

UNTITLED

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SEAN LANDERS

ANDREA ROSEN GALLERY, NEW YORK

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Reviewed by Michael Wilson

'Who will this century's Picasso be? Ladies and gentlemen, it is I! I am who you are looking for! I, Sean Landers, am the most significant artist of my time!' You've got to admire this guy's chutzpah, if nothing else. *Dear Picasso* (all works 2001), is the prototypical slacker's latest manifesto, piped continuously through Andrea Rosen's cavernous Chelsea gallery to the swelling accompaniment of Samuel Barber's *Adagio for Strings*. 'I have infinity, I have resolve, I have genius!', he crows, with such insistence that we find ourselves wondering if his bloated self-assessment might contain at least a grain of truth. Landers' impact on the way art has been made and looked over the past decade or so has, after all, been considerable. From his scrappy stream-of-consciousness text drawings of the early 90s (arguably responsible for the spread of lo-fi as the ultimate fin de siècle stylistic trope), through the publication of his hand-written confessional [sic.] to a series of costumed chimps cast in bronze, Landers' output has established him as a contemporary anti-hero, both mawkishly self-deprecating and smartly ironic. The roster of young Brits indebted to him is headed by Peter Davies, and seems to include every other significant player of the past decade; Bob and Roberta Smith, Angus Fairhurst; your name 'em, they owe him.

Landers' allusion to Picasso is no one-liner but rather a sustained theme; one which will be familiar to some from his last solo show in London at greengrassi, a year ago. Landers cites the series of fifty-eight canvasses based on Velazquez's *Las Meninas* which the Spaniard executed in 1567 as his specific inspiration: 'Picasso did this because he believed that he belonged in the company of one of the major art historical figures of all time. Forty-four years later I have made a new series of paintings based on several of Picasso's paintings because I'm determined to be in his company.' So, in each of the half-dozen large-scale works on display here, the New Yorker has mixed'n'matched elements of Picasso's work with inventions of his own.

The exhibition's epic (or mock-epic) centrepiece is *War and Peace*. Here, Landers cannibalises his exemplar's *Guernica*, *La Guerre*, *La Paix* and *La Joie de Vivre*, blending them with a tangled clutter of animal imagery culled from related sculptures and drawings. The sweet, cartoonish colours recall his own stripe painting *I Can't Think* (1994), made at a point of mental exhaustion, and relate to his computer-assisted design work for commercial magazines. (Rosen's press release also throws in a modish, if tenuous, allusion to late Picabia.) Landers appears absolutely genuine in his admiration for the way in which Picasso's vision has effectively entered the public domain - *War and Peace* is thus less critique and not quite homage, more frank admission of professional jealousy. Asked by Adrian Dannatt for his definition of 'genius' ('This is a question I

could go on about over a beer, maybe four beers'), Landers narrows it down to supreme self-confidence. That this is the very trait which he has been at pains to dissect throughout his career is what gives this current obsession, thoroughly embarrassing as it might appear on paper, a certain terrible logic.

In *Sean* and *Genius*, Landers has reworked motifs from, respectively, *Femme au bouquet* and *Femme au buffet* to spell out the titles within the compositions - a pseudo-subliminal riff on an earlier painting in which the artist's signature is half-buried in a doodly abstract (*Sean*, 2000). Again, both canvasses have the jaunty feel of animation cells from a Ren and Stimpy - in short - so grotesquely flat and bright and weightless that any claim to creative struggle made on their behalf would never quite ring true. They are rather diagrams of someone else's struggle, made with affection but at a distance of miles and generations.

The title of *On the Wall Above* alludes to the workings of posterity; the painting on the wall in the picture is the one on which Picasso was working immediately before his death. The figure itself is a fusion of two earlier portraits of women looking into blackened mirrors, symbols of the finite nature of existence. The letter which the figure holds reproduces an extract from *Dear Picasso*, and the yellow sheet on which it is written recalls the works on paper with which Landers first made his name. In this painting, Landers' influence anxiety is brought full circle, and his invitation to join him in 'laughing through tears' is at last, hilariously and tragically, irresistible. 34

