Sean Landers in Conversation with Johanna Fateman

It can be like pulling teeth to get artists to talk about their work. But for Sean Landers, the desire to explain is defining; it becomes, at times, the very substance of his art. The textless canvases on his studio walls the day I visit, in January, as he prepares for his upcoming New York show, are examples of the refined allegorical realism that has become his style in recent years, and perhaps feats of restraint as well. "I've been chattering in my artwork for so many years," he tells me (in fairness, he's been making paintings without words, off and on, for a while). "Maybe it's time for me to be quiet and let people have their own thoughts about what I'm trying to do," he wonders aloud at one point. Maybe. But I don't have to twist his arm to get him to talk.

Our conversation ranges in subject matter: from a rundown of the existential themes and personal symbols that shape this exhibition to the music he listens to as he paints to the predicament of the *enfant terrible*, midcareer. Landers returns, as we talk, to his early work—the frenetic conceptual practice that announced him in the '90s, which had his stream-of-consciousness writing and the abject provocations of his alter ego, Chris Hamson, at its core. He invokes that era not to reminisce but for context—to describe a point of origin or a corner he painted himself into, so to speak, and how he got out.

Among the works-in-progress we look at, there's a line of dog portraits on one wall, busts of Labrador retrievers gazing into the distance. Opposite, swaths of ocean and sky seem primed for his lines of cursive, all-caps aphorisms or swirling clouds of agitated prose (Landers says this time they will not appear); beached whales, long dead, have become strange cathedrals of bone. And *The Fog Warning (Halibut Fishing)*, Winslow Homer's scene of peril and dreadful portent, from 1885, is reimagined here in stark, metaphysical terms. Adrift in time and space, dogs—the artist's current avatar—are alone in boats, absurdly or wisely placid, beyond hope.

Johanna Fateman: I like to ask people what they were like in high school. Because it's . . .

Sean Landers: I think it's hugely important.

Whatever we figure out later in life about what to make or write and how to do it begins there—hopefully, the work becomes smarter and more sophisticated—with some, you know, insufferable version of it.

I agree. When I taught, my first assignment for every class began with the question, "What's the first artwork you ever made where you thought, *Maybe I have something*; *maybe this thing separates me from other people who don't really have this ability?*" And then I said, "OK, I want you to remake it with the full artmaking abilities you have now."

That's a great assignment.

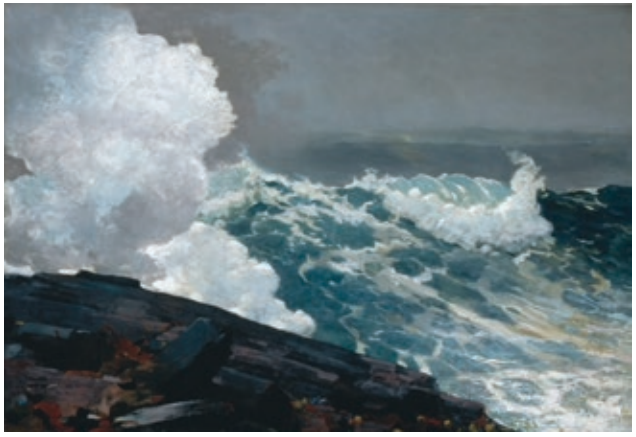
It resulted in some really weird stuff. Sometimes, you could recognize it; you could see some relationship between whatever the student made for the assignment and what they were doing now. Sometimes, it was totally different. But either way, it's a great way to learn about that person as an artist.

So, what's yours?

Well, in high school, I was drawing a lot and writing. I was writing poetry, lots of it, horrible teenage-boy poetry that was shameful in every possible respect . . . Oh, what was my first artwork ever?

Yeah, when did you say to yourself about something you made, "This is art."

I was in second grade and . . .



Winslow Homer
Northeaster, 1895,
Oil on canvas,
34 ½ x 50 inches,
Image courtesy:
© The Metropolitan Museum of Art / Art Resource, NY.

. . . second grade!

