

## Artist's interview, New York: Sean Landers

### Appropriating Picasso “because I want to be as great as him”

*“I would like to leave a sad, funny, little painting”*

Sean Landers has an ambiguous, not to say ironic attitude towards his own importance and that of other current practitioners. Obsessed with the notion of “genius” and “great art”, it is never clear whether Landers was joking ten years ago when he first launched himself with a series of straightforward comic texts about himself, handwritten on paper and pinned to the wall in a brutally simple manner. Landers was one of those artists whose smartness lay in their ability to mask their real intentions, a gifted orator with a spiel almost as dramatic and egotistical as Jeff Koons. Those baffled rather than illuminated by such discourse have been all the more mystified by his move from scrappy texts and doodles to full-scale oil paintings packed with juicy, high-modernist bravado. Even more surprisingly, his new work at Andrea Rosen Gallery is directly based on that of Pablo Picasso: “I have made a new series of paintings based on several of Picasso’s paintings because I’m determined to be in his company.”

**Adrian Dannatt: Could you explain your latest show of Picasso paintings and the idea behind them?**

**Sean Landers:** The body of work did not develop out of a cohesive idea I have to confess. I was just looking for a new direction after making a series of paintings based on Magritte. I started looking through Picasso books and thinking damn, he’s good, I wish I could be that good and I just wished I could have one. So then I realised I had a lot of canvases in my studio and I had paint, so I figured I’d just make one, and in the process I got hooked. I figured I’d copy a few of his paintings and if he makes me a better artist then it’s worth it. It just blossomed into a body of work which much more closely adhered to him than I’d ever anticipated. I kept going because it was enjoyable to do and I tried not to think of it too much. I just tried to enjoy the practice of painting and conceiving of new images and it was a very enjoyable show to make. In the large ones you can make out these hidden letters that spell SEAN and another one that says GENIUS.

With the “SEAN” one in particular I was new to the process and I was thinking I have to make Picasso mine, so I thought I had to bury my name in there. It was really that clunky and basic an idea. I felt a little insecure because I was borrowing too much from him and had to put something else of my own in there, the grand idea of putting my own name in. It follows from paintings I just showed at Greengrassi Gallery in London, where I spelt my name SEAN and filled it with very colourful stripes. GENIUS because, as I thought about the body of work, I realised why I am using Picasso so much. It’s because I very much admired and was jealous and envious of his position in the 20th century. I just wanted to be

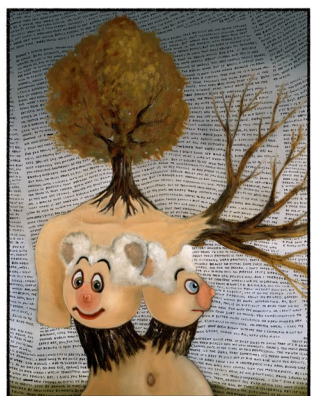
completely honest with myself and say: “Yes I want to be that guy for this next century.” Whether it’s realistic or not is really immaterial; the truth is I want to be as great as him.

**AD: And what is a “genius”?**

**SL:** This is a question I could go on about over a beer, maybe four beers. Picasso really was a true creative genius. I know he wasn’t confident all the time; I know his wives had to beg him out of bed by telling him he was a genius, but I think when he was actually with palette in hand and brush before canvas he just had a confidence about him. Even if he’d made the lamest drawing of something he just had such “a fuck it, I don’t care” attitude that it’s utterly convincing, every single painting he’s ever done. That’s the particular element of his genius I admired so much. It’s one which I felt is vaguely achievable in my lifetime for myself.

**AD: There’s a painting with a figure holding up a letter addressed directly to Picasso. Is that a reference to your first text work?**

**SL:** That painting has more specific symbolism than any other in the show; it’s the last painting I made. Its title is “On the Wall Above” which is a double-meaning, the painting above, and also eternity. How does an artist’s name survive when the artist is dead? The work on the wall in my painting is the one Picasso worked on the day before he died; the figure was an amalgam of two different paintings of his in which you had women looking into blackened mirrors, supposed to symbolise no future. It’s contemplating his death. I was using his symbolism to deal with



“Apollo and Daphne”, 1999

that whole issue of mortality. I just thought it would be nice to re-introduce one of my yellow page pieces in there instead of the mirror, and have the subject matter addressed on the yellow page. That’s an area of working which is quite comfortable for me, to sit down and write one single page and address the same issue as in those Picasso images which I copied. So that painting is particularly solid in its conception; with others I didn’t know what I was doing.

