

YOUNG AMERICANS

New American Art in the Saatchi Collection

Part I: 25th January – 3rd March 1996
Part II: 21st March – 12th May 1996

IRRATIONAL CONCEPTS

Nine Essays on American Artists in the Saatchi Collection

by Jeffrey Deitch

Sean Landers

Mindfill

"I try to portray what minute to minute living is. Like what you are thinking about when you are driving in a car for a long period of time. What we all normally spend our whole day with are utterly banal thoughts."

Sean Landers in an interview with Jen Budney, *Flash Art*, March–April 1995

After a successful New York debut in 1990 where he showed the kind of conceptual sculpture that might have been expected from a 1986 graduate of the Yale Art School, Landers returned to the same gallery ten months later to show what was really on his mind. Replicating the floorplan of his previous exhibition, he displayed a group of clay busts on makeshift pedestals, covered with plastic garbage bags. Tacked to the walls on yellow ruled legal paper were the rambling writings of Landers' surrogate, a troubled sculptor named Chris Hamsun. The subject was the daily obsessions of the ambitious, broke, sexually frustrated typical downtown artist. The "truth" about what it was really like to make and think about art hit a nerve in a young art community that had become accustomed to art that pushed aside the artists' personal anxieties in favour of conceptual strategy. Landers was immediately anointed as one of the prime artistic representatives of Generation X.

We generally associate the work of art with the concentrated insight, the special moment when profound thoughts converge. The most memorable works of art often have an iconic power, with simplified, concentrated imagery. Sean Landers' streams of semi-consciousness are just the opposite. Their structure and their content are flowing, rather than converging. They are dispersed rather than concentrated.

With the continuing strong influence of Pop and Minimalism on the contemporary visual vocabulary, one tends to forget that there is another kind of visual image that is just as compelling as the concentrated icon. These are repetitive images of infinite variation such as the burning of a bonfire or the rolling of waves onto a beach. One can sit for hours watching the sea, and its meditative image can remain as strongly embedded in one's mind as a simplified iconic form. I was not surprised to hear from Landers that his favourite reading is sea stories. His writing flows like the waves. Nor is it surprising that Landers is now actually painting seascapes with his words rolling into the surf.

It is ironic that Sean Landers, the diarist of minute-to-minute banality, would turn out to be the artist to revive the seascape. Those of us who have lived inside the universe of minimal and conceptual art for the past thirty years have tended to forget that a vast area of artistic expression: the seascape, the cloudscape and the lyrical impressionist-type landscape have been neglected by the artistic vanguard. Artists have generally been pursuing more "classical", tightly structured images during the past several decades and more romantic, flowing imagery has been out of favour. It is fascinating that Landers has arrived at the romantic seascape not through a painterly route, but through Conceptualism.

Conceptualism is associated with "classical" structures of thinking. The pioneering conceptualists were generally concerned with rigorous, rational thought. Their conceptual structures were elegant and logical. It was "front of the mind" thinking. The toughness and radicality of conceptual art overshadowed its more poetic and romantic side. Now that it is part of art history, and its radicality has been absorbed, we can appreciate the romanticism in the work of Lawrence Weiner, for example, and even understand it as a prelude of Landers' conceptual seascapes.

In the early 1970s, as art connected to the counterculture, Conceptualism began crossing over from the rational territory of the front of the mind, to the irrationality of the mind's recesses. Artists like Vito Acconci, Jonathan Borofsky and Laurie Anderson introduced a new pre-rational Conceptualism, pursuing dreams and obsessions. Art moved into a new frontier beyond focused thought to the nebulous mental states that proceed rationality. It had been assumed that conceptualism was the last stop on the reductivist path; that the "concept" was the essence of art. In fact, there is a vast sea

