

Sean Landers' exhibition at the Consortium Museum, his first in France in over 20 years, offers a retrospective outlook on his pictorial work: about forty paintings created between 1993 and today, mostly from private collections, revisit the various series punctuating the path of this artist born in 1962 in Palmer, MA, and settled in New York since the mid-1980s.

Though Sean Landers is one of today's greatest contemporary painters, in the 1980s he actually studied sculpture at the Philadelphia College of Art and later at Yale, where Vito Acconci was his teacher. As he explains, he learned painting from his mother and his grandmother, both painters. After graduating from Yale, he came to New York in the fall of 1986, settling in an East Village building with Richard Phillips and a few others—John Currin had a studio across the street, and Lisa Yuskavage wasn't too far away. In the East Village, where neo-conceptual artists Peter Halley and Jeff Koons were beginning to blossom, other conceptual artists who had decided on figurative painting could be found. Ever since Yale, Landers had been making large wooden sculptures representing animal fights inspired by traditional painting: *"to make figurative art in school was the 'wrong' thing to do back then at a time when Minimalism and Conceptual Art were taught. It was thought preposterous, laughable, so of course how could I resist?"* he said. He would write down notes directly on the walls of his studio, transforming them into a sort of more or less private diary, which took over any other kind of expression; then something happened when he transferred them on a writing pad.

"The first day I wrote on a legal pad and taped it to my wall as work, I got an immediate reaction. John Currin came by, and I could tell a light bulb went on in his head: this is not writing, it's certainly not painting. It's something weird and in-between and maybe it tries to make its own space." In 1990, he exhibited around a hundred handwritten pages at Postmasters gallery in New York, excerpts from a journal narrating his heartbreaks as well as the life struggles of a young artist in the East Village, making use of a character bearing his name (*"he's 90% me"*), or sometimes an alter ego. Sean Landers' painting oeuvre is wholly encapsulated in this journal; between fiction and biography, it exposes its author in whichever manner he decides on, never shying from giving this persona center stage. In short, it foretells the self-staging that thirty years later became the mode of expression introduced by social networks, which is ultimately close to the mode of reality television. Sanders himself mentions the influence of *An American Family*, a TV series created in 1973 and considered the very first reality show, which closely followed the Loud family in Santa Barbara.

The journal and handwritten notes were transposed on canvas. The artist displayed himself in these paintings in exactly the same way people display themselves on Instagram today, sometimes looking for the best angles, at other times for perspectives that would elicit self-pity, and at still other times moving away from reality to give the illusion of something other. In this way, *Fart* (1993), a 9-foot wide painting, is studded with a hundred notes among which *"Goodwoman I love you," "I went to an art party last night and couldn't handle it," "Helena just called me from the airport I love her," "At least I don't feel rejection anymore," "Enough about you, what about me," "I owe Germany an apology," "I love myself so much," "Macaulay Culkin is my favorite actor," "I'm not the loser you think I am," "I need therapy but won't get it to make my art crazier."*

Sloth (2001) tells another story: *"I live within one mile of the World Trade Center. On September eleventh I was in my living room with my two-year-old daughter Penelope sitting on my lap when we heard the roar of a low flying jet liner. (...) I entered a prolonged period of inactivity. For nearly three full months I'd come to my studio here and just sit in a chair for eight hours. The most productive thing I'd do is jerk off to porn on the internet."* The text,

whatever it is, then becomes a compositional motif, sometimes simply reduced to a sheer signature—well before Josh Smith. Images were progressively added to the text, as were alter egos, odd creatures, or even at times anatomical parts, as with *The Ether of Memory* (1994), dotted with breasts. *“It was just so taboo in those knee-jerk politically correct times that I couldn’t resist,”* confessed Landers, who also explained that any attempt to link aesthetics and politics in an artwork is *a priori* irrelevant.

Text is often present in Landers’s artworks; the notes were soon joined by numerous signposts indicative of anecdotes rather than directions, libraries with books displaying imaginary titles, birch tree forests with their tree trunks covered with carved inscriptions ... It is easy now to mention all kinds of influences, but what is remarkable is that at the beginning of the 1990s Landers looked in the direction of Magritte, Picasso, and Picabia. *“Basically, the 20th century in art was an argument between what was possible via Picasso and what was possible via Duchamp. Almost everybody wants to be on Duchamp’s team, because who’s going to roll up their sleeves, show their biceps, and say, ‘I’m a painter’? I did a whole series focused on Picasso and it culminated with a ‘Picasso, I want to be like you’ letter.”*

Later, he painted animals whose pelts were replaced with tartan motifs, exploring a surrealist tradition he was not stepping back from and brilliantly demonstrating a quasi-limitless imagination.

Finally, the Consortium Museum exhibition presents in its entirety his most recent series centered on *Plankboy*, a character made of assembled wooden boards nailed together that appeared for the first time in a 2000 painting— also shown in the exhibition. Like a character on a TV show that would have been absent for a few seasons, Plankboy is now found taking part in simple activities referring to Greek myths such as Icarus, Narcissus, and Sisyphus. It becomes immediately perceptible how this charming marionette is probably a metaphor for the figure of the artist in general, and for Sean Landers most particularly. *“He is like a more pure and sincere me. In these troubling times, it is nice to have him back. He is innocence, like something made by a kid. I try to make his construction feel innocent, similar to how I would have constructed a go-cart when I was eight years old. (...) When I first made him, I was thinking about not fitting in. He is a piece of milled lumber in a forest of natural wood. Kind of like an American returning to a country of their ancestry.”*

Eric Troncy