

THE UNBEARABLE LIGHTNESS OF PAINTING

Jeffrey Dennis and David Ben White discuss the work of René Daniëls in response to *René Daniëls: Painting on Unknown Languages* at Camden Arts Centre, London during September and November 2010.

David Ben White: For me, like many painters, the chance to see a relatively comprehensive retrospective of the work of René Daniëls couldn't have been more welcome and timely. It appeared that his work carries a freshness and open-endedness that still seems as dynamic as the first time I came across it, and it is still very clear that his work carries possibilities that artists are still grappling with. I remember when Justin Hibbs and I met up with Luc Tuymans in Belgium (reviewing the Painting Biennial at Museum Dhondt Dhaenens) - it was René Daniëls that we ended up talking about. For Tuymans, it was the word-play/tree paintings that had proved particularly interesting. Daniëls still carries a strange significance for him; strange in the sense that what he has brought to the painting-table still appears to be growing and shifting under our noses. I really enjoyed so much of the show and cannot remember the main gallery space looking more exuberant. What I hadn't banked on was the connection the work would make for me with the work of René Magritte; in particular his body of paintings entitled the *Période Vache* from 1947.

I was thinking over what to write and what seemed appropriate for such a curiously slippery and enigmatic artist. I had met up with you, Jeff, and felt that

you had a better take on the cultural significance of Daniëls' paintings and their lyrical elusiveness, but I felt at a loss as to how to develop a suitable response. I was leafing through the book that accompanied the Magritte *Période Vache* exhibition at Shirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt, 2008 when a painting jumped out at me... then another. It was as if I had experienced a curious high contrast, high pitched colour clash, poetically enigmatic with raucous speed, somewhere before ... and then it hit me.

