

DOMOBAAL

Walter Swennen at Aliceday Gallery

ArtForum, April, 2008 by Yoann Van Parys

Walter Swennen, born in 1946, has been a presence in the Belgian art world for many years, and his work is admired by many in his native country. His renown, however, does not extend much beyond the borders of Belgium. The reasons for this have to do with the work itself, whose variety may seem puzzling to those who expect an artist to develop a singular style: Swennen's art is always unpredictable, always in progress. Then there's the way the artist has managed his career: He has resisted giving any one gallerist exclusive representation of his work, a stance that has always had a political dimension. He has made an effort to remain open and free, a philosophy that is deeply ingrained in his practice.

But what does it look like? This exhibition gave an excellent overview of Swennen's painting--his abundant and interesting work on paper was not included. The show comprised eight oil paintings, two of which are diptychs. Some are painted on canvas, others on wood panels or improbable supports that appear to have been found by chance; this humility in the choice of supports is telling. One canvas, *Untitled*, 2007, depicts an airplane, brushed over a white background, placed on a layer of red. At the bottom of the image is a partially legible inscription: HAPPY BIRTHDAY. Then there is what appears to be a landscape placed summarily on the back of a wooden box beam: a hillock flanked by a workman's hut, dominated by a blue moon, also *Untitled*, 2007. All the images, despite their apparent simplicity, teem with details and nuances of execution and possess a strange glow; what they represent is, finally, mysterious. To describe them exhaustively or perhaps even accurately is a challenge.

Yet these paintings are not hermetic in the least, and the viewer invariably finds elements that have personal meaning. A whole visual vocabulary exists in these works, an ensemble of forms and objects that one's eye and memory can instinctively recognize. Hidden resonances rise to the surface, from the most anodyne to the most symbolic. What is manifest is the desire not to make exclusively melancholic or amateurish or lighthearted work but rather work that has all these qualities at once and more--which is to say, all the nuances of existence. Certainly, Swennen's work is as rich as that of other Belgian painters who enjoy a greater celebrity abroad, such as Luc Tuymans or Raoul De Keyser. Let's hope he achieves equal recognition someday soon.

Translated from French by Jeanine Herman.