

Interview with
Blake Daniels

Blake Daniels 專訪



About the Artist

關於藝術家

Blake Daniels (b. 1990, Cincinnati, US) renders expressive figures, often familiar, within intimate landscapes in an otherworldly territory that lingers between reality and fantasy, exploring themes of belonging, memory, utopia, and the afterlife. Through vibrant colors, dynamic brushstrokes, and textured surfaces, Daniels creates magical-realist dreamscapes that delve into the personal and socio-political dimensions of identity formation and adaptation. They draw inspiration from the traditions of storytelling, queer cultural practices, art history, and personal memories to chart diverse perspectives on contemporary society and politics. With the subject matters of their works revolving largely around the subversive queer communities in Johannesburg, Daniels weaves together vibrant narratives and explores how we mourn, heal, and find vitality in the seemingly impossible worlds we inhabit together.

Daniels received their BFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 2013 and their MFA from the University of the Witwatersrand in 2017. They are the recipient of the Emerging Artist Grant at Rema Hort Mann Foundation in 2022 and have taken residency programs with the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown and Académie des beaux-arts x Cité internationale des art in Paris.

The artist currently lives and works between Paris, France and Johannesburg, South Africa.

Blake Daniels (生於1990年·美國辛辛那提) 在游走於現實與幻想之間的超凡境遇中·呈現親密風景內富有張力、通常與其相識的人物·探索歸屬、記憶、烏托邦和來世等主題。透過鮮艷的色彩·動態的筆觸和複雜的繪畫肌理·Daniels 在他們的作品中創造了魔幻現實主義的夢境·深入探討了身份的認同和適應中存在的個人和社會政治維度。他們從敘事傳統·酷兒文化實踐·藝術史和個人記憶中汲取靈感·描繪出對當代社會和政治的不同視角。Daniels 的作品主題總是圍繞着約翰內斯堡顛覆性的酷兒社區展開·將充滿活力的敘事編織在一起·探索我們如何在看似不可能的世界中哀悼、治癒和尋找生命力。

Daniels 於2013年獲得芝加哥藝術學院純藝術學士學位·並於2017年獲得金山大學純藝術碩士學位。他們於2022年獲得Rema Hort Mann基金會的新興藝術家助力項目·並在普羅威斯頓的Fine Arts Work Center和巴黎的Académie des beaux-arts x Cité internationale des art進行了駐留項目。

藝術家目前生活和工作於法國巴黎及南非約翰內斯堡兩地。



Artist Portrait

藝術家肖像



Blake Daniels : 記憶者
2023年12月16日至2024年1月20日

Blake Daniels: Those Who Remember
December 16, 2023-January 20, 2024



Installation views of "Those Who Remember"

「記憶者」現場圖

On the occasion of Blake Daniels' solo exhibition "Those Who Remember," the gallery team had an in-depth discussion with the artist, highlighting the thoughts and concepts behind their art practice. The exhibition opened at MOU PROJECTS in Hong Kong on December 16, 2023. Seamlessly weaving together a selection of recent paintings and drawings spanning the past two years, the exhibition centers around the theme of memory and explores its profound significance in shaping human motivations encompassing beauty, love, death, adoration, and empathy. Drawing concepts and narrative inspirations from a fictitious utopian kingdom named "Land of the Pomegranate" in Yukio Mishima's novel *The Temple of Dawn* (1970), Daniels constructs fantastical, dreamlike landscapes in their exhibited works, populated by people in states of transfiguration entangled in scenes that oscillate between beauty, violence, intimacy, profanity, and pleasure.

值 Blake Daniels 個展「記憶者」之際，畫廊團隊與藝術家進行了一次深入的探討，談及了藝術家的創作理念以及創作過程中的所見所想。展覽於 2023 年 12 月 16 日在 MOU PROJECTS 香港空間開幕。是次展覽集合藝術家近期繪畫及近兩年來的紙本作品，圍繞着記憶的主題展開，探索它在塑造包括美學、愛戀、死亡、崇拜和共情在內的人類動機上的深刻意義。Daniels 從三島由紀夫的小說《曉寺》(1970) 中虛構的烏托邦王國「石榴國」中汲取概念和敘事靈感，在展出的作品中構建了奇異而夢幻的風景，當中不乏棲息着處於形變狀態的人物，他們在美麗、暴力、親密、褻瀆和快樂的狀態之間搖曳穿梭。

MOU PROJECTS (MP):

One of the key inspirations of the show comes from Yukio Mishima's *The Temple of Dawn* (1970), especially the passage about a fictitious kingdom named "Land of the Pomegranate." In this passage, Mishima delves into the intricacies of collective memory, religion, and the essence of existence by presenting a multitude of eerie yet captivating concepts such as the theater of sexual murder, "The Garden of the Loved Ones," and the "country of recollections." What's your initial experience reading the novel? Is there any particular takeaway? How do you think your works resonate with Mishima's writing?