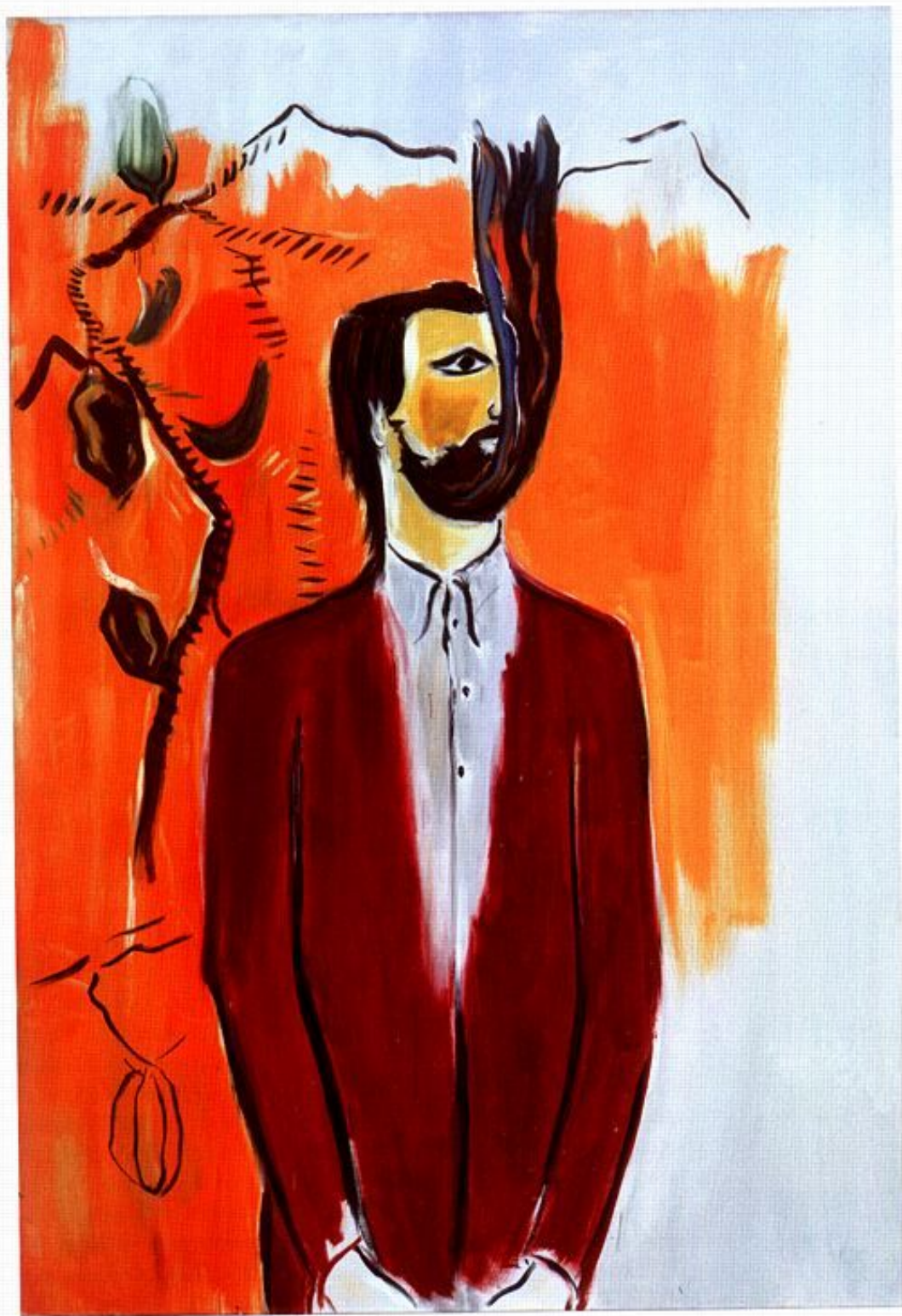
Jeffrey Dennis: It's claimed by Robert Fleck in his essay in *A Certain Degree of Freedom: The reception and Influence of Magritte's Période Vache since 1978*, that certain artists born in the 1960s - Sean Landers, John Currin, Cecily Brown - not only demonstrate a clear debt to the *Vache* paintings (this is indisputable and acknowledged by them), but even that their primary encounter with Magritte's work would have been through the *Vache* works rather than through the 'classic' Magritte oeuvre. This might be overstating the point in order to clinch the argument. The *Vache* works represent a violent break with the past, and it would be impossible to imagine them without an apparent paradoxical relationship to the 'classic' Magritte's: they may otherwise have appeared to be context-less, 'outsider' curiosities. From the moment that the *Vache* work was included alongside that of the new generation of emerging artists in *WestKunst - Zeitgenössische Kunst seit 1939*, Rheinhausen, Cologne, in 1981, it has been assumed that Magritte's rediscovered period exerted a key influence on the younger artists. But clear positions and relationships are easier to map retrospectively. Franz West frankly admits that in the chaos of installing the exhibition, he didn't really notice Magritte's work. Daniëls was included in that show too, but if we are to explore a relationship between his painting and Magritte's,



Les Profondeurs du Plaisir
(The Depths of Pleasure)
- René Magritte
1948
Gouache on paper
(46 x 32.8 cm)



Le Stropiat (The Cripple) – René Magritte
1948
Oil on canvas
(59.5 x 49.5 cm)



Mr Cocoanuts - René Daniëls
1982
Oil on canvas
(200 x 240 cm)

Courtesy of Jan Maarten Boff

Zonder Titel (Untitled) - René Daniëls
1985
Ink, watercolour and gouache on paper
(24 x 32 cm)

Courtesy of René Daniëls Foundation and
Camden Arts Centre



Daniëls' familiarity with *Période Vache* must have predated *WestKunst*. Daniëls' *Vache* like works were afloat by the late 1970s, as is clear from a series of works from 1979 entitled *La Muse Vénale*.

