playing one of my videos such as ANYONE'S ORGASM (1992), which I saw as a tasteless living performing sculpture in the Gilbert and George SINGING SCULPTURE sense. There would also have been text work in a variety of forms hanging on the walls, such as CALENDAR PAGES FROM 1991 (1991), cartoons of art-world stereotypes, letters to my student loan officer, or a giant sheet of photo backdrop paper covered in stream-of-consciousness writing. It's important to remember that at this time I felt that my writing was, in a sense, 'the drawing' or 'the picture.' The burst of emotion on the page, with all of its imperfect spelling, grammar and emotional penmanship was 'the thing.'

I guess what was hooking the viewers was what underlies voyeurism and that was their own self-recognition. Maybe that was why people would endure aching feet to read my art because while staring into my open soul they were actually evaluating themselves. I think this is a fundamental component of the unspoken communication between art and viewer.

CAOIMHÍN *Can you say a little more about what your intention was with language in regard to previous artists using text?*

SEAN Well, I realize that I couldn't have done what I did without the precedence of artists such as Lawrence Weiner, Joseph Kosuth, Carl Andre, and Vito Acconci. Vito was a teacher of mine, and someone whom I've never stopped admiring. He was a huge influence on me. I admire On Kawara very much, too. Even though some of his forms were dry I always found them interesting and poetic. They seemed to cut to the quick of what art actually is. I needed the precedence of these artists for what I was about to do. However, I did want to counter what they had done, and radically. My angle on text was the exact opposite to most of them; it was the sloppy internal, which is more like Acconci.

CAOIMHÍN *As opposed to Hans Haacke and Mary Kelly, whom you mentioned earlier, whose primary objectives were political. You've said elsewhere that you feel no affinity with any artist whose work is overtly political. I know you're very interested in politics and very interested in aesthetics, yet you seem to have a problem with an art that strives to combine both.*

SEAN I feel that art should be what's free of that. For me art is exactly the stuff that is free of that. Art and politics marry only when there's a necessity to communicate beyond language. Pre-Renaissance church painting and Mexican mural painting, for instance, had their purposes historically to educate, inform, and manipulate the illiterate masses. Art does not function in that role today. I think there is a place for political art, but it's rare that it works in forms other than movies or popular music. Jimi Hendrix's rendition of the National Anthem is, I think, the perfect piece of political art because it's aesthetically wonderful, and it's something that had powerful political meaning in 1969 when it was performed at Woodstock, and it has re-emerged with political meaning today. When you hear it now you can't help but think of how the United States has again gone off course. Taking a melody so unifying for Americans and handling it that way was perfect political art. But Hendrix also made it beautiful. It's a beautiful piece of music.

CAOIMHÍN *So the denial of aesthetic pleasure is something you found worrisome in some of the art you were reacting against early on.*

SEAN Exactly. But there was another sort of content missing from the work of text-artists like Haacke and Kelly. Humanity. Which I felt I was re-inserting, basically: the drippy, ugly stuff of humanity.

CAOIMHÍN *There's a crucial distinction between producing a confessional memoir to be read in private and pasting texts up on a wall. There's an immediacy about the way people engage with the visual in the gallery space, even though it's durational. You still read words in the same sequence and arguably take the same time as you would in a book, but the effect is different.*

SEAN Yeah, it makes them self-conscious. Also, these texts have their own aesthetic. The handwriting slants and my spelling goes crazy when I become emotional and write faster.

CAOIMHÍN *So there is a necessary marriage between form and content?*

SEAN Right. So many reviewers at that time referred to it as "the art of the pathetic." I guess the thoughts appeared pathetic to them, as did the form, which was wrinkly, dog-eared, yellow legal pad pages with doodles in the corners and terrible penmanship. They looked authentic, though what's interesting about them is that they were not 100 percent authentic. There were times when I was utterly controlled by my writing and my compulsive need to write something horribly personal about myself was almost a form of self-wounding. But there were other times when I would control it and spin it. It was always a mixture.

CAOIMHÍN *There is a conventional association between bad handwriting, bad spelling, and immediacy, intimacy, and confessionalism that also affects the reception of works by other artists such as Tracey Emin. Yet this is no less a convention than the assumption that messy expressionist brushwork gets you closer to a genuine emotion than, say, a meticulously planned hard-edged painting.*

SEAN Right.

CAOIMHÍN *So the critique of authenticity and the confessional mode was every bit as necessary in the 90s as the critique of expressionism was a decade earlier; but that hasn't really been elaborated in relation to your work, or that of Tracey Emin for that matter, has it?*

SEAN No, but it should have been, perhaps, or could still be.

CAOIMHÍN *I remember a phrase you once said to me. You once said that you have an utterly different relationship to shame than Tracey Emin.*

SEAN I can't even remember when I said it.

CAOIMHÍN *It could have been four or five years ago.*

SEAN I'll admit that we both have learned to use shame to our advantage. I see that similarity. But I think that if we both sold portions of our soul to the devil, she sold more of hers than I did. I think it makes her less complicated in an Oprah Winfrey kind of way. Her art doesn't appeal to the sort of voyeurism that is about self-recognition, it's more akin to a spectacle or a train wreck – how can you not stare? I think at this point she is a parody of her earlier sexually-abused self, as I am perhaps a parody of my younger angst-ridden self. When artists like her and me make work about ourselves, it doesn't take long before you use up all of your memories and you find yourself in the horrible present. Which is partly why I feel so compelled to actually render something in paint and to sculpt – to invent. You know, it's like "put up or shut up."

CAOIMHÍN *Would you have felt an affinity early on with the mixture of endearing openness and conscious artifice in work like that of Karen Kilimnik, or maybe even Raymond Pettibon.*

SEAN Yes absolutely. But there's something about their art that is slightly more genuine than mine. I am my character in my writing but I am probably more self-conscious about it, I spin my character more. Whereas I would be shocked to find that the character in Karen's work is anything but 100 percent true. The same probably goes for Raymond too. I'm not a victim of the process but that doesn't mean that I'm a trickster. There is an amazing amount of generosity and genuineness in my stuff. The small amount of deception in my work provides me with a needed fig leaf to operate behind. The chance that what you read is fiction allows me to be more explicitly honest.

In the early 90s I sometimes used writings by my sister Maura such as her thank you notes for wedding gifts. Through her writing you got a different picture than probably what she had intended, and that's what attracted me to it. As you read more and more of them the story wasn't, "oh, what a sweet girl who is thankful for these wonderful gifts" but more like "this is my reality, these gifts suck. God damn it! Is this all I get? Is this my new life?" I thought it went so much further in describing her than she could have if she had sat down and written her life's story.

I realized that ultimately I could not control everything either. The picture I was rendering was something other than what I had intended. Another thing I found was that I could humiliate an audience by humiliating myself by using their self-recognition. It fueled my subject matter for a while, but I was in conflict. I wanted approval and popularity but this was a strange way to get it because I was in a sense humiliating myself to become more popular. I would ask myself things like "do I actually want recognition so badly that I'll jerk off on camera?" The palpable question was: are they laughing with me or at me? My instinct is now, and was then, for privacy. Exhibiting my whole early body of work was extremely counterintuitive. On the eve of my 1992 show at Andrea Rosen Gallery I was so nervous about what I had exposed about myself in the art works that I broke out in shingles. Luckily the show was well received. After this I measured my commitment to an artwork by how embarrassed I was of it. Now, at this point, I simply can't write the way I wrote back then because I'm too...