It was Presidents' Day. The teacher said, "You can either draw George Washington or Abraham Lincoln." So, I drew Lincoln because I liked his beard. A lot of the other seven-year-olds had drawn circles for faces with *L*s or triangles for noses. But mine actually looked like Abraham Lincoln. The teacher held it up and said, "See, everybody, this is how you do it." And I remember thinking, *This feels good. I want to keep feeling this feeling for the rest of my life, whatever it is*.

Have you remade it?

No, I don't think I made a painting of Abraham Lincoln ever again. I didn't do my own assignment! I wonder what I would learn about myself if I did? Maybe if I have some free time after this show, I'll do it—or I could just throw it into the show, in my line of dog portraits, have one of Abraham Lincoln.

Yeah, a wild card.

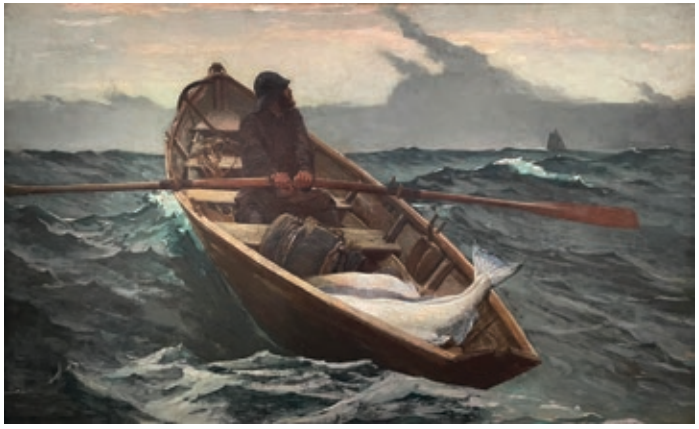
I think you might have a good idea for me there.

Do you have a title for this show?

I don't. I guess it would be something like *Dogs Adrift*, *Dog Adrift*, or maybe *Dog Alone*.

"Alone," that's the feeling. There's a real sense of desolation here because a dog isn't supposed to be alone.

In a boat. I know, it's horrible. My mom, who is ninety—I showed her the paintings, and she was like, "The dog's alone; how's he going to get back?" I said, "You got it. That's exactly it."



Winslow Homer
The Fog Warning,
1885, Oil on canvas,
30 ¼ x 48 ½ inches,
Image courtesy:
© 2023 Museum of
Fine Arts, Boston.

And is that really how you feel? You're like, "This is me, the dog."

Well, yes, to an extent. I see the dog adrift as an allegory for what a painting is once it leaves an artist's studio. Then it is on its own journey, adrift in time and space.

So, the dog is the main character.

Yeah, the dog in the boat, symbolizing art, is the main character. The ocean symbolizing time and space is another character . . .

. . . the lighthouse.

Yes, there are two lighthouse paintings, which are also characters, and there are two whale-skeleton paintings. The whale skeletons, for me, symbolize the inevitability of all art. Those are the four elements, or characters, of this show.

And Abraham Lincoln.

[*Laughing*] Yeah, Lincoln. So, I wasn't going to tell anybody about these four characters, what they mean to me, or what they're doing with each other. I thought I'd just see what happens. But I'm still alive, and we're talking about it now, so . . .

Yeah.

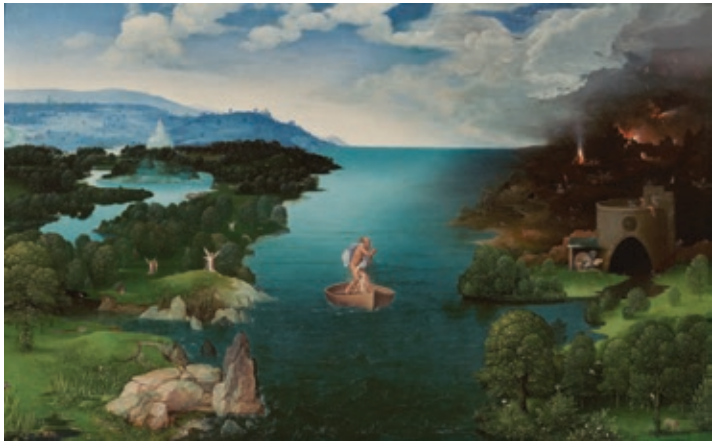
I didn't really have an idea for the show. I just started painting what I wanted, and I made these two [*indicating* Northeaster *and* Summer Squall] directly after Homer's paintings of the same titles. I've been thinking about him for a long time. Early in my career, in the '90s, I was making stream-of-consciousness paintings. My idea was that when artists make paintings, they have all these thoughts that go unrecorded. I decided I would put down what I was thinking—directly while painting it—extemporaneously.

