

Modern Art

René Daniëls

Modern Art Bury Street
20 September–16 November 2024
Private View: Thursday 19 September, 6–8pm



Untitled, circa 1980

Modern Art is delighted to announce an exhibition of paintings by René Daniëls, his third with the gallery. The seven paintings, most of which have never been exhibited, span the formative period of 1980 to 1984, prior to and prefiguring the development of his signature 'bowtie' motif. Early works from this period are mainly figurative, notably loose in brushwork, and made up of several layers often revealing traces of underpaintings. Superimposed figures appear as dreamlike apparitions, floating over the canvas and dissolving into inanimate objects. Together this body of work shows how Daniëls used mysticism, ceremonial rituals, as well as woodland and jungle environments as iconography to probe the lexicons of art history and mechanisms of the art market.

Art itself has been the subject of his paintings throughout his oeuvre; what defines an artwork, how it is interpreted, exhibited - and most poignantly - how it is assigned value. Daniëls often worked cyclically, returning to certain compositions repeatedly, changing small details with each new work. Every iteration shows him ushering his subjects' transition toward an unknown destination. His urge for transformation is especially evident in *De fontein in Afrika*, a painting he reworked after it was originally exhibited in 1984. The outline of a giraffe is overlaid by the pattern of its skin; only visible in the brown segments left translucent. The painting fuses different perspectives: the foreground with the background, and the sign with its interpretation. He found "objects and ideas always appear twice, once as a reality and later as the idea for a work." These foundational paintings give insight into an artist who sought to refine his pictorial language through developing an interconnected web of double entendres and multilingual puns.

For Daniëls, Edgar Allan Poe, Marcel Duchamp, René Magritte, Marcel Broodthaers and Francis Picabia are key lodestars for their "lucidity of unique thought." In a similar tongue-in-cheek way to these artists, Daniëls offers institutional critique through dark humour, metonymic wit, and radical self-awareness. Charting a course independent from his peers, Daniëls' oeuvre has received multiple recent revisionist appraisals including surveys at Camden Art Centre in 2011, Museo Reina Sofia (2011-2012), and WIELS, Brussels and MAMCO, Geneva (2018-2019). At a time of heightened commercialisation of the art world, his spirit of experimentation and humour undercut by a deep belief in painting lives on in the younger generations of artists working today.

René Daniëls began his career exhibiting in the Netherlands in the late 1970s and gained international attention in the early 1980s when his work was presented widely in Europe and the United States. It was at this point that he became identified as one of the foremost twentieth century Dutch painters, recognised for his unique approach to the medium of painting that was driven by both conceptual and painterly concerns, and brought together references to art history, literature, and wider cultural sensibilities. Contesting the fundamentals of the basic picture plane, Daniëls' work sought to construct a new kind of painting. Its imagery is self-reflexive, inquisitive, and laced with humour, making representation itself the subject. As such, Daniëls' work can be considered in relation to Institutional Critique, in its laying bare of the mechanisms of the commercial art world and contesting institutional conventions.

During the 1980s, Daniëls developed some of his most iconic painterly configurations, forms and motifs. Perhaps his most famous is what has come to be known as the 'bowtie' paintings, in which the perspective of a floating, abstracted, three-walled space – resembling that of a gallery – is amplified to crudely resemble the shape of a bowtie. Allegory and ambiguity are constitutional elements of Daniëls' works, but self-referential witticism and semiotic play is only one register among several. Marlene Dumas writes, "He is not just special for making forms dis- and re-appear but also for his understanding of painting as a performance of and in space. [...] Daniëls can make colours breathe, take a walk on the wild side, smile like Matisse, and untie Mondrian with a bow." In 1987 Daniëls experienced a brain haemorrhage and was unable to continue to work until recent years. As a result, the majority of the limited number of existing works by Daniëls were made between 1978 - 1987.

Born in Eindhoven in 1950, where he continues to live and work, Daniëls studied at the Royal Academy of Arts and Design in Hertogenbosch and from 1983-84 attended the studio program at MoMA PS1, New York. He participated in numerous international exhibitions throughout the 1980s, among them *Zeitgeist* (1982), *documenta 7* (1982), and the 17th Bienal de São Paulo (1983). He resumed drawing in the 1990s, and painting in 2006. In recent years, his work has been the subject of several major presentations including a 2010 survey of his work at Camden Art Centre, London in 2010, a 2011-12 survey at Museo Reina Sofia, Madrid, and the Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven; and the 2018 exhibition *Fragments of an Unfinished Novel* at WIELS, Brussels, which travelled to MAMCO, Geneva, the following year. Daniëls' works are held in collections including the Art Institute of Chicago; the Groninger Museum, Groningen; Kunstmuseum Den Haag, The Hague; Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg; Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam; the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam; the Städel Museum, Frankfurt; S.M.A.K., Ghent; Tate, London; the Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven; and the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis.



René Daniëls in his house on the Leenderweg, Eindhoven, 1979. Photo: Paul Andriessse.

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