



CONVERSATIONS

As Is: Sean Landers

Share

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33

Sean Landers interviewed by Chiara Moioli

“The next real [...] ‘rebels’ in this country might well emerge as some weird bunch of anti-rebels, born oglers who dare somehow to back away from ironic watching, who have the childish gall actually to endorse and instantiate single-entendre principles. Who treat of plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction. [...] These anti-rebels would be outdated, of course, before they even started. Dead on the page. Too sincere. Clearly repressed. Backward, quaint, naive, anachronistic. [...] Real rebels, as far as I can see, risk disapproval. [...] The new rebels might be artists willing to risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs, the parody of gifted ironists, the ‘Oh, how banal.’ To risk accusations of sentimentality, melodrama. Of overcredulity. Of softness. Of willingness to be suckered by a world of lurkers and starers who fear gaze and ridicule above imprisonment without law.”¹



(<https://galeriemichaeljanssen.de/>)

Sean Landers as Chris Hamson.² Sean Landers as the slacker artist. Sean Landers as the antihero. Sean Landers as the exhibitionist. Sean Landers as the clown. Sean Landers as the

chimp. Sean Landers as he is: a chimera, a captivating organism originating from two (or more) genetically different cell lines combined into a single entity—in Landers's case, one that charmingly blurs the boundaries between innocence and artifice, between sincerity and insincerity, between the candor of a pure soul and the stunt of a manufactured persona, situating his voice at "the point where irony has gone full circle and the return to sincerity begins."³

Expanding upon—while breaking away from—the most widely recognized facade of postmodern cynicism, in his writings, videos, drawings, paintings, and sculptures Sean Landers delivers a form of sarcastic yet straightforward entertainment that spans dreams, faith, fear, fantasies, failure, doubt, lust, trust, pathos, angst, boredom: basically, self-awareness of life lived in all its ups and downs (emphasis on the downs).

In *Studio Films 90/95*, on view at FREEHOUSE, London, Landers presents twelve video works shot between 1990 and 1995⁴ that condense all of the above through monologues and comic performance of the self that, despite being the expression of a verbose, individualistic ego (a big one)—the consistent topic of the art of Sean Landers is Sean Landers and his striving for greatness—embody the universality of life's motions. We laugh out loud at his "epic fails" taped on film—just try viewing *Fall Down* (1995) without giggling; still, we are genuinely touched by his rambling tumults resembling the dark thoughts one confesses to the priest after the holy mass to obtain absolution, while we simultaneously sit petrified watching him simulate the parody of a masturbatory act—both

happen in *Improbable History* (1992); and again, we are playfully transported by his karaoke-singing sessions, especially when he claps hands at himself as if he were Elton John—check out *Skyline Pigeon* (1995) for that.

Sean Landers's videos transcend the pathetic: they exude drippy humanity through hilarious gaucherie, allowing viewers to empathize with him by satisfying their voyeuristic hunger, making "Sean Landers, the character" amusingly as much as awfully seductive, not to mention pioneering—after all, isn't this lust for lurking to see what others reveal of themselves what drives our contemporary attraction (or is it an addiction?) toward social platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook?

All this, and more, in the ensuing conversation.

CHIARA MOIOLI: Given your affiliation with figures of the likes of Daniel Johnston—"I'm a loner / I'm a sorry entertainer"⁵—I'm inclined to get the ball rolling by starting this interview by asking, "Hi, how are you?"⁶

SEAN LANDERS: Hi, Chiara. I'm doing great! I'm fifty-six and have loved every year I've been on Earth. Looking forward to the next fifty-six. I'm glad that you bring up Daniel Johnston to start this off because it's a good way to open up a conversation about my early work. If there is a significant overlap between him and me, besides the handwritten look of his lo-fi cassette tapes and my early work, it was our sincerity, which was a direct about-face from the episteme of the time. For instance, it was such a great change of mood to hear Daniel Johnston's earnest and beautiful self-produced "Hi, How Are You?" after having endured the ubiquitous highly produced bands of the late 1980s—i.e., Poison, Guns N' Roses, and so on. Daniel Johnston was a very welcome opposite extreme. There were other bands that were just as refreshing at that time, like Sonic Youth, Pavement, and Nirvana. Similarly, in my world at that same time—the late 1980s—the art world seemed to have reached a height where highly produced works and high prices seemed to define the moment before the art market crash of 1990. I think there was a natural appetite for a lo-fi, sincere art to emerge, and I just happened to be that guy—I was heartbroken on the Lower

East Side trying to make it as an artist and writing my heart out about it on yellow legal pad. I was insane enough to tape those drippingly earnest pages to a gallery wall—Postmasters in 1990.

