

ARTFORUM

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REVIEWS

LOS ANGELES

SEAN LANDERS

REGEN PROJECTS

Ever the showman, Sean Landers served up a ribald homage in his recent West Coast show to—of all people—William Hogarth. What, one asks, is Landers, the self-proclaimed cultural neophyte who gave diletantism a good name, doing evoking an artist who is anything but the flavor-of-the-month?

Whatever the reason, Landers is definitely not turning to the past to satisfy a morbid desire for art-historical excavation. On the contrary, Landers' gutsy, jocular, and ultimately lyrical interplay of paintings, video, and sculptures based on Hogarth's *A Midnight Modern Conversation*, 1773, represents a symbolic recuperation of our "colonial history," making it speak to the contemporary moment. Indeed, the artist's flair for extracting poetry from the heart of things abject and marginal fueled his casual cannibalization of both Hogarth's subject matter (the inebriated), as well as his painting style (a folksy sort of realism). If Hogarth's original work offered an allegory of male desire as a state of alcohol-induced stupor, Landers' cycle of paintings testify that nothing much has changed.

And like one of those drunken fools, I'm still reeling from Landers' attachment to the notion that art can tell a tale, no matter how banal. Perhaps this is what has always informed Landers' preoccupation with "confessional" storytelling, and collateral sputtering. Plucking his protagonist from Hogarth's painting, Landers invited us to follow the "loser's" progress from trial to tribulation in a debauched and futile quest for female companionship. In *A Midnight Modern Conversation (Boredom)*, 1996, three forlorn souls (one bearing



Sean Landers, *A Midnight Modern Conversation (Ignoring Hallucinations)*, 1996, oil on linen. 50 x 74".

a suspicious resemblance to Landers) and a chipmunk sing into the night sky, while the quaint *Striptease*, 1996, speaks volumes about the desperation of male wantonness.

Ironically, Landers' show, like the New York exhibition that preceded it, looked to the historically burdened medium of painting as a way beyond his "impoverished" postformal style—writing on yellow notepads, and so on—which first brought him notoriety. And, though the maudlin, stream-of-consciousness, diaristic entries that filled his earlier "paintings" gave way to art-historical allegory, familiar figures from Landers' earlier work, including a pair of memorably ridiculous, disembodied breasts and the artistic/autistic chimpanzee running amok in the artist's studio (a stand-in for Landers), reappear here. In the painting *A Midnight Modern Conversation (Ignoring Hallucinations)*, 1996, a gentleman under the influence witnesses the faces of his drinking partners turn into women's breasts, while the chimp shows up as a drinking companion in *A Midnight*

Modern Conversation (Double Take), 1996. A bit of 18th-century (proto-)surrealism anyone?

Viewing a video, *Wassail, Wassail*, 1996—in which Landers appears as a seaman, handsomely outfitted in 18th-century garb, humming period tunes—in tandem with a pair of clay guy & gal chimp sculptures (also dressed in period costume and engaged in a courtship ritual), you get an idea of the absurdist excesses to which Landers takes his use of allegory. Yet this ridiculous (albeit clever) excess was tempered by a measure of genuine poignancy: the three last paintings in the cycle gave us the waning, desperate moments of the protagonist's existence. First, pictured guzzling a brew, *Guzzler*, 1996; then, on his knees proposing to a lady, *The Proposal*, 1996; in *Drowning*, 1996, he ultimately disappears into the ocean's moonlit bluish froth. Perhaps, in the future, Landers will resuscitate his pathetically tragic hero, so that he might imbibe and lose at love all over again.

—Joshua Decter