Manly Satire's Varied Graces

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> If fond of knowledge
> Seek it in town, and quit the ruddy college.
> Here, the soft sex, here, the enlivening bottle,
> Will teach you more than can old Aristotle.
> — Anon., 'The Rake of Taste', c. 1735[1]

In 1996 Sean Landers was ten years out of college, Yale University School of Art to be precise, where he had completed his MFA. On a return visit to his alma mater he became fascinated by a painting that hung in the Yale Center for British Art, William Hogarth's *A Midnight Modern Conversation*, ca. 1732. This is a rambunctious indoor scene in which a late-night gathering of eighteenth-century London worthies — lawyers, merchants, clergymen and physicians — has degenerated into a rowdy debauch fuelled by copious amounts of alcohol. In other words, a classic Hogarthian scenario of debilitating indulgence and excess. Meanwhile, back in town — late twentieth-century Manhattan in this case — Landers was also engaged, by his own account, in the nightly pursuit of the "enlivening bottle," not to mention the "soft sex." He was enjoying the fruits of early success and a degree of welcome notoriety as registered by a string of one-person shows throughout the early '90s in galleries in New York, Chicago, London, Paris, Cologne, Berlin and Zürich. Invited to mount a solo exhibition at Regen Projects in Los Angeles, he embarked on a series of works inspired by Hogarth's painting. All thirteen of these paintings have been reassembled here, for the first time since their initial outing, accompanied by a suite of related drawings.

That Landers should be attracted to the work of Hogarth at this time is hardly surprising. Hogarth was once described by William Hazlitt as a man "carried away by a passion for the ridiculous," an artist not content to show folly or vice "in its incipient, or dormant, or *grub* state; but full grown, with wings, pampered into all sorts of affectation, airy, ostentatious and extravagant."[2] Hazlitt might as well have been describing Landers, whose work to date had included a freewheeling, semi-autobiographical screenplay, jotted down on reams of yellow legal pad,

featuring the artist's hapless alter ego, Chris Hamson; a selection of free-standing sculptures covered with plastic bags, as if abashed by their own ineptitude; a collection of cartoons lampooning the self-regarding fractiousness of the downtown art world; a video of a chimpanzee let loose in the artist's studio; a troupe of grotesque leprechauns in green-glazed terracotta; a steady stream of billboard-sized canvases covered in handwritten narratives of tortured or ecstatic self-revelation; a no-holds-barred, published memoir in a similar vein; and a series of videos featuring the artist's solo performance of various actions ranging from madcap dancing through artful onanism to painful self-flagellation. Despite the deployment of such surrogates as the Hamson alter ego as well as those iconic figures of low-comic high-jinks, the leprechaun, the clown and the chimp (as in the 1994 painting *I'm a Clown in a World of Chimps*), the threads that drew this disparate body of work together were the logorrhoeic confessionalism of the artist's voice and the exhibitionistic display of the artist's body, which is to say the manically orchestrated performance of a more or less consistent persona.

Whereas the modern-day 'Sean Landers' seemed constitutionally incapable of staying in the wings, William Hogarth, two centuries earlier, preferred to liken his role as an artist to that of a playwright-cum-theatre director: "My picture was my stage and men and women my players, who by means of certain actions and gestures, are to exhibit a *dumb shew*."[3] Here, evidently, was something Landers could use. For an artist of such voracious, not to say catholic tastes, it must have seemed irresistible. This is not to suggest that he was about to abandon the autobiographic underpinnings of the earlier work. Far from it, as his subsequent account of the "Hogarth paintings" makes clear. He describes these works as constituting "an incredibly juvenile rendition of the story of growing up," of "outgrowing the drinking based camaraderie/culture on which my friends and I had subsisted for so long . . . [where] we kept each other company as we waited to be 'discovered' and, ultimately, of "finding my future wife and deciding to get married." As he puts it, "I was telling a story from my life through painting and using art history to do it."[4] This is fair enough, as far as it goes. What remains unaccounted for is the manner in which this narrative — the archetypal rite of passage in which the single male is disassociated from the delinquent, but nonetheless licensed *Männerbünde* and incorporated into the ordered domain of married life — is articulated, or indeed disarticulated, in the paintings themselves. First of all there is the question of the narrative arc they describe or, rather, the relative lack thereof. The suite as a whole comprises two distinct groupings: five landscape-format paintings clearly inspired by Hogarth's *A Midnight Modern*

Conversation, and somewhat larger than their exemplar (they are roughly 4 by 6 feet), and eight smaller canvases of varying dimensions, which reconstitute the *dramatis personae* and take the action outdoors, before spinning off in various directions. For a body of work derived from Hogarth, a painter most famous today for the relentlessly sequential morality tales that are *A Rake's Progress* and *A Harlot's Progress*, Landers' bifurcated suite comes up short on moralism and progress alike. Both groupings begin in disarray, insofar as they can be said to have a beginning at all, and end ambiguously.