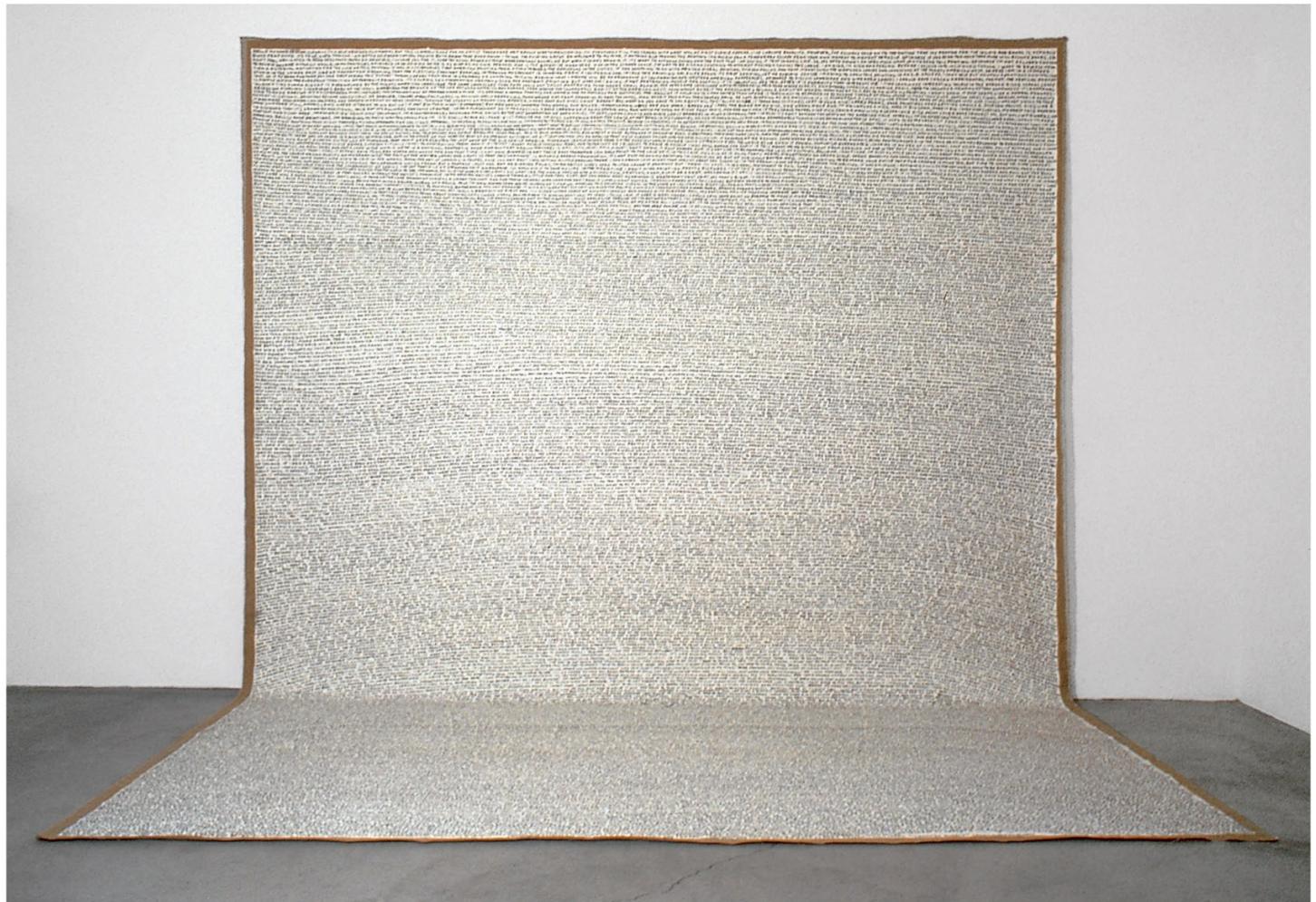
of pre-rational emotions, urges, instincts, and fantasies that fill our minds before structured thought emerges. It is in this swamp of irrationality that many of the most powerful artistic impulses are generated.

