

SEAN LANDERS

THERAPY?

JEN BUDNEY



FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: SONGS OF LOVE AND HATE (VIDEO STILL), 1993. VIDEOTAPE, 30 MINUTES COLOR, EDITION OF 10. COURTESY ANDREA ROSEN, NEW YORK; MCGINTY AND HIS MAGIC FLYING PIG, 1993. EDITION OF 1 IN TERRACOTTA & GREEN GLAZE AND 1 IN BRONZE, 18 1/8 X 16 X 8 3/4".

JB: *Recently the media has pegged you as a Generation X "slacker" artist, alongside Art Club 2000, Rita Ackerman, and others. I recall that in your book [sic] you said you wanted to be the Douglas Coupland of the art world.*

SL: I think I said that, but then made fun of myself for saying such a stupid thing. I don't think Douglas Coupland is a very good writer at all — he sucks — but he got to be a big figure in the literary world and I was jealous of people in my generation who were prominent in the literary world. I said things like, "Well if you really want someone to talk about this generation, don't use a jackass like him — use me." But I was also fantasizing about winning Pulitzer Prizes and all kinds of embarrassing things.

JB: *In the British pop magazine The Face Rita was quoted as saying that slacker art's inward focus was an expression of her peers' powerlessness. The writer of this article assumed that you would agree if you could only take a minute out from contemplating your own navel. Is this true?*

SL: I don't feel powerless. And I don't feel like my life is pointless. I don't feel like my artwork is pointless. Maybe because I'm getting old now or something — I just turned 32. My writing is so banal it certainly does typify the Generation X stereotype, but I never do that on purpose. I just write about what I'm thinking about at the time. I try to portray what minute-to-minute living is. Like what you're thinking about when you're driving in a car for a long period of time. What we all normally spend our whole day with are utterly banal thoughts.

JB: *At a certain point in the book your writing took the form of a novel.*

SL: Yeah, that surprised me, and made me very happy in the end. I was writing about not being able to write a book, that nothing ever happens to me at all, and then something really happened to me — and what happened really sucked.

JB: *Writing about all these personal problems and making them public must influence your personal life.*

SL: That's one of the main problems with my artwork. My art [sic] got too close to my own life and fucked me over. The morality of it all came into play — like, do I influence my relationships in order to make my art better? It got so screwed up. So for one, I'm now trying to stay away from love as a topic. But it's the most compelling thing for people to read and for me to write about, so it's hard. What else is there, really? Deep down, feelings about sex and love are what compels my art-making. Nothing more, nothing intellectual per se; all that seems to be afterthought. I could have edited my work, but at the time of my last show at Andrea Rosen I decided to leave it all in. At that point it seemed like everything in my life had fallen apart and I didn't have anything to lose. I just said "Fuck it, nobody loves me, I might as well make it art." Because art never fails for me but relationships do.

JB: *And as a result [sic] also remained more pure to the conceptual formalist trope that was your initial inspiration.*

SL: Which I kept declaring throughout the



I CAN'T THINK, 1994. OIL ON CANVAS, 55 X 83". COURTESY REGEN PROJECTS, LOS ANGELES. PHOTO JOSHUA WHITE.

whole thing: This isn't fiction, it's real, I'm real. That book is going to be published, by the way, by a real publisher, and will be sold in real book stores... I'm going to change the names, though.

JB: *Do you read a lot of fiction?*

SL: I only read fiction. Or true accounts of people surviving on rafts at sea.

JB: *Like Kon-Tiki?*

SL: I'm actually reading *Kon-Tiki* right now. I'm interested in the way the mind works in solitude, and when writing in a diary becomes a method of keeping one's sanity.

JB: *You've mentioned before that your art is therapy.*

SL: I think it's therapeutic. I learned to write when I was going through puberty and couldn't deal with love. Instead of hanging myself in the closet, I wrote.

JB: *I thought it was strange that throughout your book you complained about self-help organizations, like the 12-step programs, and yet your book was a confessional, which is the basis of any 12-step.*

SL: Is it really? I guess the way I looked at it was by presuming that what's true for me is potentially true for everyone. So by exposing these things about myself there's a possibility

of touching someone in the same way, say, as a portrait painting could. You can see a two-hundred year old portrait in a museum, and when you look at the face you recognize something familiar, something that reminds you of people today. You can relate to the painting on a very human level.

You could look at the painting's style, the way the marks are made, and say that's the content of the painting, or you can think about the feelings you have when you look at the painting and understand that to be the art's content. What I was doing, when I first started writing as art, was trying to get to that latter form of standing in front of the painting and having a feeling about humanity.

I started off writing fiction, constructing incidents that I thought would portray those feelings. Then it seemed a challenge to go further and further towards truth, and so I followed it. And that's how I turned into the monster that I am now! I don't know if it's good. People have accused me of being immoral for that. Or narcissistic. And I am narcissistic, but I'm not taking an easy way out. The art I make is not easy to deal with. I freak out before shows — I can't believe I've written things or done things on video and actually show them.

JB: *[sic] reminded me vaguely of Somerset Maugham's Of Human Bondage. It's about*

this struggling young artist who falls in love with a waitress who wants nothing to do with him for the longest time. When she finally does return his interest, he reacts in hostility, and becomes abusive. His lack of understanding of his own desires seemed similar to yours.