In *Ignoring Hallucinations* a bald gent, whose wig is being mischievously lifted by one of his drinking buddies, seems bent on studiously ignoring the fact that both of his companions sport a fulsome breast where their face should be. *Double Take* presents a bleary-eyed carouser clutching a half-empty carafe of wine shadowed by a pipe-chuffing chimp in a red coat and tricorn hat, whereas in *An Altercation*, the same man has felled another drinker with the empty carafe to the amusement of onlookers. The soporific tedium that suffuses *Boredom* has apparently spread from the three men yawning in unison to the pint-sized chipmunk perched in the middle of their table. In *The Conclusion* a sleepy smoker puffs on his unlit pipe, oblivious to the fact that he is setting his sleeve alight with a badly aimed candle. One of his chums has crashed out over a nearby table while another is standing on a stool shouting, his arms flung crazily in the air. While the anthropomorphized chimp and the rogue hallucinatory breasts (with a Magrittean twist) are motifs that have migrated from earlier works by Landers, the rest of what we are presented with is relatively true, *mutatis mutandis*, to Hogarth's original tableau, from which specific images have been borrowed. Regardless of the largely unordered sequence of these pictures of disorder, we may take our cue from this last mentioned painting's title and conclude that the night's revels end with three erstwhile partners-in-crime sundered in pictorial space, isolated from each other and left to their own disparate moods and devices. Things have fallen apart in more ways than one.

The eight smaller paintings are quite different and follow their own frenetic course, which is at once more manifestly disjointed and oddly cohesive. Four of these, *Midnight Ride (to the Pub)*, *Guzzler*, *Dancing in the Woods* and *Drowning*, focus on a lone, uniformed Redcoat's alcohol-driven, nocturnal rise and fall. As the first of these titles clearly signals, here the Massachusetts-born Landers is having a sly dig at the macho heroics of the Revolutionary war, whose monuments and emblems colored his youth. Paul Revere's heroic ride, enshrined in American popular culture courtesy of Longfellow's famous poem, is reduced to a goblet-waving gallop to the local hostelry (and by a member of the

opposing forces to boot). A fifth painting, *Red Coats*, featuring four effectively indistinguishable soldiers, serves to undermine any individuality to which our putative anti-hero might aspire. The remaining three canvases are the most curious and crucial. In the male-dominated world of the larger indoor scenes the female figure is consistently relegated to the margins as background or backdrop. She is a caricature of the "painted lady," alternately metaphorical and literal, in the form of the buxom wench being bored by a drunk in *An Altercation* and the fearsome odalisque glimpsed in the painting hanging on a wall in *Double Take* and *Boredom*. In the suite of smaller pictures, however, she is shifted centre stage, however reluctantly. In *Striptease* the female figure, about to disrobe in front of a gaggle of undifferentiated, leering, white-wigged men, is pictured demurely from behind. As our gaze is not theirs she remains inscrutable. Likewise, in *Rendezvous* she is viewed from behind, naked this time, in the embrace of her fully clothed Redcoat lover. She towers over him as she kisses him on the cheek with apparent fondness. For his part, he clutches on for dear life and stares wide-eyed out at the viewer as if he can't believe his luck. Finally, in *The Proposal*, our smitten Redcoat begs on bended knee for his beloved's hand in marriage, as she inclines her head bashfully with as much grace as can be summoned by a figure who, it must be said, looks a little like Mae West after a visit to Marge Simpson's hairdresser. End of story. Or not, as the case may be.

It should be needless to state that the "Hogarth paintings" can no more contain the anarchic energies by which they are animated than any other body of work Sean Landers produced before or since. Yet they occupy a notable position in the self-consciously wayward development of his oeuvre. They came at a moment when he had decided for the first time, though not the last, to abandon the textual outpourings that had become his trademark. (Years later he recalled the dismay with which they were received in some quarters, though the available contemporary reviews read favorably in retrospect.[5] He also, however, remembers a distinct sense of liberation on completing these works and credits them with opening up a range of possibilities for non-text based work, including narrative painting, in the broadest sense, which he continues to explore today.) This happened to coincide, as he tells us, with his decision to change his life by proposing marriage. That William Hogarth, in his day, should be praised by a (male) contemporary for "thy manly satire's varied graces" may remind us that an available reading of Sean Landers' earlier work was as a perverse critique of the male ego.[6] That said, pre-1996 the consolations of masculinity's unearned privileges, though questioned, remained in place, and some kind of comfort zone was maintained. We are, of course, by no means bound to credit a

biographical reading of these, or any other sequence of images, especially one suggested by an artist whose life's work has involved the performative interfusion of life and work. Indeed the account of the "Hogarth paintings" just offered may indicate the folly of attempting to do so. Yet it would be difficult to deny that, taken as a whole, they tell a tale, however convoluted, of bewildered disengagement from a *modus vivendi* and *modus operandi* whose transient pleasures and dubious rewards had grown stale. It was time to move on.

NOTES

1. Quoted by Mark Hallett, "Manly Satire: William Hogarth's *A Rake's Progress*" in *The Other Hogarth: Aesthetics of Difference*, eds. Bernadette Fort and Angela Rosenthal (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2001), 144.
2. Quoted by Jenny Uglow, *Hogarth: A Life and a World* (London: Faber and Faber, 1997), x.
3. Quoted by Peter Wagner, "Spotting the Symptoms: Hogarthian Bodies as Sites of Semantic Ambiguity," in *The Other Hogarth: Aesthetics of Difference*, 103.
4. Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith and Beatrix Ruf, "Interview with Sean Landers," in *Sean Landers: Kunsthalle Zürich*, ed. Beatrix Ruf (Zürich: JRP|Ringier Kunstverlag AG, 2004) 44.
5. Joshua Decter, "Sean Landers: Regen Projects," *Artforum*, May 1996, 108. Lisa Anne Auerbach, "Lush Life: Sean Landers' Intoxicating Images," *Los Angeles Reader*, March 15, 1996, 17.
6. Hallett, 143.