Blake Daniels (Daniels):

This was the first book from Mishima that I read (very on cue with my chaotic nature starting with the third book in a tetralogy instead of the first), and this must have been nearly a decade ago. It took me forever—the book was arduous and hard. Whenever I read his work, I'm often left with the feeling of suspension as if I could no longer orient to the cardinal directions or recognize the way gravity places the earth and the sky. In that, like most things I read and witness, my initial experience and memory are honestly quite blurry. I struggled to remember and reclaim the intricacies and extracting nature of not just the book itself, but its role in the moment of life when I was reading it. For me, the strong takeaways lie at the core of the novel and other works by Mishima—themes around the impossibility of desire and touch, the sanctity of memory and its desecration through re-enactment, and the very human experiences of the contradictions of a life unconcerned with decorum or legibility within society (though almost always bound and shaped by it). I've been referencing, or better, tackling this passage since I started preparing for "City Without a Sun," a duo exhibition with Dorothee Kreutzfeldt at blank projects back in 2018. I think, in the works presented in "Those Who Remember," I am being more honest with how the influences and experiences of my life resonate within my practice, and this passage is definitely a strong example of such.

MOU PROJECTS (MP):

展覽的主要靈感之一來自三島由紀夫的《曉寺》(1970)。尤其是當中關於一個名為「石榴國」的虛構王國的段落。在這段文字中，三島深入探討了錯綜複雜的集體記憶、宗教和存在的本質，提出了許多怪異恐怖而又引人入勝的概念，如性愛謀殺劇場、「被愛者樂園」和「回憶之國」。你閱讀這部小說的最初感受是什麼？有什麼特別的收穫嗎？你認為你的作品與三島的寫作有什麼共鳴？

Blake Daniels (Daniels):

這是我讀過的第一本三島的小說（這與我混亂的本性非常吻合——我從四部曲的第三部開始讀，而非第一部），而這應該是將近十年前的事了。讀這本書花了我很長時間——它既艱深又晦澀。每當我閱讀三島的作品時，我常常會有一種懸浮着的感覺，仿佛我再也無法確定基本方向，再也無法感受到重力對地面和天空的影響。在這一點上，就像我讀過和目睹的大多數事物一樣，說實話，我最初的體驗和記憶是相當模糊的。我努力回憶和重新拾起這本書的精妙之處，不僅是這本書本身，還有在我閱讀過程中它在我生活中扮演的角色。對我來說，這本小說和三島其他作品的核心主題總是讓我思緒萬千——欲望和觸摸的不可能性、記憶的神聖性和重現這一舉動對記憶造成的褻瀆，以及人們生活中不在意禮教規範的束縛卻又總被它限制和塑造的矛盾。早在 2018 年，在我開始籌備與 Dorothee Kreutzfeldt 於 blank projects 舉辦的雙個展「City Without a Sun」時起，我就一直在參考，或者更確切地說，是在處理和應對這本小說。我認為，在展覽「記憶者」所呈現的作品中，我更加誠實地表達了我生活中的影響和經歷是如何在我的創作實踐中產生共鳴的，而三島的寫作無疑是一個很好的例子。

