

MAR 4, 2018 @ 05:45 PM

## Sean Landers At Petzel Gallery (67th Street), New York

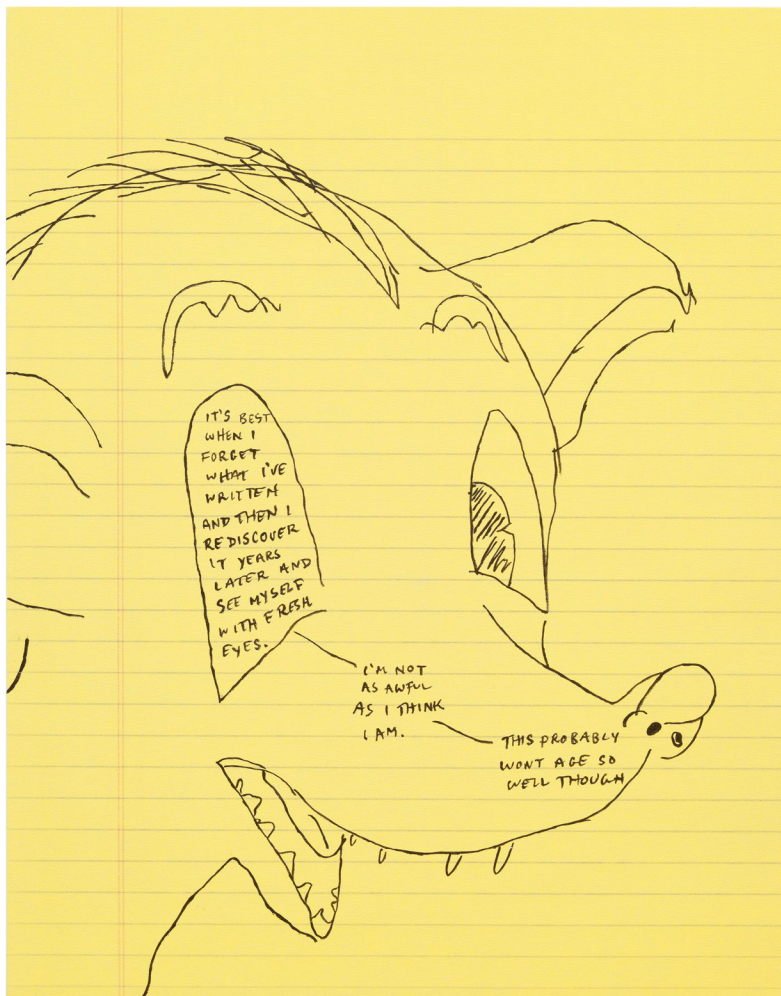
Clayton Press, CONTRIBUTOR

“ I drink to drown my sorrows, but the accursed things have learned how to swim!

José Frías, appropriated by Frida Kahlo

Poor Sean, carrying the weight of the world, even worse the weight of the art world, on his shoulders for nearly 30 years. Beginning with his earliest drawings, paintings and books from the early 1990s, Landers is still at it, self-flagellating, mortifying both spirit and flesh.

Landers is the guy who says what other people think, but are afraid to say. . . about themselves. He airs his self-doubt with absolute aplomb. Like Stuart Smalley, an Al Franken character from the 1990s, Landers aspires to be good enough, smart enough, and doggone it, to be liked (enough.)



Sean Landers. *Fresh Eyes*. 2017.



Sean Landers. *The Eternal Dawning of Now*. 2017.

When you enter Petzel's uptown gallery, on the left there is a 2017 painting titled *Fresh Eyes*. It is a blown-up version of the cartoons Landers made on 8 x 5-inch canary yellow legal pads in the 1990s. This piece is a mental welcome mat for the exhibition. The text is almost a lamentation, "IT'S BEST WHEN I FORGET WHAT I'VE WRITTEN AND THEN I REDISCOVER IT YEARS LATER AND SEE MYSELF WITH FRESH EYES. . . I'M NOT AS AWFUL AS I THINK I AM. . . THIS PROBABLY WON'T AGE SO WELL THOUGH." Hardly.

Rather than using ink on paper, Landers has pre-printed canvas to look—rather authentically—like a sheet of giant-sized legal pad paper. Then using oil, he jots and highlights his musings and misgivings, which are pictorially annotated with doodles and sketches. *The Eternal Dawning of Now* announces in misspelled (the artist is dyslexic) block letters:

“ THE GOOD NEWS IS:  
WE ARE ALIVE!  
THE BAD NEW IS:  
IT'S TEMPORARY.