CM: One of the starting points of your career came with the screenplay *Art, Life and God*, a work featuring 159 pieces of paper—handwritten streams of consciousness and drawings on paper from legal pads—that you taped onto the walls for your solo show at Postmasters Gallery in New York (1990). What was going on in your life when you started making them, and why did you choose the medium of writing to express yourself?

SL: What was going on was a breakup. I had been going out with a woman whom I had met through mutual friends. She is a wonderful and talented filmmaker whom I am happy to be friends with to this day. She is also the daughter of a famous American author. We had been together for about three years when it came apart. While she needed to be free for her own reasons, there was another factor which weighed on me. Her father disapproved of me because he doubted that I would become a “great man” like he considered himself to be. He thought his daughter deserved a great man. So the rejection had a double burn to it. I could have handled the love rejection; it happens, it’s life. But the additional rejection of me by her father for having, in his estimation, no legitimate creative potential to become great was wounding and it motivated me to throw everything I had into my art with every bit of power I could muster. And that was *Art, Life and God* at Postmasters, in 1990. It worked. After exhibiting that work, I became well-known and established fairly quickly. I began showing internationally within just months and have continued to do so ever since. So in sum, I really have to thank him—my perception of his rejection of me was very motivating.

I chose writing because it was my original medium, even though I had learned to paint when I was a young kid from my mother and grandmother, who were both small-town oil painting teachers. It was poetry that I truly lost myself in when the hormones of puberty struck. I wrote poetry on my bedsheets, I filled my dresser drawers with horrible poetry written on scraps of paper. Throughout my high school and college years, I kept writing. It was a secret from the world that I kept for myself. I didn’t write much at all during those early years with that ex I mentioned above, but when she and I parted ways in 1990, the levee broke. I have been writing ever since.

CM: In your first videos, for instance in *I’m a Bitter Guy* (1990), you are showing the aforementioned yellow papers as a tool to communicate with the audience. Can you talk about how the transition from paper to video came to be, and the linkage between the two media?

SL: The videos began kind of by accident. Andrea Rosen asked me to participate in a show in her new gallery called *Work in Progress? Work?* in 1990. My idea was to get a video camera to document me working in my studio. As soon as I had the camera set up on a tripod, I could not resist sitting in front of it and trying to entertain anyone who might eventually wander into her art gallery. I wasn’t trying to make a film or a video that would be for a seated audience. I only intended it to be like a window into me and my life, for anyone who might happen upon it. At the time, I was also writing on huge sheets of photo backdrop paper, filling them with stream-of-consciousness writing in ballpoint pen. I thought of the video works and the

stream-of-conscious writing in the same way—as a window or an invitation for a viewer to move through time with me. If I had a sheet of paper that was nine feet by nine feet, then I would stand in front of it day after day filling it until it was finished. The same for video; if it was an hour-long blank tape, then I would sit in front of the camera and fill it with an hour of content as honestly as I could. But because it was a video, and I didn't want a potential viewer to walk away, I would try to entertain them. The same for the writing—I would try to tell stories and make the time spent with me a little extra than just total banality. This is how the performative aspect of the video and writing entered the equation. And I realized the potential that my acting or writing fictively gave me, a sort of fig leaf. Just the potential that I may be fictive allowed for an even greater candidness, because who really knew what was true or false? This way I could really unload my truest inner self, which gassed up the content and gave it a greater voyeuristic hook.

CM: Your video works are raw, there are no special effects, not much editing image-wise, the camera is fixed. What was your approach toward the medium, and which were your influences?

SL: They were raw. I knew no other way. I was completely ignorant of the medium. I had never used it before. I relied solely on my personality. I didn't want anything to get in the way of that. I was presenting myself to the world in the truest form I could. I trusted this is what art is. Art is the truth of people sincerely rendered and offered to the world in any medium that can capture it. If it's true and it feels true, then it will have merit and people will want to look. When we go to see art, I believe what we are looking for is *self*, in some way. If it's abstraction, your subconscious looks for human form even if it isn't there. We search for ourselves in the characters in literature and in movies. We are all alone in our heads, and anything that gets us out of our heads into others' heads is interesting to us. We sometimes find horrors there, or delights, but what we are looking for is likeness. We want to feel that we are not alone. If, through my writing, videos, or paintings, I can show you a relatable moment, then I have done my job; I have created a sincere portal through which your empathy can operate.

