

Petzel

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Sean Landers

The artist sets sail on stormy existential seas.
 By **Joseph R. Wolin**

★★★★★
Marianne Boesky Gallery + Friedrich Petzel Gallery, through June 18 (see Uptown + Chelsea)

Sean Landers's reputation as a painter has sometimes been overshadowed by those of his Yale grad-school pals John Currin, Lisa Yuskavage and Richard Phillips, as well as by his own notoriety as a purveyor of Conceptual art masquerading as abjectly confessional comedy (or vice versa). His current gallery doubleheader makes a case for Landers as a figurative painter worthy of consideration alongside his peers, and for his figurative paintings as part and parcel of his larger quasi-autobiographical project. Two bodies of work, made 15 years apart, show Landers developing a painting style that shares something of Currin's and Yuskavage's homages to the Old Masters via *Playboy* magazine pinup illustrator Alberto Vargas, but also something of George Condo's versions of the same via *Mad* magazine cartoonist Don Martin.

The Old Masters get the Landers treatment in a 1996 series in the exhibition at Boesky. Titled "A Midnight Modern Conversation," after William Hogarth's painting of the same name at the Yale Center for British Art, the show ensconces Landers's send-ups of 18th-century art in the 19th-century Eastlake-style interiors of Boesky's Upper East Side brownstone. In five of the canvases, Landers reprises

vignettes from Hogarth's picture of men in various states of drunken dishevelment around a punch bowl. But instead of Hogarth's moralizing genre scene, he gives us id-fueled grotesqueries, inspired, a gallery handout suggests, by his own imbibing, inhaling, wenching and, presumably, fighting as a young artist in New York. In the surreal piece de résistance, *A Midnight Modern Conversation (Ignoring Hallucinations)*, a pipe-smoking gentleman's drinking companions have grown tits in place of their faces. This work numbers among Landers's first forays into representational painting, and



Around the World Alone (Push on Able Seaman Push On)



A Midnight Modern Conversation (Ignoring Hallucinations)

notwithstanding its entrancing weirdness and a few passages of genuine painterly brilliance, its crude rendering verges on the amateurish, as much a burlesque of "serious" painting as of male fantasy. This approach works better in small, sketchy pictures like *Striptease*, which portrays a damsel baring herself to a ghoulish crowd of grasping, periwigged men, or *Drowning*, in which a redcoat sinks beneath the waves under a crescent moon.

The ocean reappears in the exhibition at Petzel—titled "Around the World Alone"—in nine new large paintings of sad-faced clowns manning the wheels of sailing ships on shoreless seas. In *Around the World Alone (Boy Skipper-Dawn)*, a young clown, with a full head of orange fright-wig hair anxiously grasps the helm with one hand, while gripping the ship's rail for dear life with the other; rosy dawn tints the corner of the sky. In a canvas subtitled *Lord of the Seas*, a mature clown with a high forehead and a beard muses while smoking a calabash pipe. The clown in *Venerable Seafarer-Dusk* appears older still, with a bald pate and a paunch; a candle on the ship's rail burns symbolically down to a stump. Other works show clowns in sou'westers steering through thunderstorms or in sealskin, sailing past icebergs.

Crisp and pellucid, these paintings seem assured in comparison with the more tentative Hogarthian revels, artfully walking the broad line between persuasive realism and cartoons. Landers even gives each clown—despite matching bulbous red noses, Bozo hair and greasypaint—an individual character, or, really, the same character seen at different ages.

The show makes the case for Landers as a painter worthy of consideration.

Together, they suggest the traditional theme of the voyage of life, with the funnyman as everyman: a stand-in for the artist (who, like most of the clowns depicted, is middle-aged) as well as the rest of us, as we navigate the wide seas of existence. Landers makes this point explicit in a piece subtitled *Epilogue 1* by placing a real captain's wheel in front of the show's largest painting: a boldly cinematic expanse of empty ocean that invites us to step up and set course.

Yet for all his triumphs as a painter, it is as a sculptor that Landers really stands above his contemporaries. Three bronze heads on posts near the gallery's entrance portray our sailor aging from chipper and handsome young clown to creased and careworn old jester, lower jaw jutting forward, eyes sunken and haunted, painted eyebrows indicated in low relief. A fourth, *Ancient Mariner*, is visible in the gallery's back office and is naturalistically polychromed in colored encaustic. Life-size and affecting, it possesses a real sense of pathos. If the ship's wheel makes us all into clown captains surveying the endless horizon, *Ancient Mariner* transforms us into clown Aristotles contemplating the bust of a clown Homer. And that's a seriously funny thing to be.