CAOIMHÍN *Self-conscious?*

SEAN Yeah. But not self-conscious 'scared' but self-conscious in that I know too much about what I'm doing. I understand it too well. Everything's purposeful now. That's why my current show with Andrea Rosen (2004) is like a parody of my earlier self. The text, as it appears in the new paintings, are like echoes of an earlier event ricocheting in the far reaches of the brain or through space or something.

CAOIMHÍN *It's no longer a continuous narrative. The texts tend to be short words or phrases repeatedly superimposed on themselves in the manner of a graphic rendition of an echo. They're more heraldic, or emblematic, or epigrammatic. So, they're self-conscious self-quotation?*

SEAN Yes. There's very little direct writing where I felt something and wrote it. My earlier work was solely 'feel it and write it.' In this show most of it happened on pieces of paper and then I copied it. I've never done that with paintings before. Anyway, it's different now. I just can't sit there and complain about depression anymore, because it's not accurate.

CAOIMHÍN *But didn't that realization come along as early as the mid-90s, the realization that with success came an inability for your audience to perceive you as this unsuccessful slacker artist?*

SEAN Right.

CAOIMHÍN *I know you have always had a problem with that perception of you as a 'slacker artist,' though that was your shtick for a while.*

SEAN That's what people thought of me. That's what they wrote about. But I was never disaffected and I was never pessimistic about my future. I was quite the opposite. I had every intention of being a very hardworking and important artist. I deeply believe in myself. That's probably what is very hard for people to believe. How else could anyone confess all this crap if they weren't utterly confident? I'm not afraid of humiliation because I know that ultimately I have nothing to be ashamed of.

As it turns out, I never actually was a slacker, but when I first began to get press this was in a lot of it. Coming out of obscurity I was just so thankful I was getting any press at all that I was willing to accept anything they said, even though it wasn't true. So I was, like, "yeah, okay, I'm a slacker." It was immature of me because now I have to live it down (laughs).

CAOIMHÍN *It did chime with what was in the air at the time, the whole 'Generation X' thing.*

SEAN Yeah. But I either grew out of it or it was never really true. Maybe it was a combination of both.

CAOIMHÍN *What might have given that impression was the rhythm of self-deprecation and self-satisfaction, or indeed exultation that remains a constant in any of your longer narrative texts to this day, don't you think?*

SEAN I don't know if that's a hallmark of anything particularly 'Generation X' or 'slacker.' The Generation X condition, as defined by Douglas Coupland – was that the generation before mine, the baby boom generation, got all the good jobs and that there's no place for us to go, and we can only get service industry jobs, and there's no career for us anywhere – a claim that I think is stupid. I never believed that for a second. I always felt totally empowered and capable within my profession. In fact, I felt that I was part of a generation of artists that would put form back in art.

CAOIMHÍN *What? Could you say something about that?*

SEAN Well, that's exactly what I was talking about earlier when comparing my writing to the work of previous artists using text. I put 'form' right back into text art again. I mean 'form' in the sense of

'personality,' 'humanity.' To put form back into abstract painting or sculpture was to put an image in it. With all due respect to Neo-Expressionism, it was my generation who made that popular again. I did it in my various different ways. Others of my contemporaries did it in their ways.

Neo-Expressionism may have been the first visceral reaction against Minimalism and Conceptualism, but I know that when I took on 'the project' or 'the mantle' or 'the responsibility' to move or evolve painting into a truly new form I wasn't merely going to react against history. I was going to use everything history offered me. That's why one of my clowns alone in a landscape is as much a descendant of Vito Acconci's SEEDBED as it is from Hudson River School painting and the notion of the anti-hero from literature.

CAOIMHÍN *Are you comparing the reintroduction of narrative into text to the reinsertion of figuration into picture making?*

SEAN Yes. I think that's partly what my texts did. There were actual stories. There were beginnings and endings. There were plots with climaxes and turning points. There was human emotional content.

CAOIMHÍN *So, to return to specific formal developments in your work, what happened after you discarded the yellow legal pad?*

SEAN Well there was a reason I discarded my yellow legal pad. It was my book [SIC] (1993), first published by Publicsfear Press Ltd. in 1993 as a limited first edition of 250 and then by Riverhead Books in 1995. This book was the culmination of all of my yellow legal pad work. It was like a bomb that went off in my life. It's the point at which everything we've been discussing thus far came to a head. It included the reverb I spoke of from AN AMERICAN FAMILY where art influences life. It included the question of whether I was in control of or a victim of my candor. It was fueled by heartache like my earliest art writing was and it painfully detailed a humiliating infatuation. Most importantly it was conceptual art with 'form' re-inserted. It literally dripped with humanity. It was figuration returned to the minimal form that text art had been in the 70s. [SIC] combined my art and life very successfully, but this created huge problems for me. So many people felt personally betrayed by it that it forced the question for me: what is more important, my art or my life? If I was to love anyone and expect them to love me could I continue to do this? I was way overexposed and genuinely humiliated by this book and I craved privacy, a fig leaf of some sort. So I continued along a new form I had invented previously where I could write what I wanted to but no one would be able to find it. I'd take a giant piece of photo backdrop paper and would just fill it up with stream-of-consciousness text. There was so much writing on these giant pieces of paper that one would lose one's place constantly while reading it and this gave me a place to hide. I completed four of these: I SUCK. RIGHT?... FUCK YOU! (1991), ANYONE'S ORGASM (1992), HARD MALE/SOFT MALE (1993), and DINGLEBERRY SEAN (1993). Each of them was an enormous amount of work so I became fearful that they'd rip, that they'd never last, and that's when I sought out giant pieces of unstretched linen to paint my words on, simply because the medium, oil on linen, has proven durable. Art for me is all about survival, immortality. Painting simply lasts longer than ballpoint pen on paper. So, just like that I was painting. Pandora's box had been opened.

Also at this same time, as I was making the transition from my yellow legal pad phase to my text painting stage, there was another significant development. I was sculpting a series of nine naughty naked Leprechauns. Each was based on something either specific or vague from the history of sculpture. I'd do this to force a comparison between me, "20th-century cartoon raised Sean," to some of the more revered moments of art history such as Rodin's JOHN THE BAPTIST or Donatello's DAVID, etc. I was eager to demonstrate how I both did and did not rate, because that demonstration illustrated art's dilemma in our time.

BEATRIX *Art's dilemma? Could you say something more about that?*

SEAN In the wake of an art education that devalued skill in art-making what were we left with? An art that is dominated by a couple of old 70s idea people who, by the way, guard their turf like old junkyard dogs standing in the middle of the worn out dust circles that surrounds their doghouses. "NO TRESPASSING!" I admire these guys and what they've done, but I don't want to be trapped in a world dominated by or confined to their ideas alone. This was the terrain of my art education and what I wanted to react against. Which is why the sculptures in my MFA thesis exhibit were like Ronald Bladen sculptures that you could skateboard in. It was putting the 'Me' back into austere art forms. This is also why pre-World War II European painters figure so heavily for me now, because their art was the last gasp before art became supposedly conceptually checkmated and minimally reduced to nothing here in America during the 60s and 70s. Art has been reeling ever since. This will all make more sense when we talk about what I did in the later 90s and what I'm up to now.