So let's assume he had already absorbed the chaotic importance of Magritte's lost year, but was anxious not to have his own life-work appended to it. The *Période Vache*, a body of work which was painted for Magritte's first, long awaited show in Paris (still, in 1948, widely regarded as the centre of the art world) has been interpreted as the Belgian thumbing his provincial nose at the Metropolitan sophisticates. Daniëls has been careful to establish his distance from other artists whom he was initially grouped with, such as the *Junge Wilde* painters. It may be that Daniëls strove to build complexity and slippage into his work partly to avoid being absorbed and consumed as quickly as the *Junge Wilde* group were.

I remarked how the paintings sometimes operate like the visual equivalent of cockney rhyming slang ('plates of meat' = feet, etc); a mussel shell in one Daniëls

painting serves as a skateboard in the next; a bow tie becomes an exhibition hall seen in perspective. Any verbal slang may be employed by a cultural group to exclude outsiders, and to do this effectively they keep morphing and evolving, so that dads and tourists are always left behind. Painting (especially the painting of things) is the perfect cow-on-the-line for derailing smooth conceptual monorails. Daniëls certainly represents a thread of 'Bad Painting' – a term first made popular by Marcia Tucker's exhibition at the New Museum, New York, 1978 – from an era that still provokes discomfort in many commentators and artists, and for which painters have still not been completely forgiven (i.e. painting is suspected to be decadent, conceptually incompetent, a leaky vessel, anti-Modernist, reactionary). But by linking himself, by his deft word/image play, with the strategies of artists like Broodthaers and Duchamp, Daniëls carves out a territory for himself that seems to overlap the visual and verbal zones. Humour is a wonderful

motor within the work. I cannot look at a painting like *Cocoanuts*, a picture of a man with an apparently levitating beard, without thinking it's Eric Morecambe entering one of Ernie Wise's spoof plays in some preposterous costume, and distracting the guest stars with an absurd sight-gag.

DBW: I agree with you, but if we want to take this a little further, why not focus on that particular painting and see if the stylistic connections were there in 1982. Within *Cocoanuts* there is clearly a 'painting shorthand' at work, with the strong verticals being held in check by the horizontal graphic depiction of the mountains, which are broken into by the figure's flying beard. The main visual thrust of the painting, aside from the obvious humour is the strong, potent clash of warm tones (orange and carmine red) emphasised and played off by the ascending orange/green vine and the cool white of the primed canvas.

In comparison, I would like to think about *Les Profondeurs du Plaisir* from the *Vache* period by Magritte - a strong vertically charged image of a chromatically shifting woman rubbing her breast against an enlarged chess piece. The background is reduced to a fast, graphic depiction of a horizontal/vertical lattice design, which balances out the strong vertical push. Surrounding the figure are brief, shorthand depictions of grass and scrub. Both paintings contain strong, clashing keyed-up colours.

In Magritte's painting the woman's thigh and her long hair move chromatically up the canvas from warm, modulated flesh tones through and into the cool blue of the upper half of the canvas, derailed on the left hand side by the pink right hand that pulls the pawn towards the figure's body. Both paintings seem to share a similar effect in being strangely unsettling and funny in equal measures. The graphic style of short hand outlines are both in play, but it is the colour and its modulated movement in the woman's

