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“Sputterances’ Metro Pictures”

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531 West 24th Street  
New York NY 10011  
tel 212 206 9100 fax 212 206 9055  
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# ARTFORUM

IN PRINT



## “Sputterances” METRO PICTURES



Karlo Kacharava, *English Romanticism*, 1993, oil on canvas 39 3/8 x 39 3/8".  
From "Sputterances."

"A poem should not mean but be," a poet formerly famous once wrote: The line is a perfect example of one that does the opposite of what it says, since the dictum's force lies in its all-too-seductively self-evident meaning. Language only begins to reveal its being when meaning trips itself up, when communicative urgency interferes with its own expression. The Dutch artist René Daniëls must have had something like this in mind when he coined the delightful portmanteau *sputterance*—the term denoting, apparently, an enunciation whose very resistance to completion or closure constitutes its significance. Today, amid insistent demands for clear and correct messaging in art as in culture more generally, it's good to be reminded that painting, like poetry, can be most affecting when meaning's misfires become the work's substance. Taking Daniëls as his Virgil, painter Sanya Kantarovsky organized "Sputterances" as a kind of guided tour of the fissure between expression and its (enabling) obstacles.

Daniëls has mostly had to give up artmaking since suffering a catastrophic brain aneurysm in 1987, but among the three paintings of his in "Sputterances" was one—really a line drawing in oil on canvas—dated 2006. In its inscrutably self-undermining logical simplicity, this depiction of what might be a Saturn-like planet orbited by a severely decentered ring and a moon that's attached to the globe by a rod—thereby also suggesting some mysterious nineteenth-century machine part—was emblematic of the show as a whole. All the better that the work takes its title, *The Most Contemporary Picture Show*, from an inscription on its upper edge. "Sputterances" did feel pretty contemporary, despite or maybe because of its success in sidestepping the easy, ingratiating air of a great deal of new painting these days (what prompted the critic Rob Colvin to dismiss much of today's painting as merely "Like Art"), not to mention the fact that the show reached beyond Daniëls's work of the 1980s by way of Milton Avery,

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Jacob Lawrence, and Bob Thompson to a couple of stunning Charles Burchfield watercolors. This contemporaneity is not that of newness, fashion, or topicality. Rather, it involves the continuingly problematic nature of what painting can't resolve—embodied in such disturbances in the field of vision as the tree that seems to be metamorphizing into a phantasmatic airborne octopus in Burchfield's *Windy Trees in Sunlight*, ca. 1917, or the cyclopean champagne flute resting horizontally against an eyeless head whose nose defines its contour in Daniëls's rather Picabia-esque *Het verloren huis teruggevonden* (The Lost House Found), 1982–83.

“Sputterances” opened fresh perspectives on well-known artists—Raoul De Keyser, Charline von Heyl, and Amelie von Wulffen among them—in part by juxtaposing their works with those of more obscure

figures. A case in point was Karlo Kacharava, a rather punk-influenced Georgian painter who died in 1994 at the age of thirty, whose *English Romanticism*, 1993, seems to predict the direction Karen Kilimnik was about to take, only with an additional dose of the witchy eccentricity of a quasi-outsider like Austerlitz. Or there was Marcus Weber, a German artist here represented by *Jaques*, 2013, depicting a goofy figure, practically all lima bean-shaped, mustachioed, and beady-eyed head, walking uphill against a lively geometrically patterned sky that would make for a pretty bedsheet. Having admired Denzil Forrester's remarkable work from the '80s, shown last year at White Columns in New York, I was particularly happy to see an example of his more recent art. *From Trenchtown to Porthtown*, 2016, showing the incongruous scene of a Jamaican Rasta being led away in handcuffs from a strangely tilted beach full of quietly indifferent (and mostly black) bathers, is a memorably awkward spatial invention whose social implications are as troubling as they are ambiguous. “Sputterances” put a spotlight on paintings that provoke—and reward—a double take, whose visual and mental slippages turn discomfort into a strange form of pleasure, or vice versa.

—Barry Schwabsky