

Sean Landers, *Things I've Learned Part Two*, 2017. All images Courtesy of the artist and Petzel, New York

A Former Slacker Artist Gets Real

by Paul Laster

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In his new paintings and drawings, Sean Landers returns to his self-deprecating roots.

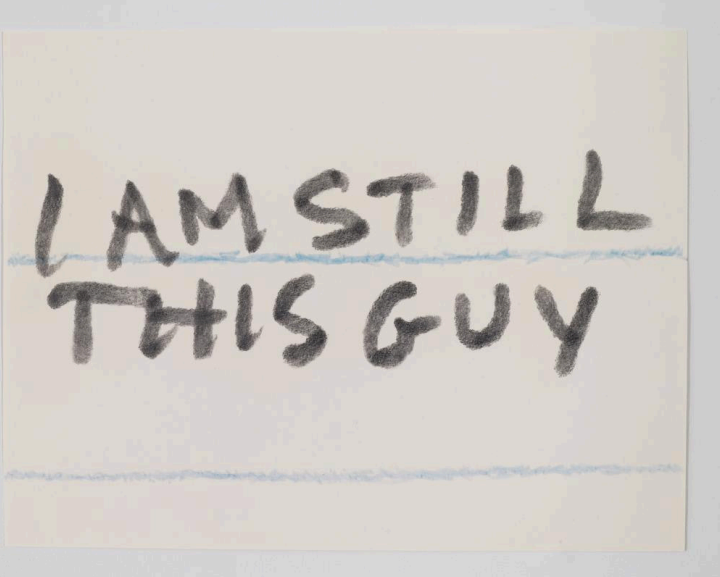
Celebrated for his acerbic paintings and sculptures and self-deprecating stream-of-consciousness texts, Sean Landers has returned to his roots recently with a new series of text paintings depicting carved trees, and canvases that resemble unhinged doodles on giant yellow legal pads. The two related bodies of work will go on view in two different venues later this week, at Petzel's uptown gallery space, and at their booth at The Art Show at the Park Avenue Armory. GARAGE sat down with the artist to learn the backstory of his parallel methodologies.

GARAGE: Your last two solo exhibitions at Petzel were comprised of colorful canvases depicting animals dressed in Scottish tartan and lone clowns sailing ships. What made you return to the textual focus of your earlier work?

Sean Landers: For as long as I've been making art there's been a pendulum swinging back and forth between relying purely on image and purely on text, as well as moments where those things get mixed. I see my tree paintings as a "mixed" moment, and my new yellow legal pad paintings as a homecoming, in a way, because it's how I entered the art world in the late 1980s and early '90s.

How did you develop your stream-of-consciousness way of working?

From the time I was a teenager, whenever I experienced turbulence, I would write to calm the waters. When I moved to New York, I experienced a big shift in my work and my personal life, which resulted in a "get real" moment. I picked up a legal pad, starting writing and created a character to say things that I normally wouldn't express. I taped these notes to my studio walls, and when my art friends responded positively, I started to make it part of my practice.



Sean Landers, *I Am Still This Guy*, 2017.



Sean Landers.



Sean Landers, *Things I've Learned Part One*, 2017.

When did your writing become the art itself?

Once I removed the fictional character from the story it became more about me. I turned writing into drawing, and then writing into painting. When I confronted a big piece of paper or canvas it became like action painting or process art, and I loved how that married into art history. Having felt stuck between being a writer and a painter, it gave me a way to fuse the two things together in an honest and purposeful way. Instead of swashbuckling with a big brush, it was just some guy's thoughts.

Over the years you've found many ways to incorporate language into the context of figurative imagery. What is it about that mix that fascinates you?

I often paint an image that stands alone, which is fine, but at other times I feel like I need to put more of my soul into it. Some paintings arrive extemporaneously, where I make a lot sketches and wipe them off so that there are all of these overlays, which lead to the final subject. I seek something in it to access the subconscious and then I just stream-of-consciously add some text.

