

Art

MONTHLY

JULY - AUGUST 2003

Sean Landers

Greengrassi London June 4 to June 30

Dead artists haunt Sean Landers. In the past the art geniuses of early 20th-century Europe have manifested themselves in his work as the basis for a series, as in his works inspired by Magritte, or as a direct challenge. A recent series of his paintings were pastiches of classic Picasso canvases with Landers applying the words 'Scan' or 'Genius' their surfaces ill order to give them his own stamp. Here, however, these granddaddies of art have been tackled head on, in a series of portraits that pay homage whilst at the same time, attempting to desecrate or possess their memory.

The main gallery space at Greengrassi contains paintings in two styles - half are a series of black and white canvases, the 'Ghost' series, where Landers has painted portraits of artists from a list he has drawn up of his influences. The list it's self (with the names crossed out as each master is conquered is used by the gallery as the announcement card for the show - ten names are on it, nine are crossed out, only Matisse survived, possibly because he doesn't quite fit the lineage of the others. These nine read like a role call of the great pre-war European Artists - Dali, Magritte, Picasso, Picabia, Earnst (sic), de Chirico, Braque, Duchamp and Beckmann. Four of them have been turned into ghosts, yet here it is they who seem to be

haunted, particularly Picabia, Ghost #3 (Picabia), 2003, who looks lost and afraid, terrified by the unknown horrors he faces.

Adjacent to these paintings, Landers has displayed another series, this time transforming the artists into clowns. In these brightly coloured works, Dali is a crazed king and de Chirico a Viking, while Picasso is a confederate and Magritte the devil. All are given clown faces - some happy others sad. There is an ambiguity to clown figures- their supposedly jolly and entertaining exterior often disguising a darker, more melancholy soul within. They have featured before in Landers's work but as self portraits, a reflection of his mixed feelings about himself as an artist. One particularly poignant painting, Alone, 1996, shows the artist as clown out at sea, desperately rowing against huge waves with a threatening sky overhead.

The portraits here began as drawings, beautiful but quite straightforward renderings of Landers' art heroes, some of which are also on display at the gallery. It is only in the paintings however that Landers takes control of the figures, using his power to transform them into his own possessions. This is not to say that he has made them into figures of fun or mockery. Although there is a strong element of satire here, he is respectful of his subjects and there is a tenderness too, as the clown figures also carry the sad, hunted eyes of the ghost series.

Landers is known for his ability to jump around in style, often in the same exhibition, and this is no exception. The upstairs gallery contains two paintings that seem almost in opposition to the works displayed below. In a rougher more ragged style, Landers has painted two fawns in a clearing and a beaver chewing at logs for a dam. The subject matter seems so fluffy and kitsch that it is impossible not to see them as a joke, however well executed they are. Yet the figures downstairs are hard to shake off and somehow imbue these ultra innocent scenes with something more menacing. A clown has made it upstairs as well: again, a Dali figure but this time painted in the surreal style of Landers' heroes. Back downstairs, a final work on show is a self-portrait, but while this time the artist is no longer the clown, he is still a disguised figure, portrayed as an American buffalo. His face is entirely hidden by hair, yet his eyes are still revealing, weary and with heavy grey bags beneath them.

Landers has in the past been critically savaged, accused of being a purveyor of 'bad art', perhaps due in part to the confusion his varied styles of work creates. He has also come under fire for self-indulgence, largely for his stream-of-consciousness word works. Here the self-analysis is subtler, though Landers continues to be obsessed with the notion of being an artist and exploring what his place in art history will be. Whilst operating as a tribute to his idols Landers' artist paintings also seem part of a battle to align himself with them, and to manipulate their images to become part of their world.

Eliza Williams

