

# Writing the Song of Myself

## An interview with Sean Landers

Interview by Robert Enright and Meeka Walsh

In the beginning was the word and the word got fleshed out. That would be the opening line in Sean Landers's version of his Bible, were he to write one. It would be a kind of secular new testimony because, for him, language is the medium and the message. When I say, the word gets "fleshed out," I mean it literally. Both his written paintings and [sic], his quasi-fictional, quasi-factual *Bildungsroman*, are overflowing with the pleasures and the anxieties of the flesh. He

presents himself as two characters, one who is a writing self and the other a fictive self, and together they tell the story of Sean Landers. He says the fictive persona not only makes things more interesting, but it also provides him "with a fig leaf to hide behind." There are occasions when that cover falls off and he ends up being full-on leafless. His early videos and language paintings are delightfully outrageous acts of exposure. Were he to make one, his philosophical declaration



Sean Landers, *Both Things at Once*, 2018, oil on linen, 59.5 x 77.25 inches. Photo: Christopher Burke Studio. © Sean Landers. Courtesy the artist and Petzel, New York.



would be *Discoverio ergo sum*. The translation goes something like, “I uncover and lay bare; therefore I am.”

In understanding the world according to Sean Landers, staying within the territory of fauna and florid is appropriate, not only because he has painted a series of North American mammals with tartan-covered bodies, but because of his fondness for metaphors of growth. In addition to the discretion of his fig leaf, he also explains his passion for writing through nature. “The desire and the need to write have always been central to what I have done,” he says in the following interview. “The way I like to imagine it

is, all my work is a tree and writing is the trunk of that tree and the branches are the various series I have made.”

The branches have been richly unpredictable. Landers has particular admiration for Francis Picabia, the polymathic French artist, because “he was not governed by style and he went through so many changes and had so many ways to express himself throughout his long life and I want the same thing.”

Landers has realized what he wanted. His series have included *Art, Life and God*, 1990, a collection of texts written by his alter ego, Chris Hamson, the first indication that “intimate personal



1. The Eternal Dawning of Now, 2017, oil and archival inkjet on canvas, 71.5 x 55.5 inches. Photo: Christopher Burke Studio. © Sean Landers. Courtesy the artist and Petzel, New York.

2. Installation view, "Sean Landers," 2018, Petzel Gallery, New York. Photo: Christopher Burke. © Sean Landers. Courtesy the artist and Petzel, New York.

content is extremely compelling”; a number of giant “Writing Paintings” on unstretched linen, like *For the Love of Nothing* and *I’m a Clown in a World of Chimps*, both from 1994; and a suite of oil paintings based on William Hogarth’s *A Midnight Modern Conversation*, c 1732, a painting that he became fascinated with on a return visit to Yale, his alma mater, 10 years after graduating with his MFA. In 2003 he produced a series of tribute paintings in which he depicted his favourite 20th-century artists as clowns—de Chirico is a Viking, Salvador Dali is a king and Georges Braque an elf—and they are joined in the tributary gallery by a series of grisaille ghosts, including Max Ernst, Marcel Duchamp, Max Beckmann and Martin Kippenberger.

Among the clowns is René Magritte, imagined as a devil, and some of that demonic irreverence has rubbed off on Landers and caused him to make paintings like *Plankboy Hurt*, 2009, where a wood-grained boy lies folded up in a wintry landscape; and *Trial and Error*, 2016, where Magritte’s troubling image of a woman’s face morphs into her naked body, and then is taken one step further with the addition of a drooping dark moustache above her sexualized mouth. In 2014 at the Petzel Gallery in New York, he exhibited an ambitious combination of paintings of steel-grey library bookshelves and tartan-skinned animals, including a silver fox, a blue buck, a pink lynx and a whale that measures in at 112 x 336 inches.

In 2018 he scaled down and moved from fauna to flora in a series of aspen trees with messages carved on their bark, and still another series of paintings of wooden roadside signposts with directional pointers that ask, ‘is art a thing itself or a depiction,

or can it be both things at once?’ These conjectures and queries are followed by a plank that suggests ‘maybe the painting is just a picture of signs,’ an idea that is both a reduction of possible reads and a journey that points you in the direction of a village called Semiotics.

Landers admits that his problem stems from “an empty canvas and an unwillingness to repeat the thing that’s popular,” and his response has resulted in a cornucopia of subjects and approaches. “As soon as something becomes popular,” he says, “I develop wanderlust and want to get away.”

The scale and the densely autobiographical nature of Landers’s art practice make me think of Walt Whitman, America’s great epic poet, who in *Leaves of Grass* sang the celebratory and contradictory song of himself. There is something in the American character that wants to tell itself in a large scale, and Landers has felt some of that pull. In the process, he gets to have his language cake and eat it, too. His oil and archival inkjet on canvas called *The Eternal Dawning of Now*, 2017, is a collection of observations about the passing of time, mortality and the nature of consciousness. In addition to the words, there are a few drawings—a small violin to play for sympathy, a snowflake to mark his uniqueness, the warning of a mouse dead in a trap and, at the bottom, an anchor and a vise, accompanied by words that reiterate the drawing’s message: “I’m your anchor and I’m your vice.” It is a recognition that speaks to the two functions his art performs: it secures him at the same time that it traps him. From the time he first began writing and drawing, Sean Landers recognized that he was not just a goofy clown floating on a stream of consciousness, but a



wise mariner sailing on the large and more complex ocean of consciousness, as well.

