

THE WHITE REVIEW

Interview with Daniel Sinsel

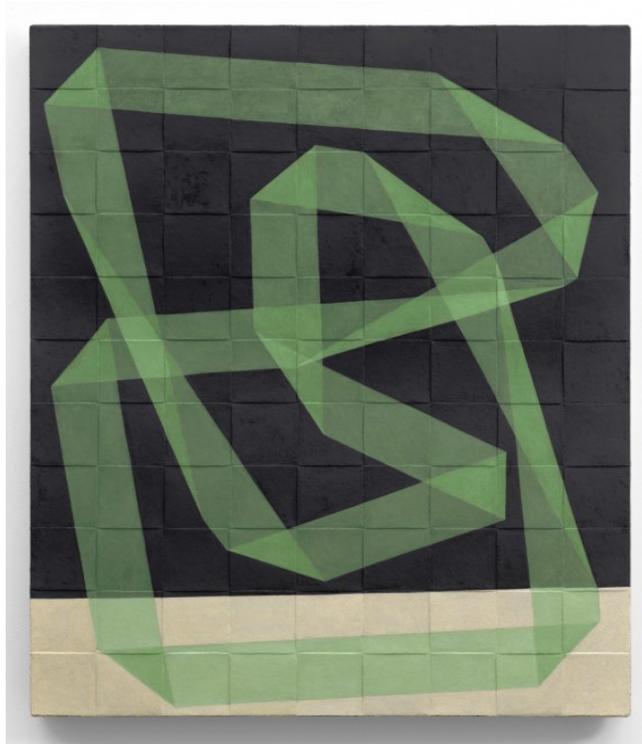
In the decade after leaving Chelsea School of Art in 2002, Daniel Sinsel made a name for himself with puckish, homoerotic, trompe l'oeil paintings: flutes draped in fabric, bottoms and slits, gaping mouths, and various conceits of pictorial hide-and-seek. That period culminated in a solo show at London's Chisenhale Gallery in 2011, since when Sinsel has turned his attention to the materiality of painting, making frames, hand-weaving canvases, and producing objects to insert through their surfaces.

'Where's the sex gone?', he recalls one disappointed gallerist asking him. While there may be fewer flutes inserted between butt-cheeks, such disappointment is unfounded, even among the more prurient of his following. In focusing on the sculptural possibilities of painting, Sinsel brings tension, allusion and kink to the essential components of the medium: now, more than ever, erotics are fundamental.

When I first visit Sinsel in his studio in South London, a number of his paintings are on tour as part of the BRITISH ART SHOW 8, and he is preparing for solo exhibitions at Office Baroque in Brussels in April, and at Sadie Coles in London in July. I am welcomed into a cluttered room by a tall, softly-spoken German man with skeletal cheekbones and remarkably elongated fingers. Aged 40, Sinsel has about him an air of faded, magical difference – like a boy from a fairy tale, forced to mature in a world of high-speed proclivities at odds with his own fey somnolence.

He hands me some materials he is using in his latest work: a whale tooth, out of which he has hand-carved almonds, a pair of pink nipples fashioned from coral, and a fossilised turtle dung which stains my hands ochre. As we talk, Sinsel sits on a stool in front of a half-finished painting, his spindly body framed by allusion and craft. He has slipped hazelnuts between the weave of the canvas, so that the surface bulges suggestively. Painted on to the canvas, and covering these protuberances with a nod to Renaissance modesty, a composition of fig leaves is slowly taking shape. He recently employed an assistant, he tells me, to extract each nut from a sack of hazelnuts, before gluing the shells back together. It will stop them from rotting and attracting flies, he says – it is also precisely the type of arduous, sexually encoded labour that makes his paintings pulse.

When I return a month later to interview Sinsel, the painting of the fig leaves is packed and ready to be shipped to Brussels. In its place hangs a trompe l'oeil of a tangled white ribbon, set against darkness. With this image as a backdrop, we discuss sexuality, technique and secrecy, until Sinsel's phone buzzes and conversation draws to a close. He will have to ask me to leave soon, he says politely. His masseuse will be arriving, and he will need to clear the studio floor.



*Daniel Sinsel, Untitled, 2016. Oil on linen, 132 x 107,5 x 9,5 cm.
Copyright the artist, courtesy Sadie Coles HQ, London.*

THE WHITE REVIEW — In the painting hanging behind you, the ends of the ribbon meet like a Möbius strip. Are all of the ribbons you paint endless?

