

# Art in America

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Sean Landers: Installation view of exhibition, 1997; at Andrea Rosen.

## Sean Landers at Andrea Rosen

In his text paintings, Sean Landers has used a relentless chronicle of his private and professional life to pick at the scabs of his own inadequacies. Judging by the work in this show, all of which was made this year, the artist has abandoned word-filled canvases in favor of figurative painting, but the results are much the same.

The subjects of the new paintings seem to have been deliberately selected to highlight Landers's artistic shortcomings by begging comparisons with the masters. *Dance of Life*, for instance, echoes the exuberant composition of Matisse's *Dance*, but Landers's latter-day revelers, painted in a rubbery, thrift-shop-painting style, are a group of long-in-the-tooth hippies who cavort glumly in a

forest clearing. (Two of the figures have also been realized as near life-size wax candles which, during the show, stood in the middle of the gallery, wicks burning.) With their paunchy physiques and stiff poses, Landers's figures mock the Woodstock era's rhetoric of personal liberation. They also deflate Landers's own artistic pretensions so thoroughly as to forestall any criticism. As usual with Landers, you feel sure that nothing you could say against his work is as bad as what he might say about it himself.

Similarly, in a painting titled *Zorkon* reminders of such masterpieces as Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa* and Winslow Homer's *The Gulf Stream* only reinforce the vapidness of Landers's conception. The painting depicts a doomed sailboat listing dangerously in a storm as the little green aliens

who populate it gesticulate futilely toward the approaching cyclone. Their big eyes brim with pitiful expressions which suggest that Landers had in mind not only Géricault and Homer but also the big-eyed waifs of Walter Keane.

*Robot and Bunny/Me and Michelle* is a pastoral scene of two lovers lounging on a blanket underneath a sky of fluffy white clouds. The echoes of Giorgione and Manet are skewed by the fact that the figures are a fluffy white bunny with well-defined breasts and a robot reminiscent of the 1960s animated cartoon "The Jetsons." The bunny gazes coyly at the robot, but any undercurrents of eroticism are neutralized by the faux wholesomeness of the two nonhuman protagonists.

*Space Ape on Mars/Self Portrait* belongs to the hoary genre of the self-portrait, which Landers jokingly updates by painting himself as an ape in an astronaut suit. The ape-artist is shown at an easel making a plein-air rendering of the Martian landscape around him. Ignoring the quest for self-knowledge that usually marks self-portraits, Landers instead offers a silly riff on evolution (or, more precisely, devolution, as humans turn back into their long-lost cousins).

His Gen-X message seems to be that everything sacred can become grist for contemplation of one's own deficiencies. Ultimately, Landers's new paintings are as irritating as the self-absorbed ramblings of his previous work, and that, no doubt, is exactly the point.

—Eleanor Heartney