

Walter Swennen

What the body can do

9 June —5 August 2023

Press Release

Xavier Hufkens is proud to present the gallery's sixth exhibition dedicated to the work of Walter Swennen. OK. The presentation offers a broad overview of the painter's oeuvre and includes new paintings and both recent and earlier works on paper. Alright then. The wide range of works, from different time periods, reveals how certain themes surface, in various forms, through both time and materials. No, not like that.

A theme is a proposition or subject that is up for consideration or discussion. Swennen does not use his canvas as a projection screen for ideas. It is precisely in the painting itself—in the drawing, scratching, struggling and evading, in the meticulous failures and clumsy improvements—that the thinking is hidden. These actions occur in the present, a domain over which intention and interpretation have no hold. Anyone looking for underlying thoughts in Swennen's work will be disappointed. Of course, he generously scatters it with letters and images, siren songs for us poor souls, always grappling for a foothold in the comfortless void. He wouldn't want to make things too easy for the viewer. So he leads us astray, suggesting a world that ranges from Schopenhauer to pirate flags, from children's drawings to cigarette butts. What it is really about—the materiality of it all (and not in an experimental way, because experiments are designed to test a preconceived hypothesis)—is hiding right beneath our noses.

Swennen's preference for reality, shaped by how paint clashes and cracks, where cause and effect play leapfrog, and chance alone leads the way—we only call it 'chance' on account of our imperfect knowledge, since things could not have been created by God in any other way or order than they were, in fact, created—where rubbing leaves a trail of debris behind and where a stroke of oil paint that is too wet today will be just the right consistency in two days' time to allow coffee grounds to be mixed in, this love for the material might stem from an aversion to any system that authoritatively abstracts things, under the false promise that words can convey a certain message—a smarty pants would suggest that no message can ever coincide with our thoughts, although they would be wrong to assume that an 'ourselves' exists at all—the germ of irony and intellectualism, this rule-based structure that pretends to be objective, but constantly divides and orders, and thus judges, in short, it stems from Swennen's distrust of language.

This presents us with a considerable problem. Thanks to photography, we have already succeeded in reducing paintings to illustrations. No more drilling holes in the wall. And when we place these reproductions in books, they form suitable illustrations for columns of text. Because admit it: making art is a nasty business, only suited to forgotten loners in draughty studios. The world of literature, on the other hand, where the work of these plonkers is deepened and disseminated through theory and discourse, is pure and universal! There we have a centuries-long tradition of schools and movements, explanations and ideas, and enough reading material to keep us indoors until the end of time. This is where the communication that makes art into culture flourishes. We have to provide the community with an

identity after all. Hang on a little longer and we will soon be able to enjoy an utterly unadulterated art world, free of heavy crates or transport costs, where talking will suffice. I'm setting up a grant programme for hanging the last living painter.

As long as he can paint, Swennen will throw his spanner in the works. Not so much from a place of lofty ideals but rather for the pleasure of being a nuisance. His resistance is reflected in an aversion to any kind of style or programme and in work that is steered only by the capricious nature of materials. Or so he says... Like any respectable artist, Swennen doesn't fail to occasionally bend integrity and principles to his will (after all, artistic success is always 50% genius, 50% deceit, according to Bernd Lohaus). And where better to see this cunning devil operate than in a commercial gallery, where the value of the work is determined by its actual properties: format and material cast into a mathematical formula. And so the painter deceives us one more time. Swennen hides behind the pretext of objectivity but offers a touching poetry in which our flaws and meaninglessness can graze to their hearts' content. Swept onwards by contrary winds, we bob around at sea, ignorant of our fate. But why complain when there is also room for laughter?

Walter Swennen (b. 1946) lives and works in Brussels. In 2021-2022, a large-scale touring retrospective was shown at the Kunstmuseum Bonn, Germany, the Kunstmuseum Den Haag, the Netherlands, and the Kunst Museum Winterthur, Switzerland. The artist received the Flemish Government's culture prize in 2020, which he promptly gave to the oppositional Communist Party. Other solo exhibitions include La Triennale di Milano, Milan (2018); White Columns, New York (2017); Kunstverein für die Rheinlande und Westfalen, Düsseldorf (2015); WIELS, Brussels (2013) and Culturgest, Lisbon (2013).

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