The irrational side of Conceptualism has been the foundation for much of the most innovative art of the past twenty-five years. But the past five years in particular have seen a revival and an extension of the more raw, irrational conceptualism of the early 1970s. Landers' work reminds me of Borofsky's counting piece, a column of composition paper which recorded the artist's writing of a continuous stream of consecutive numbers. Like Landers, Borofsky was interested in the flow of random images that fill the mind before the construction of cognitive thought. But where Borofsky was more interested in the startling dream or recurring haunting image, Landers is interested in the banal and unremarkable, the trivial conversations and reveries that fill daily life. When I picked up a copy of Landers' 454-page hand-written "novel", [sic], at first I thought of it as a kind of abstraction. It did not seem to be something that should be, or even could be read. It seemed like something to look at as a conceptual sculpture, like Borofsky's pile of counting. I did not imagine that I would find myself staying up late into the night reading and absorbing every page. The minutia of daily life may be unremarkable but it can be endlessly interesting. The reader becomes drawn into Landers' mind. After about fifty pages one has entered into his consciousness and feels as though one is inside his mind looking out rather than outside his mind looking in. The sense of irony that characterized a previous generation of neo-conceptualists is absent. One does not doubt for a minute that Landers is telling the "truth". A previous generation tended to give up on an artistic search for truth because the deeper one looked, all one seemed to find was the false. Landers is typical of a younger generation that is seeking and finding authenticity in the ordinary reality of their own lives and backgrounds.

Conceptual diarists like On Kawara and Hanne Darboven might seem to be the direct inspiration for Landers' artistic approach, but the aesthetic figures he most admires are actually not artists, but writers. The writers he esteems are not the expected slacker generation heroes, but pioneering modernists like Fyodor Dostoevsky and Herman Melville. Landers relates to Dostoevsky's ability to write from "inside the anti-hero's head", and Melville's "detailing of the minutia of day-to-day living." He reserves special empathy for Norwegian early twentieth-century novelist, Knut Hamsun, who "eventually died from his obsession with a woman." Landers so thoroughly identifies with Hamsun that he gave Hamsun's name to the main character in his first significant work, *Art, Life and God*.

"It is impossible to separate art and life," Landers told me. He has immersed himself in his own memories, obsessions and reveries as his aesthetic terrain. His scribbled thoughts are elements of a vast mental landscape that he has rolled out for us. Landers is structuring his art as a complement to the structuring of his self-identity. We simultaneously experience the artist and his art. Although Landers is constructing sculptural novels, it is not really fiction that he is writing. It is all the artist's real thoughts and it is all his real life. As Landers stated in his *Flash Art* interview with Jen Budney, "This isn't fiction, it's real. I'm real."

Landers' work may be real, but it is also abstract. His painting can be read word by word, or they can be read as abstract fields with words functioning as brush-strokes. The works never have to be read in their entirety to have their full impact. By extension, Landers' mindfill becomes an abstraction as well. His work is built on trivial rambling, but it builds itself into a profound statement about the human condition. He has become the contemporary existentialist, transforming his banal musings into a grand abstraction of being and nothingness.



Sean LANDERS
Thought Bubble
1994
oil on canvas
210 x 168ins/533.4 x 426.7cms

overleaf
Sean LANDERS
Self-Something
1994
oil on canvas
108 x 168ins/274.3 x 426.7cms

Sean LANDERS
Worry Wart

1995

oil on canvas

84 x 120ins/213 x 305cms



above
Sean LANDERS
Sept 04, 60°05'S. 100°58'E.
1995
oil on linen
50 x 82ins/127 x 208cms