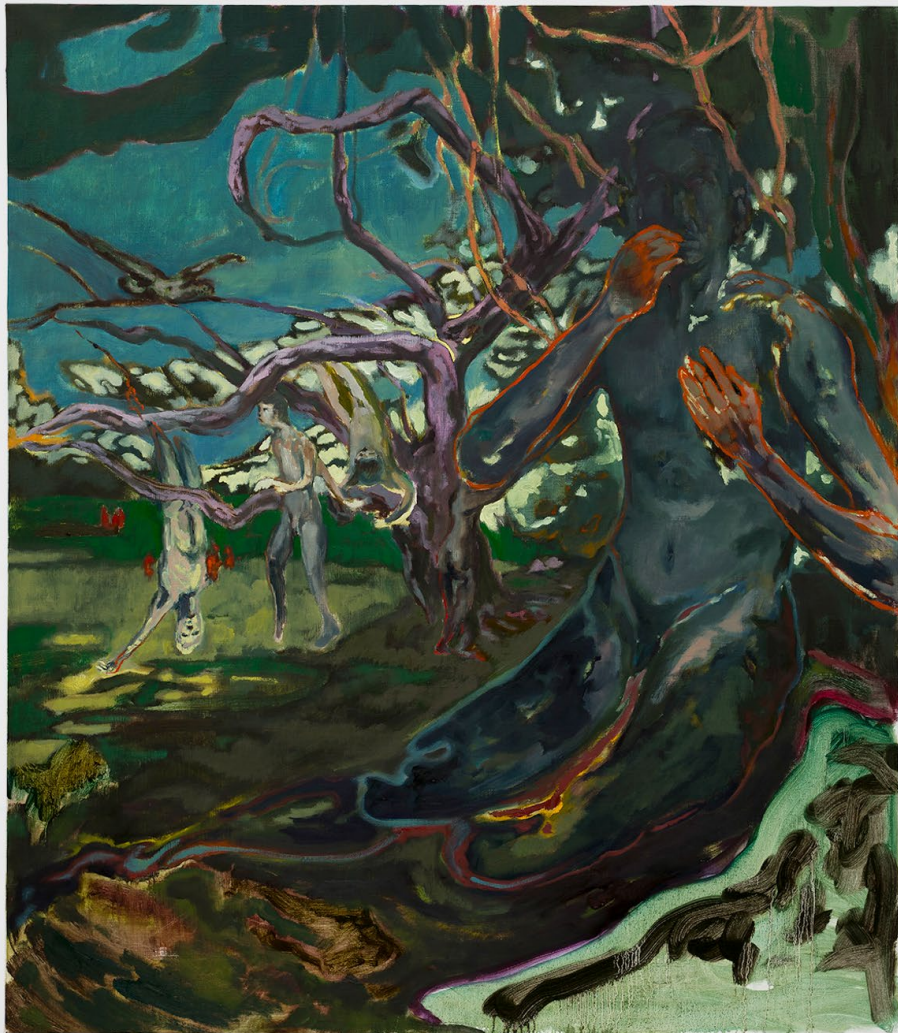
MP:

記憶是貫穿整個展覽的一個關鍵概念。展出的作品大部分都是基於你對你所愛之人、約翰內斯堡和那裏的酷兒社群的記憶。你能談談記憶這一概念是如何在你的創作實踐中展開的嗎？



The Remembered Ones or The Ones Who Remember, 2023
Oil on linen
150 × 200 cm

《被記憶者或記憶者》，2023
亞麻布面油畫
150 × 200 cm



A Profane Love, 2023
Oil on linen
150 × 130 cm

《世俗的愛》· 2023
亞麻布面油畫
150 × 130 cm

MP:

Memory is a key idea that threads together the entire show. The paintings and drawings presented here are predominantly based on your memory of your loved ones, Johannesburg, and the queer community there. Will you share some insight into how the idea of memory unfolds in your studio practice in general?

Daniels:

My studio practice usually begins with moments of inexplicable dread—me returning again and again to this painting practice while still navigating the fear of distilling such complex ideas, memories, experiences, and influences into even more complex materials and colors. There are many modes of speed and ways of working in the studio, and there are days of bliss and discovery as well as days of painstaking self-introspection where I feel I've lost all that is mine. The maturation of my practice has not been around profound ideas or finding moments of genius within myself, but the process of trusting these subtle shifts in my own consciousness and relationship to both the ideas I'm pursuing and the challenges of the material itself. Regarding memory specifically, it is very slippery and something I am constantly trying to give form to. This happens largely through constant scribbling and drawing, but also in my approach to painting. In my last show in Paris this past June, I worked on a painting of a friend who had gone missing and whom I had lost contact with for months. I painted him because it was a way for me to convince myself he was still alive, but as I made that painting, I became obsessed with a specific idealized memory of him, an ideal of beauty that took his place. I repainted his figure almost 30 times in that painting. I don't think it was my most confident hand in painting, but it was a more honest one.