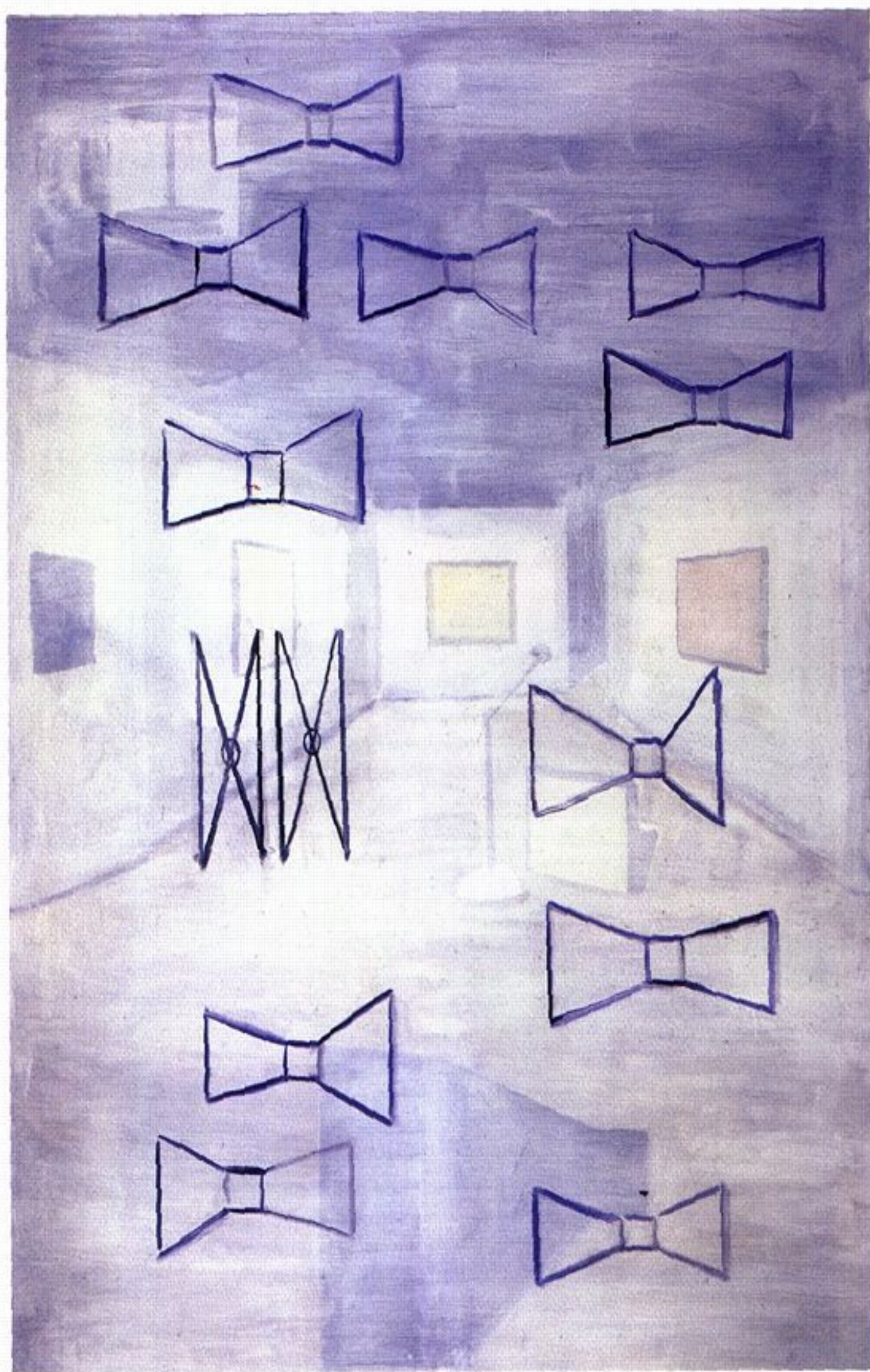


Installation view, Camden Arts Centre 1985

Courtesy of René Daniëls Foundation and
Camden Arts Centre

hair and the similar complex movement in the man's beard in the Daniëls that heightens their connection. I'm trying to think about this shared language, because I have generally found it difficult to contextualise Daniëls' stylistic mode of painting. However, it seems to me that Magritte's violent use of this pictorial, graphic led short-hand was clearly helpful for Daniëls in concocting his fugitive aesthetic of potential connections that cannot be fully pinned down.