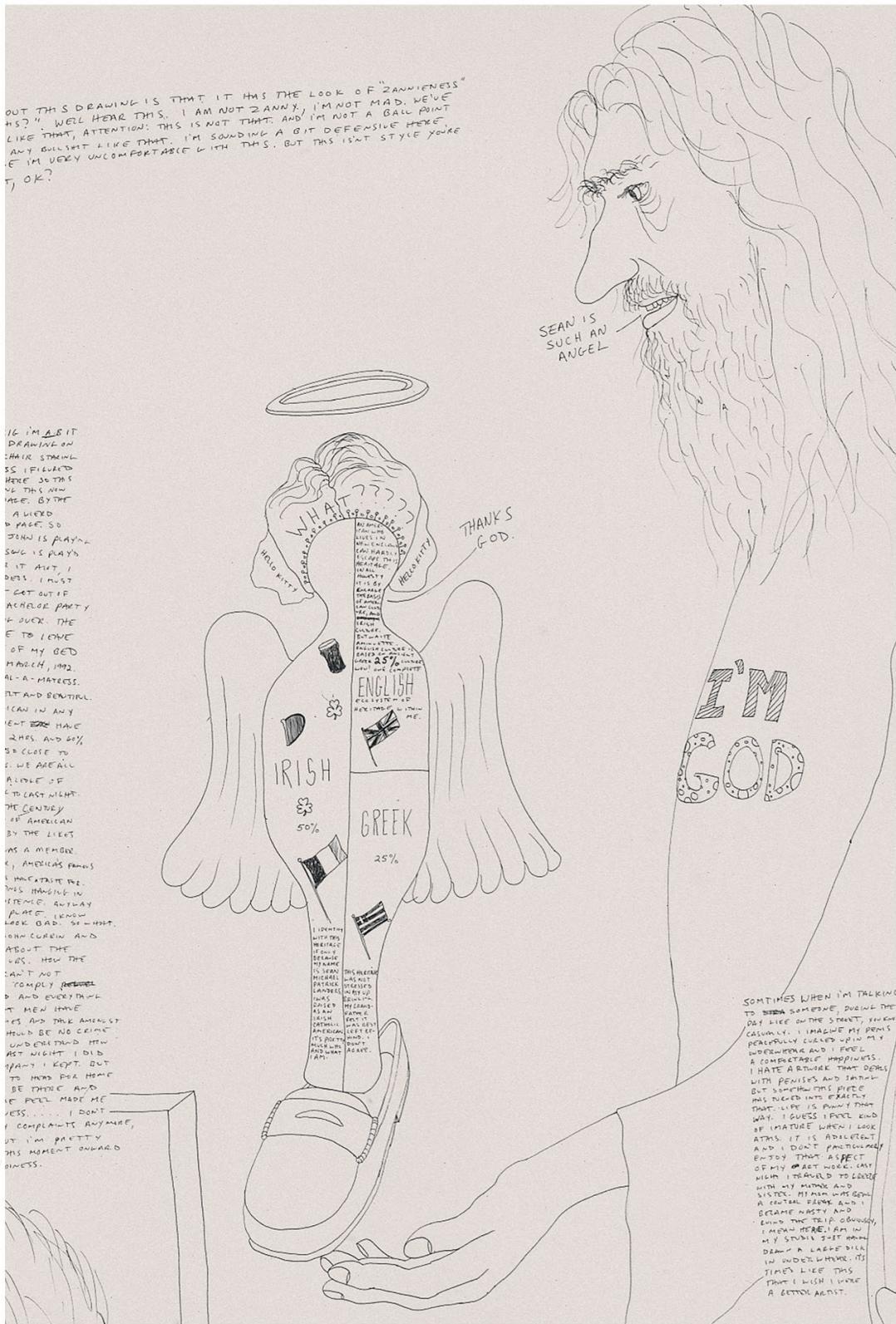


Sean LANDERS
Sept 05, 61°24'S. 101°39'E.
1995
oil on linen
50 x 82ins/127 x 208cms



Sean LANDERS
Sept 06, 62°09'S. 103°14'E.
1995
oil on linen
50 x 82ins/127 x 208cms

Sean LANDERS
For the Love of Nothing
1994
oil on canvas
8 x 168ins/274.3 x 426.7cms



Sean LANDERS
Anal Fetishes, Loafers, Lofts and God (detail)
1992

ink and enamelac on paper
80 x 130ins/203 x 330cms



Sean LANDERS
**Italian High Renaissance
and Baroque Sculpture**
1993
videotape, 45 minutes, colour



Sean LANDERS
Patrick and Mary Landers
1994
cast bronze
2 parts, each 16 x 7 x 10 ins/40.6 x 17.8 x 25.4 cms



Sean LANDERS
Singerie: Le Sculpteur
1995
bronze
36.3 x 44.5 x 24ins/92 x 113 x 61cms



Sean LANDERS
Naked In Nature

1992

58 c-prints

each photograph 8 x 10ins/20.3 x 25.4cms

overall dimensions approximately

65 x 172ins/165 x 437cms



Sean LANDERS
Naked In Nature (detail)
1992