In words.

I'd stand there and fill the thing up. When I went to replace the stream-of-consciousness text with images, I came up with this idea for a clown in a rowboat on the water. This was in 1996. And to learn to paint the ocean, I went to Homer and, in particular, I looked at *The Fog Warning (Halibut Fishing)*. When I started to think about this show, I thought, *Well, I'll just start by painting what I like*, so I went back to Homer. This [*pointing at Homer's* The Fog Warning (Halibut Fishing)] is that famous one of the fisherman in the rowboat. [*Shrugging*] I put a dog in there instead. The dog character gained significance for me recently when I was doing a series of animal portraits.

My favorite was of a Labrador. I wrote above the dog: *I was a bad boy before I was a good boy,* which, if you are familiar with my trajectory over the past thirty-seven years, is kind of my story, in brief.

I was also thinking about a painting by Joachim Patinir that I saw at the Prado in Madrid. Everyone wants to get into a big room to see the famous Bosch painting *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, but there are some small paintings there, too. One of them is Patinir's depiction of a guy in a little boat on the River Styx, *Charon Crossing the Styx.* This painting captivated me. I felt that Patinir was trying to portray that time between life and the afterlife or whatever. And I thought, *That's the position that* painting *itself is in*. Because artists make these works that are like reliquaries to themselves—I know it's a corny thought. But when you go to museums, you think of the artists' names; you think, "I saw a Picasso." The artwork stands in for the artist. As artists, we try to ignore what we're doing, but I just decided to be up-front and make a subject of it: *What am I doing here?* I'm eulogizing myself in oil paint and hoping people will take care of it in the years to come. And *that* is the helpless dog adrift—a painting adrift, an artist adrift, in time and space.



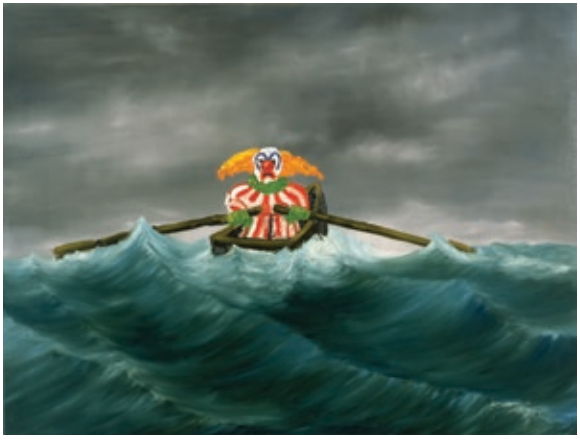
Joachim Patinir
Charon crossing the Styx, 1520-1524,
oil on panel,
25 x 40 ½ inches,
catalogue no. 1616.
Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado.
Image courtesy:
© 2023 Photographic Archive Museo Nacional del Prado.

Where do you get the dogs?

On the internet. I find bodies and heads that work, and I Photoshop them together, or I amalgamate them together directly as I draw them onto the canvas. I couldn't find a perfect dog online for each situation, so they're more from the mind. And an important point is that painting this way is almost the same for me as writing extemporaneously used to be. Back then, I was emptying my head of words. And now, I'm using images in almost the same way. When I first started making surreal paintings, I would draw with paint on a canvas, then wipe it off. So, if I made a cartoon, and I didn't like it, I'd wash it off, but there was still a little ghost image left. And then I'd do another one and another. After a while, there were so many crisscrossing lines that an image would emerge, almost like a Rorschach. And that is solidly in the tradition, I think, of what the Surrealists were talking about, trying to get to the unconscious.

