

# METRO PICTURES

Herbert, Martin. "Rene Daniëls," *Frieze* (January-February 2011).

## frieze



In 1985, René Daniëls made two paintings and christened them both *Painting on Unknown Languages*. If the Eindhoven-based artist – who would suffer a brain aneurysm two years later, though he recently began painting again – could get away with such a title, it's because known languages are blunt instruments for dealing with his loose-limbed, affably implacable enigmas. Here, for example, is Peter Doig's game attempt at summarizing Daniëls' art: 'His paintings are like some dreams.' Michael Raedecker's: 'A mental painter of reduced and archetypal images.' Michael Kimmelman's: 'There is something going on in the work; you just never know exactly what.' One can readily assent to all these analyses, and then go back to the paintings for the other 90 per cent of what it feels like they're doing.

From 1984 onwards, a motif rising repeatedly from Daniëls' casually lissome brushwork is an airborne shape that's at once a bowtie, a diagrammatic butterfly and a long room seen in schematic perspective. In the mock-portentous *Battle for the Twentieth Century* (1984), one of these – tinted a convivial orange, inset with glowing yellow rectangles suggesting windows or diminutive canvases or pure patterning – hovers above a turbid, gold-flecked sea. It's a painting that, improbably, makes of suspension and liquidity both motif and subtext.

Elsewhere Daniëls could coax the same volatile glyph into a murmuring of unarticulated potential. When 15 of them, painted an impenetrable black, float in massy formation around a central tower block with lit windows in *Mystic Transportation* (1987), they naturally read as darkened architectural interiors: containers for whatever.

In this generously hung show, contrapuntally arranged and cherry-picking Daniëls' work from 1981–7 before segueing tidily into his exploratory production over the last two years, *Mystic Transportation* is hardly the only finished work that positions itself as merely a starting point. Daniëls' paintings frequently seem to anticipate future events (as well as, need it be said, future painting) or uncompleted trajectories: the precipitously pitched bridge across water in the wine-dark, Japanese-looking landscape *Underground Connection* (1984), the tree-like branching arrangement of microphones within a De Chirico-esque gallery – all deep perspective, gravity-defying objects and watchful silence, with a silhouette peeking in from a doorway – in *The Return of the Performance* (1987). Such spaces wait to be traversed, animated, filled with words. These are, if you like, paintings about the process of being seen.

At points, Daniëls broaches a style of painting whose heart-racing thrill comes from its ardent inarticulacy, its sense of the artist trying to ram something massive and internal through a relatively tiny aperture in the real world. In *Historia Mystera* (1981–2), where painting feels like an unknown language even to its speaker, an event of cartoonishly cosmic dimensions is palpably kicking off between two freestanding architectural arches – one rocked by a yellow-and-purple explosion, the other at the end of a roadway vectoring from the blast – but it's the devil's own task to say what. Such feverish tentativeness may be what's underwriting the continuity between Daniëls' earlier work and the post-stroke art that was gathered in the show's final room. silence about Daniëls' health ('he has not fully recovered' is all that was said), one doesn't necessarily want to think past gratification at his ongoing creativity.

What's certain is that Daniëls' older work feels as new as his newest. The exhibition's most beckoning abyss, for this writer, is *The Dark Room* (1986). On the threshold of a royal purple interior whose depth is once again constructed using an asymmetric bowtie design, you're immediately met by a central pair of vertical rectangles, divided up using a pinched, elongated, crimson-and-white variant on the same pattern. Where diagonals transect at the midpoint of each is a circle containing a pair of unblinking white eye-shapes, flipping graphic abstractions into bat-like sentinels and back again as you wait. Come in and get out, the painting says. You probably shouldn't attempt a substantive response.