

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Hans Theys, "A Concise Conversation with Walter Swennen," *H ART*, September 21, 2017



A concise conversation with  
Walter Swennen

## Elementary Escaping

De Belgische schilder Walter Swennen heeft tot 28 oktober een grote tentoonstelling in één van de topgaleries in New York: Gladstone Gallery. De nieuwssite Artnet plaatste half september volgend bericht: 'Here are 51 New York Gallery Shows That You Need to (Somehow) See This September.' De Swennen-expo is er niet bij. Er is dus werk aan de winkel, voor al die door de Vlaamse overheid gestuurde promo, via Kunstenpunt en dergelijke. Als troostpleister: deze bijdrage, voor het gemak in het Engels.

Monday, June 29th 2017. Walter Swennen has invited me to have a look at his most recent paintings, about to be shipped to the States for a show at Barbara Gladstone's in September. I decide to go in with a camera. When I step into his studio, he starts to lay all the smaller paintings on the floor. I start filming them, one by one. To my surprise, fewer paintings rely upon a textural difference created with a painter's knife (one of Swennen's favorite tools). Again, I discover new textural interventions, sometimes obtained by pouring thick paint, sometimes by a comical, apparently clumsy use of a brush. Some textures are amazingly intricate, with an unreadable chronology. I know it's no use talking about this, because Swennen will never admit having 'done' something, because this seems to imply that he is 'planning' his paintings. (It's like trying to pinpoint a flea.) But I have a go at it anyway.

**How did you arrive at making these strange patches?**

Walter Swennen: "Well, as you know I didn't decide anything. But having scraped away parts of the upper layer of paint, revealing the layer underneath, I started to 'fill in' the gaps."

**That's what restorers of old paintings do these days: they fill the gaps with a kind of removable plaster and then imitate the oil paint with a thin layer of gouache... And what happened in this other painting?**

Swennen: "Suddenly, I had obtained some streaks that looked quite expressive. To counter this, I repainted the streaks meticulously with a very small brush, as did this French painter ..."

**Hans Hartung.**

Swennen: "Yes, that's the guy. They think his paintings are 'gestural', whereas they are the result of a meticulous application of paint."

**In this painting, the yellow droplets also suggest an expressive approach, until you notice that they suddenly stop ... You must have wiped them away at the border of the painting ...**

Swennen: "No, I haven't. I used tape ..."

**That's why, for him, all matter is soaked with godliness. A very bold image, of course, for God has no other address, he cannot be found somewhere else.**

Swennen: "Indeed, the world is made of God like a table is made of wood."

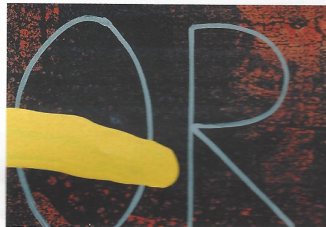
**Some people think a table can also exist without the wood, resting eternally in heaven, where it can be scrutinized and explained by intellectuals ... This reminds me of a debate within Christianity that has been going on for centuries, namely the matter of the double nature of Christ.**

Swennen: "Tell me all about it."

**As we all know, Christ is at the same time God and Man. To show us how we can cope with our mortality, the Christian God takes on the shape of a man. (His only problem was that he needed a woman for this, but gladly they found Mary, who was warned by the archangel Michael that she would feel her soul be pierced by a sword.) But all his life, Christ remains God. Only in his hour of dying, he starts doubting himself, and asks Himself why He has abandoned him. (For the living God was humble, and admitted his fears.)**

Swennen: "Come to the point, you're rambling ..."

**Well, for centuries there have been violent debates about this double nature of Christ. Some factions sustained that he was purely human, others that he was solely God. It took several big conventions to decide the matter once and for all by declaring that Mary had been 'theotokos': the One Who Gave Birth**



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**to God. And all this was necessary, because some people always want to 'understand' everything: they want to grasp the so-called true nature of Christ. Is he a God or is he a man? Tell me! Whilst the power of the image of Christ resides in its 'unknowability': he is both at the same time, man and God, just as a painting can be an image and an object at the same time, color and meaning.**

Swennen: "Hence Aristotle's distinction between 'being contrary' and 'being in contradiction'. Things can be contrary, whereas the words we use to describe them are in contradiction. I believe this contradiction springs from language, not from the things themselves."

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**We make a distinction between 'form' and 'content' to be able to think about a work of art. But such an approach is only justified if we keep in mind that in reality form and content do not exist as separate entities.**

Swennen: "Freud, speaking of dreams, said that their form is part of their content."

**So now about these yellow droplets ... I know you'll never admit to anything. But let's kneel down and look at this painting carefully. I don't think you used tape. I think you wiped the paint away ...**

**(We both kneel down and look at the painting from a distance of three inches.)**

Swennen: "I think you're right. I must have wiped it away. But if I did, I wasn't aware of it. My mind must have been wandering of ..."

**You're a cheat, Mr. Swennen.**

Swennen: "I know, my dear Watson."

It's Sancho, sir. Just call me Sancho.

Hans THEYS