

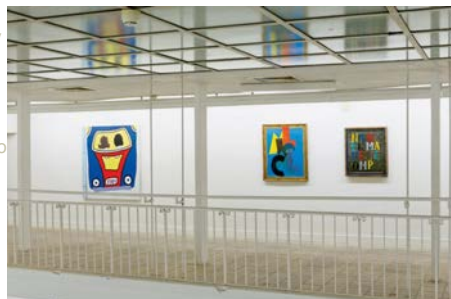
WALTER SWENNEN

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KUNSTVEREIN FREIBURG

by mark prince

FREIBURG Walter Swennen's relative obscurity seems as structural as it might be contingent. He belongs to a celebrated generation of Belgian artists that includes Raoul De Keyser and Luc Tuymans, so therefore attention has certainly been trained in his vicinity. But his art is concerned with what is missed or over-looked in the attempt to visualize or communicate, with what doesn't automatically get through. What he conveys often seems a front for an ulterior message he imparts by stealth.



Consider his use of language. Swennen was a poet before he began to paint, and around half of the 27 mostly recent paintings at Kunstverein Freiburg featured words, numbers or letters, from the handwritten scrawl of an expletive to isolated block capitals that could be perceived as assemblages of geometric forms. Since 1960s Conceptualism, language in art has predominantly been a means of injecting the objectivity of consensual meaning into a more ambiguous visual realm. For Swennen, however, words are not reliable signifiers but incoherent cries. They fight for space with nonsignifying elements, and dis- solve into them. English, French and Flemish speak over each other. The abstraction of a word phases into abstraction as a manifestation of irreducibly visual painterliness.

"Allo" is repeatedly handwritten onto *Allo Patti* (2011), sometimes fortified with a preceding H, while PATHY is corrected to PATTI, as though despite the desperate importun- ing of the writer, the identity of the person he addresses is open to doubt. In *Tears for N* (2011), seven droplets—adapted from symbols the computer industry uses for ink colors—are frozen in mid-fall above the inscription of the title. The cross-referencing of word and image is reminiscent of René Magritte—another great Belgian—but with none of his coy, semiological point-making. These tears are more



asserive as signs than the words which name them. And the capital "N," a depersonalized stand-in, creates an absence of identity that no amount of sentiment, and possibly ironic sentiment (the droplets are, after all, corporate ciphers, not genuine tears), will restore to full personification. Even the white ground proves to be a screen for overpainted marks that have more density

than the title superimposed onto them. Unlike Magritte, Swennen does not have a didactic bone in his body, and his work is also refreshingly free of the painterly navel-gazing—the "painting about painting"—that is so prevalent. He plays word off image not to score a deconstructive point, but to intimate how painting is subservient to neither. The misspelled "Shangai," in *Shangai* (2010), is a corrupted echo of cultural static, as well as a painterly concoction liberated from its linguistic duties. The exoticism of the skewed reference is an absurd antithesis to the humid intimacy of the smeared oil paint out of which it emerges.

Swennen's sampling is both material and conceptual. His supports are often found objects: sheets of scrap plastic, metal shelf components, panels of salvaged wood. Similarly, the gestures he applies to them are contaminated by pop- cultural traces—cartoons, logos, stock notations from advertising—etiolated as voices summoned at a séance. But this secondhand matter brushes up against newly minted perception. *Chalet* (2009) places an otherworldly modernistic building into a tawdry illustrative hinterland of zigzag pines and fluffy cumulus. The cartoonish crown of *Couronne & Bougeoir* (2011) contains smudges of phthalocyanine green that render an emerald's glint with hyperreal intensity.

If Swennen's work from the 1980s sometimes recalls Sigmar Polke's juxtapositions of visual quotes, he has never shared Polke's interest in generating grand pictorial schemes. His world is always modest, intimate, even personal. This modesty is also structural, synonymous with his reluctance to believe that painting's language can carry beyond the expediently improvised forms of an individual painting. It is a doubt that does not recommend him to the art world's confidence seekers. The words "OH CAROL," across the top of a 1992 painting, name Swennen's first love, the daughter of a plumber, hence the sketch of a sink which occupies most of the picture. But we need not know this, and Swennen's inability, or unwillingness, to clarify the connection becomes the painting's tonal essence. If this is self-revelation, it comes, paradoxically, in the form of a mystifying conflation of pic- torial elements, like codes that were never meant to be cracked.

Photo: (right) View of Walter Swennen's exhibition, 2012, at Kunstverein Freiburg. (left) Swennen: *Allo Patti*, 39 3/8 by 47 1/4 inches, and *Couronne & Bougeoir*, 23 1/2 by 27 1/2 inches, both 2011, oil on canvas.