So, you think of your stream-of-consciousness writing as automatic writing in André Breton's tradition?

I think it must be connected just because it is so similar. I went to art school, so I didn't have a lot of literature courses. I didn't study it. But I remember finding a book by Gregory Corso. I think it was printed in his



Sean Landers
Alone, 1996
Oil on linen
72 x 96 inches

handwriting and was close to automatic writing, and I thought it was interesting. Of the Beats, I loved William S. Burroughs a lot, too. (I know that's not automatic writing.) At that time, I also read lots of Henry Miller, whose writing appeared to be stream-of-consciousness. They were all formative for me, but none more than Knut Hamsun, James Joyce, and Dostoyevsky, all of whom pioneered a style of writing from inside the main character's head. I felt I was in this tradition when I made my first text paintings.

I think that was the theory of the cut-up technique, at least partially. You were supposed to be getting the truth—some unconscious truth.

Yeah, and that *is* what happens. However, like anything, the longer you do something, the more in control of it you become. When I started writing—as a part of my art—in the late '80s and early '90s, I wasn't in control. I was shooting a weapon I couldn't handle, spraying bullets all over the place. First, I watched my friends' reactions to the written stuff I'd taped on my studio walls. Were they laughing with me or at me? First, it was *at*. By the time I started exhibiting, when galleries were willing to show this stuff, I was way more in control.

And do you still write that way?

I do still write a lot. There are pieces of paper everywhere [*pointing at piles of papers on his desk*]. I write when I'm having an emotional time, and things are hard to manage.

When I taught, I'd have a nude model come into the classroom. Then I'd hand each student a yellow legal pad and a pen and say, "Write for a half hour. Don't take the pen off the page. Just write." I wouldn't tell them what to write about.

Would they do it?

Everyone would do it. And my point was that the "subject"—the model—is not the subject. The subject is *you,* the artist. And that's where I would lead the discussion. But, anyway, I'm just saying that I think ultimately, if you're painting a subject or whatever you're doing, you're talking about yourself in the end, and that's . . .

. . . that's your whole deal.

Well, it's everybody's whole deal, don't you think? Whether artists acknowledge it or not, they are making art about themselves.

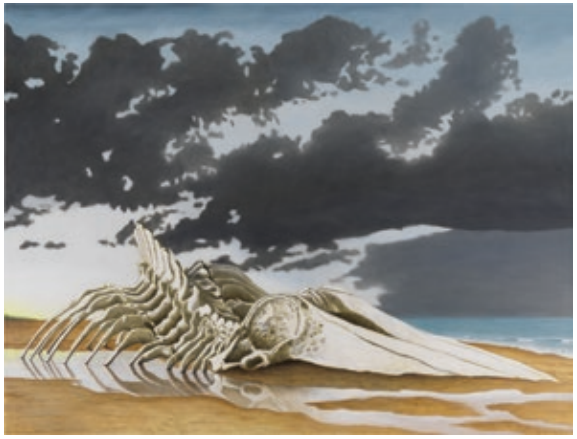
I'm of two minds about that.

Sean Landers
Moby Dick (Merrilees), 2013
Oil on linen
112 x 336 inches

People have subjects they try to address in their art, and the subjects are something other than themselves. But my view is that in the end, it *is* about themselves.

