

ArtReview

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Walter Swennen *So Far So Good*

Wiels, Brussels 5 October – 26 January

Belgium has a strong tradition in painting, ongoing to the present day. Think of Luc Tuymans or Michaël Borremans, household names in the contemporary art world. But there are plenty of other great painters out there, like Walter Swennen, a painter's painter who has not really received the international acclaim he deserves. In 2013, however, at the age of sixty-seven, Swennen had an exhibition at Culturgest in Lisbon: his largest solo show abroad to date, featuring 73 paintings. Wiels, in his hometown of Brussels, has now almost doubled the size of this, presenting a 130-work show.

Swennen was a late bloomer who only started painting at the age of thirty-five. Prior to this, he wrote poetry. The earliest painting in the exhibition, *Sans Titre (Mots Effacés)* (1982), consists of words that have been blotted out and become signs: a gesture almost as symbolic as that of his late friend Marcel Broodthaers, who embedded his unsold poetry volumes in plaster and hence emblematically made his transition from poetry to visual arts. Whereas Swennen's early works still share wild gestures and brushstrokes of the neo-Expressionism with which they were contemporary, they already display the relativistic approach that is so characteristic of his practice as a whole. Take *La Commande (De Opdracht)* (1982). The work depicts a rapidly painted phone, mice, cars and a rubbish bin.

Faced with painter's block, the artist called his daughter, then age five, and asked her what he should paint. The result, the fruits of a child's imagination, can be seen on canvas.

That notion of 'what to paint' is a crucial one. Hence Swennen's sources are versatile, ranging from art history to psychoanalysis, via comic books. In *Veronica* (2007), his ironic version of a Bible story, Swennen uses the title to evoke the tale of St Veronica – whose veil bore an impression of Jesus's face – while his imagery comes from a dated advertisement of a housewife hanging up washing. In *Konijn & Canard* (2001), he depicts the rabbit-and-duck gestalt diagram as two separate entities. And in the letter painting *Tum de Dum* (1992), he draws on the Flemish *Suske & Wiske* comics, evoking the sound of an animation character humming a tune.

But it is rather painting itself that is his main subject, as in *Super Blaue Reiter* (1998), made according to instructions in a painting manual. Swennen not only tackles the issue of painting by routinely changing his style or imposing restrictions on himself (eg, working in the dark or in a confined space) but also by experimenting with the carrier, the support. Besides painting on canvas, he also uses wood or even washing-machine lids. And he deliberately overpaints earlier works, like *L'Oncle du Congo* (1989) or *Patmos Revisited* (1988), an approach that

contributes to the palimpsestlike quality and richness of his oeuvre.

Though Swennen's aesthetic is highly individual, one can see parallels with Philip Guston's cartoonish style, Sigmar Polke's and Martin Kippenberger's versatility, and René Daniëls's poetic and painterly observations. Yet none of these comparisons – or labels like 'neo-expressionist', 'post-Pop' or 'postmodern' – quite catch his unique position. In his whimsical way, Swennen prefers the vernacular to the international: painting the logo of a no-longer-existing Belgian brand of potatoes (*Jef Patat*, 1986), for example, or the aforementioned comic books, the references all lost on an international audience. The many linguistic plays between Belgium's national languages that he slips into his paintings might be another reason why Swennen has not received the international fame obtained by less interesting artists. Hence the importance of this comprehensive overview. A smaller selection might also have done the trick, since the diversity on show doesn't always aid coherence, and some of the abstract and more neo-expressionist paintings are less convincing. It's a minor issue, however, in a show that will hopefully contribute to the establishing of Swennen's international reputation.

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Kapitein Detzler, 1997, oil on canvas. Private collection, Antwerp. Photo: DMF. Courtesy Culturgest, Lisbon, and Wiels, Brussels