So, to go along with these sculptures I made a video that depicted myself in the nude and in various states of arousal, mocking famous Italian sculptures, called ITALIAN HIGH RENAISSANCE AND BAROQUE SCULPTURE (1993). Again I was thinking along the Gilbert and George line of a living, breathing, acting sculpture on video among my actual sculptures. But more importantly I was taking on the notion of narcissism. It was my view

that all art is narcissism. For anyone to believe that the thing they made is worthy of attention, exultation, money, and being cherished throughout time by generations to come is basically narcissistic! In this video I sought to illustrate this conceptually and in reality. I mean, you can't fake an erection.

CAOIMHÍN *Bringing it back to your paintings, as soon as you actually make a decision to put these words not on a throwaway, lowly material, but on canvas, you plug into a very resonant history of picture-making, of fine art, of durability of materials and so forth.*

SEAN Right.

CAOIMHÍN *You were obviously conscious of that at the time.*

SEAN Yes, I was. But there are a few different things I was trying to capture at that point and least among them was probably 'painting history.' It was really a question of the aesthetics of necessity. In other words, the way the thing looked was what the process delivered to it. I didn't conceive of a look for those things. They just happened to look that way because what I wanted to do was get every thought I had while painting the painting onto its surface.

So it was very different writing than the yellow legal pad stuff. I thought it was a total evolution away. Conceptually, it was basically "Kilroy was here" again and again and again.

Why I thought that was so important is because I believe that's what art is in civilization. At its foundation it's really just making your mark.

CAOIMHÍN *Saying "I was here"?*

SEAN Yes, "I was here." Ever since the caves of Lascaux, where people blew pigment around their handprint on the cave wall, art making has sought to record the life or existence of the artist. Right through the history of Western art up to now where art making became so self-referential, "I was here" has been a huge part of it. This is what I admire so much about On Kawara and that sort of work.

CAOIMHÍN *"I am still alive. I was here?"*

SEAN "I am still alive, I am here." But my large text paintings just took this idea much further and gave you the exact thoughts I was having at the point of the painting's creation. So I'm not just telling you that "I'm still alive," I'm telling you what I was thinking when I was alive. From the beginning of the painting to the end, everything I thought and could possibly write was recorded. It's an On Kawara idea, deeply elaborated upon.

CAOIMHÍN *That's interesting in that there's a sense of immediacy in the work, but it also involves the immediate sense of a narrative produced in real time, which again is very different from reading a book,*

SEAN Right. It's because everything's a performance.

CAOIMHÍN *A performance of immediacy, which is a trick, a strategy whereby the viewer is invited to imagine they're experiencing these thoughts in the same time – in real time – as you originally did, if you're registering everything you think and leaving nothing out.*

SEAN Right.

CAOIMHÍN *But it has, of course, its echoes in the history of stream-of-consciousness in modernist literature as well.*

SEAN Yes it does. Those stream-of-consciousness paintings of that period such as DUMB DUMB (1993), or FOR THE LOVE OF NOTHING (1994), or THOUGHT BUBBLE (1994) are very large and difficult to read. You start on the left and by the time you move all the way to the right you lose your place and can't find it again. Therefore, as you read it, you just get these fragmented thoughts. Ultimately, I wanted to be more in control of the experience. That's where the 'patch paintings' come from.

CAOIMHÍN *You're talking about paintings like SELF-SOMETHING (1994).*

SEAN Right. They're very much like me standing on a stage trying to entertain you as much as possible while basically giving the picture of human thought. It's taking a much more aggressive role in actively trying to entertain anybody who stands in front of the painting. I don't want the viewer to walk away. These little 'patches' are just enough to read and to maybe hook you into reading another. One in ten hopefully can make you smile or laugh at them and as you continue to read, hopefully you begin to see a bigger picture.

CAOIMHÍN *It's the difference between a very long monologue and a lot of epigrams.*

SEAN Yes.

CAOIMHÍN *The monologic and the epigrammatic modes are quite different.*

SEAN Basically, it's the difference between a monologist and a comedian. As a comedian tells hundreds of jokes in a row, he eventually begins to paint a portrait of himself. If you hear a hundred butt jokes, you will begin to think after a while, "oh, this guy's got an anal fetish." It gets sort of creepy. So when you read everything that's written on the painting, there's a picture of me that is constructed that I can't control. Now we're getting into the fact that all art earnestly done is basically self-portraiture.

CAOIMHÍN *As the title SELF-SOMETHING indicates.*

SEAN Yes.

CAOIMHÍN *Right after this, very specific images begin to appear amongst the words.*

SEAN Well not quite, there was an endgame played out with the large unstretched word paintings. After filling many of them for a year and a half, I was tired of writing and tired of the look of them. So I phased into a willful form of writer's block by making striped paintings. I did a show with Regen Projects in Los Angeles for which I made a huge word painting titled THOUGHT BUBBLE. Exhausted from it, I painted stripes on my next canvases, as if it were a mental vacation, and titled the first one ABSENCE OF THOUGHT BUBBLE (1994). This was also the show where clown and chimp imagery first appeared in sculpture.

CAOIMHÍN *So after this, images began to appear in your text paintings?*

SEAN Yeah. The first was the painting titled I'M A CLOWN IN A WORLD OF CHIMPS (1994), in which a clown and chimpanzee are fighting, and two other paintings GROOVIN' CORDUROY MIND-SNOT/7092 (1994), and STARING AT MY ASS IN THE MIRROR (1994), that were painted under a sort of Picabia influence. These would have been the first paintings where I wanted to put in or use images. They were part of my 1994 show at Contemporary Fine Arts Gallery in Berlin. There were just three paintings and a sculpture of a chimpanzee titled ICH MACHE MICH (1994). I thought this show was of particular importance because it was my first concerted effort into the realm of a more traditional and less conceptual form of picture making.

CAOIMHÍN *These were very oblique references to Picabia.*

SEAN GROOVIN' CORDUROY MIND-SNOT/7092 was a reference to his painting titled 7091 (1938) which is a spoof on abstraction. All the paintings that I have like this – where there's a scribble, and all the conjoining areas that are made by the scribble are colored a different color – including some overlapped images taken from Picasso – are in what I think of as my 'Picabia 7091 series.' They, like his, are my spoof on abstraction, but like all ironic gestures, once repeated it becomes sincere. They're all titled '709-something.' I'm up to maybe 7099 or 7100 in this ongoing series. But they take totally different forms at this point. Some are striped paintings, some are 'Picasso paintings,' and some are text paintings. Picabia is the only artist I can think of who was totally free from the beginning of his art-making career to the end. He utilized many different media and forms and he was great in all of them. He represents freedom to me. When I refer to him in paintings I'm not copying their look so much as quoting him obliquely, as a sort of symbol for my own artistic freedom, which I think is essential for my survival.

When I painted I'M A CLOWN IN A WORLD OF CHIMPS, I had reread a few years of my own writing and had recognized the cyclical pattern of self-aggrandizement and self-abasement. This thought pattern had become almost like a perpetual motion machine, out of which images and content were spinning. So I gave them both figures and characters. The chimp was self-aggrandizement and the clown was self-abasement. That's why in every single cartoon on this painting the chimp is getting the better of the clown.