As for influences: Vito Acconci was one of my teachers at Yale. This was in the mid-1980s, so he was past his own performative works, but just getting to know him inspired me. Before that, William Wegman came to my undergraduate school, Philadelphia College of Art, and showed his early videos. This was a period before the dogs were his main focus. A lot of them were just him in his studio goofing around. I love all of that early 1970s Conceptual art. It really resonated with me. There was also a documentary called *An American Family* that had a huge impact on me. It originally aired on PBS in the United States in 1973. I remember watching a few episodes with my father back then, but PBS replayed it in its entirety on New Year's Day 1991 and I watched it all. I found it mesmerizing. It was a vérité portrait of an American family from Santa Barbara, California. Each episode was originally aired as it was being filmed, so the characters changed in real time with their newfound celebrity. I found that the characters almost became performers as the series went on. I had been making videos myself for a year at this point, but this taught me to pay attention to what was happening to me as a character within my own increasingly performative videos and art—and most importantly, to be in control of it.

CM: What were you aiming for in making those videos? How did you expect the audience to react to them?

SL: I was trying to expand what I did into other mediums. I was writing stream of consciousness because I believed then, and I still do, that the stream of consciousness is the primary experience of life. Everything we see, say, hear, or do is done through the scrim of our ever-flowing stream of consciousness. It is the flow of life passing through us. I capture it in my art and make it my primary art material. I fill paintings and drawings with it. I make surreal paintings that access the subconscious, which is the wizard behind the curtain of all art making. I do it in paint, clay, cartoons, poetry, in any form I can, and from 1990 to 1995, I did it in video. I didn't know how audiences would react at first—I assumed they would be thought of as boring art videos and ignored. But I soon got a pretty strong reaction. As far as I could tell, the videos, like a lot of my work, seemed to divide people. Some really liked them and told me so, and some people not only hated them but also hated me. In a few of these videos, there was suggested masturbation, and in three, I appeared naked. This was a lot for some people to handle gracefully, I guess. It was weird going to parties and openings back then—people felt like they knew me intimately from my art, and they'd assume I was exactly like the character in my art, which wasn't exactly the case. I guess I had overshared before oversharing was a thing.

CM: Your diaristic films predated reality television, and later, the blogosphere, with platforms like YouTube. How do you feel about these trends, and do you see seeds of your practice sprouting in a younger generation of artists?

SL: I'm glad you asked that because when these things began emerging in our culture, I kept thinking, "Hey, that's like that thing I was doing in the early 1990s." And then I'd feel shame that I was being a typical artist who thinks they are the center of the universe and that everything is about them. But people started telling me [that] things like my text paintings predated blogs and Twitter, and my videos predated YouTube. Of course, I find it flattering, but as I think of it now, it makes sense because I had some semblance of an audience in the real world before the Internet existed. Even though it was a small art viewing audience, I had the idea in my mind that when I wrote or turned on the video camera, people were going to see this. That is the same sensation anyone who now posts on YouTube has. It's the same for people who tweet or write blogs. They feel there is a potential audience, so they do it. I had an audience before the Internet existed, so I posted my thoughts on yellow legal pad pages pasted to gallery walls, and into video camera lenses. Maybe the Internet has made everyone an artist of sorts. Instagram has certainly had an impact on photography, for instance. I don't know if I have had any impact on a younger generation of artists. I hope so.

CM: Music is crucial in the videos. I'm melomaniac, so I spent quite some time Shazamming you singing in order to source the melodies. While in the first tapes, music seemed more of a casual element, one dictated by what aired on the radio or in your stereo at that moment, in the ensuing videos you have dedicated entire performances to a chosen song.⁷ Can you tell me how the selection process worked, and what music represents to you? [Note: I was struck

by a passage in *Improbable History* when, listening to Neil Young's "Old Man," you acknowledged: "It's beautiful [...] I know another person understands the way life works the way I understand it."]

