

MAP

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Sean Landers: *It's Better to be a Sucker*

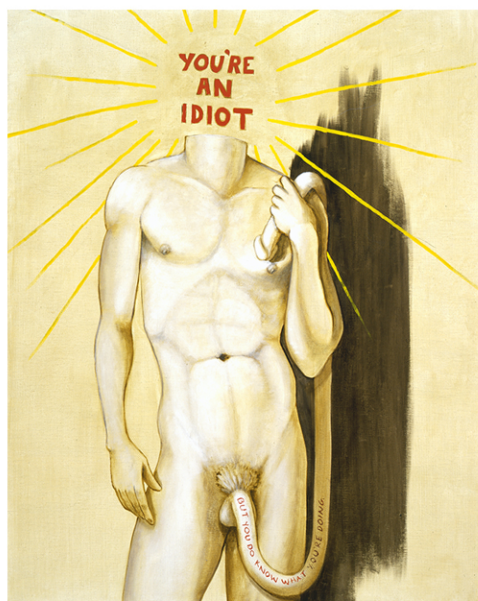
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'He who thinks great thoughts errs greatly,' Heidegger once said – and he would have known. In the 1990s, while much of the New York art world was deluding itself about how great its thoughts were, Sean Landers constructed a persona who staged confessional artworks, shamelessly voicing his hopes for greatness and his inexhaustible capacity for erring. This was done by rejecting the creatively constipated form of conceptualism that dominated at the time, and opting instead for a kind of critical laxity, producing a series of hilarious, 'pathetic' text and figurative-based paintings and sculptures. (Nobody has produced better monkey and clown paintings.) As he famously and pointedly remarked: 'I figure it's better to be a sucker who makes something than a wise guy who is too cautious to make anything at all.'

Formally, his latest show at Greengrassi highlights that nothing has changed much. On entering the space you are greeted by one of Landers' signature text paintings. Setting the tone, this work reveals Landers performing an emotional conversation with his id, hysterically detailing the 'fucked-up-ness of my life'. As his interior dialogue recounts: 'I'm coming apart . . . I don't know who I am . . . Hey id, why are you doing this to me? *Because you needed it.*'

In his book *The Encyclopaedia of Stupidity*, Matthis Van Boxsel's asks: 'Who is clever enough to fathom his own stupidity?' – a question Landers is always vainly trying to answer. In this respect Landers is part of a tradition of 'wise fools'; from the folly of Flaubert's Bouvard and Pecuchet to the mirthless laughs prompted by Beckett, what unites all is their determination to, as Beckett put it – 'try again, fail better'.

Like the poet Paul Valéry, Landers long ago realised that 'there's an imbecile inside me. I must profit from his mistakes'. And profit he has. His ability to get in touch with his inner idiot has seen him become a successful, canonised artist; consequently his self-satirising is now turned towards the contradictions of searching his inner self for trademark expressions of



Sean Landers, 'You're an Idiot', 2006, oil on linen

angst while living a comfortable family life.

The worry is that (Landers is too arch to be saddled with the jargon of authenticity) in all these works he has lost his creative mojo. Over and over again, he ruminates on the consequences of becoming a parent and settling down – 'family makes your devils disappear, but also buries you in its soft grave' or 'great art never comes from happiness. Happiness is a stupid person's disease'.

Occasionally his fear of being comfortable comes over as smug – you just want to slap him. But ultimately, beneath the use of humour to distract, there is something genuinely unusual in the content of these works. What's rehearsed and re-rehearsed is the seemingly irresolvable dilemma of practising in a profession which Mike Kelley rightly described as wholly dysfunctional, populated as it is by dysfunctional adults (all artists *are* adolescents – it's their virtue). Personally I found it funny, timely and strangely affecting for a male artist to ask whether you can stay a big kid if you have the responsibility to look after a little kid.

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