CAOIMHÍN *You've said before that your interest in Picabia or later Picasso was because you want to be counted among the great artists, like them.*

SEAN I said that in a recording, an audio piece titled DEAR PICASSO (2001).

CAOIMHÍN *So that should be read within the context of a particular artwork rather than as an artist's statement?*

SEAN Yes. I'm fully aware that when I say that kind of thing it's kind of sad and endearing for you all to listen to. That particular piece is an excellent example of me personally meaning what I'm saying, but realizing that to others it's not credible. I didn't expect anybody to think "Sean is Picasso," or "He thinks he's going to be the next Picasso." But I do think that another artist can recognize that wish or thought pattern. That's a big part of my art: presenting an embarrassing situation like that and hoping for the viewer's empathy.

CAOIMHÍN *Presenting what may be a more universal aspiration than other artists are willing to concede openly?*

SEAN Right. I think it's a sign of strength. When you first hear that tape you think "oh, how sad and pathetic." But actually, I felt it was a bold and powerful thing to do. I'm not afraid of my dreams (laughs). Even if I know some of them are probably out of reach. I mean, I do want to be important. I'm not selling that one away here. I am just saying that I'm not crazy. I know that there are certain things about Picasso that... (pause). No, I can't even say it. Sorry. I'm not going to say it (laughs). You know what I think. You know I'm not going to say that I'm not a great artist. I won't. I don't believe it.

CAOIMHÍN *But the pictorial quotation from Picabia and the performance of the role of an artist aspiring to be Picasso are rather different.*

SEAN I think they're related in that they allude to other artists to create new meaning for myself. I admire Picasso for his unquestionable genius. I envy that. To quote him is to allude to the notion of artistic genius. I admire Picabia for the creative freedom he displayed throughout his life. I too need freedom, I have to continually change to be excited about making art. People generally do agree that I

might be as free as he was. The difference is that he could afford to be, he had family money (laughs). But you know what it was with Picabia specifically? I needed help to create a picture because I was coming out of a sea of text, from two-dimensional graphic paintings. I was looking for help from art history to be able to create a new kind of picture from text. So I used Picabia. Later I used other things... such as breasts (laughter).

CAOIMHÍN *Would you like to talk about the ‘breast painting:’ THE ETHER OF MEMORY (1994)?*

SEAN What can I say? If you want to paint something, paint what you love! It sounds so stupid, but it’s honest.

CAOIMHÍN *This was in 1994, a time when for a white, male artist to paint a profusion of breasts was probably the most unpopular subject you could have chosen.*

SEAN Exactly. It was provocative. Sort of bad-boyish, rather than scandalous or nasty. Shall we even say political? It was just so taboo in those knee-jerk politically correct times that I couldn’t resist. The objectification of women is nothing to be proud of. But I have never believed that women were anything but men’s complete equals. At the same time to believe that ‘enlightened’ men don’t fetishize women’s bodies is crazy. Of course we do.

CAOIMHÍN *How about the title, THE ETHER OF MEMORY?*

SEAN Breasts in the memory, at the point of self-gratification, on one level. If you read this text it’s about my maternal lineage as far back as I could imagine it. I’m a painter because my grandmother was a painter, and my mother is a painter. As a kid I used to go over to my grandmother’s house to paint. She had great big boobs and every time I’d go over there she’d hug me right into the middle of them before we’d go up into her attic studio to paint. It was one of the most pleasurable things. I loved it. So it was the maternal-mammary-origins of myself as a painter thing.

FOOTBALL DUCK (2003), the bronze sculpture and FOOTBALL DUCK (1999), the painting, also relate to that. My football practice field was right next to my grandmother’s house. I hated going to football practice so much that I’d just skip out and go to her house to paint. I’d be sitting there in front of an easel with my shoulder pads and cleats on, painting geraniums while my teammates were out practicing. They are portraits of my youthful self-perception in conflict between ‘sporting manliness’ and ‘feminine artisticness.’

CAOIMHÍN *What was the next step after THE ETHER OF MEMORY?*

SEAN The next big step was my chimpanzee show, 1995, at Andrea Rosen Gallery. I made paintings, a sculpture and a video using a visit by a chimpanzee to my studio. I hoped the chimpanzee would represent me or portray me. This is where things really began to open up.

With my license to paint given to me from Picabia, now anything could go onto a canvas including marks made by a chimp. I wasn’t restricted by just what I could think to write. I could make images and use illusion, which meant I could do anything and go anywhere I wanted inside the rectangle of a painting. It turns out that art’s oldest form, painting, is art’s truest freedom, which is what I was looking for.

With the painting LOOKING FOR MR. GODBAR (1995), text floats over an illusionistic cloudy blue sky. All of a sudden the words occupied a physical space, not an imaginary space. I meant it to be like when you’re looking out an airplane window, five miles up. If you’re not reading a book or engaged in the movie your thoughts are uniquely loud at that point. I was remembering those sorts of thoughts and that type of thinking. For me, God becomes an issue...

CAOIMHÍN *God becomes an issue, but more mundanely, with this image of a wide expanse of sky in LOOKING FOR MR. GODBAR, so does the history of the sublime, from nineteenth-century romantic landscape painting to the abstract sublime and beyond.*

SEAN Yes. Definitely. It was absolutely that. The Hudson River School. A small insignificant figure in sublime landscape. What I was writing on this was in fact transcendental. Which is what those people were all about...

CAOIMHÍN *Or a seascape, such as 36 HOURS (1995)?*

SEAN ... Yes, absolutely, with this too. But this had something more specific about it. I began reading many books of survival stories, of people on life rafts after their boats had gone down in the ocean, or solo circumnavigators kind of losing their mind on the trip. So, rather than looking out the airplane window, I imagined myself on this trip. And when you listen to your thoughts this clearly for so long – I filled so many canvases like this – it doesn’t take long for me, at least, to get into this “why are we here” question, which just keeps coming up and up and up.

CAOIMHÍN *Soon after this, in paintings like ALONE (1996), which relates formally to 36 HOURS, you lose the textual element in the paintings.*

SEAN Yes. And this is where I totally lose my audience (laughs). Not really, but I felt no one adequately understood it. Actually, ALONE has never been exhibited. However, many other clown paintings



from this period were exhibited at Contemporary Fine Arts in Berlin (1996), and at Rebecca Camhi Gallery in Athens (1996). In ALONE there's an impasto-painted clown, on top of an illusionistic seascape, who was directly replacing the text from a painting like NAVAL GAZE (1995) or 36 HOURS. I loved this painting. I got so high from making it that I wanted to do it again and again. So these paintings of sad lonely clowns struggling in nature became a full series, which, I guess, then acquired a new meaning in my life.

Up until this point everything I had done had been amazingly well received. I'm referring to the superficial things relating to career that just kept feeling better with every show that I made. When I removed the text from my paintings, all of a sudden there were enormous problems. No one knew what to make of them. The thing that people probably trusted about my art – writing on a painting – was gone. I felt misunderstood. Writing was just one method of re-inserting form into conceptually based art for me. It wasn't the be-all and end-all.