SL: Neil Young: I still love Neil Young, and, in fact, am listening to him now as I write this response. I was listening to Daniel Johnston as I wrote my first answer in this interview. I make all my art while listening to music. Every artist I know does the same. Music is the updraft upon which we soar—to put it as corny as possible, but it's 100 percent true. There may be no closer relationship between disciplines as art and music. What I love about Neil Young is that the melodies are beautiful, the words are beautiful, the sentiment is beautiful, and his imperfections as a vocalist make him perfect. What I mean by that is when Neil reaches for a note he can't quite reach, it supercharges the song emotionally. It makes him real to us, it makes him one of us. And as I was writing above in another answer, it is what I try to do in art. I believe making my failures or my foibles public conveys my genuineness and hopefully makes me more likeable. Like in *Fall Down*. Neil is relatable, and that's what we are looking for as viewers and as listeners. It's touching.

David Bowie: I cannot write about music and art making without mentioning the vast contribution that David Bowie has made to countless artists in their studios over the years. I love him, unlike [what] I said in *I'm a Bitter Guy*—I can't believe I said I don't like him in that video. It's totally not true. I love him. I have no idea why I said that in that video, and I 100 percent take it back. In my video *Anonymous Testimony (He Wants to Believe)* (1994), I am talking during and being utterly inspired by his song "Cygnet Committee."

Scott Walker: This man was a genius. Every song is a masterpiece. I am dancing to his song "Seventh Seal" in my video *Dancing with Death* (1995). I titled the video that because making art is dancing with death. We artists make things that will outlast our own time on Earth. It's a crazy job when you think about it. I wanted to make a video that was a true dance with death, and I danced with all of my might.

Elton John: I did a video of me singing his song *Skyline Pigeon* (1995). I liked it because it was corny and sincere, and I thought that was kind of like me—corny and sincere.

Monteverdi: When I was standing in front of my video camera in 1993 racking my brain for an idea for a video to include in the *Aperto* section of the Venice Biennale, a mass written by Monteverdi for St. Mark's in Venice happened to come on the radio as I was standing there. It made me remember traveling through Venice and St. Mark's as an art student. I was raised a Roman Catholic and educated formally as a sculptor, and it all came together in that instant. Inspired by the music, I got naked and began to pose as sculptures from art history. That video is titled *Italian High Renaissance and Baroque Sculpture* (1993).

CM: Your practice is steeped in ambivalence—mixing Conceptualism with the heritage of Institutional Critique and elements of a Post-postmodern sensibility, and emerging in the exact moment when New Sincerity powerfully arose. As a viewer, you cannot really grasp whether everything was staged or, vice versa, if every act, every confession, was an

expression of purity, of Sean Landers “as is”—and, above all, whether you were in control or moved by a need to express something about yourself. Could you expand on this ambivalence?

SL: Wow, that is a huge and great question. I feel like I could write a book in response to it. How to put it briefly? Yes to all of the above. All are true at the same time. I am always “as is,” as you put it, or *[sic]*,⁸ as I would put it. The ambivalence is purposeful because I am uncertain. I always feel as if I know what I’m doing, and it’s all going according to plan when I think of my entire artistic output from a macro point of view. But when I’m in it—making it every day and seeing it from a micro point of view—I feel victim of my various processes. When I’m struggling with painting various pictorial illusions, I can lose all sense of my conceptual pedigree. But when I zoom out and go onto my website, seanlanders.net, I see the whole picture and I love it. I sometimes can’t even believe how many and varied things I’ve made so far. But I feel that the picture I am truly making is a picture of my life on Earth, and it will not be finished until I’m dead. I don’t know now how I will land this ship, but all I know is that I need to keep it aloft until then. I just need to keep making stuff until I can’t.

When I was younger, I mixed staged with honest confessional both to hide from the viewer and to better expose myself. The possibility that I may have been acting or writing fictively gave me the cover I needed to tell the unvarnished truth. But now I just am this guy. I perform the act of being Sean Landers the artist, and it doesn’t feel as much like acting anymore. If I write a sappy poem on a painting, it’s because I feel that way.

If you take anything away from this interview, it should be the feeling that I am a pretty sincere guy. That is, unless I’m just fucking with you.

CM: Despite the thirst for fame and striving for greatness that art critics attributed to you, early in your career you employed the nom de plume of Chris Hamson, and you later delegated your role as an artist to a monkey freely hopping around your studio, painting and drinking as you did (*Singerie: Le Peintre* [1995]). What about this duality?