Why do you like using a yellow legal pad paper, which in the case of the current works is pre-printed on canvas?

I've stuck with the yellow legal pad paper ever since I first started using it. It's always been what I use to jot things down on, like when I'm planning a painting or sketching out ideas. I don't make many conventional drawings, but I have scores of yellow legal pad pieces.

Your work of the 1990s was sometimes identified as "slacker art." Were you that apathetic or was that just a cool subcultural tag?

That was at a time when I was doing maybe three solo shows and a dozen group exhibitions a year, which made me anything but a slacker. I was working my ass off. But because I was just emerging, I thought any attention was fine. It was only later that I realized the slacker label didn't really fit—even though some of my work might have fit the characters in Richard Linklater's 1991 film, or the grunge movement of that time. The tag stuck, however, and because of the Internet, it still has a long tail.

You were definitely more angst-ridden when you were emerging. Are you becoming more philosophical and sagacious with age?

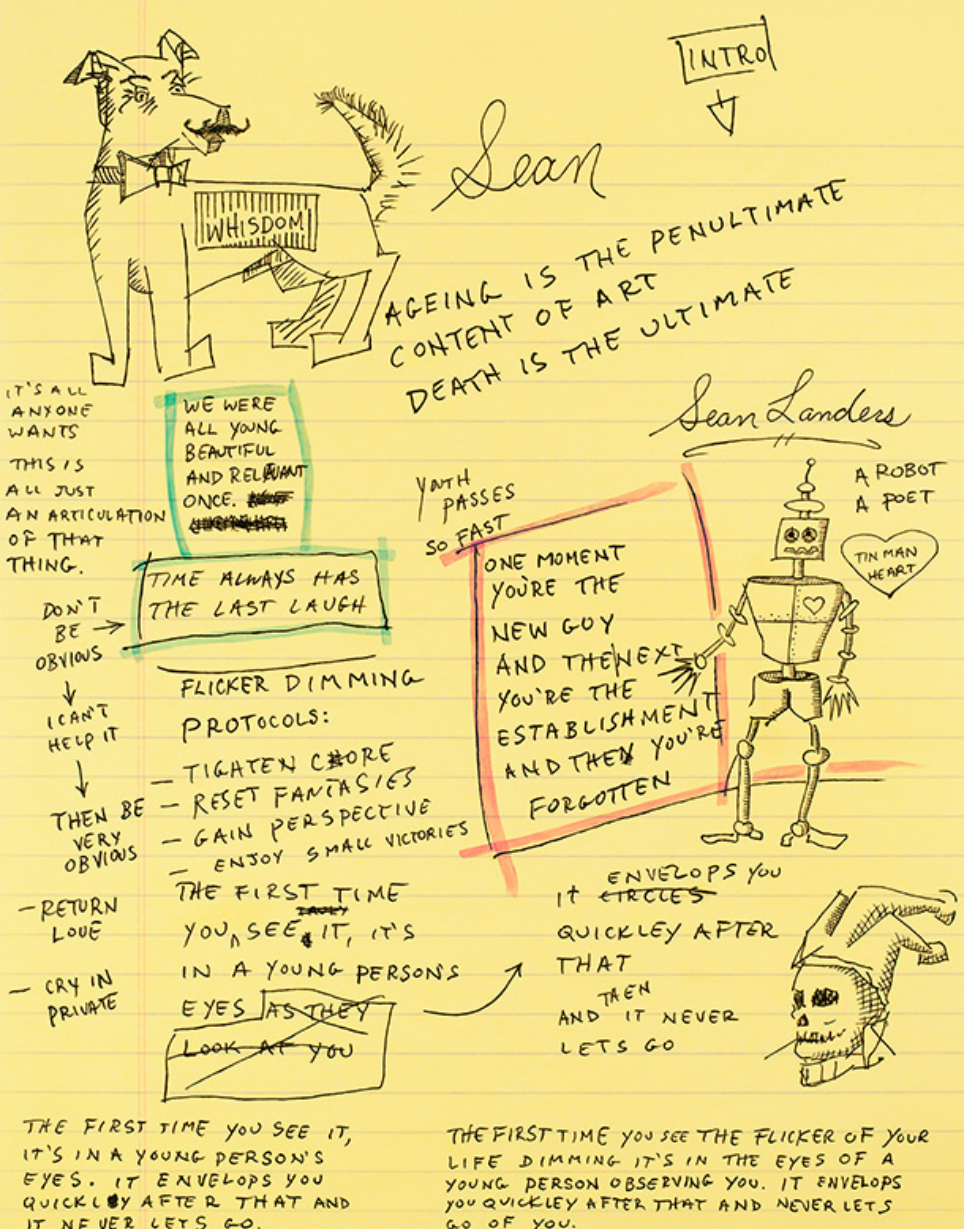
I hope so! Because I used to write when I was in emotional turmoil, more of that content found its way into the world than when I was walking to my studio without a care in the world. I was writing when I broke up with my wife Michelle, before we were married. It happened only once, but it famously became the basis for my book SIC. Unfortunately, I recorded it for all time, which means it could become a major motion picture some day.