Therefore, when I began to make more ever-saddening clowns, their sadness referred to the fact that I was painting them and that no one seemed to understand them. It became a kind of conceptual death spiral. The more I made, the worse it seemed and the sadder the clowns became. Which I found hilarious when I was sitting around in my studio discussing it with friends, but it was also sad. I thought that someday this would be one of my favorite bodies of work and favorite stories to tell. And it is. As my wife hastens to add when I bellyache about this body of work, it has proved to be one of my most popular.

CAOIMHÍN *It's interesting that at certain points in your career there's an emphasis, sometimes literally, on the signature, as in the diptych SEAN LANDERS/7098 (2001). Yet at other times there's a denial of a signature device, which up to this particular point had been writing on paintings.*

SEAN I think all artists' natural reflex is to try to elude definition. But I felt that the clown became that signature. What frustrated me at that time, perhaps, was that I felt this 'new signature' was the same thing as my words.

CAOIMHÍN *I guess people were unwilling to accept it as the same.*

SEAN Maybe they felt that I lacked the facility or permission to 'simply' paint a picture or something. So many artists today paint in a far more lame fashion than I did back then and they get lauded for it. It was probably just timing, or maybe it was the particular emblem, the clown.

CAOIMHÍN *You mean, at the time people might have been saying that a slightly older painter like George Condo had cornered the clown market?*

SEAN No. I got no George Condo comparisons.

CAOIMHÍN *Really?*

SEAN No. Well, not that I knew of or remember. And I shouldn't have. What I was doing then was different. He is, however, one of my favorite living painters.

CAOIMHÍN *Nauman, then? Though it's less obvious, as he's not a painter.*

SEAN They gave me Nauman, probably because no one thought of me as a painter either. I got so much 'Nauman,' and the truth is that I never thought about him at all. If you even accidentally stumble across an old Nauman idea as an artist you will quickly find yourself in a shit storm from the 'Nauman lobby.' People come out of the woodwork to tell you "Nauman did that first," even if he didn't. What does it say about someone's art history education that they think Bruce Nauman invented the idea of clowns in art? He wasn't the first navel-gazer either. Artists contemplating creativity has a full history before he ever got to it. I think they saw me as a conceptual artist, plain and simple, and wearing those blinders perhaps I appeared like Nauman. The crazy thing is that no one ever thought these were paintings. That's what's remarkable. To this day people still don't think I'm a painter. I certainly have made a hell of a lot of paintings.

CAOIMHÍN *Well, what did people think they were?*

SEAN They thought this was a conceptual art act. That it was an oil painting as performance. Fair enough, but at the end of the day I did have to squirt paint out of a tube and spread it on with a brush, you know? It's a painting!

CAOIMHÍN *The distinction was probably more useful in the late 80s because the whole return of painting that had happened a decade earlier, whether perceived positively or negatively, had been seen partly as a reaction to conceptual art. So, painting per se and conceptual art were perhaps more obviously perceived as in opposition then. In any case, the initial negative critical response didn't stop you painting. What did it cause you to do within the painting?*

SEAN What it did allow me to do was paint more clowns becoming sadder in more extreme physical conditions. So that's why I find this particular series so central to the whole body of work. It's still self-conscious writing, but there's no actual text. It's me worrying about how I'm perceived, but through these cartoons.

BEATRIX *But doesn't some sort of collective consciousness come into play with the clown figure? I wonder if you can just say*

*that it's about you. This is inherently a collective experience. You can speak about yourself as much as you want, but it's a shared feeling. Failure is a shared feeling, or wanting to be great, or wanting to last.*

SEAN Yes, and this had been one of my early surprises. When I showed this vulnerable side of myself that it was rewarded by the empathy and understanding of others. It turns out that most people are like-minded. That's the axis on which my work functions, and always has. The way that I reach out to the viewer is by giving them something utterly personal that they recognize within themselves. Like Vito Acconci did in that 70s performance on a pier giving away whispered secrets to people who'd make the trip to see him. However, I discovered that it doesn't always take 100 percent truth in a work of art to be convincing. In a Hollywood movie, for instance, you'll notice that the whole thing is ridiculous and absurd, but there are brief moments of something that seems utterly real, that you recognize, and that makes the whole picture convincing. Zuzu's petals, for instance, from Frank Capra's IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE. It's the same in a text piece. I can write all bullshit throughout the whole thing and have just a few moments that reach through the bullshit and actually touch you with the truth, and this makes the whole thing convincing. I learned very early on that I wasn't only portraying myself, and that was fortunate. Otherwise it would have only confirmed that I was a crazy.

CAOIMHÍN *Let's return to the notion of signature and signature devices. The performance of signature in repetitive composition is something that is at the heart of 20th-century art, even the type of painting that doesn't inform your work much. The first thing a Jackson Pollock says to us today is "this is a Jackson Pollock."*

SEAN Right. And I have my trademark signature. It's the text on canvas. That's my Pollock-like signature medium. Anybody else who does that falls into 'my thing.' I feel like I own it. If there is a signature for me, it's that. And it's the unifier for all my work, right from the beginning to now.

CAOIMHÍN *So, when the cards of recent art history are shuffled, how do you think your work in this 'signature medium' will relate to that of painters as different as Ed Ruscha or Christopher Wool?*

SEAN I admire both of those artists. I welcome any comparisons with them, but I'm also secure in the knowledge that my work is completely its own thing when compared to theirs or anybody else's. It's just a brief moment for me in which I can be compared with them. There are so many artists that I can briefly be compared to, but then I move on. I don't think about them before I make the work. It just happens that it looks a certain way or shares a similarity but if it's intentional, you'll know it because I'll write about it. Like I did with Hamsun, Kawara, Acconci, Magritte, Picabia, Picasso, Hogarth, etc.

CAOIMHÍN *Yet, despite your claims to the signature medium of text on canvas, you consciously chose to jettison text around 1996 to produce what you now perversely claim to be among your favorite paintings, as you said earlier!*

SEAN Right. But you're assuming that I am the sole judge of what my signature is. In fact, others kind of assess that for you. I also said that we artists like to defy definition, and that I need to be free to do whatever I want when I want to do it, like Picabia. One can only do well what one loves to do. Anything else will be mediocre. I also didn't get to say earlier how, having had so many years of writing, the freedom of not writing was like a huge weight off my back. I had just gotten so sick of hearing my thoughts. It got really claustrophobic after a while. The freedom of just painting a picture was, like, "oh my God, everybody else who just does this has it so easy. Why do I have to push the stone up the hill? I don't have to." However, I quickly learned that I did have to. Or at least my audience expected it. I don't know why people are so uncomfortable with change within an artist or change in their 'signature.' I initially turned to Picabia for a way out. Now I look to him at times for solace, almost. That's why I keep referring to him symbolically. He's almost like a father figure or something. He sort of reassures me that it's okay to change, and to do what I need to do.

CAOIMHÍN *It's probably more common among artists of your generation of the 90s than previous generations to have what amounts to a signature style of doing lots of different things, to put it tritely.*

SEAN Well, to be trapped in a single style for life just seems like misery. How can you take yourself seriously if you do this? Even Pollock didn't. He has a full breadth of work too. What we commonly know of him is that one thing, but when you see a fuller perspective there's a lot more to that guy. He was brave enough to try many forms.

