

Petzel

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Sean Landers: *The Urgent Necessity of Narcissism for the Artistic Mind (Jaguar)*, 2014, oil on linen, 50 by 65 inches; at Petzel.

SEAN LANDERS

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A compelling struggle between uncomfortably revealing candor and bombastic narcissism once drove Sean Landers's work. Although these qualities still resonate, the force behind the 23 recent paintings in his show "North American Mammals" is different.

Agreeably ensconced in midlife with family and success, Landers no longer seems obsessed with the shallow pursuit of fame, and is now focused on his artistic legacy. He has decided mortality is the new black.

A visually sophisticated showman, Landers is not content just ratcheting up the wow factor in his work, but must ensure its profundity. In the final room of this four-section show, the two massive, dark paintings of shipwrecks on the ocean floor, which surround the 28-foot-long showstopper of a plaid, harpoon-riddled *Moby Dick*, include boulders with chiseled inscriptions explaining the canvases' metaphorical significance. As is often true in Landers's work, text assumes major importance.

Two large canvases of birch forests in the gallery's anteroom served to introduce the paintings of North American animals, which lurked in the next room beyond these painted glades. Words carved in white bark recall either neurotic self-criticism from Landers's youth or his current obsession with *vita brevis*.

However, the real inventions of the show were the animal paintings. Subtly anthropomorphized in tartan fur, the creatures are depicted in shallow landscape spaces that suggest dioramas at a natural history museum. Confident, impeccable craftsmanship has replaced the expressively clumsy brio of earlier paintings. In *The Urgent Necessity of Narcissism for the Artistic Mind (Jaguar)*, 2014, Landers perches the pink and green plaid feline on a fallen log by a stream, all strategically set against a striped brown and ochre background of trees and sky. The masterful illumination emphasizes the sensuous volumes and textures of log and fur. Pinks, greens, yellows and umbers ripple in the mirroring pool, which is given motion by the jaguar's lapping tongue. Nevertheless, Landers's use of a traditional representational style is as calculated as other techniques he's employed. If these paintings sometimes seem to border on illustration, think Magritte, not Soutine.

The nine animal paintings correspond to nine 72-by-55-inch canvases, displayed in another room. Each of the latter is an elegant portrayal of a fully stocked six-shelf bookcase. When read from left to right, the titles on the colorful spines form whole sentences, which in turn comprise various fables, composed by Landers, about the spiritual perseverance required to make great art. So the analogue to *Strange Progeny (Fawn)*, 2013, depicting a young doe whose white-furred throat sports a gold "Fawn" necklace, is *Fawn (Strange Progeny)*, 2014. Here, the book titles relate that Landers considers his paintings to be his only future remnants after his biological descendants have perished, and that he has "Cloaked Them/In Tartan Fur/To Help/Protect Them/From Indifference/On Their/Journey/ Through Time." A crystal globe encases each animal, shrunk and minus plaid protection, on a shelf in its corresponding library painting.

Simultaneously charming and infuriating, Landers has continuously tried to reconcile the antithetical nature of visual and textual meaning, using various approaches. If he eschews text, he doesn't believe he communicates what he must imagine is his works' deeper significance. However, when we are focused on reading, we leave the experience of the painting. Trying to have both inevitably courts failure. Though, as Landers argued in the show's final section, on a stone inscription in *Shipwreck II*, "Since immortality is impossible, even through art, every . . . attempt is a guaranteed failure. Failed attempts are beautiful things, poignant poetry."

—Dennis Kardon