

Sean Landers *Small Brass Raffle Drum*
Capitain Petzel, Berlin 16 September – 28 October

In 2004, Sean Landers claimed that his art had become conscious of his self-conscious persona – he was ‘not self-conscious “scared” but self-conscious in that I know too much about what I’m doing... That’s why my current show [at Andrea Rosen Gallery, that year] is like a parody of my earlier self.’ Landers was either being fatuous or disingenuous to imply that his earlier work might have evaded formalising the self it represents. His handwritten paintings of the 1990s, with their outpourings of confessional, stream-of-consciousness text, were always performances posing as crises, balanced between self-knowledge and self-doubt, like the word self-consciousness itself. Perhaps, as David Foster Wallace once said, ‘we need more words for self-consciousness the way Eskimos have for snow’.

Landers’s art has always been embarrassing, but whereas it used to make us embarrassed for him, the series of nine three-quarter-length ‘figure paintings’ at Capitain Petzel are remarkable in that the embarrassment is all ours. Our susceptibility to their overweening demand on our empathy is pathetic, given the absurdity of their anthropomorphic reconfigurations of the debris of an early-twentieth-century surrealist vocabulary. Landers himself, previously centre-stage, has withdrawn, his self-consciousness expunged from his facture, his gestural expressionism sublimated into fine *peinture*.

In the plush showroom, this looks, at first, like art conforming to a commodity status that it used to hold at the remove of the awkwardness of its execution. These are no longer paintings that admit, however partially, to having failed. They brandish their craft unironically.

And yet, the refined technique is not a gratuitous embellishment, but a means of gaining a finer grasp on Landers’s art-historical models – or on his own past. If he can now do Bruegel as well as Magritte – with one as another’s background – he is just as likely to be doing himself, with some of the figures based on earlier paintings. This is one way for art ‘to argue the relevancy of [its] maker’ – as Landers claims ‘all paintings do’: by placing yourself in the exalted company of your own canon. *Captain Homer (Seven Pipes for Seven Seas)* (all works 2016), a sailor based on Magritte’s *Le Cripple* (*The Cripple*, 1948) with an array of pipes protruding from his full beard, is set against a Winslow Homer seascape. The virtuosity required to produce the still-life effects of a meerschaum pipe, wood veneer or beaten gold is the equivalent of the painterly standup routines of Landers’s text works. But, with the exception of *Elysium* – a wide-format painting of a forest glade, with an iconographic key to the cycle etched into its trunk – text, previously the primary weapon in Landers’s arsenal, has been exiled to the paintings’ backs, onto which sheets of handwritten comments

are attached. These esoterically personal musings on what appears on the other side of the canvas are invisible, except to the owner, the curator, the gallerist or the visitor armed with laminated copies available at the desk. The concealment is apt because Landers uses the portrait genre, that traditional embodiment of artistic subjectivity, as an alternative outlet for his self-consciousness.

Eyes, here, are focal points of sentiment – a snowman’s melting tears, the gold coins of a scythe-bearing skeleton. They implore our sympathy for a figure’s plight, stranded in a limbo of crossed references. Their gaze insists on their exposure of subjectivities that challenge our credulity: a weeping snowman, with a pine cone for a nose, against a Bruegel snowscape; a smoking Cyclops, with a bottom for a mouth, in a park courtesy of Bosch. The artistic test might be to evoke figural presence as a painting’s centre of gravity in the midst of a virtuoso jumble of allusions, which does everything to render that presence risibly implausible. Landers’s high-definition illusionism has impersonalised his painting. The effect is to transfer his self-consciousness into that of his invented figures, taking the spotlight off himself, and allowing his voice, so prominent in earlier work, to disappear behind the canvas, as though acknowledging its own redundancy to the form he has invented. *Mark Prince*



Captain Homer (Seven Pipes for Seven Seas), 2016, oil on linen, 122 × 104 cm.
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