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ARTFORUM

René Daniëls

WIELS CONTEMPORARY ART CENTRE,
BRUSSELS

Barry Schwabsky

WHAT I REMEMBER from the couple of shows René Daniëls (then not using the diaeresis in his name) did in New York in the mid-1980s is mainly feeling puzzled. The paintings were representational, and—if I recall correctly—mostly without figures. They more than flirted with abstraction, and they were shown at a gallery, Metro Pictures, that seemed to maintain a distinctly antipainting stance. At the time, these camps—the neo-expressionists, the abstractionists, and the Pictures crowd—seemed utterly at odds, and yet this artist shared something with all of them and none. Whose side was the Dutch painter on? It's telling that, reviewing Daniëls's 1985 Metro show in *Artforum* that year, Jeanne Silverthorne felt compelled to read his work as a riposte to two other artists from the gallery's stable, Louise Lawler and Allan McCollum; I wouldn't have been so sure.

Today, such questions of affiliation seem moot, all the more because Daniëls's strongest work appears wonderfully free of period affectations, and thus is able to gracefully make the "transition from postmodernism—with its characteristic use of allegory, quotation, paraphrase, borrowing, mockery, pastiche and hyperbole—to 'neo-modernism,' which went on to reinvent the idea of art broadening and unshackling the means and tools we use to perceive and interpret the world," as Dirk Snauwaert and Lionel Bovier, the respective directors of this exhibition's two venues, Wiels Contemporary Art Centre in

Brussels and Musée d'Art Moderne et Contemporain in Geneva, put it in their catalogue introduction.

In Daniëls's best-known paintings, made between 1984 and 1987, a standard subject is a configuration of three walls portrayed in extreme perspective, so that the overall shape resembles that of a bow tie, with several colored rectangles arrayed across them: in other words, a kind of theater-set rendition of an art gallery. In these "*Mooie tentoonstellingen*" (Beautiful Exhibitions), the three walls typically hover in a larger undefined space, suggesting that the gallery—the "white cube" that Daniëls usually imagines as being some other color—exists as a free-floating idea rather than as a concrete reality. And therefore he paints it in translucent, almost bodiless tones—contradicting the perspectival space by evacuating any sense of volume. Independent of gravity, it can even float sideways, as in *Observatorium*, 1985. In *Painting on Unknown Languages*, 1985, some walls have disappeared, apparently submerged in a dark sea, but their rectangles still hang there, shining through; while for *Het huis* (The House), 1986, Daniëls has scumbled the entire scene in white, so that the underlying depiction of the gallery can still be made out, as if through a scrim on which the artist has inscribed various versions of the three-walls-bow-tie motif as a linear glyph—an ornament or emblem. Daniëls was dwelling, one might conclude, on the idea that the art gallery displays nothing other than itself—not even the paintings it purports to present, let alone their real-world content, whatever that might be. But to do so would be hasty. Thanks to the magic of color, the gallery as Daniëls shows it can evoke almost anything, anyplace—a sea, a sky, a city, a landscape—and the canvases that inhabit it walls, windows, doors: whatever frames a space or opens it to what is outside the frame. As the exhibition's curator, Devrim Bayar, suggests in her catalogue essay, Daniëls situates his imagery on a "fragile and imperceptible 'membrane'" that simultaneously separates and connects seemingly distinct realities.

None of this could have been predicted from Daniëls's work of the late '70s and early '80s, with its rather clunky

paint handling, similar to that of some of Germany's *Neuen Wilden*; at their best, these paintings—with their cartoonlike drawing and vaguely youth-cultural imagery (records, skateboards)—embody a sweeter, gentler cousin of the abject humor Martin Kippenberger and Werner Büttner were doing at the same time. It's around 1982 that Daniëls's touch lightens and a more distinct personality begins to emerge—and yet there's still something elusive there, perhaps deliberately so, as suggested by one of the artist's most striking early works, *Gespletenheid geaccepteerd* (Split Personality Accepted), 1982, in which two heads peek out from behind an overcoat that seems to hang from a nail in a stand of trees whose trunks, on further inspection, appear to be upside down pairs of naked women's legs.

In 1987, Daniëls suffered a debilitating stroke; he did not paint again for twenty years. Thus the exhibition's title, "Fragments from an Unfinished Novel," holds a special poignance. The show does, however, include a number

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of the small paintings he's made since 2007; in highly simplified ways, they pursue some of the same themes as his art of the '80s. Several of them (along with a painting from 1983) carry the legend **THE MOST CONTEMPORARY PICTURE SHOW**. I suppose it's meant ironically. And yet Daniëls's work of more than thirty years ago really does seem as contemporary as anything going on right now. □

"René Daniëls: Fragments from an Unfinished Novel" is on view through January 6; travels to Musée d'Art Moderne et Contemporain, Geneva, February 27–May 5.

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From left: View of "René Daniëls: Fragments from an Unfinished Novel," 2018. From left: *Painting on the Bullfight*, 1985; *De slag om de twintigste eeuw* (Battle for the Twentieth Century), 1984; *Painting on Unknown Languages*, 1985. Photo: Hugard & Vanoverschelde Photography. René Daniëls, *Gespletenheid geaccepteerd* (Split Personality Accepted), 1982, oil on canvas, 59 × 47 1/4". René Daniëls, *Observatorium*, 1985, oil on canvas, 55 1/4 × 39 3/4".