The following interview was conducted in the artist's New York studio on June 21, 2018.

**BORDER CROSSINGS: Do you remember the first time you used written language in a work of art?**

SEAN LANDERS: It depends on how far back we go. I wanted to be a poet, and when I was a young teenager and the hormones struck, I began by writing poems on my bedsheets with a ballpoint pen. I filled my dresser drawer with dozens of poems scrawled on scraps of paper. My mother read them and thought they were really good and arranged an appointment with the most respected English teacher in my high school. So I went over to her house on a winter Saturday with 10 or 12 of my best poems. She went through them one by one and as she read them out loud, she said, "These are terrible, these are awful." Then finally she looked at me and said, "You're not going to kill yourself, are you?" I was mortified and utterly humiliated by her reaction. I wasn't suicidal at all but I guess the brooding teenage poetry really got her worried. So, after crashing against that wall, I retreated back towards the safety of artmaking as my primary creative output. But the desire to write and the need to write never went away and have always been central to what I have done. When I was in graduate school, even though I was making giant sculptures in the studio, I would also be writing notes on the walls for my sculptures, or using those walls as a diary and writing creatively on them, as well. So my studio walls would have drawings, confessional writing and poetic and jokey stuff all mixed together.

**Writing was a form of self-expression that exteriorized your interior thinking about who you were in the world and what you were doing?**

Yes, and that has always been central to what I do. The way I like to imagine it is, all my work is a tree and writing is the trunk of that tree and the branches are all the various series I have made. All of it, every seemingly 'out of left field' series derives from writing—the trunk—in some way.

**The branches from which you've grafted have been pretty various. I was interested to read that the three writers and works you talk about are Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, James Joyce's *Ulysses* and Knut Hamsun's *Wayfarers* trilogy. What those writers have in common is a stream-of-consciousness methodology.**

Exactly. It was about giving voice to and expressing the interior voice. I first read Knut Hamsun's *Hunger*, in which the narrator is the inner monologue of the main character. It woke up something inside of me that said, this is how I want to express myself in writing. It seemed as if it had already existed in me and reading Hamsun just flipped a switch on.

**In *Crime and Punishment* Raskolnikov considers committing a crime to find a way out of his abjection, but I gather you weren't prepared to go quite that far?**

No. It was his interior life that I found mesmerizing and masterfully done. I had a different story to tell, not one about

contemplating a crime but contemplating being an artist and transforming myself from the general populace into one of these ostensibly special people. The first thing I wrote and showed in New York, *Art, Life and God*, was a roughly hewn screenplay of an artist struggling to get into the art scene here in 1990. It was based on *Hunger*, where the nameless character was trying to make it as a writer in Kristiania, which is now Oslo. I simply overlaid that structure onto my life, and once I had that structure I could write about my true self. But I also fused in other fictive things and began that especially fertile mix of fiction and reality. So I would include foibles of my own—i.e., trying (and failing) to get into the art world—and foibles of my friends trying to do the same thing. For instance, one scene I wrote was about trying to give slides to Mary Boone. In the 1980s Mary Boone was this mythically huge art-world figure—so a young art student coming to her with slides was funny on its surface. I never did that but I had my character do it.

**You develop this persona named Chris Hamson, an alter ego who allows you to separate your writing self from your fictional self. You sign a piece called *Ouch* from both of these characters. Those two people seem to have become the same person.**

After a little more than a year or so, I let Chris Hamson disappear and fused him into me, the Sean Landers persona who makes art and writes. My artmaking 'persona' is very honest but also occasionally fictive. But mostly it's honest. The fictive part makes things more interesting, but it also provides me with a fig leaf to hide behind. Also, the threat that I might not be honest has allowed me to be far more honest than I possibly ever could be. I think all artists need to step into the role of who they are or who they are perceived to be. I wrote in one of my paintings from 2014 that being an artist is in some way performative, and when I walk in here to my studio and go over there to paint, there is figuratively a small stage that I step onto and perform the work of my character.

**All the writers I know tell me that at a certain point, the story actually takes over and then they are not in control. In *Art, Life and God* and certainly in [*sic*], how much control were you prepared to exercise over the actual act of writing as you record the minutiae of your life?**

With [*sic*] I battled for control and I feel that I lost. It was difficult because I tried to do such a crazy thing—exposing myself to that degree. It's a genuinely humiliating book and it causes me great anguish every time it gets attention. Recently Matthew Higgs from White Columns organized a reading and initially I was thrilled and flattered that he wanted to do it, but then it actually happened and I had to hear that book read out loud by 20 of my friends over the course of several hours in front of a large audience. It was pure torture for me. But I also understand that [*sic*] is the one book where somebody went all the way. I mean, what other book is like that? So I'm proud of what I did and deeply ashamed at the same time.