DANIEL SINSEL — Yes. The endlessness of the ribbon is a rumination, a thought that will not lead to a decision. I don't think my paintings offer a lot of resolve, and the ribbon is representative of that.

THE WHITE REVIEW — Is that a form of punishment? I can imagine that when you work on a painting for as long as you do, and so meticulously, by the time you finish you would want some form of resolution. It seems maddening to me to structure in eternal indecision.

DANIEL SINSEL — There is a lot of denial in the work. Denial of the present, denial in terms of the materials, in terms of the subject matter, in terms of what surrounds us now. There's nothing digital, no reference to advertising, no garish colours, no glitter, no found materials that are clearly of the contemporary.

THE WHITE REVIEW — Why is that?

DANIEL SINSEL — Making art and making objects is so clearly different from getting things done in life – like making choices, making decisions, following your heart or your instincts. What my work feels like, if anything, is a respite from this.



*Daniel Sinsel, Untitled, 2016. Oil on linen, 32 x 29 x 3,5 cm.
Copyright the artist, courtesy Sadie Coles HQ, London.*



*Daniel Sinsel, Untitled, 2016. Deer parchment, bistro ink, 62 x 45 x 5 cm.
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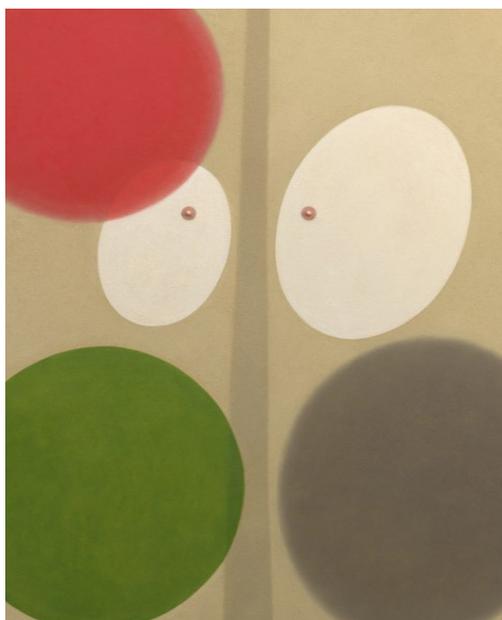
THE WHITE REVIEW — Whether in your trompe l'oeil works or your more sculptural paintings, there is a suggestive dynamic at play, which revolves around concealing and revealing – whether hiding nuts behind the canvas, or opening up illusory depth. It's there in your imagery, too. Your recent paintings with fig leaves, for instance, play on that idea that it's naughtier not to reveal, that suggestion has more charge than exposing something explicitly.

DANIEL SINSEL — It's a sensation that I'm after, and maybe this sensation is what, as a child, I would perceive in front of paintings. It had a lot to do with sublimated messages, or suppressed desire, and that feeling is the thing I am approaching when I work. Even at a pre-pubescent age, there were lots of paintings that I saw that I couldn't believe existed. Because the things they depicted – a decapitation scene, or Théodore Géricault's 'The Raft of Medusa' (1819) for example, where there are people naked and dying – were so different from what my nuclear family would talk about, or what I would experience on holiday. And very often there was a sexual kinkiness. I thought there was something really bizarre about this discrepancy.

THE WHITE REVIEW — Did this secret world prefigure the eroticism in your paintings?

DANIEL SINSEL — It had to do with secrecy, with seeing something but not speaking about it, the idea that when you speak about something it would be lost. I think also that my homosexuality was something I experienced this way. I remember a copy of a painting by Bartolomé Murillo at my parents' friends' house. He painted children, usually urchins. And in this painting {'Boys Eating Grape and Melon', 1646} they were eating grapes and melons, and the juices were dripping down them, and they had these ripped clothes and dusty feet. There was something so weird about seeing this as a boy, and wondering who these dark-skinned boys were, and why they had these plump grapes, and why they ate like that. I was pre-pubescent at the time, and so I wasn't aware that what was happening might be a sexual desire. For me, looking at that painting was a slightly painful experience, and it is a type of experience or feeling that I have since come to associate with painting.

THE WHITE REVIEW — As a painter you are going in the wrong direction, historically. In your style, and your references, your paintings seem as if they don't really belong to the world past 1900.



Daniel Sinzel, Untitled, 2016. Oil on linen, pink coral, 150 x 130 x 12 cm. Copyright the artist, courtesy Sadie Coles HQ, London.