CAOIMHÍN *The reason why some people choose to have a practice that is other than varied, I suppose, is that what drives them most strongly is an act of negation or refinement that needs to take the same form. And they find it again and again and again, rather than insisting on variety.*

SEAN That's what I think is really suspect. Because, as a practitioner, I know how fast things get thin. And to think that refining just one thing can be interesting to somebody over the long term... well, I just question their curiosity. Assuming that curiosity represents intelligence, then how intelligent are they? To continue to crank out the same product is desperately cowardly. It's one of the saddest things. Yet it's what the art world seems to reward most handsomely. It's like the system has evolved to encourage mediocrity.

CAOIMHÍN *But arguably, you can have curiosity and refinement, rather than curiosity and variety. It's just not your particular way.*

SEAN As a practitioner I'm suspicious of it.

CAOIMHÍN *So you think that Agnes Martin or Robert Ryman should throw the odd clown in there?*

SEAN Yeah (laughs). Robert Ryman is an excellent example. He should have had me over to write on them (laughter). You know, there are emperor's new clothes arguments, and maybe there is none more apt than Robert Ryman. I know what a debate this could create, but ultimately it's a white painting again and again. What do you think? Are you totally sold with Robert Ryman's stuff? Some of them are beautiful, I guess. But, you know, so is some stucco work. The same goes for Ad Reinhardt. In a lot of ways those two people basically created this sort of phony checkmate to painting. It was totally false. It didn't exist. Painting was supposedly dead and they supposedly killed it. Its immediate reaction was Photo-Realism. And what came after? Neo-Expressionism? And then there was Neo-Geo, and then what...? Nothing? Obviously there were many very not-dead exceptions during this time, including Martin Kippenberger and George Condo, to name a few of my favorites. But then when painting really begins to become 'rehabilitated,' or to pick up steam again, I think, is by my generation, who actually go about the process of rebuilding this 'troubled' thing with rules that say that anything goes, and that has Conceptual art as its influence as much as, say, Velásquez, Manet, or Picasso.

CAOIMHÍN *Without any sense of imminent closure or belatedness or crisis?*

SEAN Right. That's why I'm not a slacker artist? In fact, if I were a slacker artist, then a black painting would make a lot of sense. But trying to reinvent painting is the project for everybody and anybody who paints. That's the mission for whoever takes it on.

CAOIMHÍN *But your commitment, nevertheless, is not to painting per se as a medium.*

SEAN My commitment is not solely to painting. It is to art in general.

CAOIMHÍN *But here you are talking about painting.*

SEAN I happen to be, but I don't limit myself to painting, because I don't have to. Others have to.

CAOIMHÍN *You feel they have to?*

SEAN Or they're not very good at anything else. They're not very good writers. And they're not very good sculptors. Basically, their fear prevents them from going there. I just don't have as much reticence, even with a medium that I'm not a master of. I don't mind heading straight into it. It's like the Icarus myth. I strive for greatness and if I crash and burn, and if the arc of my descent has meaning then I have created a new kind of art. There's a story in failure that's as beautiful as the story of triumph. Which is that whole anti-hero thing I learned from HUNGER.

CAOIMHÍN *If you fake failure too often, it becomes...*

SEAN No, it's not faking failure. It's trying and failing. It is failure. Failure is a story I want to tell because it's a story that everybody knows, a story that everyone lives, but no one wants to own.

BEATRIX *But you want to own it?*

SEAN Yeah. It's like beach-front property that no one wants because there's a sewage pipe on it. Well, the raw sewage is terrible but I'm on the beach.

BEATRIX *And the beach means what in this analogy?*

SEAN Art History. I hope.

CAOIMHÍN *So, it's "Try again, fail better," as Beckett put it.*

SEAN Yeah. Well, you can't say Beckett enough in regards to me.

CAOIMHÍN *Can we talk a little about your sculpture? You started with clay but you've also cast bronzes. That choice of materials is quite significant and resonant. Bronze is an enduring material. It's the material of monuments.*

SEAN Well, that's why I stopped writing on paper and started writing on lead-primed linen. I wanted it to last. That's behind my impulse to make art. I want it to last, to outlast me. In the show at Andrea Rosen Gallery (2004), that's what the painting THERE WAS A TIME... (2004), is stating. It describes my belief that, incrementally, I transfer my life into artworks, into these static objects, and when I die that's all that will be left. Perhaps that's corny, tacky, laughable, or whatever you want to call it, but it's at the basis of my impulse to do this. I've always taken great pleasure in telling the truth, especially when it's the 'wrong' thing to do. Most artists will do their damndest to avoid this kind of statement.

CAOIMHÍN *But the ways in which you would choose to be remembered have apparently changed. You once said that you'd be as happy to be remembered for producing a sad funny little painting as for Robert Smithson's SPIRAL JETTY.*

SEAN Well, that's not changed at all.

CAOIMHÍN *There is a difference between the implied modesty of a 'sad little painting' and the monumental aspirations of a bronze sculpture.*

SEAN Monumental? I've never done anything taller than three feet.

CAOIMHÍN *Fair enough. But there are intimations of the monumental in the material itself that are unavoidable.*

SEAN I disagree. It's just a satisfying, lasting material. As far as we know oil paintings last, what, five, six hundred years? We know that bronzes last at least six thousand years. What I had in mind when I mentioned the 'sad little painting' were paintings like THE IDEA MAN (1998), or THREE NOSE

GUY (1998). Anything from the ‘image and text’ series, my ‘vache period,’ was exactly what I had in mind when I was saying that. But we are ahead of ourselves. Can I go back and connect a few dots?

BEATRIX *Sure.*

SEAN I made that series after a long evolution in my image-painting which began with the Hogarth series (1996). I took one painting by William Hogarth titled A MIDNIGHT MODERN CONVERSATION (1732) and made a dozen or so paintings from it. I used it to tell the story of my outgrowing the drinking-based camaraderie/culture on which my friends and I had subsisted for so long, where we debated and became inspired by each other’s ideas. Where we kept each other company as we waited to be ‘discovered.’ Of finding my future wife and deciding to get married. It was an incredibly juvenile rendition of the story of growing up. This was the most overtly ‘wrong’ art I had ever made. They were mad paintings, but it was in line with my work. I was telling a story from my life through painting and using art history to do it. They stunned the gallerists with whom I exhibited them, Stuart Regen and Shaun Caley of Regen Projects in Los Angeles, who I cared for greatly. I’ll never forget the look on Shaun’s face when they came out of the crate. Needless to say, I was never asked to do another show there.

Next was the clown series, which I have already elaborated upon. That evolved into my 1997 show at Andrea Rosen Gallery in New York. These paintings were amalgams of two or three famous paintings done in a Disney-like cartoon style but in my own hand, with all of its own virtuosity or lack thereof. DANCE OF LIFE (1997), is half Matisse’s DANCE (FIRST VERSION) (1909) and half Poussin’s BACCHANAL BEFORE A STATUE OF PAN (1631–33). ZORKON (1997), is half Winslow Homer’s BREEZING UP [A FAIR WIND] (1876) and half Géricault’s RAFT OF THE MEDUSA (1819). For me the Disney influence was important because it represented the collective unconscious of imagery for people raised in the Baby Boom era and forward. We all have this sort of imagery in our heads, be it Looney Tunes, Japanimation or Tin Tin. To resist it and refer solely to imagery from the Met, Louvre and Prado I felt was just too pretentious. Again, it was the ‘wrong’ thing to have done but I was eager to, because it spoke of being an artist in my time. I was comparing myself favorably or not to the greats of art history to illustrate my or any artist’s predicament of trying to make ‘new’ art in the wake of art history and, more specifically, in the wake of my generation’s art education, which was dominated by theory, Conceptual art, Minimalism and Process art. These shows were my humble effort to re-insert form back into Conceptual art, to ‘fail like Icarus’ perhaps, but ultimately to use Conceptual art as a dagger against itself. It was a Conceptual art act that was anti-conceptual.

