

René Daniëls

An Exhibition Is Always Part of a Greater Whole

René Daniëls (Eindhoven, Netherlands, 1950) began his personal exploration of the possibilities of painting as a medium in 1976, on completing his art studies. He linked the visual arts and their rich history with literature and everyday life. Ambiguity and double meaning play a crucial role in his work, showing evidence of a relationship with predecessors like Francis Picabia, René Magritte, Marcel Duchamp and Marcel Broodthaers. Indeed, Daniëls saw himself more as an heir to these artists than as a contemporary of the neo-expressionist painters who found fame in the period when the first phase of his highly original work was developing, even though he was sometimes misleadingly associated with them by exhibition curators and critics.

Exhibition organized by the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía and the Van Abbemuseum Eindhoven



vanabbemuseum

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Grammofoon
(Gramophone),
1978
Oil on canvas
141.7 x 111.7 cm
Collection Van
Abbemuseum,
Eindhoven

He exhibited at important international shows like Westkunst (1981) and Documenta 7 (1982), and had a retrospective at the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven in 1986. A year later, when he was thirty-seven and already regarded as one of the foremost Dutch painters of his generation, Daniëls suffered a stroke which prevented him from returning to work for a very long time. Hundreds of drawings, sketches and notes, together with more than ninety pictures from his studio in various stages of completion, then fell to the care of the René Daniëls Foundation. At the Foundation's request, this material was recorded, documented and preserved by the Van Abbemuseum in

Eindhoven. The wealth of images, ideas and cross-references in the works is immense. In the current exhibition, these materials play an important role in showing Daniëls' work in a new light.

Through a broad selection of paintings, gouaches and drawings, together with a wide-ranging compilation of other materials from the René Daniëls Foundation, this exhibition opens a perspective onto the versatile nature and the complexity of the artist's work within the framework of the 1970s and 1980s underground culture which was so decisive for Daniëls, including punk, new wave and 'no wave', and also within the neo-liberal and commercial context of the (art) world at that time. Unlike most of the other painters of his generation, Daniëls' work can be regarded as allegorical in the broadest sense of the term, as employed by Walter Benjamin in many of his writings. For Benjamin, allegory is a concept with implications that are simultaneously philosophical, religious, aesthetic, political and historical, all of which appear to be very important aspects of Daniëls' art.

Although the artist always attached great importance to the production of sketches and texts, painting was always his

ultimate objective. Everything else is preparatory work, a process leading towards his complex and multi-layered pictures. By presenting a selection of this “preliminary work”, the exhibition allows a revelatory glimpse of part of his creative process and the numerous sources of inspiration characteristic of his work. Above all, the artist always made sure his work remained open to interpretation at as many levels as possible. By surprising viewers, he allowed them to discover its complexity little by little for themselves.



The Most Contemporary Picture Show, 1983
Oil on canvas
130 x 100 cm
Bonnefantenmuseum
Maastricht

While Daniëls was at first influenced stylistically by painters like Polke and Baselitz, it was Duchamp who played a fundamental role in his growth as an artist. “Duchamp’s achievement,” Daniëls asserted, “is undoubtedly based most on the expansion of the possible ways of making art, [...] of using everything life offers us. Of using what was once a no man’s land between literature, visual art and life.” And it is precisely this “no man’s land” which Daniëls explores through his work.

Although Daniëls had recourse to expressionist brushwork in these early pieces, his painting from the early 1980s onwards is characterized

by transparent layers of thinly applied paint, often leaving portions of canvas completely bare. The works may be unfinished, inviting viewers to conclude them in their heads and discover new meanings in them again and again. Their titles range from ‘Untitled’ to enigmatic and poetic names, adding a further stratum to the complexity and ambiguity of the work. In this way, Daniëls literally allows words and phrases to penetrate the canvas itself, broadening the poetic qualities and possible significances of the piece still further. Literature, visual art and everyday life, the trinity which he

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places at the forefront of his oeuvre, have played a leading role ever since.

