

NY CULTURE

## Sean Landers Show, Plaid Whale and All, Opens at Petzel Gallery in Chelsea



'Moby Dick (Merrilees)' (2013) SEAN LANDERS/PETZEL, NEW YORK

By **ANDY BATTAGLIA**

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The artist Sean Landers had a whale of a time completing one of his latest works: a nearly 30-foot painting of a great leviathan, harpoons in its back, inspired in part by “Moby-Dick.”

To mash things up further, its flesh is plaid, a recurring motif in Mr. Landers’s new exhibition at Petzel Gallery in Chelsea, opening Thursday. The look is a nod to a period in the 1940s when René Magritte used the decorative pattern.

“He was the world’s leading surrealist, but he had been shunned by Paris and never had a big show there,” Mr. Landers said.

When Magritte had his chance, he resentfully “made paintings that he thought were purposefully bad,” Mr. Landers said. “But they were really good. They don’t look like normal Magittes, but in my mind they’re the best paintings he’s ever done.”



Sean Landers in his Manhattan studio. *ADRIENNE GRUNWALD FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

The premise plays out in 10 of Mr. Landers's new paintings of different animals in plaid, among them a mountain goat, monkey, walrus and boar. Matched to each is a related painting of a bookshelf with words on the spines and the corresponding animal in a miniature glass globe.

"Everything is linked and connected," said Friedrich Petzel, whose gallery has represented Mr. Landers since 2009. "His work is based in a tradition of performative artists, but he has tried to find tools and ways of how to explore further or do it in a different way—or, to say it another way, to ask, 'How can I make conceptual art that is not boring?'"

Mr. Landers's path to the kind of painting showcased in his plaid whale has been circuitous. In the 1990s, he became known for large wall works that featured tortured handwriting on sheets from yellow legal pads.

One such work, "Sic," featured 454 sheets of paper and was later published as a book. From there, he moved the words to canvas, and the ideas expressed in writing turned visual.

"A lot of his early work is about what it means to be an artist and trying to be a painter," said New Museum's artistic director Massimiliano Gioni, who included Mr. Landers in his 2013 show "NYC 1993: Experimental Jet Set, Trash and No Star."

"After so many years, it's finally less about trying and more about being," Mr. Gioni said.

Mr. Landers, 52 years old, said all his work draws on the same kinds of questions.

"When I was writing giant canvases with text on them, it was all stand in front and write,

think and write,” he said. “But I had a longing for making images.”

It is a search he compares to the one at the center of “Moby-Dick.”

“The white whale is to make a great or lasting work, or a lasting life as an artist,” Mr. Landers said. “Every harpoon is an attempt.”

For four months, he worked eight hours a day, toiling to depict the whale as it would look in the wild.

“Sperm whales have this rippling flesh behind the nose,” Mr. Landers said. “Those ripples took a lot longer. Then gradating the way the light hits the top of the whale and diffuses down, and the tartan from a highly lit area on top to a deep shadow on the bottom.”

Is it hard to paint plaid, with all its layers and intersections?

“It is if you don’t have strategy,” Mr. Landers said.

*“North American Mammals” opens Thursday and runs through Dec. 20 at Petzel Gallery, 456 W. 18th St.; 212-680-9467; petzel.com.*

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