

METRO PICTURES

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Art in America

RENÉ DANIËLS

Metro Pictures

René Daniëls is often described as a "cult" figure, an appropriately ambiguous honorific for the Dutch painter whose body of work from the mid-1980s has been hugely influential even if it has provided little grist for typical canonizing narratives. Just as the Velvet Underground's first record is said to have spawned a thousand garage bands, so, too, have Daniëls's cerebral, stylish canvases motivated a wide swath of contemporary experimentation. (Any number of Millennial artists from Bushwick and Sunset Park could have found kinship in this exhibition, a veritable retrospective of more than a dozen paintings plus a large selection of drawings, all from 1980 to 1987.)

The work's carefully tailored air of casualness, conveyed through loose brushwork and deceptively simple color schemes, seems designed to frustrate those in search of profound existential drama. And Daniëls's subject matter—gallery interiors, cartoonish vampires, bridges, books and bowties—hardly seems "critical" in the overt way that telegraphs artistic seriousness. He worked in a minor key that continues to resonate widely, in part, perhaps, because it lacks the pretentious trappings of self-consciously "major" artistic achievements.



René Daniëls: *Soft Stripes*, 1986, oil on canvas, 59¼ by 79 inches; at Metro Pictures.

As a description of this situation, "cult" feels intuitively right, but defining the term with some precision can help clarify the significance of Daniëls's work. For instance, he is definitely not a charismatic spiritual authoritarian of the sort who thrived in New York's Neo-Expressionist scene. Nor should the tragedy of the artist's personal life—a brain aneurysm in 1987 effectively ended Daniëls's career—shade the analysis of his work with devotional pieties. Daniëls's cult status might be more related to the obsessive appreciation of undervalued pop-culture artifacts, most importantly the cult movie. "Cult," according to film scholar Gregory Taylor, "attracts those enticed by high culture's aesthetics yet disaffected from its ideological values." Melding sophistication and irreverence, "cult" might describe both a mode of critical analysis and an approach to cultural production, one that is embodied in Daniëls's work but also shared by the likes of Philip Guston after 1969, the Talking Heads, Martin Kippenberger and perhaps the punk scene in general.

Daniëls was a master at balancing complexity and ambition with affected naiveté. His *Hoefijzerschilderij* (*Horseshoe Painting*), 1982, depicts a crucifix-like highway intersection surrounded by floating horseshoes, a bizarre combination of landscape and common objects that's enticing enough to invite interpretation while deflecting sure meaning. The hazy, sketchy quality of one untitled painting from 1984, which features solid colored rectangles floating in an indeterminate space, appears like a tossed-off effort at geometric abstraction. But the work is, in fact, so intricately layered with grids and traces of erased lines that the composition must have developed out of a deliberate structure, a conjecture confirmed by a diagrammatic preliminary drawing placed alongside it in the exhibition.

Daniëls may be best known for paintings depicting simple architectural spaces that, rendered in perspective, look like bowties and often have monochromatic paintings hanging on the walls. Daniëls repeated this motif again and again in more or less detail, an approach that speaks less to some anti-subjective seriality than it does to a searching impulse, as if the artist were grappling with a tradition of describing interior spaces that has fascinated Dutch artists in particular since the medium of oil painting was invented. A sharp, self-reflexive take on the basic conditions of viewing art in classical perspective lies beneath the inherent dumbness of painting bowtie after bowtie. Indeed, the cult of Daniëls has a low barrier of entry, but drinking the Kool-Aid can lead to some profound revelations.

—William S. Smith