**The conceit in *Ulysses* is that Leopold Bloom records every aspect of his inner consciousness over a 24-hour period. So the structure of the book is determined by the duration of a**

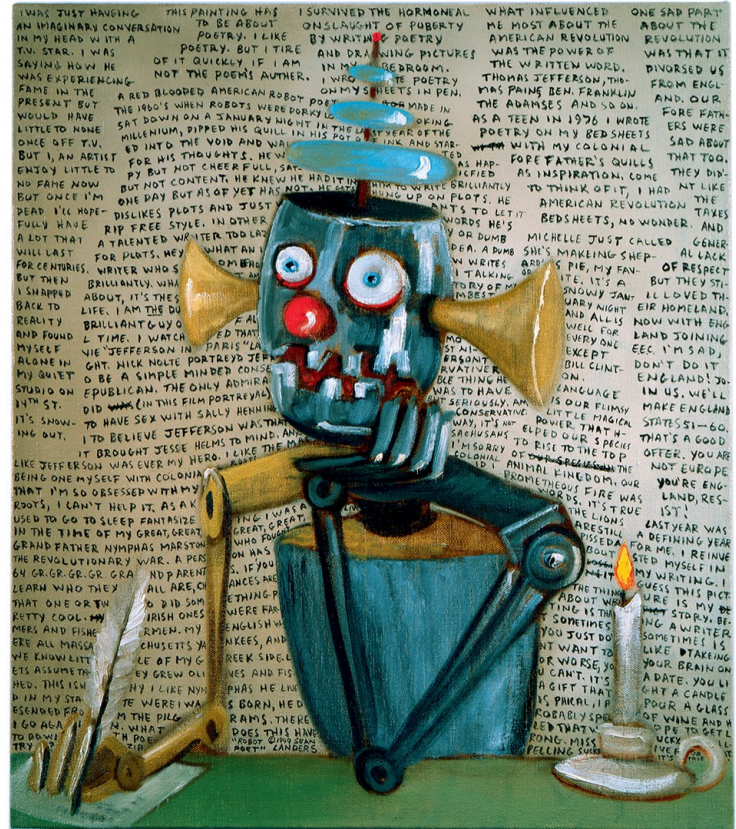
day. Were you concerned with what the structure of *[sic]* would be? You didn't use *Ulysses* and the Homeric myth as the foundation for your narrative.

I thought of my effort in terms of an odyssey, but my working premise was that it would be purposefully comedic in comparison with what Joyce did. But I was thinking in that way, not only for *[sic]* but in most of my artwork, that you the viewer/reader are with me as the clock ticks, and I wanted to entertain you as much as I could but I was documenting real time passing by. It was kind of a reality novel in which I documented everything I thought or experienced while holding the pen. I brought the reader with me through the mania of my real-life lovesick drama to the lows of the bored meanderings of my mind while waiting at the gate for a flight in an airport. I had wanted *[sic]* to be 1,000 pages when I started out, but I had to write so many other giant extemporaneous artworks at the same time that mental exhaustion set in and there was also so much emotional exhaustion caused by my personal life. So I just had to end it because it was making me crazy.

You say you were embarrassed by it but were you aware how far you could push the audience's tolerance? I'm asking because I did read through *[sic]*. Then I owe you an apology.

No, no. I'm intrigued by the strategy of composition and whether or not it was more a question of getting the book and its content out than a question of thinking about what it was going to be as it came out and what effect it would have on the reader.

The way I felt about it was that it was a conceptual exercise. I set out to fill 1,000 pages of yellow legal pad with stream-of-consciousness writing. I expected a reader to take that for what it was. Essentially, you were walking with me through time and I was being as honest as I could be. It's the same process when I am painting/writing a giant unstretched canvas, such as *For the Love of Nothing* (1994), or for any one of my other big stream-of-consciousness paintings. It's the same style of writing. Whatever is occurring to me is occurring to you while we go through it; we are passing through time together. I wanted it to be interesting for everyone, but I also knew the structure would probably include a lot of flatland. But that's the reality of life. One of the things I thought about early on and what I got from the authors you mentioned was that the primary experience of life is the stream of consciousness. No matter what we do or experience, no matter what we look at,



we're looking at it through the scrim of our thoughts going by. I recognized that this constant flow of thoughts was an incredibly abundant art material that no one really uses. So I wanted to use it and I have been using it my entire life. Sometimes it is not stream of consciousness; sometimes it is active writing where I'm editing and boiling things down so that they are more purposeful, meaningful and, I hope, easier for people to read. But there are times where I want to let it go feral as well. All those giant paintings are extemporaneously filled by me just standing with a pot of thinned-down black paint and a tiny little brush. That is in fact where the idea for the rowboat clown comes from, because standing in front of a giant empty canvas and filling it up with a tiny paintbrush feels like rowing a boat across an ocean. It becomes very existential very fast.

**In the tradition of picture making, it has aspects of outsider and psychotic art as well. Writing these massive, monumental paintings means you could be out of your mind. You don't seem to be.**

I might have been a bit out of my mind when I was younger and filling up those giant things, but of course I was fully cognizant of what I was doing. Although I will admit that there was certainly a therapeutic aspect to it and I think I benefited from it. Maybe I didn't go insane because I went through that period of writing so much.

**In [sic] you are full of aspiration, saying that you want to save American literature, and then you add that the first thing you should learn to do is to spell. Why are you such a terrible speller?**

I don't know. My dad was a very smart man and he was also extremely dyslexic. I never was diagnosed as dyslexic and never had problems in school. I was, in fact, an early reader but I might have inherited a bit of his dyslexic legacy. I don't know what to say other than I just don't spell well. Perhaps if I cared or thought it actually mattered, I would have made more of an effort.