**AD: It says in the letter that when you die you want to have just completed “a sad, funny, little painting”. Is that a good description of your work?**

**SL:** Yeah. There’s really nothing

more you can do. I don’t know if, say “Spiral Jetty” [Robert Smithson’s great earthwork] is the one I’d want to leave of myself so much as a weird picture with almost Sesame Street characters which in their pathos, capture our own frailty in life. My affinities really lie with painting made before World War II, such as Picasso and some periods of Magritte, artists to which Duchamp was directly opposed to. I realise that a lot of my work has been in the wake of Duchamp up until now, and I have just realised I have a whole other equally vast, if not vaster, affinity with this Picasso way. Duchamp and Picasso are almost polar opposites and all art after 1945 is in one camp or the other. Up till now it has been pretty much dominated by Duchamp.

**AD: Is there a danger these paintings could be read like the appropriations of Mike Bidlo [an artist of the 80s who makes copies of key 20th-century works]?**

**SL:** That might be a very quick and thoughtless response. I’d thought about it earlier, but every painting in there is highly changed from its original image and it’s nothing to do with consumerism or whatever Bidlo was about. I was a student at the time when he was popular and I confess to not studying up on him much. I felt that this was not trying to reproduce Picasso for any conceptual reason.

**AD: It’s far more of an innocent and honest homage?**

**SL:** Even homage I’m not so sure; it’s also stating who I am very boldly. I’m not terrified of a comparison. I was very comfortable with my level of execution in this show so I don’t feel terrifically inferior to the grand genius of Picasso. I would understand why other people might think I am, but I don’t feel that way.

**AD: The “sad funny painting” as opposed to the grand gesture, is that part of an anti-macho sensibility?**

**SL:** That sensibility is often seen as pathetic and lowly but actually it’s the opposite, it’s quite confident, it’s understated, you don’t need to make this grand gesture. It’s like the guy who gets a Maserati and the one who gets a VW Beetle: who has what to prove?

**AD: How did you come to move into painting? Was it through this interest in Magritte’s “Vache” period?**

**SL:** It was before that. The first move up to painting was from writing on gigantic pieces of paper with ballpoint pen and I realised this wasn’t going to last. So I went to priming up some linen and writing on it with black oil paint. My mother and grandmother were

oil paint teachers and I grew up being forced to paint on the weekends, so it opened up a whole other world. I thought wouldn’t it be nice to see letters across a blue sky with white clouds, or across a stormy ocean. So out of necessity the images kept growing and becoming more complex



“On the wall above”, 2001

and eventually, around 1996-97, I just wanted to show paintings alone. Their reception was very, very mixed, which put me into a confidence tail-spin. But now I’ve sort of regained my footing.

**AD: Was there a negative critical reaction because of where you’d come from, as a conceptual text artist?**

**SL:** I think so, because when I look at those paintings they still hold up for me. There’s a series on Hogarth and another on clowns in trouble in extreme weather conditions. When I give lectures in colleges and show that body of work students just erupt with laughter, they’re the high moment of the lecture. Something in that work was not well received. Probably because I’d set the stage, I was going to be in the mold of Vito Acconci or On Kawara, the funnier version, and then I started making paintings.

**AD: Some negative critics said they looked like George Condo paintings?**

**SL:** Well, he’s also read in his reviews that his paintings look like mine. I like Condo. I think he’s a really good painter. There’s a strange change in many artists of your generation. They start painting from an ironic or conceptual stance and then slowly it’s as if the act of painting is a virus which takes over, until they are straining to be as seriously good painters as possible. I taught this last semester at Yale in the painting department and I gave my theory which was pretty much debated. In the history of painting after World War II it became a checkmate situation in the Duchamp mode. You have Ad Reinhardt painting them all black; you have

Ryman painting them all white, which I think of as cynical solutions to making painting intelligent. In a way they got to the top of that mountain to claim it dead. Then there are pathetic efforts to revive it with photorealism, maybe New Expressionism in the 80s.