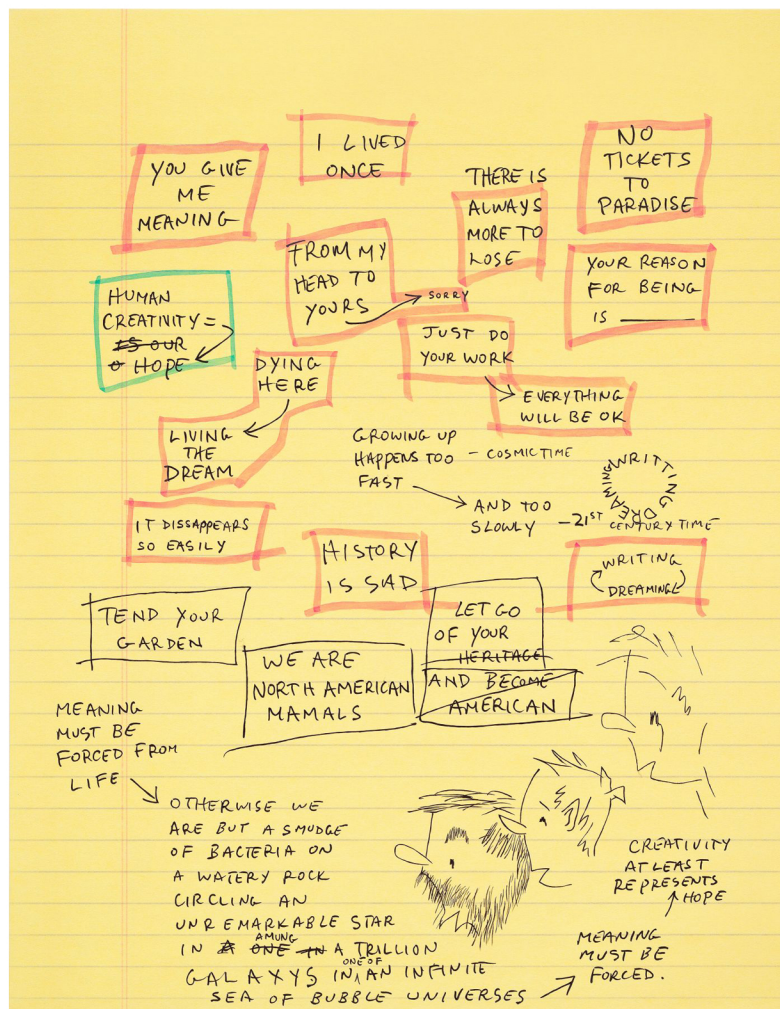
Above this text is a cartoon of a dead rodent in a snap trap. The mouse did not make it. Yep, life is temporary.



Busy scrawls, scribbles and sketches fill the paintings. References to other earlier series, like the tartan-furred *North American Mammals* and clowns at sea are all over the place. Everything, as always, is exactly, painstakingly painted, sharp and crisp. There is no evidence of chance or unplanned mistakes. Cross your eyes slightly, and the paintings are layered abstractions—words and images on a simple field. Words, words, words.

Landers has been illuminating his not-so-private, stream-of-consciousness thoughts for 3 decades. He has consistently used language and humor, especially, across all media: drawing, painting, books, sculpture, sound and video. He intentionally pushes our buttons by self-consciously pushing his own. We chuckle nervously and snicker knowingly when we “read” his paintings. If you’re honest with yourself, his uncertainty is very close to your own.

Before or after going to Petzel’s gallery, visit Landers’s website: [www.seanlanders.net](http://www.seanlanders.net). Scroll to the site’s “Work By Year” tab, and you are treated to early works on paper, sculptures and videos. One drawing, *July 9 Tuesday 1991*, leads with “I’VE MADE A LOT OF MISTAKES IN MY LIFE BUT ONE TIME I DIDN’T MAKE A MISTAKE WAS . . . ” The pattern is set. Words are everywhere—foreground and background, thought bubbles and complete sentences. Landers uses language as a medium much like Robert Barry, Kay Rosen and Lawrence Weiner. It is as primary for him as ink or oil.



Sean Landers. *History is Sad*. 2017.

Obvious humor in “fine art” is a prickly thing. Wry and subtle seem to be preferred, like a Dieter Roth chocolate head with bird seed, Roth’s own testament to impermanence, aging and bodily decay. Martin Kippenberger’s work was filled with unsettling humor, *Zwangsbeglucktertum*—forced good cheer. Nonetheless, art folk are serious folk, and it is something of a challenge to get them to lighten up and embrace (and enjoy) humor *in* art. Pirates and clowns, cartoon figures and chimpanzees, Landers uses visual metaphors that work well with his self-deprecating humor.

If Bruce Nauman’s *The True Artist Helps the World by Revealing Mystic Truths* (1967) is a truism, then Landers is a truth teller. Landers’ own take on truth is revealed in a 2010 painting, *True Artists*, featured on Lander’s website, where the artist declares:

“TRUE ARTISTS KILL THEMSELVES AT THEIR PEAK TO PREVENT THEMSELVES FROM MAKING BAD WORK.”

Poor Sean. He is doing such a fine job of aiming for his peak. Hopefully he will not achieve it anytime soon since his progress is so rewarding. Mystic truths can wait.

Sean Landers at Petzel Gallery (35 E 67th Street), New York through April 21, 2018.