SL: They were both devices to describe myself as an artist, or what I believe an artist is. In *Singerie: Le Peintre*, I hired a chimpanzee to portray me on video. After five years of staring into the lens and recording way too many candid hours, I just couldn’t be that guy anymore, so I hired a professional chimp to do the monkeying around. I think he did a pretty good job. By then I had split my personality into two halves in my image paintings. A clown represented my self-doubt, and the chimp represented my self-confidence. So it was a mentally healthy act to hire a chimp for the job instead of a circus clown. It is still my personal favorite video to watch because I’m not in it. It just goes to show that acting is best done by professionals and that three-year-old chimpanzees are a lot cuter than thirtyish-year-old sad-sack artists.

Chris Hamson was a raw artist’s ego made manifest in a character. He was not 100 percent me. He was an amalgam informed by my life, as well as by many of my friends’ experiences. For instance, one day I was sitting in my loft, and my friend who is a painter rang the intercom and came up to hang out. He told a story about finding a coupon for a free sandwich from Subway sandwich shop. He was hungry and had no money. We were all hungry and broke then. He waited in line and ordered his sandwich, they made it and handed it to him, at which time he handed them the coupon and they informed him that he had misread it and that it said, “Buy one, get one free.” He left the shop hungry, humiliated, and pissed off and came

over to vent this experience—at which time I promptly wrote it up as if it had happened to Chris Hamson. I had done this with countless Chris Hamson scenes. Many scenes were, in fact, my humiliations, albeit exaggerated, but many were those of my friends who were going through the same things I was going through at that time. The stories were typical of a struggling artist who had moved to the big city to make their dreams come true. It's difficult for everyone to break into the art world, and it's a relatable experience to write about. This is why this work resonated so well. It was not just true for me. Critics could not get this through their heads at the time though. I kept reading that *Art, Life and God* was pure confessional, alter ego, et cetera. They focused on Chris's thirst for fame and fortune and described them as my own personal character flaws, as if it wasn't a common pandemic of the time. Lust for fame and fortune is Warhol 101, for God's sake. After that Chris Hamson show, I began writing as myself, but I kept the fictive part as a fig leaf, as I have already described above. Over the years, though, that wore off, and here I am writing to you as honestly as I can—I think...

[1] David Foster Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction," *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13, no. 2 (Summer 1993): 151.

[2] Chris Hamson is a fictitious name Sean Landers used at the beginning of his career. As he explained to Beatrix Ruf, "Chris Hamson was taken from the Norwegian author Knut Hamsun, specifically his book *Hunger*, a story of a young artist living in Oslo, trying to make it as a writer. No one is paying attention to him. He's on the outside, hungry, going mad, in love, and heartbroken. I wanted to use the archetype of that story to write my story on the Lower East Side in 1989. I wanted to tell the story of an outsider trying to get into the art world. The main character in Knut Hamsun's book didn't have a name, so I named mine Hamson and Chris, after my childhood best friend." Sean Landers, "No Intention to Fail," interview by Beatrix Ruf, *Mousse* 31 (December 2011–January 2012): 90–99.

[3] Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith and Beatrix Ruf, "Interview with Sean Landers," in *Sean Landers: Kunsthalle Zürich*, ed. Beatrix Ruf (Zürich: JRP|Ringier Kunstverlag AG, 2004), 46.

[4] As they appear in the gallery: *I'm a Bitter Guy* (1990); *Sexy Vid with Chicken* (1991); *Improbable History* (1992); *93% Sincere* (1992); *A Great Day for the Irish* (1993); *Νάρκισσος* [Narcissus] (1993); *Fall Down* (1995); *Skyline Pigeon* (1995); *Dancing with Death* (1995); *Six Feet Under (Dust in the Wind)* (1995); *Six Feet Under (Sweet Caroline)* (1995); *Singerie: Le Peintre* (1995).

[5] Daniel Johnston, "Sorry Entertainer," from *Yip/Jump Music* (Eternal Yip Eye Music, 1983).

[6] Daniel Johnston, *Hi, How Are You: The Unfinished Album* (New York: Homestead Records, 1983).

[7] See, for instance, *Skyline Pigeon* (1995); *Dancing with Death* (1995); *Six Feet Under (Dust in the Wind)* (1995); *Six Feet Under (Sweet Caroline)* (1995).