MP:

The subject matters of your works are largely related to the sights and scenes of Johannesburg. What's your story about this city? How does it always draw you back?

Daniels:

我在工作室的創作實踐通常開始於不可言狀的恐懼和憂慮——我一次又一次地回到這種繪畫實踐中。同時還要克服將如此複雜的想法、記憶、經驗和影響提煉成更加複雜的材料和色彩的恐懼。在工作室裏，我有許多不同的工作速度和模式，有幸福的、獲得新發現的日子，也有艱苦的、自我反省的日子——往往這種時刻我會覺得我已經失去了一切。我的創作實踐的成熟並不是圍繞着深刻的想法或者自己靈光一現的天才時刻，而是信任自己意識中的這些微妙的轉變，以及與我所追求的想法和材料本身帶給我的挑戰之間的關係的過程。具體到記憶來說，它是非常脆弱且轉瞬即逝的。我一直在我的創作中嘗試賦予它形態，這大量體現在我不間斷的塗塗畫畫中，同時也體現在我進行油畫創作的方式中。在我今年六月在巴黎的展覽中，我畫了一個失蹤了幾個月、無法取得聯繫的朋友。我畫他是因為這樣可以讓我說服自己他還活着，但在我創作的過程中，我開始沉迷於對他的一種特定的、理想化的記憶，一種取代他本人的理想化的美。在那件作品中，我把他的形象重繪製了近三十次。我不認為那是我自信的作品，但那是一副最為誠實的作品。

MP:

你的作品題材大多與約翰內斯堡的風景和場景有關。你與這座城市有什麼故事？為什麼它總是能吸引你去描繪它呢？

Daniels:

在過去的十年裏，我曾多次思考過這個問題，最終我得出了一個簡單的結論：約翰內斯堡是我生命中第一個向我展示了什麼是家的地方。它向我展示了什麼是自己選擇的家庭以及無條件的愛。它向我展示了我作為一個酷兒和一個完整的人可以做到什麼。對於這個問題，我過去有過許多更聰明的答案，涉及政治、學術和意識形態，但事實上，歸根結底是因為我真的認為這座城市已經成為了我的家。那是我生命中唯一一個會不斷回歸的地方，不是因為這裏是什麼偉大的豐碑，而是因為那些塑造了我在這裏的生活和記憶的人。

Daniels:

I've overthought this question many times over during the past decade, and I've really come to a simple conclusion: Johannesburg was the first place in my life to show me what home could be. It showed me what family, chosen and accepted, as well as unconditional love could be. It showed me how I could be in my queerness and wholly formed self. I've had many smarter answers to this question in the past, relating to politics, my academics, and ideologies, but I really think this city simply has become home. It's the only place in my life I continue to return to. It's not some monolith but just the people who have shaped my life and memory.

MP:

There are many recurring motifs throughout the show, such as the pink tree branch and the ginger-haired figure. What's the story behind them?

Daniels:

The recurring motifs are less like grand metaphors or plot devices, but more as key figures I continue to explore and expand upon within the world built within my practice. The red-headed figure is almost always a form of self-portraiture. I am usually unconcerned with likeness as much as the many ways I've perceived myself over time. Other motifs are just objects or places I become fixated on, such as in the painting *Night Practice* (2023), the depicted fence belongs to an old dance hall near the soccer fields I lived by in Johannesburg. Elsewhere in my practice, the motifs just appear and take form; this has been the case with the skeleton figure in the green cloth, which—though very much calling from of legacy of depicting death—first appeared in *Death (Here Where the Land Subsides)* (2023) and is a motif I have returned to quite a lot since then.

