

METRO PICTURES

Vitorelli, Rita and Devrim Bayar. "René Daniëls," *Spike Art Magazine* (Winter 2019): 178-180.

SPIKE

BRUSSELS

René Daniëls
„Fragments from an Unfinished Novel“
WIELS
07.09.2018 – 06.01.2019

Rita Vitorelli: The title of the show you curated at WIELS, „Fragments from an Unfinished Novel“, is borrowed from one of the rare texts written by René Daniëls. What can you tell me about this text?

Devrim Bayar: Published in the catalogue of a group show in 1982, it's a short text that recounts the dream of a character named Auntie Cobra who travels and makes a phone call to someone named Bosch. This text reflects Daniëls's interest in the dream universe and its surreal logic, and the references to art history, the humour, and the unfinished/fragmentary quality can all also be found in his images but also, of course, in his biography.

What role does language play in his work?

Language abounds in his paintings and works on paper in many different forms. His very first paintings from 1977 depict a book and a bookshelf. He was a huge fan of literature and poetry, as well as of artists who explored the relations between text and image such as René Magritte and Marcel Broodthaers. Daniëls also wrote words directly on the surface of his paintings – often the title of the work itself, but also words that are almost impossible to decipher, written in what Daniëls referred to as his „ugly handwriting“. The confusion is of course deliberate.

Daniëls's work is full of irony, and there's also a lot of humour. Do you think humour is what makes his work so important today?

I think humour is what gives his work a lightness that balances the more conceptual side of his practice, but I wouldn't say that it's what makes his work so important. Daniëls's work can be very self-referential: he explored the nature of representation, the relations between text and image, the role of the artist, the art system, etc. Yet his sense of humour, probably inherited from Picabia's irony and Duchamp's conceptual playfulness, allowed his work to never feel „heavy“.

Could you please explain the „bow tie“, one of his most famous motifs, which he used again and again in many variations?

The so-called „bow tie“ motif is in reality the schematisation of an exhibition space seen in perspective: two lateral walls which meet a central wall. Daniëls first painted it in 1984 and then reused it in numerous compositions. His reflection on the „performance“ space of art – where art is performing in front of its audience – becomes more and more abstract as it unfolds from 1984 until 1987, when the artist suffered a stroke which put an abrupt end to his career.

The bow-tie works are not exactly a series, but more an ensemble or a family of works that Daniëls called „The Beautiful Exhibitions“. There is a lot one could say about them works, but one of their key features is that they create a doubling effect or *mise en abyme* as viewers find themselves in a painting exhibition looking at an exhibition of paintings. In some of these images, he suggests the painting can be entered through a door or a keyhole; in others he creates compositions with multiple layers so we sense there is another space behind the first one but we cannot really access it. For Daniëls, the work of art inhabits this invisible „membrane“ between the visible and the invisible, seeing and knowing, perception and imagination, reality and fiction, the actual and the virtual, presence and absence.

178

179

BRUSSELS

Photos: Hugard & Vanoverschelde Photography



René Daniëls, „Fragments from an Unfinished Novel“, WIELS, Brussels, 2018
Exhibition views



Views

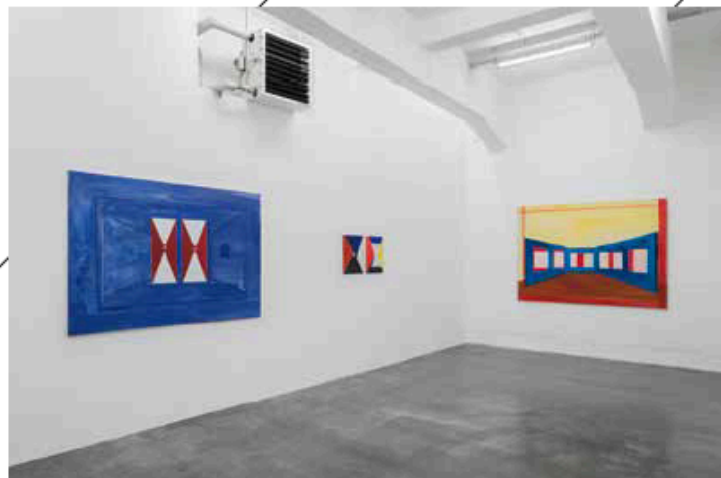
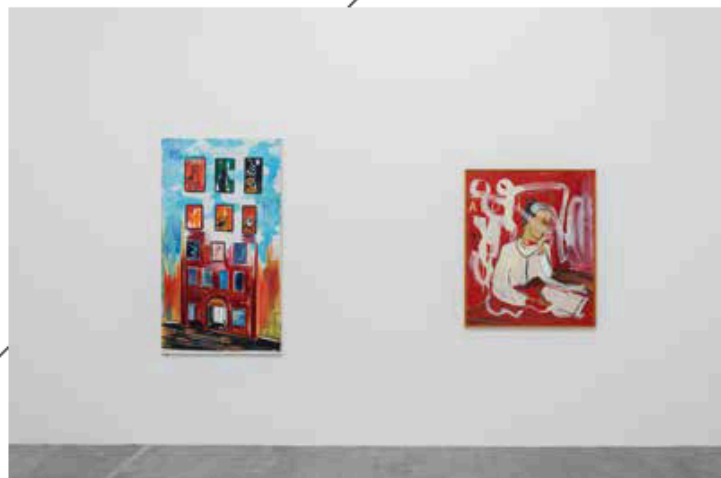
Views

BRUSSELS

I'm very interested his use of repetition. Many of his images are almost replicas of each other, with only very minimal differences. Can you tell us more about this part of his practice?

There are indeed a lot of repetitions in Daniëls's work. He repeated himself, for instance, by painting his own paintings in new works, where they appear as quotes or citations. Various motifs also reappear in different works in an ever-changing guise. One the most important of them is the „two I's fighting for one dot“, as Daniëls called it, which comes back in a number of images as a geometric abstract pattern, as exclamation points, as two legs and a circle on a shirt, etc. The logic is akin to that of a dream. There are also some compositions that are mirrored reflections of others and provoke a sensation of déjà vu, which blurs memory and perception.

Some titles are recycled, too. Very different works sometimes have the same title, which means they must have something in common, even if they don't look alike. But very similar works sometimes also have very different titles... Daniëls seems to leave clues for viewers to access his poetic visual world, but these clues are full of paradoxes and contradictions that compel us to use our own imagination to interpret what is in front of us.



René Daniëls, „Fragments from an Unfinished Novel“,
WIELS, Brussels, 2018
Exhibition views