SL: That's like Knut Hamsun's novel *Hunger*, which is one of my favorites. He was a writer living in what is now Oslo, not making it, starving, and going crazy. Hamsun and Dostoevsky, with *Crime and Punishment*, were the first writers to really take that on as a style — getting into the anti-hero's head. I think the anti-hero and the internal workings of the mind are very appealing. *Moby Dick*, because of Melville's detailing of the minutiae of day-to-day living, is also an influence. I thought that *[sic]* was like a combination of these three books: Hamsun's portrait of the young artist as a moron, with the guilt of *Crime and Punishment*, and the day-to-day banality of *Moby Dick*. Always waiting for something to happen, like *Waiting for Godot*, and nothing ever does.

JB: *You talk about very few artists in your book. You mentioned that you didn't want to be the John Cage of writing.*

SL: Because that was a possibility, and he's boring!

JB: ...and you talked about how much you like the work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres. He takes such a different stance from you because he deliberately engages the political. He places himself into a social and political context in everything he does.

SL: I think it may read that way, but, well, I can't speak for him or his work, yet I don't think that anything political is the strongest component of his work. I think that Felix is a very aesthetic artist, and extraordinarily genuine, and he reveals himself in his artwork, which means he's a good artist.

JB: And then you mentioned Barbara Kruger as someone who is a hypocrite.

SL: She is. I think that making "I shop therefore I am" bags and selling them in every museum store across Europe, where I've seen them, means that she is exactly who she hates in her artwork. I don't like people who tell us that we're wrong.

JB: But she's done so much to locate the relationships between representation and power. Have you seen her work too much? Is it just that?

SL: Perhaps. She was obviously more relevant in the eighties than she is now. But any artist whose main component is political is an artist I will never be interested in. I like politics as a subject, but I don't like it when art is involved in politics. Art is something else.

JB: Do you think of yourself as an entertainer?

SL: Yes. I don't want to have shows where people get really bored. An artist's role is very similar to an entertainer's role today. It's not like we're performing the role of Mexican mural painters, trying to demonstrate political ideas to illiterate masses, although some people would say, "Yes we are." Art is a total luxury.

JB: So as an entertainer, do you worry that people will get sick of your shtick?

SL: And that my "Happy Days" sitcom will have to come to an end?

JB: Or that the persona of Sean Landers, the narcissistic, self-deprecating, insulting character, will in itself limit any further interpretation of your work...

SL: Like how Bob Denver never got another role. Was his name Bob Denver, or is that the singer? See? I don't know. Am I afraid of becoming Gilligan? Probably, yeah. But I don't think I'm limited to just one shtick. I think that my work changes a lot from show to show, just like my life changes. You know, some people tell me that I could make a lot more of a certain type of painting, that they're practically guaranteed sold, but I don't want to. I would get bored. But what can I do? If it happens I'll be really bummed out.



GROOVIN' CORDUROY MIND-SNOT, 7092 (DETAIL), 1994. OIL ON CANVAS, 84 x 120".

Jen Budney is a critic and regular contributor to *Flash Art*, she lives and works in New York.

Sean Landers was born in 1962 in Palmer, Massachusetts. He lives and works in New York.

Selected solo shows: 1989: Tom Solomon's Garage, Los Angeles; 1990: Postmasters, New York; 1991: Robbin Lockett, Chicago; Marc Jancou, Zurich; 1992: Andrea Rosen, New York; 1993: Jennifer Flay, Paris; Esther Schipper, Cologne; Andrea Rosen, New York; 1994: Jay Jopling/White Cube, London; Stuart Regen, Los Angeles.

Selected group exhibitions: 1986: "Mutual Respect," Vanguard, Philadelphia; 1988: "Sculpture," White Columns, New York; 1989: "Outer Limits," Holly Solomon, New York; American Fine Arts, New York; 1990: Benefit exhibition, The New Museum, New York; "Total Metal," Simon Watson, New York; "Work in Progress? Work?," Andrea Rosen, New York; 1991: N.A.M.E., Chicago; "5 Days," Tom Solomon's Garage,

Los Angeles; "Gulliver's Travels," Sophia Ungers, Cologne; "Letters," Christine Burgin, New York; "Pleasure," Hallwalls, Buffalo, New York; "Ornament: Hum All Ye Faithful," John Post Lee, New York; 1992: Stuart Regen, Los Angeles; "Paradise Europe," Copenhagen (traveled); "I, Myself, Others," Magasin, Grenoble; "New Deal," Bruno Brunnet, Berlin; "Under Thirty," Metropoli, Vienna; "The Anti-Masculine," Kim Light, Los Angeles; 1993: "Confessional," Liz Koury, New York; "Sean Landers, Raymond Pettibon, Richard Prince," Jurgen Becker, Hamburg; Aperto, Venice Biennale; "Word of Mouth," Friesenwal 120, Cologne; "Backstage," Kunstverein, Hamburg; 1994: "Backstage," Kunstmuseum, Lucerne; "Don't Postpone Joy or Collecting Can Be Fun!," Neue Galerie, Graz; "Sammlung Volkmann," Kasper König, Berlin; "Die Orte der Kunst," Sprengel Museum, Hannover; "Arte in Video: 22 inches," Internos/Le Case d'Arte, Milan; "Exposition," Jennifer Flay, Paris.