

## DOMOBAAL

There Always Comes a Moment Where Disorder Reigns

The painter Walter Swennen on life and work  
by Jan Braet.

A welcome is uttered by the 'assistant', with a short bark and an invitation to throw a tennis ball, again and again. Meanwhile, her boss silently clears a space to sit. Among hundreds of small memorabilia, two canvases dominate the studio in Berchem. There's not much on them yet. Walter Swennen (62) has had too much talking to do lately. Besides which he has had a 2-part exhibition: 'How to paint a horse'. Comical paintings juxtaposed with heartbreaking paintings in cutting lines and strident colours, one part of which was at the CC Strombeek, and the other at The Garage in Mechelen. All this at the cost of painting itself. To see clearly we should go back to where it all started.

WS. I used to paint when I was at college in Brussels. I took private lessons from a woman painter who my mother got in touch with. There was a myth held in the family that an uncle of my mother's called Gaston Wallaert, painted. A romantic figure, a painter living in penury. He had been helped to an extent by priests, in a way that was fashionable then. He lived in poverty and went blind. And en plus he resembled Beethoven. So that was perfect. The first paintings that I saw in my life were those by Gaston Wallaert.

JB. What was on them then?

WS. Young women, death and seascapes. But of course stormy seascapes. And one or more stormy landscape in Flanders, I believe.

JB. Painting did not appeal to you then?

WS. It did, I was interested in painting. An important figure was Bernard Buffet. He was at the base of an incredible amount of callings. In the fifties there was an old gallery on Avenue Louise in Brussels, a gold-fish bowl with plush walls. It only exhibited paintings of flowers. Flowers in a vase and such like. My mother took me there to see them. That rather bored me. Moreover, I would peer at them very close up. They thought that there was something wrong with my eyes, but I looked at them at such close range so that I would not have to look at the flowers. From where I stood, I saw only the paint, and I found that fantastic. And I loved all that matter, those particles. They were mannerist paintings, with those pasta-like paint layers. I always did that, looking at details, and using details of things. I live at close quarters (he gets a magnifying glass, and a second one to further reinforce this). I use this every day, simply to look closely at the detail of images and things. As you know, God is in the detail.

JB. You pressed your nose to the window in the sixties. You met Marcel Broodthaers and made objects in the manner of Pop Art, you participated in happenings.

WS. You know, it was a weird time. A friend had a white goods store in the red light district here in Brussels. And he had to leave. We occupied the shop and the house for 2 days, made work and invited the public in. The whole thong was improvised, there was no photographic record. Quite poetic really. I had made a sculpture consisting of 2 sleeping bags, each on a different floor, connected by a tube filled with fluorescein. In the upper room, there was a black light. The fluorescent tube glowed on the upper floor, not downstairs. There were 2 actresses in the sleeping bags. It was a homage to William Reich and Jacques Lacan (he smiles). The police shut the place down. I still have a pamphlet by the poet Herman J Claeys, who had an organisation against censorship. Marcel (Broodthaers) had an exhibition early on in his career where I had to stand at the entrance and whisper a poem in the ear of every accompanied woman who came in. All gone, or nearly.

In the window of the shop, I had hung 2 plastic cubes – packaging boxes for washing machines. In one was a friend constantly applying and then removing make-up. In the other was her boyfriend repairing his bicycle tyre. Those things happen because you find 2 pieces of plastic. On occasion these things are dangerous. People entered the shop from the rear. There was a patio where my friend, the electrician had stacked a lot of empties. Another friend sat in the window and shot at the empty bottles.

## DOMOBAAL

JB. With a toy gun?

WS. With a rifle. Vito Acconci did far worse in those days.

JB. A one-off event?

WS. Yes, but we did have an active group named *Accuse*, after Zola's text. That was a fun time. You talked with someone and 2 days later it happened. It did not last very long.

JB. After that, you stopped making art for a long while. What did you do in the seventies?

WS. I did my thesis afterall, well after I had left Louvain University. I had heard that there was a time limit, otherwise I would not have been awarded my psychology degree.

JB. Didn't it take ten years?

WS. Yeah, a long time! (he laughs)

JB. How was life then?

WS. I don't know, life as a tramp you mean? (he sighs)

JB. You didn't travel the world?

WS. No, I just stayed in Brussels.