THE WHITE REVIEW — Do you think part of the appeal of your work, to the people that view it and the people that collect it, is your technical ability, and your relationship to the Old Masters?

DANIEL SINSEL — Sometimes I'm terrified that I attract really conservative people who love old things. I imagine ill-informed conversations, like 'oh my god, he paints like a genius, like a Renaissance master,' because people can have these half-baked ideas about what technique is. I didn't train in a workshop. My painting techniques are just things that have evolved through what suits my temperament. It has a lot to do with shifting paint around, the idea of paint becoming second nature.

Do you know why Renaissance painting became so relevant to me? Because those paintings are constructed with an inner logic, like there is an entire cosmos in the painting, how the layering of paint gives the illusion of a parallel world. In order for skin to look like skin it has to have a cold, green-blue-grey underneath, to convey the cool underflow of veins shining through pale skin. So, very literally, nature was copied. Or maybe you would put a bright red underneath like blood, and then cover it up until you just have a faint glow of life. But nobody taught me any of these things – this is the stuff you learn from textbooks.

DANIEL SINSEL — I find it very difficult to be in the contemporary world. Sometimes it feels like something is wrong, or I've got the wrong job, or I feel like I'm working against something. I didn't grow up in a family that was particularly up to date. My parents seemed to have skipped the seventies – I wonder if they have ever even heard of David Bowie – and there are lots of things that I was completely unaware of, and stayed unaware of. But then outside of the contemporary art world there are so many people like this, so many people who are completely oblivious to so many things. I have to work hard to assess that attitude all the time, and sometimes it does feel so stubborn that it is actually unhealthy, that I'm alienating myself from what is actually going on. But then I realise also that people have so many coping mechanisms in life. They cultivate chrysanthemums, or they keep budgies, or they listen to operatic music, in order to keep alive, to keep their minds healthy or stable.

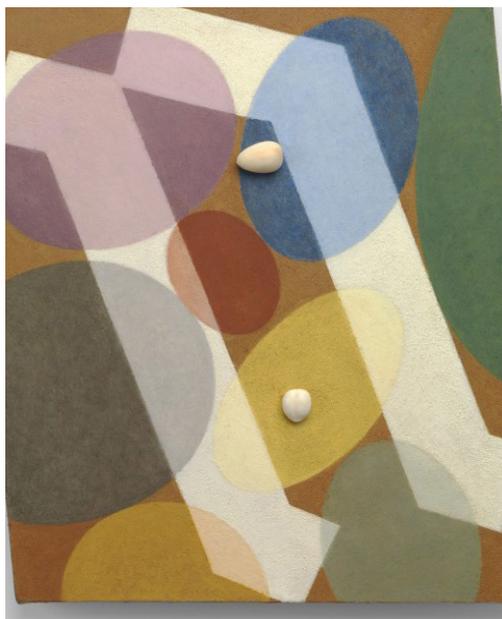
THE WHITE REVIEW — Is that how you taught yourself?

DANIEL SINSEL — Yes, and through fiddling with paint, finding how things relate to each other, how a head relates to the space around it, what is background, what foreground. It's so pleasurable when you see that grow in front of you, when gradually your eyes and your hands begin to understand. It's an incredibly slow process, like with anything that involves the body or the hand, because it's not only to do with your intellectual capacity, it's also to do with your physical memory. For me the closest thing is learning to sing. I take singing lessons with a friend who is an opera singer – I'm probably the slowest student ever. Like painting, it's one of those things where people can tell you so many times what to do, but you still won't understand, you just have to keep going. The funny thing with singing is that you use muscles that you can't see, so everything is referred to in metaphor. You are told to 'hook your mask' into a sound, to pretend you're 'swallowing a melon', or that you have a 'hot potato' in your throat. In the beginning you just go nuts. But at some point, your brain does something where it connects the information, and your body does something where it falls into place, and finally, you move an inch towards understanding what you're trying to do. In one session after five years of thinking 'I don't know what the fuck I'm doing', suddenly you accidentally do it right. You have no idea how you knew how to do it, but you just felt it and it felt right, and so you imitate it. Gradually it becomes second nature, but it takes so long. Painting is the same.