[8] See <http://www.seanlanders.net/publications/sic2> (<http://www.seanlanders.net/publications/sic2>).

at FREEHOUSE, London (<https://www.facebook.com/FREEHOUSE-296526227565771/>) until 24 February 2019

Related Articles

CONVERSATIONS

A Womb with a View: Will Benedict
(Read more)



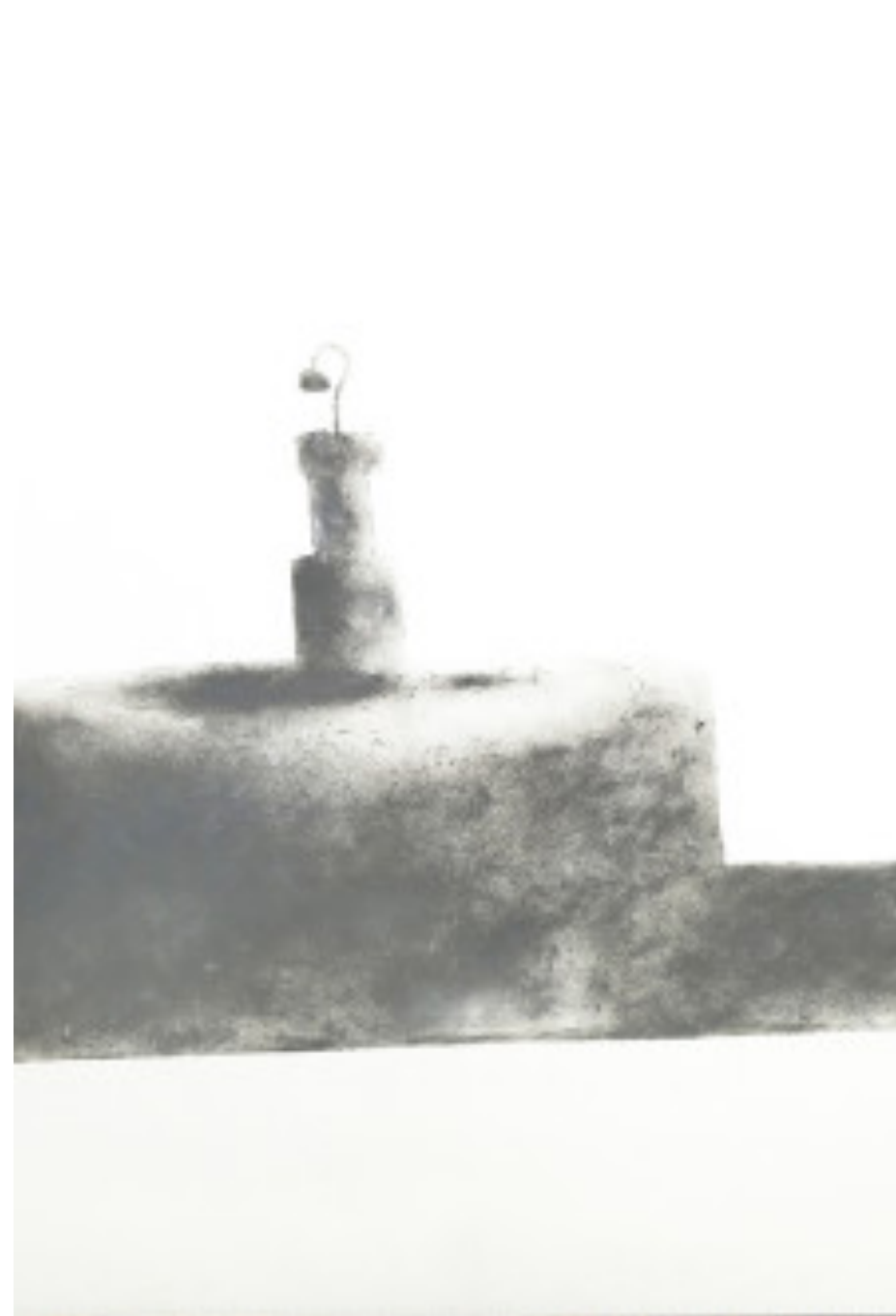
(<http://moussmagazine.it/a-womb-with-a-view-will-benedict-chiara-moioli-dependace-2019/>)

CONVERSATIONS

Loops and Escapes: Sophie Reinhold
(Read more)

CONVERSATIONS

"The Fountains of Za'atari" as Extraterritorial Site: Margherita ...
(Read more)



(<http://moussmagazine.it/the-fountains-of-zaatari-as-extraterritorial-site-margherita-moscardini-giovanna-manzotti-2019/>)