**But you do get wonderful effects from it, like with "angles" and "angels." So you don't purposefully misspell; you just can't spell?**

I like to think of them as Freudian misspellings and sometimes they are triple entendres, which is wonderful. My book's title, [sic], is a triple entendre. But what can I do? I've actually gotten much better and now with computers and iPhones and iPads, I can clean it up.

**When you go to the Medici Chapel, you say it is the smaller things and the doodles that interest you. The intriguing thing about your art practice is that you take all the thousands and thousands of small things and make them into something that is monumental in scale.**

I felt closer to Michelangelo seeing his cartoons than seeing his highly produced works. I'm not taking anything from those; I love them. But what I learned from seeing those cartoons on the raw stucco in the Medici Chapel when I was an art student in 1985 was that intimate personal content was extremely compelling. When I saw them I remembered that I had covered my own studio walls with intimate writing and cartoons, and I realized

that when people came into my studio for crits, they weren't looking at the giant sculptures I had made. All of them had their backs to the sculpture and they were thoroughly engaged in reading my walls. I learned that personal drawings and notes like these are powerful because they are so intimate, and they hook viewers through a form of voyeurism. And this is a lesson about art—people look at it because what they want to see is something true about themselves in art. It makes life less lonely to discover sameness in one another. Anyway, I first realized all of this in the Medici Chapel, looking not at his architecture or sculpture but at a funny little birdman he doodled, probably while talking to a contractor about something banal.

**You mentioned the performative dimension in what you do. Beginning in the early '90s, you were doing a lot of video art. When did that start and why was it necessary for you to go to video as part of your art practice at the time?**

I never planned on making videos. In 1991 Andrea Rosen did a show called "Work, Progress, Work." The intention was to document artists working in some way during the month of the show, so my idea was to have a video camera in my studio documenting me while I worked. Of course, once the camera was there I sat in front of it and started performing. The idea was I would give her a tape a day and I ended up with 12 over the course of 30 days. I quickly realized that the space of an hour on video is equal to a giant empty canvas, and filling them with the idle workings of my mind was the same thing; it's me with my stream of consciousness, sometimes being honest, sometimes performing, and riding that weird line between truth and fiction with my real-life character being the same as my writing character. So I saw them as different media for the same outcome. That was also the attitude I took when I started making these wacky, semi-surrealist paintings for the first time.

**Do you consider yourself a performance artist?**

No, I would not. I spend all my time working with traditional media, but I would pose the idea that most artists are performers within their oeuvre. Ooh, that's a bad word. How about "shtick"? That's not right, either.

**Your videos are very funny. I think of the two *Six Feet Under* ones where you perform "Sweet Caroline." The performance gets pretty wild.**

I was just letting it go. You know, when you're on the highway and you glance at the car next to you and the person is fully engaged in singing, that is a moment of complete self-engagement that is true and honest, and that was where I was at with those *Six Feet Unders*. As you can decipher from the title, I was obviously dancing in the grave, and there is another earlier video called *Dancing with Death*. So again that was a period where I was forming a theory of what art is. Is it a dance with death, or sticking your tongue out at death, or is it about trying to leave something that is permanent?

**It's like your text that goes, "the good news is we're alive; the bad news is it's temporary." Your piece carries that dark humour. You also play with the idea of the narcissist. Is that**



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1. *The Robot Poet*, 1999, oil on linen, 30 x 26 inches. Photo: Orcutt and Van Der Putten. © Sean Landers. Courtesy the artist and Taka Ishii Gallery, Tokyo.

2. *Super Ego*, 2009, oil on linen, 74 x 50 inches. Photo: Jason Mandella. © Sean Landers. Courtesy the artist and greengrassi, London.

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1. *When Performance Becomes Reality (Pony)*, 2014, oil on linen, 55 x 72 inches. Photo: Larry Lamay. © Sean Landers. Courtesy the artist and Petzel, New York.

2. *Pink Lynx*, 2014, oil on linen, 48 x 56 inches. Photo: Larry Lamay. © Sean Landers. Courtesy the artist and Petzel, New York.



2



**your fictional self or is that the real, and does it matter that the viewer can distinguish between the performative side and the ostensibly honest side?**

I'm not a narcissist and I don't suffer from narcissistic personality disorder. I don't spend a lot of time looking in the mirror or anything like that and aside from this interview I generally don't think everything is about me. But the whole endeavour of being an artist and thinking that you're worthy of leaving objects behind is narcissistic. The other thing is, once I started writing and reading my own writing, I noticed this cyclical pattern of 'I'm great, I'm bad, I'm great, I'm bad,' so I thought the self-love part was the narcissistic part. On the other side of the cycle is self-flogging. There's another video, *Remissionem Peccatorum* (1994), where after a moment of self-love I whip myself on canvas. There are also other ways that I've expressed this self-love/self-hate cycle. I've given them characters: the clown is self-hate and the chimp is self-love. They fight each other constantly and, ultimately, the chimp always wins.

