



# MANHATTAN FILE

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# ME AND MY SHADOW

In case you haven't been formally introduced, **Sean Landers**—the 33-year-old artist, sculptor, writer, and navel-gazer—would like you to know a little about himself. In the following “auto-interview,” which took place in his NoHo loft, the author of the just-published memoir, *[sic]*, sits down with himself and answers the tough questions.

introduction by Walter Robinson  
photographs by Mark Mann

Sean Landers is always ready to take it all off, as long as he can tell you how embarrassed and stupid it makes him feel.

Readily posing naked in his own videos and photos like a classic Greek god (as interpreted by *Playgirl*), Landers is a stellar member of a group of sexy neo-conceptual artists gathered around the gallery of femme-fatale art dealer Andrea Rosen (notably including painters John Currin and Rita Ackerman, and photographers Wolfgang Tillmans and the not-so-young John Coplans).

The critics says Landers makes art about things such as authenticity, narcissism, self-doubt, and truth. We say he writes obsessively about his career and his love life. His autobiographical musings—tirelessly handwritten at exceptional length on sheet after sheet of yellow legal paper (and more recently on canvas)—are by turns fascinating, adolescent, self-indul-



gent, ridiculous, and sincere. In an art world that is fast going online, Landers remains resolutely unplugged. He first gained notice with goofy cartoons lampooning art-school slacker and with runty little clay sculptures that were so bad he hid them in plastic bags. Now he's published a memoir. It's a great adventure, about finding his roots (in Greece) and chasing a girl (or two). Landers wants to be a great writer, the voice of his generation. It just might happen. So listen up.

**Sean Landers: A question I've long had about myself is, How true am I to the "art persona" I project in my work?**

Sean Landers: It's impossible to answer the question simply because sincerity is always in flux. The truth can be swayed by as many and different things as the need to joke—or to be so delusional that truth is unobtainable. However, most of the time, the truth is a beacon I write toward. Little sways me from its path, even if time reveals that a particular

I'm a genius, I *am* truly the smartest person I've ever met.

**Q. That's a little crazy, you know.**

A. I don't care. Dementia in an artist is like spice in a food. Besides, who isn't just a little touched?

**Q. You get down on yourself a lot in your writing.**

A. I do because I genuinely feel that people think it's an act. It's not. I am that hard on myself.

**Q. What is your fascination with the banal?**

A. Banality is the most readily available material. It accompanies us in our minds 99.9 percent of every waking moment until that glorious .01 percent of brilliance graces us.

Meanwhile, we're deciding between cedar pencils and composite ones, or getting pissed about being snubbed by an occasional acquaintance on Broadway. This is the real moment-to-moment stuff of life. But



truth happened to be very ephemeral.

**Q. Another, but more trite question, would be, are you really a slacker?**

A. I am not a slacker, nor am I a stereotypical Generation X-er who feels powerless in society. Unlike whiny contemporaries, I have never felt second-fiddle to baby boomers. In fact, I don't see people as parts of groups or generations.

Concerning slacker-dom, I work way too hard, earn far too much money, and am no less ambitious than Tiberius. While I'm disclaiming, I'd also like to add that I am no soft male—although I prefer my girlfriend to be on top.

**Q. What of your most common criticisms are true then?**

A. Many. For instance, I am solicitous within the world of my art work, but that's because it *is* my world. What artist isn't the center of their self-created universe? Artists are artists often precisely because they need this insular world in which they reign as God. Any artists not obsessed with themselves in their own worlds are, ten-to-one, bad artists. The bottom line is that if you don't believe that you are the oyster with the pearl inside, who the hell else will?

**Q. Do you think you are dumb?**

A. Yes, at times I do think I am quite dumb, but dumb is what you make of it.

**Q. Other times, though, you think—or at least you write—that you are a genius.**

A. That's because I am. In the moments I write because I'm convinced that

our memories mostly consist of somewhat unusual events, so they're "memorable."

What if one guy goes through life documenting his banal thoughts? It's still the stuff a life is made of. Just look at art history. Painters used to paint Jesus; the client was the church. As you walk through the museum by scores of early Italian portraits of Madonna and Child, you then happen into a Brueghel and what do you see? A crowd scene of people doing everyday stuff, nothing special for them then, but for us, centuries later, it's, Wow—look, they're collecting kindling to boil their gruel!

Two centuries from now, are they going to want to read half-baked philosophic mumbo-jumbo, or are they going to want to read about what real life was actually like 200 years ago? I've got about sixty more years to live, barring tragedy, and nothing would send me off more satisfied into the folds of eternity than crafting that one book, painting, or sculpture that would continually be read or viewed or thought of.