Are you parodying your earlier self in the current work?

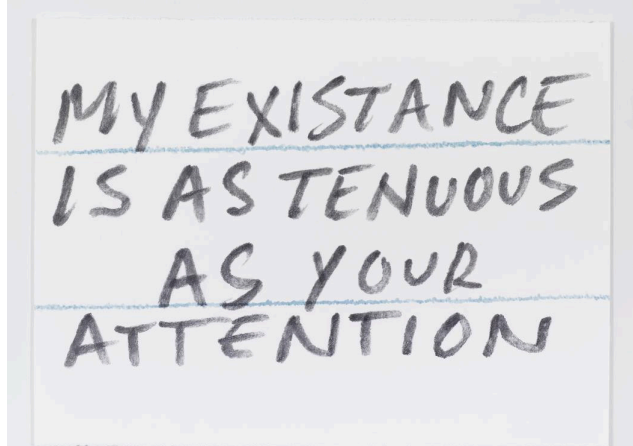
No, these yellow legal pads have always been a part of my practice. I just haven't shown them to anybody. All of my work comes into the world on these pads. The guy in the work is less self-abusive now, but that's because I'm further away from my Catholic past, where one's taught that if you show pride, you have to beat yourself down and get back into the flock.

What kinds of thoughts have shaped these new word works?

They're very existential, which goes back to the question of what does an artwork say? It says that the maker was here. Art is a transaction between a genuine gesture by its maker and an empathic



Sean Landers, *Flicker Dimming Protocols*, 2017.



Sean Landers, *My Existence Is as Tenuous as Your Attention*, 2017.



Sean Landers, *The Void of Us*, 2017.

reception by the viewer. The more truth you put into the work the more it will stand the test of time.

Should we be reading between the lines?

Always—you should be reading between the lines when you read anything, particularly my stuff. The character that you find between the lines is the true character of the work. There are cracks and fissures where I'm naked as hell.

What about your doodles, where a mouse is caught in a trap or a guy in a barrel is about to go over the falls? Why so dark an outlook for such a successful guy?

There are doodles and there are doodles—some are subconscious while others are meant to illustrate precise thoughts. It's very heavy-handed to have a guy in a barrel going over a falls or a mouse caught in a trap, but both of those images are allegories for aspects of art making.

Applying the text to your tree paintings, where you make it look like it's carved, is visually quite clever. Are you aiming at a juvenile delinquent look?

No, the carving in the trees is actually inspired by a glade of heavily carved trees that I stumbled upon near the Prado Museum in Madrid. However, the trees in my paintings are Aspens, which are linked underground by their roots, which I find to be a wonderful metaphor for an artist's body of work.

The Art Show will be on view from February 28 to March 4 at the Park Avenue Armory, New York. *Sean Landers* will be on view at Petzel, New York, from March 1 to April 21.



Sean Landers, *Aquarium Heads*, 2017.