**I want to get at the structure of your thinking. There seems to be a binary sense operating in the way you approach things. When you talk about whipping yourself as punishment for your narcissism, I think of Bob Flanagan, an artist who also has a work called *Sick*. He considered himself a super-masochist. He died at 43 from cystic fibrosis, but he was an Irish Roman Catholic guy who used Catholicism as a structure for dealing with the ways in which religion and punishment intertwine. As a kid he is rewarded by his parents for his suffering and he realizes that the way to maximize that love is to become a masochist.**

I absolutely know that feeling. I am very much a product of that upbringing. I was an altar boy, and our house, where my mother still lives, is right next to the church, and the church plays a big part in Irish Catholic family life. Mostly when I think about Catholicism, I think about how can I put it in the rearview mirror, as deeply as possible and as far back as it can go. I'm very troubled by what the church does and what it covers up.

**And you have Father Donleavy and Father Diamond playing the ecclesiastical role of good cop/bad cop in your work.**

I'm impressed that you remember those two priests. In fact, Donleavy was a beautiful, wonderful man and a great priest, and I'm sure the church has many of them, but we hear about the evil ones and there are too many of those.

**In [sic] there is a point where you claim the whole thing with Helena in Greece is a fiction, invented as a way of punishing Michelle. Later in the novel you seem to imply that it's a real story. So as a reader I'm confused about the notion of truth.**

I think I was fatigued with my own soap opera and I was just fucking with the reader when I wrote that.

**At the end of the novel you do have the "fuck everything" section. It brings to mind the idea of the dark night of the soul where you totally abject yourself in front of God and through that process you undergo some kind of rebirth.**

That section is my favourite part of the book and you characterize

it well. I also like the sound of "the dark night of the soul." But that is the way the book develops. I went very low and I felt I was most lost when I wrote that part that you refer to. Then I eventually went into the space of prayer at the end, which is still with me to this day. The one thing that I keep from my religious upbringing is the space of spirituality, a space where I can go inside myself and be quiet and hear one pure train of thought. Especially with this administration, there are many times that I go there.

**Let me shift directions entirely. Where did the plaid animals come from?**

When I was in the middle of doing my large text paintings, I saw a Magritte retrospective at the Met (1992) that included the paintings from his Vache period. They don't look like recognizable Magrittes. They're quick gouache paintings, some are oil, and each of them features a tartan element. It can be hard to notice but it's usually tartan noses or a tartan sky. When I saw those paintings, it was like what happened when I read *Hunger*. When you see yourself in another artist, you see the portal open, and that's what I saw for image making in Magritte's Vache period. In various ways I tried to get there throughout the '90s, and then in the late '90s I did a series that I like to call my "Image and Text" series. They are surreal characters with a stream of consciousness sweeping by, which I combined with this slapdash painting style that emulated this specific period by Magritte. The Vache symbolized artistic freedom and a way to grow and expand as an artist. I want my creative life to get broader and broader as I get older and not to narrow into being the guy who does this thing or the guy who does that thing. I want whatever I do, here in my studio every day, to have the potential to grow as broadly as possible. So the tartan began to symbolize that for me. Fast-forward to 2004, I was at our country place and I was goofing around in my studio, making a bunch of experimental paintings, and when I painted a deer I remembered Magritte in his studio and the tartan. He used to wear tartan slippers and I think he looked down at the tips of his slippers and saw the tartan wrapping around the toe, and that's how he came up with the three plaid noses on this one character. That feeling of sitting in front of a blank canvas and trying to come up with something is so familiar to me, so when I was sitting in front of this outline of a deer I had made, I thought, I'll throw on some tartan like Magritte did. Then I put it away for a while but eventually hung it up in my country house. Everybody who came over just loved that painting and I thought, well, maybe it's not a throwaway. So in 2009 I made another one or two and I put them aside again. I always have three ideas that I'm currently doing and about 10 that are on back order. In my mind I think, I'll get to those someday, and in 2013-14 this thing that had been bubbling for two decades came up again and I decided to do more tartans. I did a few and then I did *Moby Dick*, and once I realized I had gone to the trouble of learning how to paint tartan on a mammal, I decided to run with it. I also mixed it in with the writing and the bookshelf paintings.

***Moby Dick* is 28 feet long. That's a crazy painting to do.**

Yeah, and it could have been bigger. I made it as big as the wall in my studio would allow and I had to have scaffolding to do it.



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1. *A Midnight Modern Conversation (Ignoring Hallucinations)*, 1996, oil on linen, 50 x 74 inches. Photo: Peter Muscato. © Sean Landers. Courtesy the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York.

2. *Striptease*, 1996, oil on linen, 16 x 20 inches. Photo: Peter Muscato. © Sean Landers. Courtesy the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York.

It took six months. None of the plaids are projected and traced; they are all done freehand.

**Walton Ford is the only other artist I can think of who works on that scale, but his message about the revenge of nature carries an evolutionary caution. What is your relationship between the tartan animals and ecology?**

Some people take that vein and other people have commented on the handprint of man on nature, but I wasn't thinking that way. I was coming at it from a Belgian easel painter from the 1930s.

**Do you still find the alter egos useful strategic devices? It doesn't come directly from you but it comes through a filter. Is all your work filtering itself in some way?**

I think as you make work, you evolve, not only as a person but also the works themselves evolve, so you can have a starting point and then it can really mutate. The tartan animals are a perfect example: I'm trying to be free as an easel painter and I wind up painting a tartan whale. Early on, ideas were the governing principles that created a lot of work. Now there are so many works in my history and so many series that when I want to make new things, I don't go back to principles as much as I go back to individual artworks. I realize there was a lot more there that I didn't get to. So, no, I am not writing in an alter ego now and I am not painting in an alter ego. I think that as I get older the bifurcated performative being that an artist can be is coming closer and closer together, if it's not just one line at this point.