JD: I could sense that the small painting on paper, included in the Camden show, of a bull stuck with picadors' lances (*Zonder titel*, 1985), was highly significant, but couldn't articulate its importance until I thought about how we encounter those bow-tie/gallery walls seen in perspective that feature in many of Daniëls' paintings. The bull shares our viewpoint, and seems unsure which way to charge. The artist repeatedly offers the viewer this dilemma of multiple targets. It is even extended into physical space, with the five-armed screening construction at Camden (an arrangement designed by the artist for earlier exhibitions). This makes it impossible to view one painting on its own, and the



Het Huis (The House) -
René Daniëls
1986
Oil on canvas
(190 X 130 cm)

*Courtesy of René Daniëls
Foundation and Comden
Arts Centre*

visitor becomes that confused bull.

DBW: In that way, the bow tie/gallery paintings seem to be a very logical progression for Daniëls and it would be good to look at a couple in particular from the show. *The Return of the Performance* of 1987 and *The House* of 1986 were hung together at the far right wall in the main gallery space. The first has a small figure looking back through the gallery space towards the viewer. In the centre of the space is a coat-stand, or a complex mic stand, which also manages to act like a fulcrum or magic wand, and around which, objects – some look like pianos, some like paintings – float around, inhabiting the three walls as well as the foreground area. Silke Otto Knapp, in the press release for the show, says about the painting *A Fountain in Africa*: 'the foliage now reads like side panels of a theatre set with the empty central axis becoming the stage.' I think this idea works as cogently with *The Return of the Performance*, which to my mind also has a very theatrical feel about it. The painting on the left of this houses a similar setup, but without a figure, and with a thin wash or skin on which graphic depictions of bow ties/galleries and two strong perspective corridors are depicted. It is in particular this skin and the floating quality of the diagrams on the surface that I find so interesting. Philip Peters, in his essay *René Daniëls: Imprisoned in the 'Fleece'* says Daniëls 'called this upper layer the 'fleece'; it's really a kind of veil between the lower layer and the viewer, a veil that by definition both protects and hides.' He also talks about its 'unmistakeable reference to Picabia' (his *Transparencies*), but for me, it is also a highly original way of presenting the viewer with two different syntaxes: The graphic shorthand description of perspective depth and the tonal language of colour gradation in depicting volume, set in contradiction to each other.

JD: That's a perceptive breakdown of

what's going on in those paintings, but I worry that, by admiring the virtuosity too much, as your analysis encourages us to do, there is a danger that we underestimate the sheer punk effrontery of the work. I was amused by this term 'the fleece': could it be the mysterious object of Jason and the Argonauts' heroic quest, or the stuff gardeners use to protect their tomatoes from the frost? It's typical of Daniëls that he should encourage and then deflate the poetry. He referred to the veiling layer in an earlier painting, simply as 'holding up a sweet wrapper in front of your eyes'. Magritte is reported as saying that working on the *Période Vache* paintings made him 'feel like a real painter'; by which I take him to mean that he felt released from the strictly descriptive, quasi-illustrational way of using paint that he had assigned to himself to fulfil his Surrealist role. In the classic Magritte painting, it is vital that the paint does not get let out to play: it has to stay 'on message' in order to deliver its conflicting representational signs. In the *Vache* work Magritte allows himself to take pleasure in the painting: he behaves irresponsibly! For Magritte, it seems that ultimately there was no way forward from this: he had eventually to return to stricter practice. But Daniëls has made his refusal to stay on message into a way of life; it is what made his work progress. Each painting, almost by deliberate depictive ineptitude, betrays its representational 'day-job'. He starts to paint three walls of a room, but they soften, and drift upwards to resemble a floating bow tie. Are those objects pianos, lecterns, podiums? Maybe they are based on some improvised construction in the studio. Their apparent weightlessness is telling us something: they will not be pinned down, but will probably fly off to be something else in the next painting.



Top: *Small Green Hill* - Jeffrey Dennis
2010
Oil on canvas
(42 x 67 cm)



Bottom: *Upstairs* - David Ben White
2011
Mixed media
(122cm x 98cm)

Both courtesy of the artists