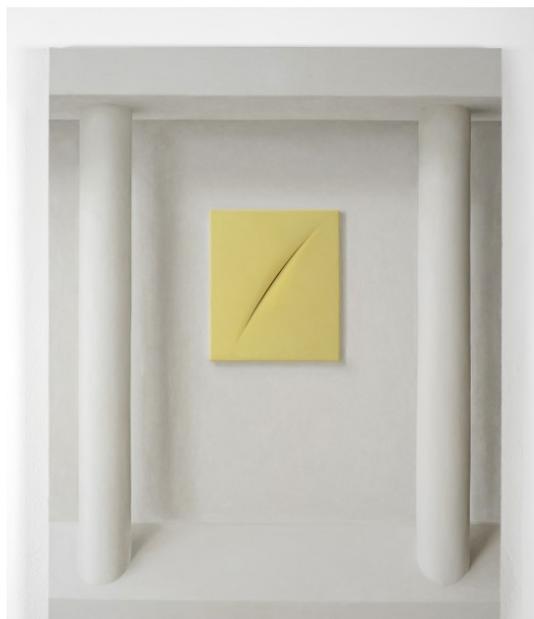
THE WHITE REVIEW — Another reading of your work besides the one you are wary of – 'Daniel Sinsel, Renaissance master' – is that your paintings offer a queering of art history. The first painting of yours that I saw was a trompe l'oeil of one of Lucio Fontana's Spatial Concept works that you did in 2011, in which you had painted in the laceration Fontana made in the canvas. Through mannered artifice, you highlighted Fontana's incision as a performance of virile masculinity.

DANIEL SINSEL — One of the reasons I was attracted to the Fontanas is that they do look very artful. They are one big, real gesture, but they still look incredibly elegant. The ironic thing with the painting I made is that either you are aggressive or you are not aggressive. But to make a fiddly painting of an aggressive action doesn't work – it's like sweetly saying, 'oh, I would like to be aggressive'. But that is what art is like. All paintings are constructed, and people often forget that they are so difficult to construct.

In this respect Caravaggio is someone I find very striking, because his work seems so much like a snapshot. I saw a Caravaggio painting in the Villa Borghese in Rome, of the little boy Jesus and his mother {'Madonna and Child with St. Anne', 1606}. In it, Jesus steps on the head of a snake to kill it. The snake jumps up in the air in a muscular twist, and the boy pulls this weird gesture with his face. I couldn't believe that somebody saw that second, and could construct it. It's the kind of expression I thought we would only know because we had been able to capture it in a photograph. But it can't be – our brain must be able to see these things, because Caravaggio did. And this was such an odd gesture to come up with. You simply cannot imagine someone sitting down and thinking, 'what would a child do, and how can I make a frightened face?', and then painting that thing over hours, days, months, years, so that it looks so spontaneous, like instant experience. I find it incredible, because it's a huge lie. It's the lie that lasts months – a split second you spend months painting.



Daniel Sinsel, Untitled, 2016. Oil on linen, antique animal tusk, 9ct gold wire, 32 x 26 x 6 cm. Copyright the artist, courtesy Sadie Coles HQ, London.



Daniel Sinsel, Untitled, 2016. Oil on linen, 120 x 85 cm. Copyright the artist, courtesy Sadie Coles HQ, London.

THE WHITE REVIEW — A modern tendency when looking at painting is to read it psychoanalytically, tracing the mark-making and using that as evidence, as a route into the psychology of the artist. So abstract expressionism is essentially a form of psychological self-portraiture, but you don't see the face, you see the mood, the temperament, the motion. Do you mind what your work reveals about you?

DANIEL SINSEL — The relationship between me and the work, between me and the audience, in terms of revealing something of myself, is very tortured and longwinded. It has a lot to do with not feeling I can express myself directly, and how I had perceived paintings in the past – that paintings did not speak to me directly, but were speaking to me about incredible things that I needed to really keep to myself. This was to do with my homoerotic desire for other men, but also with understanding that nobody could say what was in these paintings, nobody could talk about a crucifixion or a decapitation, or nobody would, and yet here are these horrific images, and everyone looks at them with such pleasure. So I expected that from painting, that lack of directness.

As a younger man, I had some genuine psychological issues about myself. In the earlier work this was much more explicit, they were much more sexually dreamy, and that had a lot to do with coming to terms with things, and also courting with the world – courting with the world in terms of getting to grips with being a gay man. I didn't go to gay clubs and experience gay life, I thought instead that it would be possible to experience such things within the realm of painting. But of course it's not, painting's not life. And so my work began to manifest how much painting is incapable of carrying out these sorts of personal transformations.

THE WHITE REVIEW — Has this informed the move you have made from producing trompe l'oeil works, in which you create alternative, fantasy worlds, to paintings which engage more with the physical materiality of the work? For your exhibition at Office Baroque, for instance, you have hand woven the canvases, or stretched cow skins.