**Malcolm Morley told us that the best thing about being an artist is that you get to choose your own ancestors. You've chosen interesting ancestors, like Vito Acconci, Francis Picabia and Picasso. Have those artists been inspirational?**

Absolutely. Picabia is a great example. What I admired about him was that he was not governed by style and he went through so many changes. Some people think that shows what a lightweight he is because he is capricious, while other people think that it displays his full power. I'm one of the latter. Again, it's freedom, like Magritte in his Vache period where he broke free of the world's expectations. When you're an exhibiting artist who has had a little bit of success, what immediately develops is a pressure to stay in your lane, and whenever you break free you get in trouble. It shows up right away with unsold works and the work has to sit on the shelf for two years and then people go, "Ah, that was a good one" and it starts popping off the shelf. I've survived this for 30 years and I have a lot more confidence. So I decide that I'm going to make whatever the hell I want, when I want to make it. You mention Vito Acconci. With his early work it was like you let a kid loose in the candy shop of conceptual art. All those guys in Soho in the early '70s were just running through what was possible. They were like explorers, throwing down stakes, saying, this is my area. Of all those early conceptual practitioners, Acconci was the one whose work I was most enamoured with. It was so crazy but it was also so cool. On Kawara with his dates and Roman Opalka, the French-born Polish artist, with his lifelong numbers project were also artists who made an impression on me when I was young and learning about art.

**Those last two artists operate systematically, and that is not how you work.**

I think that depends on whether you're looking at it in a micro or a macro way. Macro, it is systematic, but micro, you're seeing all the minutiae of my life. But when you stand back, what's the difference between Opalka or Kawara's dates and what I do? There's not much difference. Conceptually they are of the same ilk. I'm referring to my earlier paintings where I'm filling in big blanks of stream of consciousness. When I think of myself as an artist, they stand out as the most defining things that I have done because it's the core of everything I still do.

**The way you describe your career makes it sound as if it hasn't been planned.**

I haven't planned exactly where it is going to go, but I do plan that I want the entire thing to be a well-rounded picture of who I am creatively by the end. Everything I make is in some way going back into my own history and picking up threads and combining them in new ways. The way I look at it is, I have created a system or an instrument that is generative and I enjoy using that system or that machine to generate new things. That's where my true joy is as an artist.

**You talk like a conceptual artist. The idea is always generative for you. You don't come up with an image, but you come up with an idea and then an image gets made to fit it.**

I am a conceptual artist but I sometimes start with an image that I want to make. I am skirting on either side of that line between a traditional artist and a conceptual one. Ultimately, I think I'll be thought of as a conceptual artist.

**How much does the quality of the mark making matter to you?** That's not what gets me excited. The full breadth of what I do is what gets me excited and I am most excited when I start a new series because those first few iterations, when I am still discovering, is like driving in the dark with no headlights on and not knowing what is coming next.

**You also say that you like it best when you don't know what you're going to do. Is that the moment of most freedom?**

Yes, and it's when really good stuff comes. If you give someone a problem, that's when their brain works most creatively. For me, the problem is an empty canvas and an unwillingness to repeat the thing that's popular. As soon as something becomes popular, I develop wanderlust and want to get away. For some, it is about refining and perfecting those things within their parameters. I'm into refining and perfecting the entire scope of what I've done.

**There are a couple of words that have come up repeatedly in this conversation: one is "freedom" and the other is "honesty." You have talked about the honesty of Ron Howard and Neil Young. In fact, you say that you want to become the Neil Young of painting. What you seem to admire is the kind of honesty that happens when he strives to reach those notes that he can't get.** I love that. When I was teaching painting in the graduate program at Yale, I would put a pedestal in the middle of the room and have each of the students sing a song a cappella. Those who did an ironic or jokey version of a song got polite clapping; those who went for it, whether they got the note or failed, got

thunderous applause. What matters is going for it. What makes it human is when Neil Young goes for that note and doesn't quite get it. Looking at the cartoons of Michelangelo makes him more human and more relatable. What is art if it's not making things that people can relate to, so that we have a shared experience? We go to museums because we're wondering; we're looking for something familiar in the artwork. That's why we read; we're looking for things we know in the minds and in the paintings of other people. So when you see anything truthful, whether it succeeds or fails, it's an honest moment of communication where something is sincerely rendered, or sincerely offered, and you receive it with true empathy. That's the transaction between art and viewer.