[*We look at Landers's beached-whale-skeleton paintings.]*

In 2013, I made a giant Tartan whale painting titled *Moby Dick*. And when you Google me today, it might be one of the first images that come up. So, I'm somewhat identified with it, and it was obviously a reference to the novel. There were harpoons in my whale—for me, they symbolized the effort to make a great artwork. We know from Melville's story that when the whale would surface, Ahab and Ishmael would see all the broken harpoons and trailing ropes from other whalers' failed attempts. For me, that symbolized efforts at making a lasting artwork. In the novel, it doesn't work—every harpoon has failed. The whale wins in the end. So, in my parable, no one ever makes a truly lasting artwork. Time will eventually erase all traces of us. So, if my *Moby Dick* was about everlasting hope for what we make, these skeleton paintings are about accepting mortality—specifically, artistic mortality. While I was painting these skeletons, somebody wanted to buy that giant Tartan whale painting. It had been hard to sell because it is thirty feet long. They went to unroll it for inspection and found that it hadn't been stored properly. It was destroyed—the painting had stuck to itself in its roll. That incident gave these skeleton paintings added poignancy and underscored the whole point of this show. It is truly hard for art to survive. Fires, floods, wars, and human indifference all conspire to bury an artwork in time. For us to stand in front of a four-hundred-year-old painting in a museum is a truly miraculous survival story. The main reason we get to view these treasured paintings, besides luck, is love. Generations of people cared to pass this highly esteemed, revered, loved object forward through time. And that's the crux of art: It's humanity's best side preserved by the collective "us." And the



Sean Landers
Sperm Whale Skeleton II, 2023
Oil on linen
70 x 92 inches

crux of being an artist is asking for that love from the world.

I think people forget that—unless you're a painter who has assistants making the work—there's a lot of meditative time. It's physical; there's space to cover. And these are pretty big paintings.

Exactly, and no assistants were used on these. You think your thoughts as you work. That's what I was putting on my early paintings, those thoughts. There's a lot of time to think, but it's good time, and you can really change it with the music you're listening to. For many of these, for the "up" times, I found a Spotify playlist that really worked for me—"Alternative '80s." When I need to feel "low," I usually go to film scores: Jóhan Jóhansson, Ólafur Arnalds, Max Richter, and composers like that.

[*Landers shows me a small map of the show he's made, using little slips of paper to represent his paintings.*]

And when does the show open?

March 9.

You're going to be busy.

Yeah, but it feels normal to me. I have been lucky to have always been busy. If I didn't have things scheduled, I think I might panic. I want things to be going the way I want them to be going all the time. And they don't always. There are ups and downs. But I've been doing this for a long time, thirty-six or thirty-seven years or so. You can become invisible for huge stretches of time. People don't know who you are anymore. You're the uncool guy at the party.

Yeah, there are cycles.

I think you asked a really interesting question before I started talking about the whale skeletons. Do you remember what it was? Because I wanted to answer.

Well, I was disagreeing a little. We were talking about your students and what they would write for that exercise . . .

. . . what they were thinking was the subject. Yeah, I was trying to get them to ask, "What is the subject matter? Is it what you look at or portray? Or are you the subject, the lens through which it's being portrayed?" There is no definitive answer.

It's both.

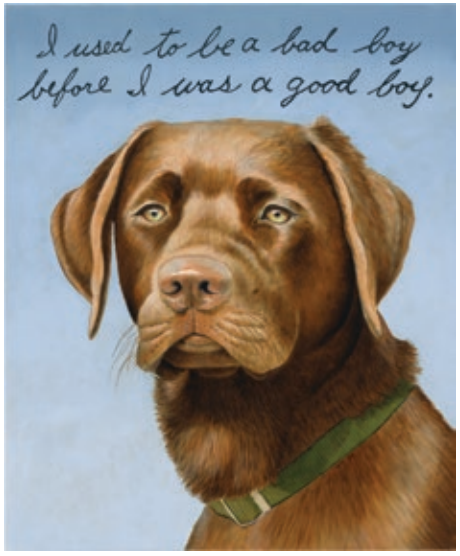
I guess I agree. I do find the lens at least as interesting as the subject itself. When I read a book, I often think the truer subject is between the lines. What an author reveals subconsciously is often more interesting than the narrative. In this interview, for instance, truth can be discerned in what I don't say.

I don't know about stream-of-consciousness being a truer reflection of the self. For me, that kind of writing often isn't. I think of it more as preparatory.

We'd probably agree that "who we are" is a moving target. We're complicated. Sometimes with a fictional character, you can express just a small fraction of what your total mind is doing. You can dump it out through them. I entered the art world as a fictional character called "Chris Hamson." He was a struggling artist living in the Lower East Side in the late '80s and early '90s.

