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Searle, Adrian. "Nazis, cake and the Wizard of Oz: a drawing show with a difference," *TheGuardian.com* (May 26, 2015).

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Bullfight (1985) by René Daniëls.

Spring blossom; a row of decapitated heads; a black ship on a dark sea. One thing leads to another in the 58 drawings currently at the Drawing Room in south London: a constellation of discs, a cake, a self-portrait. There seems no end to it. What connects drawings made in Poland in the late 1940s and 50s, in Amsterdam in the 1980s and in Antwerp from the late 70s to today isn't clear, though there are affinities and echoes everywhere. The mind skips from one thing to another.

The exhibition DE.FI.CIEN.CY brings together the drawings of Andrzej Wróblewski (1927-57) and contemporary artists René Daniëls and Luc Tuymans. The title is disjointed, just like the broken narratives and fragments the works themselves present in an exhibition first shown in Poznań. Wróblewski is at the heart of it. As a young boy, he witnessed the death of his father, who suffered a heart attack when the Nazis searched the family home. Wróblewski went on to make numerous drawings and paintings called *The Execution*, based both on his own childhood trauma and the many public executions perpetrated, and photographed, during the German occupation of Poland.

The executioners are often absent from the works. Exhibition curator Ulrich Loock suggests that the artist is the executioner, playing on the idea that he, after all, is the one who executes the work, and that painting itself is a kind of disruption and mutilation, a negative as much as it is a positive act. Wróblewski's figures are often left headless, or with their torsos inverted. Near one such drawing is a figure by Daniëls, made in 1983, in which a man is cut in half at the waist and reassembled upside down. Where Wróblewski's work is despairing, Daniëls' drawing is comic, almost joyous. Between these two hangs a recent work by Tuymans depicting a winged, flying monkey. The image is partly derived from a memory of a scene in *The Wizard of Oz*, but Tuymans also relates it to depictions of monsters in the middle ages.

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We look in vain for a signature style in this fascinating exhibition, losing ourselves among monstrosity and delicacy, private jokes, offhand cartoonishness, diagrams, abstractions and precise self-portraiture. Many of Tuymans' drawings are preparatory works for paintings, or – as a kind of reversal – made after the paintings. They have, typically, the look of some worn-out, faded and discarded image, resurrected as a faked pictorial document, what Tuymans calls “authentic forgeries”.

One of the paradoxes of Tuymans' work is the degree to which his evident technical competence and pictorial inventiveness is disguised, as though he were acting the part of an amateur, or adopting various personas in the making of works that range from a delicate and precise watercolour of a naval officer, to what looks like a stencil for patterned wallpaper, not so much cut from a piece of card as chewed by mice. Another drawing, made specially for the show here, has been drawn directly on the wall. In it, Tuymans has used photocopies of earlier works to produce a degraded image that contains the heads of Nazi officers, someone hanged on a scaffold, and a bier of flowers. The grainy blacks of the drawing and the blank flare of the photocopier's light have reduced the image to something incomprehensible.

One sometimes thinks that this exhibition could have been made by 20 people rather than three. The shifts in Wróblewski's art were determined by both the larger social and political circumstances under which he worked in post-war Poland and by his own changes in belief – a utopian, modernist abstract artist who became a dedicated communist, then renounced his political faith. Had he lived longer, who knows what he might have achieved. A number of drawings depict the interior of a bus, heading towards a distant vanishing point. We might as well be driving towards a wall; the bus is going nowhere.

In several of Daniëls' drawings, a tree is covered by words rather than leaves. Along one branch the phrase “Places, buildings, where feelings are closely related to fright ...” has been written with a brush (the phrase continues but it is not decipherable). Sometimes Daniëls switches to Dutch or French, just as, in a single drawing, a shape twists from being a diagrammatic rendition of an intersection between two walls, to a butterfly, to a bow tie. This became a familiar motif in his rich and lively art, whose forms mutate and multiply and turn about themselves, depending on their context. Born in 1950, he became well known during the 1980s for paintings that used both abstraction and figuration, and words and images, in ways that were both extremely personal and contained an implicit critique of the fashionable, image-based neo-expressionism of the time. His development was cut short by a brain haemorrhage in 1987 from which he has never fully recovered.

Daniëls' pictorial language games – a tree might also be a view of roads, a map of his familiar cycle routes or divergent paths through a city – are a kind of chart of possibilities. This can lead to an image of a lone pianist playing in the dark or to a skein of telegraph wires festooning the evening sky. We are never certain whether we are looking at a direct or innocent image or a symbol for something darker. I can't look at a drawing of cut-up carp by Andrzej Wróblewski without thinking of the sliced bodies in his execution images.

Each image has a story behind it, and there are other stories – the things the artist meant and the ones you invent. All three artists have, in different ways, a conflicted relationship to modernism, to figuration as well as abstraction. For all three, the idea that making art is an expression of some essential self, and that style is somehow innate, is inconceivable.

There is a palpable suspicion of the supposed power of images on display here. How much do the drawings reflect the tropes of weariness and wariness? Doubts about the efficacy or ability of a medium to tackle large subjects can lead one to stop making images altogether; or to work as if inside some larger fiction, as though one were a character in some story. That is how it feels for the spectator, too. Going from image to image – from the eager eyes of pigeons to a red goitre on a woman's neck, from a bullring to an execution – we invent our own plot, tracing the storyline, following the broken branches of great and small histories. Just as if we were drawing.