**Q. What you're saying is that you make art for the oldest, most stereotypical reason of all.**

A. Damn straight!

**Q. So you think your "low-brow" ramblings are going to buy you immortality?**

A. I actually do. What you call "low-brow," I call the lowest common denominator; the lower you go, the more simple truths there are to collect. Having a dingleberry plaguing you throughout a formal evening is hardly



profound, but how better to directly relate to individuals in A.D. 2195? Or do you think that humanity will evolve beyond ass hair by then? I've got news for you: we as a species have ceased to evolve. Toenail fungus may be curable then, though.

**Q. So you are practicing the intellectual equivalent of slumming because you believe that has "timelessness" potential.**

A. It was never a plan or strategy against time; I simply recognized what I was doing while I was doing it. I noticed what I liked in literature and paintings. I found myself lingering in front of Brueghel paintings and feeling true happiness there. His work made me feel the all-important feeling of, I'm on earth, too, or, My ankles get cold when snow falls inside my socks in deep snow, or, It's tragic how I need to get drunk. Brueghel is about all that and more. That's what I value in life. That's what I want to do with mine.

know anything about chimps—means he's equal in brain power to a human of the same age.

**Q. No!**

A. True, a chimp is no dummy.

**Q. What about the colonial American period interests you?**

A. It's the reverse of projecting myself forward in time and writing to the future inhabitants of Earth. I project myself backwards 200 years, and simply drink ale in a pub with some bad-mannered fellows. If the scenario interests me enough to build a body of work upon it, that's enough for me. When I'm painting a colonial pub scene, I am simply in pursuit of the pure joy and bliss of being an artist alive and well in his own world.

**Q. I must say that was a great answer.**

A. Thank you; it was the truth.

**Q. Does the same go for your sea paintings?**



From left: "Singerie: Le Sculpteur," 1995; a video still from "Remissionem Peccatorum," 1994; "Self-Something," 1994; the artist as the apple of his eye.

**Q. Name some sculptures.**

A. Picasso's Volkswagen-Monkey head guy, that one's at the MoMA. Medardo Rosso's drunk on a light post. Max Ernst's "Imbecile." And de Kooning's "Clam Digger."

**Q. Name an author.**

A. Knut Hamsun. He woke me up—the first author to reach across time and touch me. Reading all of his books literally taught me to write. Dostoyevski's *Crime and Punishment*. Melville's *Moby Dick* is more than a book. Poe is good too.

**Q. You have a book out; it came out in late November.**

A. Yes, it is called *[sic]*, first published in a limited edition. Then by Riverhead Books.

**Q. How's that going?**

A. I don't know. I walk around to bookstores and watch people pick it up. Since I'm sort of naked on the cover, typically straight-looking men don't often look at it. Anyone else who picks it up soon realizes it's handwritten and unedited and puts it back on the shelf. It's a good book, but only if you read it. Either way, what a thrill it is to see one's own book in a bookstore window.

**Q. What is your fascination with chimpanzees all about?**

A. They are an impish version of the "lowest common denominator" I mentioned before. But most of all, I just really like them.

**Q. You hired a chimp for your last show didn't you?**

A. Indeed, I did. His name is Murray, and he's 3 years old which—if you

A. Pretty much, although that was about projecting myself to desolate regions of the ocean so that the imagined feelings of isolation would force beautiful writing out of me.

**Q. Did it?**

A. Yes. It also forced me to be free of other characters in my writing, which was a relief because I had inadvertently hurt so many people with my book. The sea paintings were about wanting to write about life on Earth purely, free of the infinite amount of diversions other humans present us.

**Q. Finally, in much of your writing and painting you reveal an obsession with women's breasts. Perhaps you can top off today's discussion with a soliloquy on the subject.**

A. Gosh, that really puts me on the spot. Well...

*Twixt thumb and forefinger is the tender pea neath of which courses the blood of life it's self. The Godly mound of beauty with it's pinkend crooked eye. Always procuring the idiot so readily available within me in her glorious presence. Blessed be my divine beauties I loveth all ye with the dearest of hearts. Nare a day passeth that I don't prayeth to God on high to bid you one and all alike, God speed. No angel hath ever seen such beauty in heaven but yea here on this insufferable planet mine weary eyes do feast! Praise be, praise be to God.*

(Best if read with Middle English accent out loud and with all the inflection you can muster.) □