Creating a fictional character can be so powerful.

Right. In my early writing, it was hard to judge whether I was sincere. But I learned quickly that Chris Hamson gave me the cover to be very, *very* sincere. And that's been a good thing for me to be able to use, even in my painting now. That character—the persona—came with me as I became an image maker. And after Chris Hamson stopped making art, there was the Sean Landers character. Probably very few people who were at my art shows in the early '90s are still looking at my work now. So, for many viewers, the performative aspect of my work is lost. I don't think it's the main subject anymore.



Sean Landers
Dog, 2021
Oil on linen
34 x 28 inches

I don't think it has to be—you've taken the lessons of Chris Hamson and assimilated them. Having a persona was conceptually interesting initially, but that doesn't mean you have to keep it for your whole life. You've retained the freedom he gave you.

Yes, and it's allowed me to paint things sincerely, though I think my work is always a little tongue-in-cheek. Maybe not in this show. I see it most in the lighthouse—but that's a pretty dry joke, if it's a joke at all.

You feel weird about the lighthouse.

Yeah, I do. I'm freaked out by it. It's like, "Wow, next, I'll just make a seagull on a post, I guess, the way this is going."

Because it's . . .

. . . because the subject resembles a painting from a Cape Cod gift shop—just a really big version.

OK, well, this is good to talk about. I wanted to talk about the role of embarrassment.

In my early days, I would judge how effective an artwork was by how embarrassed I was by it. I did a show in '92 at Andrea Rosen Gallery with wet-clay sculptures of heads on poles. And I had stream-of-consciousness writing in the show and cartoons of art world stereotypes. I had twelve calendar pages with 365 entries of what I had done or not done on that day in the year. The show was very well-received. But I felt so exposed by the content, in so many different ways, that I broke out with shingles before the opening, which was not normal for a guy my age, twenty-nine at the time. I was blowing up my nervous system, and that became my standard. I would think about new work, *Well, if I'm not feeling unbearable pain and embarrassment and humiliation, then I'm not trying hard enough.*

But don't you think you can learn to tolerate embarrassment? You don't feel it so acutely.

I don't know. I survived it, but I don't enjoy feeling embarrassed. I got married in '97, and then we had our first child in '99, and I wanted to put my family first and not just go down in history as a total narcissist. This might just be me being nuts here. But I feel like I got some of the respectability back that I had bartered away when I was willing to suffer any embarrassment to make sure that the *New York Times*, the *New Yorker*, the *Village Voice*, *Art News*, *Art in America, Flash Art*, and *Artforum* wrote about me. Once I had a family, those superficial things stopped mattering as much. And now, I think I've banked enough respectability to really embarrass myself again [*laughing*] if I wanted to—I don't, though. When a thirty-year-old is doing stuff like that, it can be thought of as interesting. When a sixty-year-old is doing it, it's not a good look.

Roberta Smith wrote about my early shows, and I thank her to this day for it. One of the things she said is that, following examples like Vito Acconci, it would be difficult for me to keep that level of personal exposure up. Vito was one of my teachers in grad school, so it's true that I was trying to be an artist in his wake. Roberta's implication was, "I wonder if Landers can stay in this character because Vito couldn't." It was almost like a challenge to me. Can I keep it real? In the end, no, I couldn't. I could not remain that naked forever. And I think there are a lot of rock 'n' roll parallels for this. I guess Iggy Pop is maybe the exception to the rule?

I think he's revered for his early career, and people think it's cool that he's still doing it. But I don't think anyone is saying, "this is radical."

That's right.

But, of course, it's hard to get older when your early work, in terms of its content, really is tied to being young in some way. I think about this for myself regarding the different things I've done in my life. But I think your trajectory with Chris Hamson is a great example of what can be done. It's part of your experience, and now you're able to adopt characters and rhetorical poses sort of organically. If you were still really doing Chris Hamson, that would be totally stupid.

So, you're telling me to bring him back. I hear ya [*laughing*]. Well, I was thinking, for a show I'm curating of artists who use alter egos, I might find a cache . . .

