

# Paintings About Paintings With Rasmus Nilausen

BY CODY DELISTRATY | FEBRUARY 27, 2019



Rasmus Nilausen, Installation view: "Eye Dialect," 2019, team (gallery, inc.), 83 Grand St, NY, NY, 10013 (Courtesy team/©Rasmus Nilausen)

The Copenhagen-born, Barcelona-based artist Rasmus Nilausen is making his stateside solo debut with “Eye Dialect,” an exhibition centered on questions of authorship and referentiality, but unlike the traditional semiotic interest in signs and symbols, Nilausen has put this kind of referentiality to use as a mode of solving cosmopolitan and linguistic dilemmas. The show is on view through March 2 at Team Gallery in Manhattan.

On any given day, Nilausen estimates he uses four different languages — English, Spanish, Catalan, and Danish — which, rather than creating the feeling of having many identities, often strikes him as having no identity at all. Painting’s inherently visual nature provides a solution to this unique kind of existential crisis. “Through painting I can deal with words in a different way,” Nilausen told *Modern Painters*, “where the language is at times a wordless one and where I make the rules.”

In our conversation, Nilausen also spoke to the political difficulties of living in Barcelona as an artist, the nature of polyglossia, and the way of finding one’s own self through visual reference.

**There are numerous reflective layers to your works — many of the paintings are, for instance, about the studying of painting, thereby inviting the viewer to study the study of painting...**

Yes, somehow many works are about the idea of language. The study of painting is probably my biggest interest on a very nerdy level. But no matter how much one knows about it, I always seem to be intrigued by what we could call the medium's unarticulated potential.

**Yeah, in fact, referentiality seems to be the center of nearly all of these works — both to their own selves but also to other artists, philosophical texts, novels, and the like. What are your influences?**

Reference is often a point of departure for an idea of mine: I see, or think I see, read or whatever something that I cannot let go of, like the title of the show at Team, "Eye Dialect," which is a way of writing which to me sounds more like a particular way of seeing. These kinds of ambiguities and misunderstandings are important to me. I am basically influenced by the history of art and how it influences my inner world. Years ago, when I first looked at the works of Dutch painter René Daniëls, I understood that it is possible to not only reference other people's thoughts but also one's own work. This is something I also observe in the paintings of artists like Philip Guston or Walter Swennen. My interest lays very much in an artist's attitude towards making work.

**What does this kind of referencing achieve? What are you hoping to unlock or unearth?**

It seems like a very obvious idea, but everything one makes forms part of a greater something. This leads back to perception, I guess. We interpret the world according to what we already know. There's a certain schizophrenic freedom in that.

**It seems that the gap between representation and meaning is also vital to you. What are you saying here about semiotics that's especially new or original?**

As a painter, I do not feel like an expert on the subject of linguistics. When referring to text in my pictures I will often use symbols instead of actual words since I hope that this might leave an opening for the viewer to insert his or her own references and experiences. On a personal level, I have lived about half of my life far from the country where I was born. That is how language and translation became something that I cannot avoid in daily life. On a normal day, I will use four different ones, and I do not feel like possessing a mother tongue any longer. The languages I speak are flawed. They become natural yet never completely. Through painting I can deal with words in a different way, where the language is at times a wordless one and where I make the rules.

**Besides this linguistic confusion, how has living in Barcelona also affected you, especially in your personal politics vis-à-vis separatism, etc.?**

This matter is extremely delicate and complex. Again, as a foreigner I am less emotionally involved in a conflict that has much to do with unhealed historical wounds. It is impossible to untangle here, but I do certainly not agree with people being incarcerated for their political opinions. I did not see that one coming.

**Where do you see yourself within the realm of art history? Stylistically, where would you locate your art?**

To explain this matter I would refer to a fictional character named Salvatore from Umberto Eco's "The Name of the Rose." He was this heretic monk who would speak several languages mixed together in the same sentence thus creating a new personal one. A sort of polyglossia. The most remarkable thing about his communication with the world was that his utterings would be comprehensive depending on which of the languages his counterpart would master. This is how I think about style. I have often considered my works to be still-lives due to the absence of the human figure as such, but I am not sure if that term is still useful as a description. I am interested in somehow showing how the painting has been made. Literally and conceptually speaking, the layers are visible and often transparent. So, basically, I deal with figurative painting where I understand it to be a tangible object before it can become an image.