CONVERSATIONS

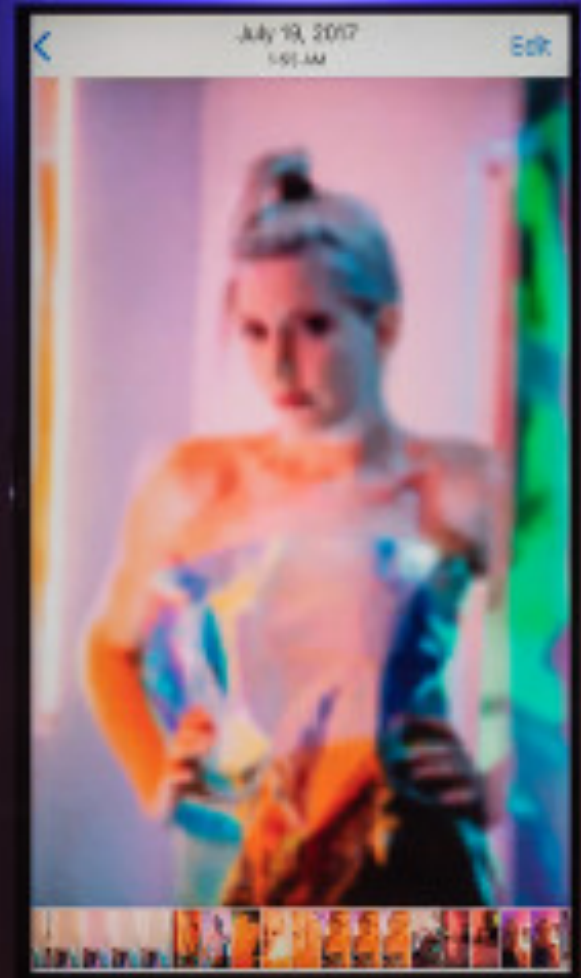
"Digital Streams of an Uploadable Consciousness: Stories 2..."
(Read more)



(<http://moussmagazine.it/sophie-reinhold-francesco-tenaglia-sundogs-2019/>)

CONVERSATIONS

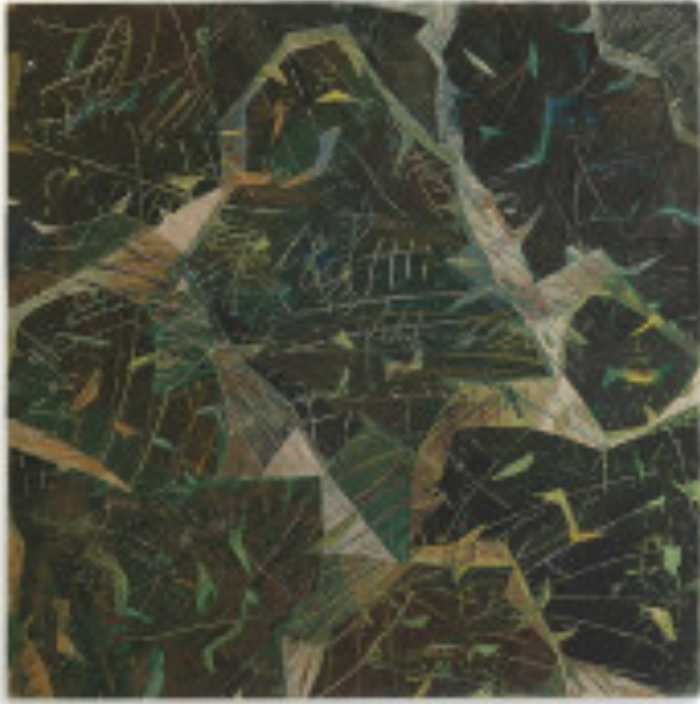
"There's texture without touching": Georges Noël
([Read more](#))



(<http://moussmagazine.it/digital-streams-uploadable-consciousness-stories-2016-2019-signe-pierce-alice-bucknell-2019/>)

CONVERSATIONS

Arcana Imperii: Kenneth Goldsmith and Francesco Urbano R...
([Read more](#))



(<http://moussmagazine.it/theres-texture-without-touching-georges-noel/>)

(<http://moussmagazine.it/kenneth-goldsmith-emanuele-coccia-francesco-urbano-ragazzi-hillary-clinton-emails-2019/>)

Mousse Magazine and Publishing
 Corso di Porta Romana, 63,
 20122 Milano, Italy
 T: +39 02 8356631
 F: +39 02 49531400
 E: info@moussmagazine.it
 P.IVA 05234930963