. . . some paintings Chris left behind in his attic.

A big painting of a lighthouse. How is performing in front of an audience onstage, which I know you've done? Is that you, or is that some version of you?

It's funny that I'm grappling with that again. My band Le Tigre stopped playing shows in like 2005. And then, just recently, we temporarily got back together. We're touring next summer. So, I have a persona of some kind, for sure. And Le Tigre has a collective persona. The three of us put a conceptual frame around the whole thing, which is a way of having distance, but it's still hard.

In what way is it hard?

Just having to stand up there and perform music that we wrote—I mean, I was in my early twenties at the beginning.

But performing a song that was ostensibly written in private prior is different than having to make it up in front of people. So at least there's some separation.

There's a plan; that's true.

So, you're out there performing things you've already done. And it's very similar to this [*gesturing at the stuff in his studio*] because you know what you make in private will eventually be shown publicly. Luckily, I don't have to sing this painting in front of people. I can just hang it, shut up, and go. I still have to show my face, though.

And I think you have to find the same kind of balance. You have to give yourself some cover so you can function and have freedom, but you can't retreat into an aloof, ironic place where you're just playing it safe.

Exactly. People sense that. They know when you're really putting it out there and when you're not. Ultimately, you can't hide it anyway, so you might as well just deliver the goods. And there can be great rewards when you do, but it's tough.

Yeah, it is. Anyway, what do you want to say about the show before we stop? Is there anything else you want to include in the interview?

Well, it's going to be a no-text show. And we've talked about the four characters.

Except for the lighthouses.

Yes, this is the most sensitive subject for me. The lighthouses symbolize the institutional or social dynamics that decide which art is worth preserving. It's not one individual or one time period. It's many different people over

the course of years who decide what a society or civilization will deem worthy of preserving. I chose to paint one lighthouse from the East Coast of the US and one from the UK, so they frame the show—or the Atlantic Ocean parenthetically—as a space for this meditation to take place. In the end, whether the dog is saved or lost is unknown. And we won't know, as these decisions are beyond my, and all of our, horizons. I won't know how any part of the show truly feels until I set everything up in the gallery. For now, I'm not sure if the lighthouses represent hope or something more sad or sinister.

It seems like it's both.

Yeah, on the one hand, a lighthouse is a beacon that you sail toward. On the other, it's warning you that you might crash on the rocks, never to be seen or heard from again.

And I'd say this about this show: I just allowed it to boil up out of what I like. I like dogs. I love the ocean. I love riding my bike from Amagansett out to the Montauk lighthouse; I have always been drawn to points where the land ends. And the whale skeletons represent mortality for me and the sad realization that nothing can last, which is the backdrop in which we all go on living. There's something about all of these four things that compel me. Not least of all, the ocean itself. The ocean as a location is hugely important in the evolution of my painting. When I was transitioning from text painting to image painting in the early '90s, I wanted to create a half-fictional, half-real world that my characters could inhabit. I chose the ocean because, firstly, it's global, connecting all people around the world.

Secondly, a circumnavigation around it seems akin to the journey of a human life through time. Thirdly, whenever you are in the ocean, you are in a completely other world; we can't live there, and its creatures can't live here. As I said earlier, I studied Homer to learn to paint the ocean. In particular, I looked at *Northeaster* at the Met. Quoting Homer directly in this new series was a way to connect my painting—and being in the present—with my artistic past.

Nothing makes me happier than painting the ocean. Its beauty, in all its states, is never-ending. And conceptually, I love how its tides are like Earth's slow, steady breath and its waves, its heartbeat. Being near the ocean provides solace and perspective, but it can also bring terror. Carried to us by comets, it is our gift of life from the universe. It is our most tangible connection to the eternal. I love the ocean for all these reasons, and painting it connects me conceptually—and warmly—to the space where so many of my characters live. Within whom I will live—eventually.

This show is probably more "me" than any other show because I'm not trying to muscle the narrative one way or another. I'm just painting what's interesting to me. And this is what it is.