

METRO PICTURES

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ARTFORUM

René Daniëls

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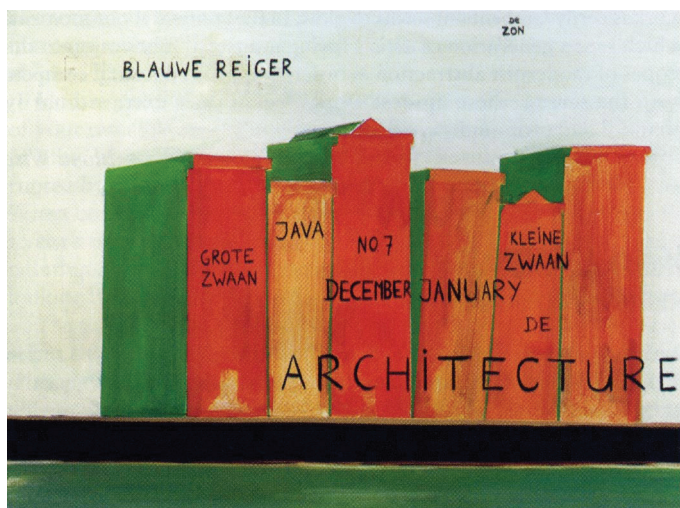
Foolish, it seems, to *not* begin with the bow ties when considering this rare US exhibition of René Daniëls's paintings, drawings, and watercolors, as that motif is the most complicated (and celebrated) of his "architectures." Rendered as a cartoony graphic—two receding rectangles joining at a small square, suggesting a perspectival view of a room—the form has nearly become a brand for the artist. Daniëls, who is based in Eindhoven, the Netherlands, began painting this icon in 1984 and stopped in 1987 when his career was interrupted by a brain aneurysm that led to a long hiatus from artmaking. In recent years, he has returned to painting and revived the motif, which is part of what makes this an apt moment to reconsider his output of the 1980s. Executed speedily with punk panache, these works come together as an inquiry into the apparatuses of art viewership. With his light touch, open-ended results, and simple statements—"I always found fruitful ideas more interesting than the complete development of those ideas"—Daniëls has come to be revered by later generations of painters. Consider the booklet accompanying his 2010 exhibition at London's Camden Arts Centre, wherein Silke Otto-Knapp writes about Daniëls's "spaces of potential," while Peter Doig notes the artist's "visions that float across the back of your eyes."

Forever infecting painting's purity and pushing its limitations, Daniëls has upheld a persistence, or resistance, that was felt throughout this show. The bow ties commenced after his participation in a series of group exhibitions in Germany, such as 1981's "Westkunst" and Documenta 7 and "Zeitgeist" in 1982. Of the latter, he once said, "The comic elements in my pictures made a strong contrast with everything else, and this did not exactly go down well with the organizers. I felt 'alone at last.'" Indeed, Daniëls's humor, ambiguity, and refusal to produce market-ready spectacles or adhere to stylistic tics clashed with the *Neue Wilde* compositions in those shows (or what he called "Deutsche angst," a moodiness that his comic bow ties reacted against).

Entering this exhibition, viewers encountered a sparse installation of three large untitled canvases, all variations on the bow tie theme. Painted in the mid- to late '80s, these pieces ranged from the overtly graphic (all-black motifs oddly spaced and overlapping against an emerald background) to the surreal (the bow tie's shape doubling as a sketchy perspectival room filled with paintings, TV-shaped sculptures, and floating objects) to the abstract (a washy white background punctuated by variously hued panels that imply disassembled bow ties). The fluctuations of the motif nicely dovetail with the works' provisional character, particularly that of Daniëls's watercolors, which were on view around a corner. Resembling unfinished studies or sketches (and made in roughly the same years as the paintings), many of these works display multiple bow ties mapped out in ink, chalk, pen, and pencil. Though often taking on a kinetic quality—butterflies or spaceships in flight—the bow ties never coalesce into straightforward depictions, and the works always upend the viewer's assumptions of just what is being represented.

The feeling of representational ambiguity continued in works shown in the exhibition's latter two rooms, from the rows of blocky, building-like forms in 1987's *Kades-Kaden* (Quays-Quays) to the oneiric wave-bridge in the sepia-hued *Ondergronds verbonden* (Connected Underground), 1984, to the dramatic, de Chirico-esque *Zache strepen* (Soft Stripes), 1986, in which a lone figure contemplates a series of squares—seemingly paintings—inside a floating blue bow tie—*cum*—gallery space while several planets converge overhead. The overall effect is that of theater. Daniëls points to the white cube's artificiality, its constructedness, suggesting that paintings are no more than props, and that within the gallery's "spaces of potential," we're all performers, caught in an infinite loop of rehearsals.

—Lauren O'Neill-Butler



René Daniëls, *Kades-Kaden* (Quays-Quays), 1987, oil on canvas, 41 1/2 x 55 1/8