



## Sean Landers

Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York

Oddly enough, I hear the words of Shakespeare ringing in my ears: 'Or sell eternity to get a toy'. This is precisely what Sean Landers has done; has had to do. The 32 year old 'impresario of Slacker art' (which roughly means someone Jason Rhoades can look up to), this 'manboy-maker', this 'lost genius of the lost generation', has grown up right before our eyes; grown into asking the biggest questions of all: 'what's it all about – where did we come from?' (I hear the rising strains of the *Girl, You'll Be a Woman Soon* cover by Urge Overkill). Before this exhibition, Sean seemed endlessly fascinated with his own marginal presence in the here and now but, as though his brain were a wobbly toggle switch, his mind just flipped over. Sean has decided to toy around with the big picture. He's become really curious about the really huge questions like, for example, eternity...

It has always been practical for me to think of Sean as Beavis doing Chaplin's Tramp; a look that is very 'TRAGIC-comic'. Sean lends his look substance by self-consciously preserving an aspect of Chaplin's modern hero, having recalibrated the heroic to what it would mean to

someone like Butt-Head. But the usefulness of this handy touchstone has lost contact with where Sean's inner self is. In order to ponder the epic questions, Sean has re-positioned himself as he imagines God to be. It does not matter where God is, how he occupies Himself, or even if there is a God – what matters is what Sean imagines Him thinking about day in, day out. In order to wrap his mind around the really big questions, like God does, Sean simulated the scenario by renting a chimp: 'God is to Sean as Sean is to the Chimp'. I admire that. It makes me recall a passage from the off-brand, offbeat Gnostic Gospels (which seem better suited to Sean than the more peremptory King James version). 'When the ruler saw his magnitude – and it was only himself that he saw: he saw nothing else, except water and darkness – then he supposed that it was he alone who existed... Next, the ruler had a thought – consistent with his nature – and by means of verbal expression he created an androgyny. He opened his mouth and cooed to him. When his eyes had been opened he looked at his father and, he said to him, "Eee!" "Eee!", the chimp screeches to Sean before bouncing off the studio wall. As Sean plays in God's world, so the chimp plays in Sean's studio, a world of creativity shared by man and beast, mirroring

the universe shared by God and us. Sean has recreated the 'divine/mere mortal' relationship in his studio bell-jar; a weird kind of Slacker Jurassic Park.

The principle of diminishing returns has kept me from doing more than skimming Sean's Blakean chatter-scrrawl, but, in the canvas he has dotted with chimp portraits, I happened to uncover one fragment in which he described his aspirations for a man-ape aesthetic coterie. His longing was to see his own unmediated expression through words, and the chimp's untempered declaration of expressive line synthesised forever as fine art. And it so happens that amalgamation materialises in this particular canvas. Sean did all the writing and drew the pictures of the monkey, while the Twombly-like passages are undoubtedly from the chimp's hand. With a deft economy of means, the collaboration works to frame the really big questions that Sean yearns to contemplate. If it is true that the monkey is Sean's looking glass, allowing him to see through to his origins, it is equally – if oppositely – true that Sean embodies the monkey's Darwinian prospects. This reciprocal mirroring nests a simultaneous meditation on origin and eternity.

As God had a plan for humankind's time on his earth, so too did

Sean have a plan for the chimp's rented time in his studio. Sean wanted the monkey to help him enact reciprocal reflection, and use it to pry the top off those big questions about origins and eternity. But further bits of Sean's diaristic rambling tell us how his plan was doomed. The chimp, it seems, spent all his time playing on the skateboard, the ladder and Sean's sofa, and only a few obligatory moments telegraphing declarations of expressive line across the prepared canvas. He spent no time at all doing what Sean had intended, because, as we can see in an accompanying video, the chimp's appetite ran toward things like gliding on his skateboard to Henry Mancini's version of *Moon River*. The Gnostic Gospels are helpful once again: Eve 'gazed at the tree and saw that it was beautiful and appetising and liked it... From that day the authorities knew that truly there was something mightier than they: they recognised only that their commandments had not been kept. Great jealousy was brought into the world solely because of the immortal man'. Plainly said, the monkey wasn't in it for the collaboration and to the extent that the little fellow failed to respect Sean's plans, 'Sean as God' concluded that things had gone wrong. There is no vengeful fable like Noah and the Ark that follows this, but there is something else that's even better. The ironic drama of one particular moment is irresistible: the monkey's instinctual will produced a total eclipse of Sean's bright plans and, as the atmosphere darkened and jealousy rose in the air, the monkey sat maddeningly oblivious, gaily applauding himself for having made those grand scribble drawings!

What makes this exhibition potent and engaging is that Landers has managed to concoct an awfully intriguing and terribly revealing version of Claude Levi Strauss' famous *Focusing Instrument*. Turned on himself, on his inner-self, he appears cooked to the core. The chimp, on the other hand, dances within the instrument's lens so freely self-involved that he would make any artist, or any slacker, or any one of us mortals, spasm with jealousy. Reality bites, and being God is a bitch. Cool.

Ronald Jones

Sean Landers  
*Singerie: Le Peintre*  
1995  
Colour videotape  
with sound