In his works from 1985 to 1987, abstract walls of what are supposedly exhibition spaces start to appear. Taking the form of bow ties, they often contrast with colored pictures that look like paintings hanging on the supposed gallery walls. These spatial diagrams could equally well be seen as settings for performances or events, and are mostly characterized by lack of action. The suggested space is waiting for something to happen, and Daniëls thereby adds an implication of change and opportunity to his paintings, where what is not visible becomes as important as what is.

One of his last groups of works before suffering a stroke in December 1987, *Lentebloesem* ('Spring Blossom'), takes the idea of abstract space as a motif even further. The paintings consist of monochromatic fields contrasted with red, white or brown branches, or with networks of streets, flanked by words and phrases. They look like plans or maps, and the words next to the painted lines refer to places, times and objects. The first painting in the series contains the titles of all the works that Daniëls had produced in the ten years and more that had gone by from his art student days to the moment when he created this singular piece.

Aux Déon, 1985
Oil on canvas
100 x 130 cm
Dhr. J.M. Boll
Private Collection



In 2007, after producing no work for nearly twenty years, René Daniëls started to paint pictures again, this time in a small format. At first sight, these images seem far removed from the skillfully painted canvases of the mid-eighties, which is perfectly understandable in itself. However, they could also be interpreted as a return to the clarity and immediacy of his



Lentbloesem
(Spring Blossom),
1987
Oil on canvas
100 x 120 cm
Stedelijk Museum
Collection,
Amsterdam

work of the late seventies and early eighties. What has changed is the form, partly as a result of the artist's physical limitations, since he now has to paint with his left hand. He has had to find a new language with which to express his ideas, one which is perhaps basic but never superficial. His work remains enigmatic and full of double meanings.

From the start, Daniëls has sought to offer a critique of the unilateral vision of art historians, who frequently isolate the work of art from society, situating it solely within tradition and the history of art itself. Daniëls' work therefore adopts an unusual stance within the visual arts of the late 1970s and 1980s, and although his international career took an unexpected turn in 1987, his work has been shown in numerous exhibitions and continues today to influence younger generations of artists.

To conclude, here are a few clues that were given by the artist himself regarding the possible meanings of his work: "Where I am concerned, if there were a secret, I wouldn't reveal it. But undoubtedly the work is an extension of a cultural inheritance in which one maintains a jovial relationship with reality and the profound significance it contains."

Roland Groenenboom

Note: All the quotations by René Daniëls in this leaflet are taken from interviews published in the book *René Daniëls: The Words are not in their Proper Place*, Roland Groenenboom (ed.), Rotterdam, Nai Publishers, 2011.

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Museum hours

Monday to Saturday
from 10:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m.
Sundays
from 10:00 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.
Closed Tuesdays

Galleries close 15 minutes
prior to Museum closing

www.museoreinasofia.es

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20 October 2011 – 26 March 2012

Palacio de Velázquez

Parque del Retiro

Palacio de Velázquez hours

October through March
Monday to Saturday
from 10:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m.
Sundays and holidays
from 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.

Images

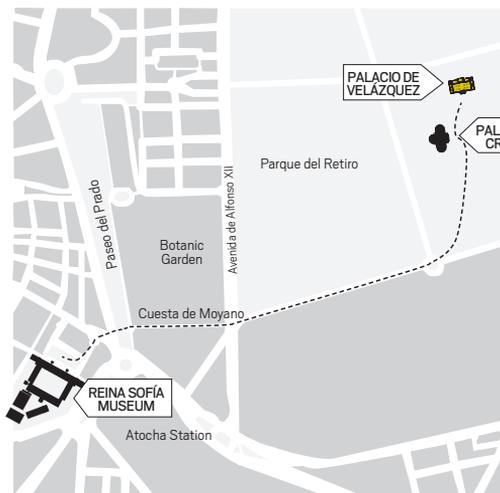
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Activities

Conference
21 October, 7:30 p.m.
Nouvel building, Auditorium 200

Discussion: René Daniëls

[Roland Groenenboom](#)
and [Dominic van den Boogerd](#)
[in conversation](#)



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