

An exhibition organized by Devrim Bayar and Paul Bernard, in collaboration with WIELS, Brussels
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Following the *Zeitgeist* exhibition in 2017, MAMCO continues its exploration of painting in the 1980s with a retrospective of the work of one of the most enigmatic and fascinating painters of the second half of the 20th century. Born in 1950 in Eindhoven (where he continues to live and work today), René Daniëls's meteoric career was brutally interrupted in 1987 when he suffered a stroke that left him physically impaired. The exhibition concentrates on a ten-year period from the late 1970s until the artist's stroke, through a significant body of canonical and previously unseen works. A separate section is devoted to Daniëls's more recent work.

René Daniëls emerged onto the art scene during a period characterised by a wholesale return to figurative and expressionist painting, in both Europe and the United States. Daniëls quickly established himself as one of this new, effervescent, vindictive and loudly disparaged generation of painters. His work was shown in each of the major 'manifesto exhibitions' of the 1980s: *Westkunst* in Cologne, *Zeitgeist* in Berlin, *documenta 7* in Cassel, and *Der Zerbrochene Spiegel* in Vienna and Hamburg. A residency at PS1 in New York brought him closer to certain American practitioners of appropriation art, with whom he exhibited at the Metro Pictures gallery.

Daniëls's first works are profoundly influenced by the early punk rock concerts he filmed in Eindhoven. The movement's energy and insolence are reflected in the spontaneous, unfinished quality of his work at the time. Moving from one painting to the next at the frenetic pace of a punk band performing a set on stage, Daniëls produced pseudo-abstract

variations on a restricted formal repertoire: round and oval shapes represent a planet and its satellite, vinyl discs, eyes, a skateboard, before evolving into swans, mussels, a face, a hat...

Daniëls's fast-moving execution and subject matter conjure dizzying semantic shifts in the context of an operational mode reminiscent of Surrealist practice. Similarly, the pictures' titles feature numerous double meanings and plays on words. Daniëls was a passionate follower of punk, like so many of his contemporaries, but his work was distinguished by a particular attachment to poetry and language. His drawings and paintings teem with references to Baudelaire, Apollinaire, Broodthaers, Duchamp, Magritte, and Picabia: a surprising Franco-Belgian pantheon for a non-French-speaking Dutch artist whose work seems a far cry from the precepts underpinning the abstraction of Van Doesburg or Mondrian.

This unprecedented alliance of punk and Surrealist polysemy allowed Daniëls to embrace a broad range of subject matter, from acerbic commentaries on the art world (its rivalries, gossip and violent, heated debates) to a more dreamlike, meditative introversion. Time and again, allusions break the surface: to his own life or the quiet landscapes surrounding his home town. Stylistically, Daniëls employs multiple layers of paint to explore effects of transparency and opacity. His paintings are poised between surface and depth, the internal and external—a technique explored with virtuosity in the *Mooie Tentoonstellingen* series ("Beautiful Exhibitions"): the so-called "bow tie" paintings, begun in 1984 and shown here on the museum's second floor.

René Daniëls is well-known today for his “bow tie” paintings, the name given to the *Mooie Tentoonstellingen* (“Beautiful Exhibitions”) series, produced between 1984 and 1987. A single motif is repeated throughout: three trapezoidal surfaces are arranged to suggest a perspective view of a gallery lined with pictures. This enigmatic series was the primary focus of Daniëls’s exhibition at the Bern Kunsthalle in 1987, shortly before his stroke. As in his other paintings, the simple-seeming motif conceals multiple layers of meaning.

The title (in fact, a sub-title) by which the series is known seems too ordinary by far: we detect a hint of irony. As with some earlier works (*The Most Contemporary Picture Show*, *La Muse Vénale...*), Daniëls’s choice of words subverts any hint of depth, and any possibility of simple, straightforward contemplation, at one and the same time. In this sense, the exhibition views seem to embody a form of institutional critique, both mirroring and caricaturing the ways in which pictures become fetishized in a formal, exhibition context. As such, the paintings echo the deconstruction of the *white cube* enacted by artists and critics alike, in the 1970s.

In some paintings, a microphone or a piano are glimpsed in the middle of the exhibition space while the artist lurks at the back, waiting to “take the stage.” The pictures stand as a reminder of how the art system of the 1980s—with its burgeoning commercial market and blockbuster exhibitions—fostered the emergence of the artist as show-person and performer, a concept revisited in the exhibition *Art & Entertainment* at MAMCO in 2018. Indeed, the bow tie makes its very first appearance in Daniëls’s work in a painting showing the artist as a kind of smartly dressed stage magician (shown here on the first floor).

But always in Daniëls’s work, the art-world critique is balanced by a more personal, poetic

flip side. Some spaces are highly reminiscent of the archetypal settings favoured in the art of memory. In some bow tie pictures, for example, we encounter memories of past works arranged as curious visual puzzles. This cartography of memory is developed in the *Lentebloesem* (“Spring flowers”) whose branching forms connect disparate words, in a manner reminiscent of the associative logic of memory.

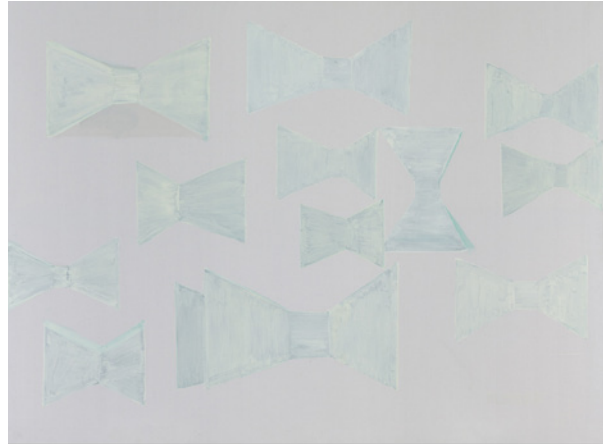
The presence of keyholes metaphorizes the essential mystery of these paintings while at the same time instating the viewers as voyeurs of a kind, searching for a definitive meaning that continually eludes us. The painting *Mémoire d’un oubli* (“A memory of a forgetting”) exemplifies this dialectic between transparency and opacity: above two trapezoidal forms, the word *PORTE* (“door”) appears twice, the right way up and upside-down, one on top of the other. We stand before Daniëls’s two-way doors, simultaneously on the threshold of the painting and about to step outside it altogether. Lastly, one should note how Daniëls upends his bow ties vertically, transforming them into look-outs or vantage points. In the simple act of turning a motif on its side, we feel the painting itself may be scrutinising us in turn.

RENÉ DANIËLS

Fragments from an Unfinished Novel



René Daniëls, *Untitled*, 1982
Oil on canvas, 121.3 × 95.9 cm
coll. Joel Wachs



René Daniëls, *Fleece*, 1987
Oil on canvas, 150 × 200 cm
Private collection



René Daniëls, *Lentebloesem*, 1987
Oil on canvas, 100.3 × 120.1 cm
Fondation René Daniëls



René Daniëls in his studio in Eindhoven
ca. 1981. Photo: Pieter Heijnen

