



LONDON

William Daniels

VILMA GOLD

You might think that what makes William Daniels's small, almost colorless paintings so exceptional is their extreme technical proficiency, but they're more intellectually ambitious than that. Three years ago Daniels gained attention for canvases based on his own torn-cardboard tableaux of famous paintings: Cheap, homey material stood in for Mont Sainte Victoire or Caravaggio's *David with the Head of Goliath*, painstakingly reproduced, with Vija Celmins-esque levels of detail, in small brownish-gray paintings. For his recent show, Daniels covered his cardboard models in aluminum foil, and the resulting paintings are even more wondrous than his earlier works.

In these new paintings, the sources are less immediately recognizable. The subject emerges slowly out of the riot of silvers, browns, blues, and whites that form an almost cubist mosaic of paint. With some effort, Baselitz's inverted trees gradually take shape before our eyes (*Forest on Its Head*, all works 2007); or we decipher an aluminum-foil curtain pulled back to reveal a rococo arrangement of metallic dahlias and roses, based on a collaborative painting by Adriaen van der Spelt and Frans van Mieris (*Still Life with Flowers and Curtain*); or Giorgio Morandi's humble jars slowly assemble across the meticulously painted surface (*Still Life*). To achieve the complicated effects of light falling on aluminum, Daniels summons a range of painterly techniques: Richter-esque blurs of blue-black; minutely drawn slivers of white, painted along the edges of creases; curious flat areas of unmodulated gray—all to re-create, quite unmistakably, this dazzling, if common, household material. One could never paint directly on aluminum

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William Daniels, *Still
Life II*, 2007, oil on
board, 11 1/4 x 15 1/4".

foil because the stuff repels paint, so there is a tension created by allying two materials that don't belong together.

Yet Daniels's project thoroughly belongs to painting: its history, its light, its heroes, its efforts, and its illusions. These paintings beg the question, What is the original behind them? Is it the artsy-craftsy aluminum-foil model languishing in the studio? Is it the cardboard armature underneath? Is it the painting Daniels has copied, or its reproduction in an art-history book? And then, what about the cup of water and the long-dead rose arranged on a silver plate in Francisco Zurbarán's studio some 377 years ago? Is the model the mountain before which Cézanne set up his easel or the image he carried around in his head? This is not Baudrillard's "copy with no original" but a copy with multiple, contradictory originals arrayed like Chinese boxes around Daniels's final tiny, unique painting. He is truly a painter's painter, skillfully paying quiet homage to greats from Caravaggio to Morandi and beyond. And they are true homages—by no means tongue-in-cheek send-ups of the earlier paintings but distinguished, sensitive tributes to and studies of his predecessors. Daniels's small paintings bear a rare humility along with their obvious care and intelligence.

—Gilda Williams