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Wanting It

Sean Landers
Andrea Rosen Gallery
525 West 24th Street
Through May 22

BY JERRY SALTZ

Sean Landers wants it bad, and he doesn't make any bones about it. Listen to him in *Le Domaine Enchante AKA Monsieur Sauc...*, a large portrait of a dapper gentleman who has a dick for a nose, a scrotum for a chin, and who stands atop a giant breast. Surrounding this figure is an undulating veil of small black script. In it, Landers writes: "If you can live without being a famous artist, you will do exactly that. I cannot. I have a no failure policy defeat is not an option." Further along on the same surface he adds, "If shitting myself would help me become more famous, I would Without a second thought."

It's been a long time since we heard Landers speak—since 1995 to be exact. Until then he had been a man of many, many words, writing incessantly—first on yellow legal pads and calendars, then canvas, then books, and even in his exhibition press releases, about his life, his art, his career, his sexual dysfunctions and fantasies, his loves, affairs, and failures. The guy was an open book.

Regularly castigated for his self-indul-

gent displays of self-doubt, arrogance, machismo, and neediness, Landers was an artist with a full-blown neoexpressionist ego. He was raging, only he was operating without any mediating image between himself and his viewers; it was just you and him. It was tender, pathetic, and amazing.

Then strange things started happening. In 1994, at the age of 31, Landers ended up on the cover of *Artforum*, the subject of two articles, one that hailed him as a kind of slacker hero, while the other branded him a "pornography-warped pervert." An artist with a self-installed lightning rod over his head, Landers was Howard Stern with a paintbrush: telling all, saying anything. Just looking at his work, let alone liking it, became a blood sport.

In 1995, he kept writing but added images for the first time—apes and breasts—lots of them (breasts that is), along with tales of touching them, looking at them, and longing for them. People went apoplectic, but the reviews were all good, and Landers apparently had what he wanted: success.

But in his 1997 exhibition, the words disappeared and the airwaves went silent. He stopped writing, he wrote in the press release to this show, "because I, like most of you, were sick to hell of my babbling." He began making images that attempted to put into visual terms this weird combination of self-aggrandizement and self-flagellation. Landers lacked either the

imagination or the skill to bring this off. The results looked like bad John Currin paintings.

The show was a fiasco. Still, somehow the reviews were positive, except for one in *The New York Times* (written by Roberta Smith, my wife), which said he was in "a painful transition." And Landers, like some obsessed Ahab, latched onto this remark with a vengeance. His "no failure policy" had been violated, and, in his own words, he became "totally depressed," "disillusioned," and "paranoid."

Over and over in his current exhibition, he refers to being "ripped apart" by his critics, and wonders "what kind of ass kicking I'm going to get this year." He warns that if anyone "tries to derail my art career I'll stop you." He says he "lost [his] confidence," "couldn't sleep; and did some 'soulful introspection.'" In *Career Ego*—a portrait of the artist as a tiny naked man with huge, all-hearing ears who stands in the palm of some gigantic hand—Landers shows his split personality. At one point, he brags, "Once again I have transformed an average painting into sheer brilliance; to which you want to reply, 'Not.'" But then he reveals his ingratiating underbelly: "In closing, I have nothing against critics; which makes you want to apologize for your earlier criticism. It's tricky, but it's thrilling, too. It's as if Landers were performing live. He opens a direct line to his audience, then he proceeds to make that line hum with interference.

What makes Landers so compelling is that he is Everyartist, only more so. Hypersensitive to criticism and totally committed to his own vision, Landers wears his ego on his own compulsively confessional sleeve. In *The Perfect Truth*, a middle-aged academic as sweater-vested teddy bear is surrounded by a field of words. Here you learn this is Landers's "favorite" painting in the show. Read on and you'll realize it's also the most recent one. So even this "perfect truth" has the ring of self-invested ego and a vulnerable overconfidence.

As deluded as Landers seems to be, he is also possessed of a certain clarity. He writes about letting it "rip;" about being "totally free." But then in *Football Duck*-a picture of a duck wearing a football jersey-he just stops and says, "Okay enough fucking around, I need some God damned money!" Elsewhere in the same painting he writes, "Here I am a 35 year old happily married man, 2 dogs, a car, a West Village apartment, and lifestyle How can I even pretend to be a crazy tortured artist living on the fringe of society?"

In this show, Landers has both pushed ahead with his surrogate self- portrait *Idea* and

backtracked, reintroducing his monologues. He's hedging, but it's also great to hear his voice again. And the voice has changed: there's no more slacker Landers to kick around; it's all about the art now-or at least the career. The sex is in the images. Writing across pictorial space instead of a flat white surface gives these new paintings an illusionistic buzz that all his previous work lacked. Sue Williams's notations and diagrams are read as sequential (like a comic book); in Christopher Wool's work, word and letter and the image. With Landers, you see the whole thing at once; the words and the pictures are congruent. Instead of his former stream of consciousness, you get a sea of consciousness: pictorial space full of the character's thoughts. This is a big accomplishment. Of course another interpretation of this is that the "bad boy" writing disguises some of the bad painting. There's some truth in this, too, particularly when you're looking at some of the weaker pieces -like *Multi-Headed Mister*.

It's too bad the pictures, or the images, aren't as interesting as the overall idea. One painting is pretty much like the next: a surreal portrait part animal, part human, a lot of tits

set against some nondescript back ground. Landers says these works were inspired by Magritte's paintings of the late 1940s, but they're oddly reminiscent of the early clown portraits of George Condo, as well as thrift-store art, and the keep-on truckin' cartooning of R. Crumb.

In the early '90s, Landers showed his generation that everything was open to an artist: he made paintings, sculptures, videos, cassettes of himself singing; he wrote a book. Since 1996, he has even contributed a monthly painting/column to *Spin*. But more important is his Rabelaisian hunger, his romantic-and incredibly American struggle for greatness.

Here is an artist who, while he may lack the essential quality of genius, is striving for it nonetheless. And this is moving, not pathetic, because it is so sincere and so exposed. His writing and his paintings are love poems to greatness and possibility. This show is not a "success;" but it is a kind of victory. With his last show, it seemed that Landers was about to fade from view. His new work puts us on notice that he intends to stick around-and in our craw.



Everyartist, only more so, Sean Landers at Andrea Rosen Gallery