Unfortunately, few people seemed to understand it. Feeling rejected, I finally became despondent to the point where I had to write again for my psychological survival. Which is why I began writing in the first place.

CAOIMHÍN *What fed into the image-making at this point?*

SEAN Magritte’s ‘vache’ period. For me, it represented a brief moment of total creative and painterly freedom and inventiveness within his otherwise very tightly rendered and deliberate body of work. When I first saw the paintings from Magritte’s ‘vache’ period I felt so close to them, it was as if I was seeing my own art. I felt almost possessive of this body of work. I didn’t want anyone else to like it because I should be the only one to like it. I felt that this was a language I already knew how to speak without studying it. I could instantly flop into it. And I did, in my way. I would paint the images referring sometimes directly to Magritte as in THREE NOSE GUY, which is inspired by what I call his ‘Mr. Slipper Nose’ (LE STROPIAT, 1948), though mine looks nothing like his. But most often they were completely my own inventions. All of my ‘vache’ figures are still part of, or an extension of, my clown language. Every one is clownish, dejected and sad. But the way these were painted in this new ‘vache’ language that was far more comfortable for me. I found a painting style that fit. It matched my ability, or it was just the right balance of cartoon and illusion for my particular skill level, which is something that was and should always be determined by my interest. I can paint far more ‘realistically’ if I want to, but the whole point of artistic freedom is not to do what you don’t feel like doing. It’s to follow your interest.

CAOIMHÍN *Some of these paintings are more overtly sexual than others.*

SEAN Yes, In LE DOMAINE ENCHANTÉ AKA MONSIEUR SAUCISSON (1999), it’s just what it is (laughs). You know, he’s happy to be where he is. The simple things in life are what’s important.

CAOIMHÍN *How preconceived was the imagery in terms of the actual painting process?*

SEAN Oh, not at all. In fact, the way that I would find the images was by working on a stained canvas to begin with. Then I’d pick up my brush and I’d paint a cartoon in the middle of the canvas, not like it, wipe it off, do another, wipe it off, and repeat that process ten to twenty times. The ghost of each cartoon remained visible so there would be a mishmash or a layering of cartoon characters. Often,

with that many ghosts of old drawings a new drawing begins to emerge. Many, many of these were found that way. That goes back to the original automatic drawing techniques of the Surrealists. I was just trying to get a good cartoon, and sometimes the best way to get one was to find them by mistake. Many of my sculptures were found in a similar way. I begin a sculpture by building the clay into a skull shape. Even skulls have humanlike characters. Inevitably it reminds me of something or someone and then I sculpt it in that direction.

*CAOIMHÍN Surrealism is the art movement most associated with a fascination with the workings of the unconscious, with automatic writing, with somehow bypassing premeditation, in so far as that's possible. As late as your last show at greengrassi in 2003, where you addressed a pantheon of 20th-century artists, all male, there was a predominance of Surrealists.*

SEAN It's more generally pre-World War II European painting. Like what I was speaking of earlier, how these guys represent to me the last gasp from the long tradition of European painting when art was pretty straightforward. Like when a person sits down in front of a blank canvas and an image arrives, not necessarily from life, but from the imagination. Before post-war American art domination occurred and the whole landscape changed so radically. If you look at all nine artists depicted in that show, with the exception of Duchamp, there's something about that with all of them: Picasso, Picabia, Magritte, Dalí, De Chirico, Braque, Ernst, and Beckmann. When I sit in front of a blank canvas I feel utterly connected to them. I feel I'm in their lineage. If there's a stream of creativity that they dipped their ladle into, I try to dip my ladle into that same one. But, of course, there's some 70s lineage in me as well, like the text-artists that I built my earlier body of work upon. But all of that ultimately stems from Duchamp, which is why he was included.

My Picasso show fits in with this too. I saw 20th-century art as divided by the art of Picasso and Duchamp. Picasso typifies what I've been describing, how an artist sits in front of a blank canvas and an image arrives. And Duchamp is of course the grandfather of Conceptual art. As a representative of my time, a time where artists feel the blood of both of these lineages coursing through their veins, I again sought to create a body of work that typified both. Both men used borrowed imagery. Obviously, Picasso riffed on Velázquez to announce his belief that he belonged in Velázquez's midst historically. Duchamp introduced the idea of the 'ready-made.' Therefore, borrowing another's imagery can be seen as 'ready-made.' To use Picasso's imagery in that way, spelling my name with it in SEAN/7099 (2001), or to write 'genius' with a piece of furniture lifted from a painting of his, FEMME AU BUFFET (1936) and having a variety of his ex-wives and girlfriends he'd depicted whose lives he ruined crying at, or placed on each letter in GENIUS (2001), was using Duchamp to riff on Picasso, melding them together to describe myself and my situation as an artist.

*CAOIMHÍN Let's talk about your reasons for sometimes showing work in a variety of mediums together, a video or audio work as well as sculpture and painting or drawing.*

SEAN I think it's an over-eagerness to please, frankly. I so want to satisfy people, and to be liked. Beyond that, I think it's also a way of showing off my talent by doing the same thing in many different media. It's all the same to me. Everything I do is united through a performance-based quality. I have become a personality operating within my work. When I paint it's a painting by this sort of artist character I've established, the same for sculpture, video, and writing. When I pick up a pen to write I just sort of click into character. Or, the audio piece I played at greengrassi (2000), for instance, which is titled THE MAN WITHIN (2000) and describes my 'greatness,' I just picked up the microphone, switched into character and let it rip. What is perhaps confusing for people is that this character is partly the real me and partly not. I am in a way, still Chris Hamson.

*CAOIMHÍN Had you any particular models for what to do with sculptural form or what to do with video when you first started using these media?*

SEAN As far as the video, it was in part AN AMERICAN FAMILY, as I described earlier. Besides that it was early Wegman videos perhaps, and Spalding Gray to some extent. I saw in Wegman the opportunity to exploit simple humor, and in Gray it was the personality of the artist and storytelling. I began in 1990 with a sort of talk show format and I sat at a desk mocking the radio and telling stories. I wanted them to appear preposterous in the lineage of video art, but in the end be far more entertaining and engaging than actual video art ever was. I wanted to win by losing, in effect. I wanted them to be full of personal content, to hook people through voyeurism and, most importantly, to be 'not boring.' Those early videos sort of evolved into the living sculpture idea à la Gilbert and George. None were ever intended for a captive audience, just something you walk by, and if I hook you, well then good for me. They were closely related to my written pieces, just acted out.

As for sculpture, again it was the 'inappropriate' thing to do at the time, and that interested me. Whether it was clay heads covered in trash bags or traditional clay, it seemed somehow perverse at the time of the 'new-materials sculpture' of Matthew Barney and Michael Joaquin Grey, who were making sculpture that seemed exceedingly smart and new.

