

Truax, Stephen. "ArtSeen: Sputterances, organized by Sanya Kantarovsky." *thebrooklynrail.com* (April 1, 2017)



ArtSeen
WEBEXCLUSIVE

April 1st, 2017

Sputterances, organized by Sanya Kantarovsky

by Stephen Truax

METRO PICTURES | MARCH 17 – APRIL 22, 2017

It's obvious that *Sputterances* was organized by a painter. For this survey of contemporary painting and its forbears that spans exactly one century, twenty-one painters and one writer were selected by artist Sanya Kantarovsky. The show circles around Dutch artist René Daniëls, whose Conceptual painting practice, and close ties to the punk, new wave, and no wave underground music scene in the 1970s and '80s, made him an important figure in the Netherlands. Though his unassuming, erudite work was overlooked in New York in the 1980s, today we see that it anticipated painting's self-reflexive, critical turn in the intervening decades.

Throughout the show, it is difficult to discern which works were made in the early 20th century and which were made this year. The earliest is a Charles Burchfield watercolor landscape from 1917, which lends the exhibition an air of museology, or even sincerity. Recent paintings refer back to historical works, or deploy anachronistic styles, such as Allison Katz's *Elf-Esteem* (2017), and Jeanette Mundt's *The Waters Are Getting Warmer* (2017), a copy of a detail from John Singleton Copley's 1778 *Watson and the Shark*. Meanwhile, Milton Avery's *Mother's Boy* (1944) is so fresh it looks like it hasn't dried.

Cézanne apples tumble down behind a great bull-like form in a surprising 1992 Charlene von Heyl. Opposite, in the late Georgian painter Karlo Kacharava's *English Romanticism* (1993—the year before his death), a morose orange twilight opens behind two wobbly figures who dissolve into a hideous green sky. Next to it, in Amelie von Wulffen's untitled work from 2016, enormous vermin huddle in a violet room—recalling Kafka's *Metamorphosis*—illuminated only by a window at night; street light projected across the floor carries with it terrifying faces.



Milton Avery, *Mother's Boy*, 1944. Oil on canvas. 35 7/8 x 27 7/8 inches. Courtesy Metro Pictures.

Kantarovsky's last curatorial project, *No Joke* (2015) at Tanya Leighton, Berlin, featured a similar range of artists, from Math Bass to Ad Reinhardt's comic strips. It took on self-deprecating, critical artwork that addressed the viewer directly. *Sputterances* ponders "the elusive boundary between doubt and conviction." It's an eclectic group of paintings held together by a thin thematic premise. But we can forgive Kantarovsky, as all of the works are so good, the effort to pull together these loans must have been Herculean, and the complex, unexpected connections drawn between this intergenerational group are compelling. All of the works share an under-resolution—even in Avery's canvas, the hands are drawn in faltering pencil—or, they maintain a casual attachment to their subject matter—as evidenced by the three giraffes in foreshortened perspective that stare blankly at the viewer in Leidy Churchman's perplexing *Free Delivery* (2017).

A top hat and bow-ties—Daniëls's signature emblem that doubles as three walls seen in perspective, a shorthand for the interior of a gallery—are multiplied across the sanded surface of *Untitled* (1987). The black symbols are all painted over with washed ivory, making them almost the same color and tone as the chromatic gray ground of white scraped over burnt umber. One bow was erased. The painting is mute. This image is repeated on the letterpress prints, along with a restrained poem by Ben Lerner, which are available as a takeaway.

Sputterance (sputter/utterance), Daniëls's term, identifies "the gap between the impulse to express—to utter—and the unanticipated obstacles—"sputters," and relates to his paintings, which alternate between language and symbol, and intuitive colorful gesture. A cerebral haemorrhage in 1987 all but halted Daniëls's artistic practice; he was thirty-seven. But in 2006, Daniëls began to produce work again. In one small offering from that year, *The Most Contemporary Picture Show* (2006), a moon orbits a planet, drawn in black oil on a white ground. This nearly two-decade gap in Daniëls's production is a key to understanding this disparate group of artists brought together over the berth of so many decades, separated by resonant intervals.

In Milton Avery's exquisite scene of intimacy, a boy is seated on his mother's lap. Under her rose-colored slippers she can feel the softness of the carpet. It is an embrace of soft abstract forms held together just so. To the painting's right, the late Belgian master Raoul de Keyser's three horizontal lines are like a body of water cutting across a landscape, while three vertical forms of transparent brush strokes hover over it like air. And to its left, Mathew Cerletty's hilarious model of the solar system, *What's the Feels Like?* (2017); the lavender sky beyond the sun's immense orange glow is like a beacon against the gallery's white walls, illuminated by the blue light of the back skylight (no doubt placed there deliberately by Kantarovsky). It's so bright it hurts your eyes. These unconventional companions hang together, effortlessly, in a way only another painter could position them.

CONTRIBUTOR

Stephen Truax