MP:

In this exhibition, a selection of small studies and drawings are shown alongside the large-

MP:

整個展覽中有許多反覆出現的意象，比如粉紅色的樹枝和紅發人物。它們背後的故事是什麼？

Daniels:

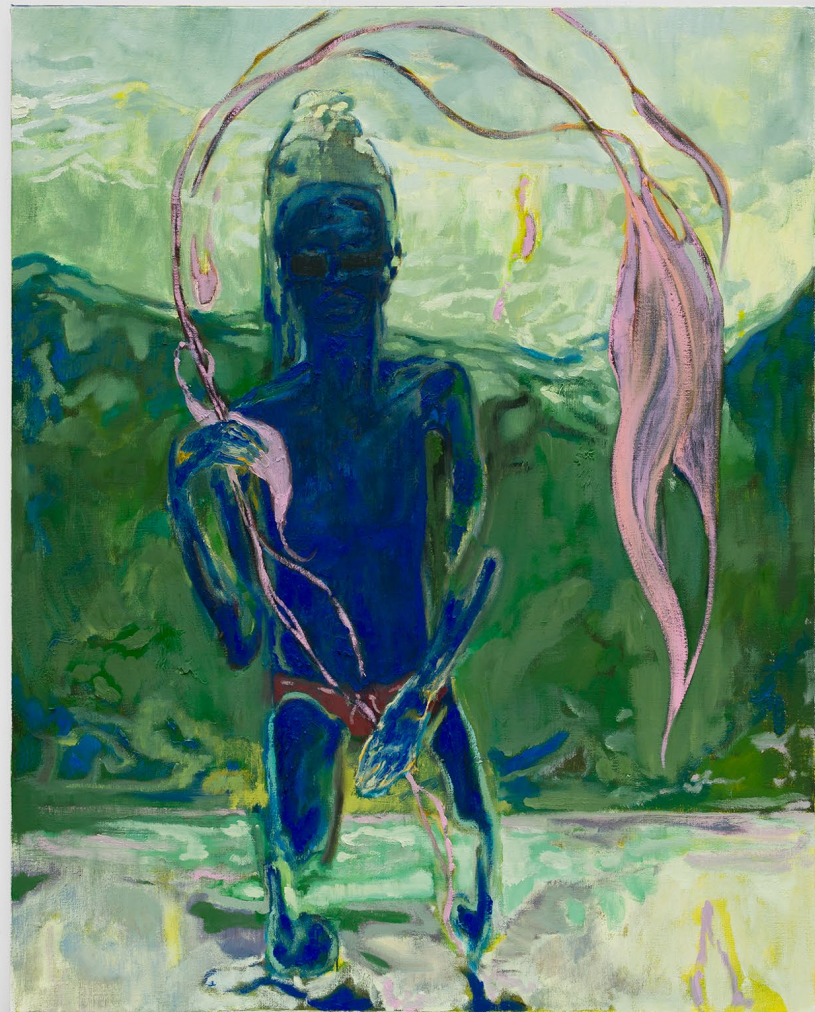
這些反覆出現的意象並不是宏大的隱喻或是情節設計，它們更像是我在自己的創作世界中不斷探索和擴展的關鍵形象。那個紅發人物幾乎總是一種自畫像。我通常不太在意自畫像和自己外表上的相似程度，而是更在意隨著時間的推移我對自己的看法。其他反覆出現的意象則通常只是我所依戀的事物或地點。例如在作品《夜間練習》(2023)中所描繪的柵欄來源於我在約翰內斯堡常去的足球場附近的一個舊舞廳。還有一些時候，這些意象的出現或許並沒有什麼原因，它們只是出現並被賦予了形象。在我的作品中，綠衣骷髏的意象反覆出現，雖然它在很大程度上來自於描繪死亡的傳統，但它首次出現在《Death (Here Where the Land Subsides)》(2023)中，而從那時起我就經常回到這個意象上。

MP:

在這次的展覽中，一些小型紙本與大幅作品同時展出。大尺寸作品和小尺寸作品之間有什麼區別和聯系？在構建更廣闊的敘事或世界觀方面，它們之間能產生什麼相互作用？

Daniels:

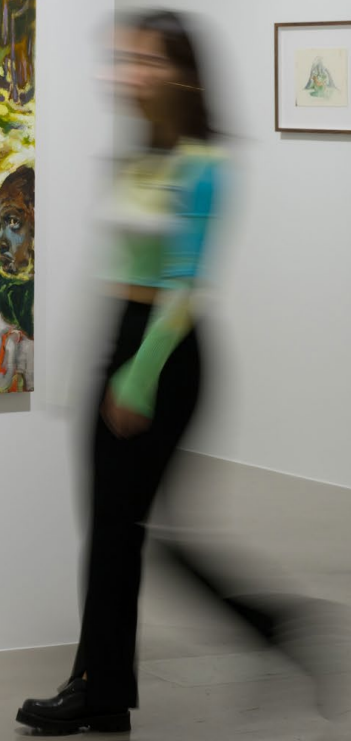
小幅作品在我工作室的日常創作中常常出現，但這是第一次在個展中將它們與大幅作品共同展出。這些小幅作品本身並不是畫稿，儘管它們和創作大幅作品確實有着不同的邏輯和技法。在某種程度上，這種不同只是由於作品規格尺幅的不同和作品對我的要求的變化。我認為自己是一個沒有耐心的藝術家，但具有諷刺意味的是，我在畫室裏的創作總是非常緩慢和艱苦。在創作大幅作品時，我需要同時畫很多幅，由於它們的大型規模，當我在如此大的表面和畫作之間移動時，我找到了與我的不耐煩的手之間的平衡。我通常很快就能初步粗略地完成這些作品，但在此之後畫作的



Tshepo, 2023
Oil on linen
125 × 100 cm

《Tshepo》· 2023
亞麻布面油畫
125 × 100 cm







Installation view of drawings in "Those Who Remember"

「記憶者」紙本作品現場圖

format works. What's the difference and connection between the large and small works? How do they relate to each other in terms of constructing a more expansive narrative or worldview across all works featured in the show?

Daniels:

The small works are something that always happens in the studio, though this is the first time showing them in a solo show alongside the larger paintings. They are not in-and-of-themselves studies, though they are painted with a different logic and hand than the larger paintings. This difference, in some parts, is just due to the nature of the scale and the change of demands the work has on me. I consider myself an impatient painter, though ironically I am very slow and arduous in the studio. With the larger paintings, I make many at once, and due to their scale, I have found a balance with the impatience of my hand as I move across such large surfaces and between paintings. My passes at them are often quite quick, but the layers build up, and I respond and change the works as I view them more times, leading to a long painting process that results in complex colors and surfaces. For the smaller works, they are more immediate and do not allow me the luxury of time to repaint, meander, and wait for drying. In that, they offer and teach me something else in the material. I think during the painting process, I was self-conscious of the difference for a while because, in some ways, the small works feel cruder or more vulnerable, like a sensation in the body you can't quite name. I believe they offer a great deal to my practice and the world of my work at large.

MP:

The majority of your works do not depict queer representation in a literal or physical sense. Instead, the queerness portrayed in your work is somehow more abstract and multilayered, allowing viewers to relate to it in their own personal way. What's your understanding of queer representation in art?

層次會不斷積累。我會反覆審視這些畫作，並對它們做出反應和修改，這會讓繪畫的過程很漫長，並且讓畫作擁有複雜的色彩和層次。對於較小的作品來說，創作它們的過程更快，讓我沒有時間重新繪製、猶豫和等待畫作乾燥。這樣一來，它們教給了我一些關於材料的其他知識。在繪畫過程中，我曾一度自我意識到這種差異，因為在某些方面，小幅作品給人的感覺更粗糙或脆弱，這就像是一種身體中的難以明狀的感覺。我相信，它們對我的創作和我整個作品的世界觀有很大的貢獻。

MP:

你的大部分作品並不會直接、具象地描繪酷兒形象。相反，在你的作品中潛藏的酷兒表征給人感覺更抽象和多層次，讓觀眾以自己的個人方式與之產生共鳴。你如何理解當代藝術中的酷兒表征？

Daniels:

我不認為我作品中的酷兒表征是抽象的。大部分出現在我作品中的人都是酷兒身份，我也是酷兒身份。這些記憶是屬於我的，這些故事是屬於我們的。我大量使用的歷史和宗教主題，也感覺很自然，因為它們也是我們世界的一部分。我作品中的酷兒表征對我來說也很真實和具象。難道一個人的「酷兒身份」會因為你看不見或認不出來而有所減少嗎？我認為，長期以來，我們一直背負着向那些從未在他們生活的世界中了解過我們的人展示自己的重擔，且我不認為這是酷兒群體或圍繞着性別和性取向議題所獨有的負擔。或許最簡單來說，酷兒的體現只是酷兒群體生活的世界，這些世界有時候可能與你毫無關聯，甚至會超出你的認知範圍。每當另一位藝術家或個人分享他們的世界時——無論是 Mara Hassan 對策展工作的難以置信的敏感，Bhoim Achimba 在詩歌中對語言的精雕細琢，還是 Siphiwe Zwane 強大的社群組織——我都由衷地感動。他們對我影響很大。

