

frieze



About this review

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Sean Landers, *Joke? Joke! Joke.*, 2015, oil on linen 1.4 × 1.8 m. Courtesy Rodolphe Janssen, Brussels

Three Painting Shows in Brussels

Rodolphe Janssen / Albert Baronian / Hopstreet Gallery, Brussels, Belgium

‘Have you been half asleep? And have you heard voices? I’ve heard them calling my name; is this the sweet sound that called the young sailors? The voice might be one and the same.’ This oneiric quote is carved into the trunk of a pale aspen in *Afterglow* (2015), one of Sean Landers’s three nocturnal paintings of trees etched with quotes, song lyrics and jokes at Rodolphe Janssen. The inscriptions suggest that existential struggles are, if not universal, at least shared by this artist and his eminent sources. Other quotes come from canonical poets Robert Frost and Anne Sexton, but any sense of grandiose literary references is punctured by the realization that the verse quoted above is from Kermit the Frog. Landers’s exhibition is one of several concurrent painting shows in Brussels, capital of a region with a centuries-old painting tradition that still provides artists with inspiration and is sustained by the medium’s popularity with a healthy cohort of Belgian collectors.

An adjacent room at Rodolphe Janssen displays six paintings of wild animals whose coats bear distinctive tartan patterns rendered in Landers’s tiny brushstrokes. Most of the noble animals – including elk, musk ox and caribou – are indigenous to North America, painted life size in their natural habitats. The works could reference current debates around climate change, were it not for Landers mapping the human organizing principle of clan markings onto the animals’ fur. The press release explains that these plaid creatures are Landers’s tribute to Belgian surrealist René Magritte’s ‘Période Vache’ (1948), a series of around 30 ‘bad’ paintings, in which Magritte swapped the wry refinement of his earlier work for a grotesque caricature of his own style. (Meant as a challenge to the genteel dominance of the Parisian art market, the project turned out to be a commercial and critical flop.) But I couldn’t help but wonder about the extent to which Landers’s pleasing pictures of animals set in chocolate-box sublime landscapes actually honour Magritte’s ‘Vache’ works. Wouldn’t it have been a more mordant tribute for Landers to paint something that was repulsive and unsellable, as Magritte’s paintings proved to be?