**There are a lot of times in your videos where you're striving for the note.**

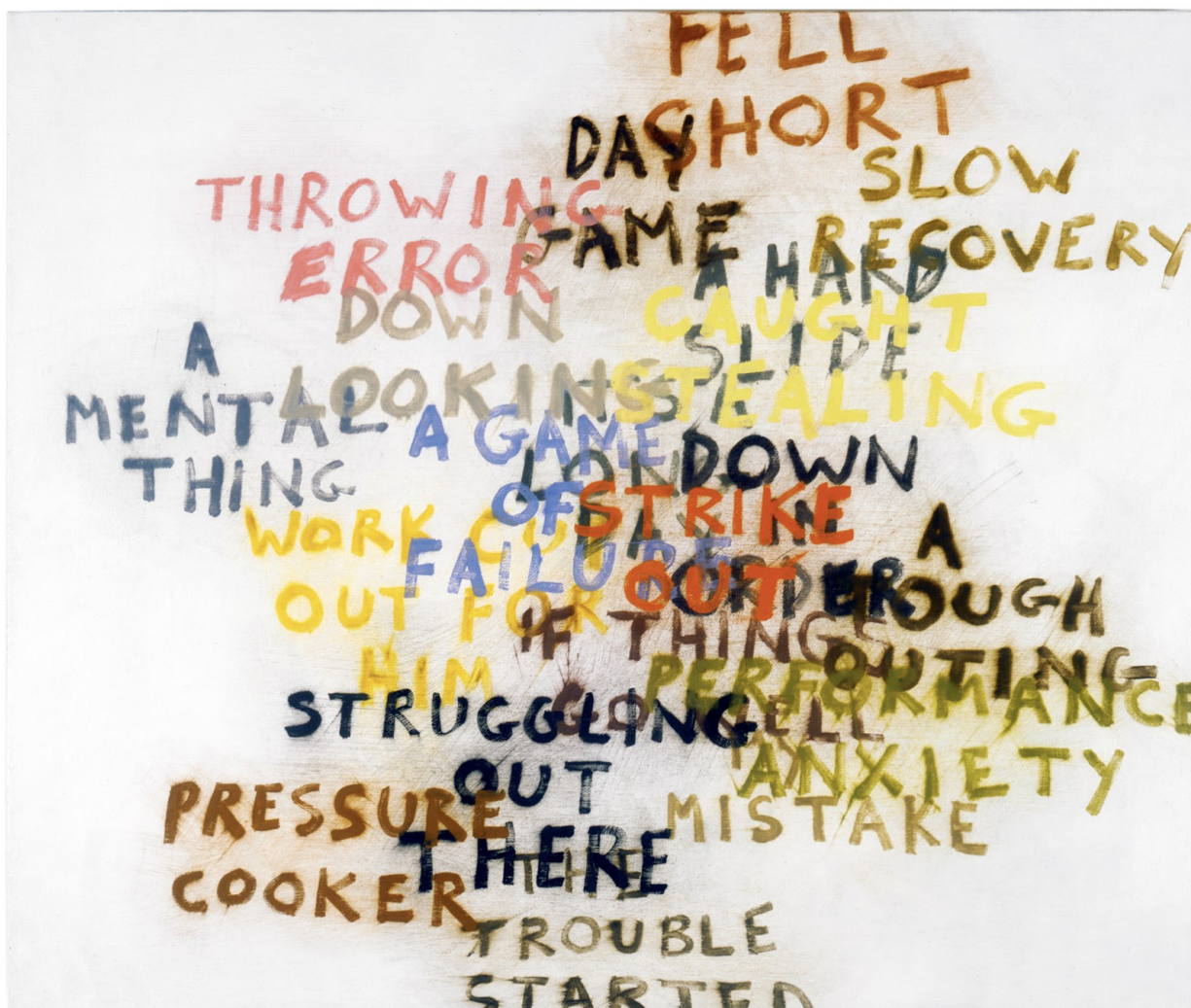
I showcase it. I had plenty of opportunities not to show those, but I wanted to show them because I felt the failure was a form of perfection when offered truthfully.

**To go back for a minute to your chosen ancestors, you also pick out William Hogarth's *A Midnight Modern Conversation* from 1732. That particular painting seems to be especially generative for you, and in the end you narrativize it and do 13 separate paintings. What was it about that painting that was so compelling?**

It was looking for a way to tell a story through picture making. Hogarth is that guy for his time. I knew this painting intimately from New Haven. It is a semi-cartoony, moral tale and it also is a story of drunkenness. When a group of my friends and I first moved to New York, our preference was alcohol and we would get insanely drunk together. I had a fascination with those aspects of the painting and I also grew up in a colonial town in western Massachusetts. I had American flag bedsheets and a Minuteman lamp on my dresser and pictures of Benjamin Franklin on the wall. My parents had made a 1776 theme in my bedroom, so liking colonial stuff was in my DNA. I wanted to take a Hogarthian scene and bring it to colonial Massachusetts. The other thing I liked about Hogarth is that he is knocking people off their pedestals and bringing them down a notch. Essentially, that is what my work does to the august title of being an artist. I'm always showing the truthful underbelly and the embarrassing parts of being an artist.

**But you extend the narrative. Hogarth's painting tells a complicated story, which you parse and then run with. So you include one of the drinkers with his pipe, but in your version the face he looks up at is one large breast. You translate the story and tell aspects that are peculiar to you or that might be an indication of your obsessions.**

Yes, and then in the small paintings the scene plays out away from the tavern and the guy finds a woman. What was happening there was that Michelle and I were engaged and we were getting married, so it was about leaving the drunken camaraderie of the tavern and going into another world. That was where my head was at with that little tale.



*Performance Anxiety*, 2006, oil on linen, 34 x 40 inches. Photo: Christopher Burke Studio. © Sean Landers. Courtesy the artist and Taka Ishii Gallery, Tokyo.

In the piece called *Striptease* the crowd watching the performance looks less like Hogarth than Ensor. There's a kind of rapaciousness to the faces.

That was just my hand coming through. I can't paint like Hogarth. I suppose I could copy anybody's painting, but I wasn't trying to do that; I was just quickly noodling some faces in a crowd.