MP:

有沒有哪些藝術家對你的繪畫創作有所啟發？

Daniels:

It doesn't feel abstract to me. Most of the people in my paintings are queer; I am queer. The memories are mine; the stories are ours. Even my dense use of historical references and religious motifs feels very natural, they are part of our world as well. The queerness in my work also feels very physical to me. Is a person's "queerness" any less just because you cannot see or recognize it? I think we have been burdened for a long time with the need to make ourselves legible to those who never saw us in their world, and I don't think this is a burden exclusive to queer people or around gender and sexuality by any means. Queer representation is, maybe in its simplest form, just the worlds of queer folks, sometimes worlds with nothing in common or out of your range of recognition. Every time another artist or person shares theirs—whether it is the incredible sensitivity of the curatorial work of Mara Hassan, the culling of English in the poetry of Bhion Achimba, or the robust community organization of Siphwe Zwane—I feel genuinely touched. They affect me greatly.

MP:

Are there any particular artists who inspire your painting practice?

Daniels:

This is a very long list, as I am like a sponge when in the world and think greatly of my practice in context with, or under the umbrella with, many artists. I think I will just list. Historically: Edvard Munch, Cezanne, Marsden Hartley, Bob Thompson, El Greco, George Pemba, David Koloane, Peter Clarke, Goya, Marc Chagall, and all those Renaissance painters I can't ever remember their names. Contemporary: Nicole Eisenman, Peter Doig, Michael Armitage, Mmapula Mmakgoba Helen Sebidi, Mamma Anderssen, Thaddeus Mosley, Reggie Burrows Hodges, Cinga Sampson, Olga de Amaral, Chris Ofili, Joshua Hagler, and others. There are always tons of books opened around the studio, including books of art and my drawings strewn about the floor.

Daniels:

這是一個很長的名單，因為我就像一塊海綿，吸收着許多藝術家的影響。我認為我的藝術實踐與許多藝術家都有很大的關係，或者說，我和他們同在一片傘下。我想我就列舉一下吧。從歷史上看：蒙克、塞尚、埃爾·格雷考、戈雅、夏卡爾、Marsden Hartley、Bob Thompson、George Pemba、David Koloane、Peter Clarke，以及所有文藝復興時期的畫家，我一直都記不住他們的名字。當代的藝術家們：Nicole Eisenman、Peter Doig、Michael Armitage、Mmapula Mmakgoba Helen Sebidi、Mamma Anderssen、Thaddeus Mosley、Reggie Burrows Hodges、Cinga Sampson、Olga de Amaral、Chris Ofili、Joshua Hagler 等等。我的工作室裏總是攤開擺放着大量的書籍，包括散落在地上的藝術書籍和我的畫作。

MP:

你願意分享一些你之後的創作計劃嗎？

Daniels:

今年七月之前，我將在法蘭西藝術院 (Académie des beaux-arts) 駐留。我將繼續畫畫，並開始學習一些有關布料和編織的技能和知識，我希望能將它們運用到我心中構想的一個作品中——它將成為一種舞臺幕布，把畫中的風景轉化成與身體相稱的比例。但最重要的是，我將繼續繪畫，並繼續在工作室的創作中實現自我成長和延伸。



Ululation of the Sicklebush, 2023
Oil on linen
41 x 33 cm

《代兒茶的哀鳴》· 2023
亞麻布面油畫
41 x 33 cm



Figure in Tree off the R24, 2023
Oil on linen
50.5 × 40 cm

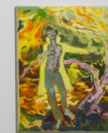
《R24 路邊樹中的人》· 2023
亞麻布面油畫
50.5 × 40 cm

MP:

Would you like to share some of the upcoming plans for your practice?

Daniels:

I am on residence until July this year with the Académie des beaux-arts in Paris. I will continue to paint, and I am beginning to learn some skills and knowledge around fibers and weaving which I hope to apply to works I've had in mind—it will become a kind of stage curtains translating the landscapes of the paintings into a scale commensurate with the body. More than anything though, I will just paint and continue to foster these growths and extensions of the self that take form in the studio.





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