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VISUAL ART

Sean Landers

by Benjamin Klein

From March 9 to April 15, 2023, the Friedrich Petzel Gallery presented “Adrift,” a solo exhibition of recent paintings by long-time gallery artist Sean Landers. Installed across two large rooms of the gallery’s new space on 25th Street in Chelsea, the show consisted, in the first room, of portrait busts of dogs in front of the ocean, and paintings of surf and rock, rough ocean waves hitting the seashore, no figures, just water, rock and sky. The second room featured a long wall of paintings of dogs sitting and standing in small wooden boats on the ocean, with water all around; two large paintings of lighthouses, with the ocean spray hitting the rocks and shore below; and two even larger canvases of the skeletons of sperm whales, long dead, lying stretched out on beaches. A cursory viewing of these works might imply that the artist was messing around, perhaps ironically, with clichés of the North Atlantic region’s tradition of painting the ocean, the seashore and its denizens, as well as indulging a kind of bougie sort of tourist imagery, and society dog portraiture, in a highly skilful and playful manner but ultimately as an easy and shallow form of midcult fetishization. The artist does hail from small-town Massachusetts, and grew up with a craftsmanly version of its regional visual arts culture as his first exposure to fine art. We could, lazily, be tempted to see this as rote, even regressive imagery and content.

That interpretation is risked by the artist, even jarringly so, but it’s completely wrong. What is true, in what seems to be a move based in an unpretentious and open kind of artistic maturity, is that Landers is mining these subjects as beloved influences and well-known image

1. Sean Landers, *Sunset Dog*, 2022, oil on linen, 121.9 × 162.6 centimetres. Photo: Christopher Burke Studios. © Sean Landers. Courtesy the artist and Petzel, New York.

2. Sean Landers, *Sperm Whale Skeleton I*, 2023, oil on linen, 177.8 × 233.7 centimetres. Photo: Christopher Burke Studios. © Sean Landers. Courtesy the artist and Petzel, New York.

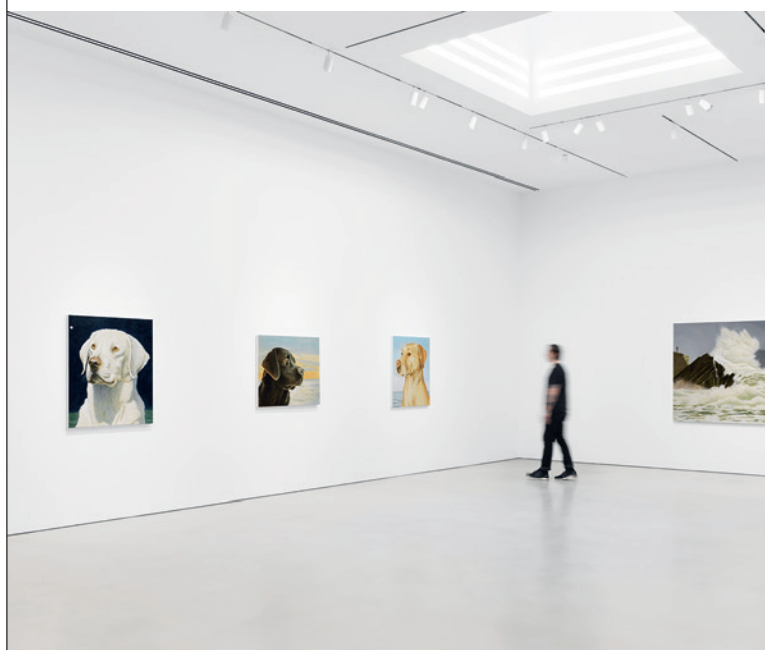
3. Sean Landers, installation view, “Sean Landers: Adrift,” 2023, Petzel, New York. Photo: Dan Bradica. © Sean Landers. Courtesy the artist and Petzel, New York.



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repertoires, and using the risk in doing so to push himself to subtly new artistic levels. These dog paintings, both the close-up busts and the ones in the boats, are of dogs and somehow also of their putative best friends, us. The dogs' eyes, expressions and attitudes are all anthropomorphic, quietly but clearly, and communicate a devastating range of emotion, human emotion (including our communal, and probably also Landers's personal, love of dogs). These dogs, painted lovingly and with absorbed

virtuosity, are like "old sea dogs," lost sadly in their predicaments. It seems impossible not to read them as allegories for wider circumstances. The current ones almost audibly whispered by these canvases are for America itself, and the best aspects of its old and serious (especially northeastern) culture, under dire threat from agents of chaos, here symbolized as that image of primal chaos—the ocean itself. It may be a stretch to equate an anxious dog in a boat to the worry that, next time, the institutions and the very fabric of society may not hold. But in the exhibition, it felt absolutely pertinent to think so, right and true.

The ghost of Winslow Homer was strongly present in this exhibition, in an open and self-aware manner, as well as a certain artistic tradition behind and alongside that exemplar of American painting. One painting of surf in the first room of the exhibition is, literally to a large extent, a copy of a Homer painting. Landers does wish to wrestle with the angels of his and our past, and to come out on the other side speaking a new language; he seems to have done so, quietly but firmly. There are other artistic images of the past that are important to this exhibition, including, oddly but resonantly,

Joachim Patinir's 16th-century painting *Charon Crossing the Styx*. But it is in literary reference and comparison that the most powerful illuminations appear to reside in trying to understand this exhibition.

Moby Dick, both the novel by Herman Melville and Landers's own painting of him with a tartan hide, are also present in "Adrift," as significant absent presences. This is especially so in terms of Melville's portrayal of the sea and its monstrosity as a vastation capable of swallowing up the efforts and essence of humankind. Included by implication are our artistic attempts to make something meaningfully whole and permanent of all of this elemental existence. A less self-evident but relevant regional ancestor presence in "Adrift" is Walt Whitman, particularly in his "Sea-Drift" poems from the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*. As I am looking at the paintings of whale skeletons, portentously recalling the White Whale, set off against near apocalyptic skies and atmosphere, poems like "As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life" and "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" recur, as in "Whereto answering, the sea / Delaying not, hurrying not / Whisper'd me through the night,

and very plainly before day-break /
Lisp'd to me the low and delicious
word death" (from "Out of the
Cradle Endlessly Rocking").

There is a control of perspective here, in Landers's paintings, a regard for the fear and anticipation of mortality, both literal and artistic. These are images of general destruction and the possibility that all our works will come to this and no more. But there is also crucially the artistic triumph of that very thing magnificently expressed by the paintings in a recuperative way, and from here, the implication of artistic and human survival for us—and for Landers's own work.

The lighthouse paintings have an uncanny presence and feel like they are concealing some secret but not one known from orthodox philosophy or religion, and here another kind of North Atlantic/New England poetry feels summoned—as if in a landscape described in an Emily Dickinson poem. These sea-and-lighthouse-scapes are filled with agency and animation, perhaps imparted by our imaginations, and here brought to life by Landers's near mystical apprehension of them. As Dickinson concludes in Poem 627 ("The Tint I cannot take—is best"), so does Landers seem to: "Until the Cheated Eye / Shuts arrogantly—in the Grave— / Another way—to see." ■

"Adrift" was exhibited at Friedrich Petzel Gallery, New York, from March 9, 2023, to April 15, 2023.

Benjamin Klein is a Brooklyn-based artist and writer, and co-director of McBride Contemporain in Montreal.