**When you do tribute paintings to other painters, they also have an element of humour. One of your animals even has a Salvador Dali amulet on it. So the painters you really love, you also mess with in lots of ways.**

Yes, Dali is definitely in my pantheon. I think the painting you're referring to is one in which I painted the minotaur standing in front of a maze, wearing a Salvador Dali amulet. For me, Dali was/is like a shaman in the painting. I have portrayed many artists I admire. In one series I included nine of my favourite pre-war European artists, most of them surreal easel painters. I painted them as either a clown or a ghost. I frequently paint myself as a clown, so to portray anyone else as a clown is to bring them into my world in a way. And to portray a favourite artist as a ghost is to suggest that I converse with them inside my head like Hillary Clinton famously said she did with Eleanor Roosevelt. So I guess I'm saying I talk to Duchamp in my head—it's weird. But the uniting principle with all the artists I portrayed

is that they would sit in front of a blank canvas and come up with something out of their head. So it connects to Hamsun, Dostoevsky and Joyce in that way, too. They all make something from their heads and offer it to us. By painting these ostensible heroes, it's me saying I do this, too. I had those literary influences and I also have painting influences. I've also painted comedians because I feel that legacy is in my work as well. Comedy, stand-up especially, is an art form that I really respect. I think it is a facet to making art that is never taken quite seriously and I don't know why. Obviously, I've practised, or attempted, a lot of comedy throughout my career.

**What determines the kind of art you're going to make? Why one kind of painting over another? Why video? What generates the work?**

I've always felt it was a pendulum where the need to write counterweights the need to make images. When I say "write," I mean writing paintings. I feel the pendulum swings back and forth quite equally. Right now I'm making paintings that will all feature writing. Those trees are getting written on now and no one has yet seen these new signpost paintings. These are the first two I've done and they're going to get written upon, too. I have other writing paintings planned. I've been enjoying writing. Not stream of consciousness but "writing" writing. I'm writing more



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poetically and refining what I write and making it how I want it to be. Because I made a lot of paintings when I was younger that talked about how much I want to have a beer, now I want to have some paintings that show I can also think.

**You take these trees and you carve aphorisms on them. Is this a reflection of your metaphor that language is the tree and all the branches come from it?**

Sort of. It involves a couple of different things. They are white with black letters like my early paintings. What I find interesting about aspen forests is that all the trees are connected underground by the same roots. That every artwork an artist makes in their life is figuratively connected underground by a root structure is something I find symbolically and conceptually appealing. When in Colorado, you can walk through many of the different aspen woods and you'll see arbor glyphs that will include carvings from the time the first settlers made their westward expansion, as well as initials carved two weeks ago in the shape of a heart by a pair

of lovers. There is something very basic about the human need to carve something more permanent than themselves. That's the motive to make art and the motive to write: to leave something of yourself. Also, as the scars heal and age, there is a kind of beauty to them that is similar to the way an artwork moves through time. We go to museums to see paintings made hundreds of years ago, and these things are on their own trajectory through life. The writing on the signpost paintings will also be very similar to the writing on the trees. What I like to do is pick up threads from old works, or sometimes bodies of work, which can then be twisted together in new ways. Once you do that you have another thread in the repertoire. These are the first two paintings in a new series, and the nature of it will inevitably change over time. I'm going to make another series of paintings alongside these two, which will be giant boulders where the letters will be carved perfectly like a funeral stone but it will be my poetry on them as well.



1. *Snowman in Brueghel*, 2016, oil on linen, 48 x 41 inches. Photo: Christopher Burke Studio. © Sean Landers. Courtesy the artist and Captain Petzel, Berlin.

2. *I Was Here*, 2018, oil on linen, 77.25 x 59.5 inches. Photo: Christopher Burke Studio. © Sean Landers. Courtesy the artist and Petzel, New York.

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**Is the real truth of language that ultimately it introduces us to doubt rather than certainty?**

Well, doubt is one of the few certainties. I'm not afraid of not knowing. I doubt myself endlessly and I'm not afraid of that, either. But we can tell truths or lies just as easily in pictures as we can in words. The great thing about truth is that, whichever form it takes, it always reveals itself. We all know truth when we see it, and it's often what makes art great.

**When I think about your work, Sisyphus comes to mind. In a lot of ways the dialectical frame of your work is Sisyphian.**

I love the myth of Sisyphus but if I have to choose, it's Icarus or Daedalus. Those are the two most romantic and poetic characters.

**Because they both fail?**

Of course, but the failure of Icarus is one of the most beautiful things I have ever read in literature. It means the most. It is the human endeavour itself because we all fail. We all fail because

everyone's going to die. Life is about managing that inevitable failure.

**You write that we're stuck in "the eternal dawning of now."**

**The world is going by and you're always making images of now?**

Yes, because an artist drops freeze-frames of life throughout their entire life. Life is nothing if not the opportunity to witness the eternal dawning of now. I make art to preserve as many nows as I can. Sometimes when I set out to explain things like this, it feels like I am putting a chair on a table and then a stool on top of the chair and trying to climb ever higher on this wobbly construction, and the more I talk the higher it extends and the more wobbly it becomes. But I guess what I'm trying to say is that all my art is just another now, lovingly frozen in nut oil and sent like a capsule into the future on waxen wing. ■