Then in the 90s it was left off again until the end of the 90s when painting got more popular, primarily with people in my generation, many of them my close friends. People just truly believe painting is a completely viable art form and will unselfconsciously go about the practice of it and not feel the need to apologise for wanting to draw a cute animal in a landscape. Maybe you do the first one ironically, but everyone knows that irony is just an introduction to sincerity the more times you repeat it. I certainly went in that way, but then realised it fits in, it feels good.

**AD: Is there something about the actual act of painting which is addictive and accumulative?**

**SL:** You’d go through galleries and there’d just be one installation show after another. It was begging for someone to make a figurative sculpture out of clay, which I was doing, or make a figurative painting out of oils and my friend John Currin would be doing just that. We did it in studios side by side and were talking at the time, that we were going back to the heart of the matter.

**AD: How do you feel regarding your earlier text**

**pieces now?**

**SL:** I feel very fondly towards them. I think what I was after was the real thing. Those pieces came out of the boom times of the 80s and then the crash, a time when there were gigantic budgets to make art work and then here was just pure art, just written on a piece of paper and taped to the wall. That marries very well with what an oil painting is: just the pure artistic impulse locked on a two dimensional surface. That’s what I really believed those things were at the time and why I presented them as art works rather than poetry or rants or whatever else they might have been called.

**AD: It’s as though you’ve worked through Magritte and now Picasso. Do you feel you’re clearing the decks for the next stage?**

**SL:** You know, if we talk again in five years we might have the hindsight to realise that’s what I was doing. Right now I can’t see any plan to it, I’m just funnelling my interest.

**AD: But would you do another show in a similar genre to this latest one?**

**SL:** I look at this painting “genius” and maybe the one with the writing on the yellow page, and I see more opportunity for growing in those directions. My next show is in September at Jennifer Flay in Paris, so far as Picasso can be useful I’ll use him for the next show, but after that it’ll have been seen in London, Paris and New York. So for the show after that in Athens or Tokyo, I’ll be forcing myself to evolve if I haven’t done it naturally. Every two years there’s some sort of major shift because I’m constantly on the move. I don’t feel I’m doing my job if I settle into a single way of working.

**Interview by Adrian Dannatt**  
Sean Landers at Andrea Rosen Gallery, 525 West 24th Street, New York, 10011, +1 212 627 6000 tel, +1 212 627 5450 fax (12 April-19 May)

#### Biography

**Born 1962**, Palmer, Massachusetts, lives and works in New York City.

**Education 1986 MFA**, Yale University School of Art, New Haven, CT

**BFA**, Philadelphia College of Art, PA

**Solo shows 2001:** Galerie Jennifer Flay, Paris, Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York

**2000:** Greengrassi, London, Taka Ishii Gallery, Tokyo, **1999:** Contemporary Fine Arts, Berlin, Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York, Gallery Presenca, Porto, Taka Ishii Gallery, Tokyo, Crown Gallery, Brussels, **1997:** Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York, Studio Guenzani, Milan, **1996:** Contemporary Fine Arts, Berlin, **1997:** Rebecca Camhi Gallery, Athens, Regen Projects, Los Angeles, **1995:** Galerie Jennifer Flay, Paris, Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York, Galerie Birgit Kung, Zurich, **1994:** Bruno Brunnet, Berlin, Jay Jopling/White Cube, London, Stuart Regen Project, Los Angeles, **1993:** Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York, Galerie Esther Schipper, Cologne, Germany, Jennifer Flay, Paris, **1992:** Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York, **1991:** Robbin Lockett Gallery, Chicago. Marc Jancou Galerie, Zurich, **1990:** Postmasters Gallery, New York

**Selected group shows 2001:** Kunsthalle Vienna, “Tele(visions)”, Galerie Jennifer Flay, Paris, “Soyez réaliste, demandez l’impossible”, Galerie Jennifer Flay, Paris, France, “The way I see it”, Jumex Centro de Distribucion, Mexico City **2000:** Delfina Project Space, London, “Salon”, Galeria Leyendecker, Canary Islands, Spain, “2000 Anos Luz, Kerlin Gallery, Dublin, Ireland, “Kin”, Barbara Gladstone Gallery, “00”, Galerie Jennifer Flay, Paris, “Body Beautiful”, Denver Art Museum, Denver, “Selections from the Permanent Collection of Modern and Contemporary Art”