Being naturally contrarian, I was interested in returning sculpture to the ‘old’ and ‘dumb’ thing it had happily been for thousands of years before they got to it. Long after the Vaseline bench-press melts into the soil or a Richard Serra rusts into the sea my dumb little bronze heads will be humming the tune of my immortality. It’s a ‘Tortoise and Hare’ thing.

CAOIMHÍN *Let’s talk a little bit more about virtuosity and your relationship to it. Is it of no interest to you that some people are praised, rightly or wrongly, for their consummate skills in a particular medium at a time when the conscious de-skilling of the media is quite common?*

SEAN I don’t try to make ‘bad art.’ This was the first conversation you and I ever had...

CAOIMHÍN *Right.*

SEAN ... and this was the issue I took, as I didn’t believe that I belonged in that category. I was just doing what I did – I never feigned naiveté. ICH MACHE MICH, was sculpted as well as I could at that time. Now I can sculpt a chimp far better. I always worked to my level at the time. If it looked really naive or had an absence of virtuosity it’s because that was the truth of my situation. The idea being that all art earnestly done is essentially self-portraiture. That’s why I compared myself directly to painters like Manet and Matisse and Poussin in that 1997 Andrea Rosen Gallery show, because I knew I didn’t rate with them on a skill level. I thought that mine was the story of searching for my comfort level in their midst because that is the situation of a painter or an artist. You’re always judged in the context of art history, contemporary art history and ancient art history.

CAOIMHÍN *Yet some of the immediate predecessors you found inspirational right at the beginning, such as Jeff Koons, never felt any need to acquire even the most rudimentary facility, as one can always commission other virtuosos in different media, from glassblowing Venetians to American sign painters, to execute one’s work.*

SEAN Yeah, whereas I do it myself, and that is what’s different.

CAOIMHÍN *And why? The choice to do so is obviously important to you.*

SEAN Because I drive where I want to go. I’m the master of my image. I’m responsible for what’s there. I’m accountable. Jeff Koons is not in full control of his imagery. He’s a director.

CAOIMHÍN *Really?*

SEAN He didn’t sculpt Michael Jackson or that chimp. Someone else did. He’s only so close to that image. My fingerprints are in my chimpanzee. You see, for him it’s an act of irony and for me it’s the point where irony has gone full circle and begins the return to sincerity.

CAOIMHÍN *So we’re back to that old gambit, the expressionist convention, of which there is an available critique. As Francis Bacon put it, you want to lift images directly off the nervous system. But is there such a thing as an unmediated access to spontaneous gestural expression?*

SEAN Yeah, I believe in that.

CAOIMHÍN *You do?*

SEAN Yes, I do. I believe the hand of a great artist extends directly from their soul. I think that has a hell of a lot of meaning. I’m not saying that it excludes what Jeff does, because I actually really love what he does and can’t say enough about how much I admire him. I’m just saying that I see what I want to see when I want to see it with the peculiarities of my own hand and imagination, which is inherently more sincere. His process is more like expert shopping, or commissioning, which preserves his ironic distance.

CAOIMHÍN *But it’s an important part of your project that you learned your skills on the job, as it were? Wouldn’t it have been nice if you’d been able to do things in the beginning as well as you can do it now?*

SEAN It would have been, yes, but we all improve in no matter what we do. Look at the early Magrittes. My God, It was like they were painted by someone in my mother’s backyard painting class.

I personally am comfortable with the level of skill in paintings like PLANK BOY (2000), MS. KITTY (1999), or BUFFALO (2003), for example. I have the ability to go further toward realism if I wanted to. But I didn’t feel like those paintings would satisfy me any more if I did. In others like HAPPY AND SAD (2002) I went a little further. I realized the figures’ outfits far more than in, say, MARINER (2003), which is done just right for what he is. It’s just that I wanted to see more there in HAPPY AND SAD. Different paintings require different things.

CAOIMHÍN *It still seems that the have-a-go mentality of doing it as well as you can do it now and not caring if that falls far short of whatever skill you may develop later on is significant. It didn’t bother you. You were relatively fearless.*

SEAN Yeah. I mean what else could I do? All I can do is work to the height of ability that my interest necessitates.

CAOIMHÍN *What difference does it make being over 40 and doing what you do?*

SEAN Well, I think I have to be honest about what I am now.

CAOIMHÍN *But how obviously has that change been registered in recent years?*

SEAN Well, this most recent show at Andrea Rosen Gallery (2004) is a great example of it. It’s a look back at my old text paintings. I took their graphic nature and exploded it into spatial abstract

paintings. Thoughts emerge in your brain, they become clear, and then they recede back into the blurry distance. They are still pictures of the way thoughts occur like my old paintings were, but the writing is different, it's self-parody. It's not like I no longer feel the things that I wrote on those early works, but when I write them now I feel how well-worn they are. It's like a closet full of old shoes. I've walked in them, they're worn out to the contours of my feet. I could put them on again and they'd fit comfortably but I just wouldn't feel snappy in them.

The reason the recent paintings have the 'echoing look' is when I was making them at nighttime, I'd look at the reflection of my paintings in the studio windows, which are double-glazed glass...

CAOIMHÍN *And they looked doubled, like the phrases in these new paintings?*

SEAN Yes, they looked so much better like that, and it just seemed like this sort of double vision/repetition effect was an exaggerated form of self-parody. It reminded me of a John Giorno recording where he repeated everything he said in his monologue and it evoked the palpable feeling of insanity. It just made sense to me that these paintings are echoes of those earlier 'well-worn shoes.'

CAOIMHÍN *It does seem like a graphic, cartoon rendition of an echo.*

SEAN Yeah.

CAOIMHÍN *You did say these texts were on abstract grounds. But some of them are not quite abstract, they are renditions of wide-open spaces, of skylines.*

SEAN Yes. The skylines are different. I grew up in a religious family, and really learned how to pray. It's still with me. My brain still falls into this mode of prayer, and I don't know what to do with it, being maybe not quite atheist, but a doubter of God.

CAOIMHÍN *When you say a 'mode of prayer,' you don't actually mean extempore praying, do you? You mean the repetition of pre-existing words.*

SEAN I mean, the train of thought in your mind that you think is being overheard by...

CAOIMHÍN *A deity?*

SEAN Yeah, a deity or a deceased relative.

CAOIMHÍN *Okay.*

SEAN So with these sky paintings, I'm attempting to capture this sort of prayer/thought. An example would be "Please make me a better artist," "Why can't things be easier?" By writing it I send it towards the heavens. "I want my paintings to last forever," "Please God, make me matter." Conversely, the one with the moon, *THE SLEEP OF REASON PRODUCES MONSTERS* (2004) was about insomnia, paranoia and the type of desperate prayer that occurs when the devils come out. It's directly made after the Goya etching *THE SLEEP OF REASON PRODUCES MONSTERS* (1797–1798). The words in this painting are like the bats rising in his etching. I was just trying to give thought a picture. A clown in the Arctic landscape is giving thought a picture in a different way, as are my text paintings, videos, sculptures and my 'vache' period. It's why I have an affinity with all those pre-World War II European painters, because they too are people who sat before an easel with a blank canvas in front of them and from their thoughts procured an image. That's what I value in art. That's what I want to see in art. That's what I like to make as an artist.