DANIEL SINSEL — In the past it was very clear that I was a good boy being naughty – that the teasing only worked because the work looked so pretty, and so nicely done. I think now, with the paintings looking materially coarser, or generally chunkier, it's different because many of things are not so delicate. Now my paintings represent this feeling, this frustration – that a tight weave is this thing that you have to pull apart, that you have to open up surface in order to give space to something. Or that frustration where I'm thinking oh my god why are my paintings so tight? Why can they not undo themselves, why can't we just shift the whole fucking thing? That's why I make the trapezoid frames. That negotiation, that struggle with the painting, has become subject matter. I also turn to mythical narratives, because they make it easier for me to talk about very personal things, or very personal struggles with the work. It's easier to refer to a mythological figure than to yourself.



Daniel Sinsel, Untitled, 2016. Oil on linen, support, hazelnut shells, lime wood stretcher, 150 x 130 x 12 cm. Photo : 2016 Sven Laurent. Copyright the artist, courtesy Office Baroque, Brussels.

THE WHITE REVIEW — Can you tell me about the role of myths and fairy tales in your work? You don't depict scenes from stories explicitly, but Hansel and Gretel was cited as inspiration for the paintings currently on show at the BRITISH ART SHOW 8, as was Amor and Psyche for those you showed at MIRRORCITY, the 2015 group exhibition at the Hayward.

DANIEL SINSEL — In my paintings I think of these stories in terms of turmoil or rescue. What I found so surprising in Amor and Psyche is how different Psyche is from the usual Cinderella character. She wasn't a poor woman, she was a princess, and she seemed fairly clever. And she and Amor had real conversations, conversations that seemed like they made sense. You could imagine them having sex, and then lying in bed next to each other and going, 'So how was your day?' Obviously he's got a golden castle, and he's invisible, but it seemed much more plausible. She also had so much more agency than Amor. After the shit hit the fan he just ran to his mother's castle and confessed, which is not very 'manly'.



Daniel Sinsel, Untitled, 2016 (détail). Oil on linen, support, hazelnut shells, lime wood stretcher, 150 x 130 x 12 cm. Photo : 2016 Sven Laurent. Copyright the artist, courtesy Office Baroque, Brussels.

THE WHITE REVIEW — It's a much more knowing portrayal of the dynamic between dominance and submission. Because Psyche, who is the ostensibly submissive party, has much more power. When Amor leaves she tracks him down, and undertakes a whole set of arduous tasks in order to get him back. In the more familiar Disney model of magical love, the relationship between the hero and the princess is completely flat, devoid of kink: there's no power in being saved.

DANIEL SINSEL — The idea of vulnerability, the idea of salvation and rescue, attracts me. For me it didn't matter so much whether it was a boy or a girl. In many ways I would be attracted if a story represents a vulnerable man, or a vulnerable boy. I think that's why Hansel is really interesting, because he's in that position of being unusually like a sexual object. He's in captivity, an older woman wants to make him plump and juicy and eat him. He's also rescued by his sister. Without the help of his sister he would just be fucked.

THE WHITE REVIEW — During the twentieth century, there was a drive in art to get rid of the lie, get rid of the illusion, to get rid of narratives such as those that underpin your painting. The idea of looking at a canvas as if looking through a window into another world, into a story, became unfashionable. I find it interesting to ask who might need such an illusory world, and what might be lost if it is closed down.

DANIEL SINSEL — The idea of suppressing your desires, within contemporary western society, is seen as a problem, something that is your own fault. Because everything is so liberal, everything is out there. You can live out your own desires, you can have whatever you want. But I find that negotiation between the things that are visible on the surface and things that are kept secret very difficult. Because if there isn't any secrecy, if there isn't a narrative to refer to or a framework to manoeuvre around, everyone just does exactly what they want to do.

THE WHITE REVIEW — Do you think there is something un-erotic in complete openness, complete choice? In listing your desires on the surface – like people do on dating sites, for instance – because nothing is concealed?

DANIEL SINSEL — It feels like the tensions are gone. Take the connection between a marriage and an affair. Now, you cannot allow yourself to have an affair. You would be expected to negotiate with your partner – to say, 'What would you like?', and allow them to say in return, 'Yes, I would like this,' and then together you would say, 'OK, let's try and come to an agreement.' I find this idea terrifying, that there wouldn't be any more tension, that there wouldn't be any more secrets.