

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Lola Kramer, "At My Own Risk. Couldn't Be Better," *Le Salon*, April 11, 2015

LE SALON

AT MY OWN RISK. COULDNT BE BETTER.

Belgian painter Walter Swennen is well known in Belgium but not yet here in America. Swennen (b. 1948, Brussels) has not exhibited work in the United States since 1992—and he is still learning how to paint. For over thirty years Walter Swennen has navigated the territory between language and image, sign and simulacra, but his work incorporates the idiosyncrasies of someone who arrived at painting after philosophy and poetry. While his visual language is informed, this exhibition proves that it has remained brilliantly childlike.

Past exhibitions of Swennen's work tend to overemphasize its "lighthearted," "graphic," "humorous" qualities as though apologizing in advance for the possibility of having a bigger picture in mind—but emphasizing the associative doesn't mean that there is nothing at stake. This exhibition includes twenty acrylic and oil paintings on canvases of varying size throughout the gallery. As with the artist's previous paintings, the pictorial elements are typically arranged laterally with cartoon figures or pictograms in the foreground (i.e. a pig, a house, a wine bottle or names of cities) on a monochromatic or color-blocked background. Hand-painted text is often treated like an object, remaining within the space of the rectangle or extending beyond the limits of the frame as if the viewer is reading a sign out of a moving car window.

A painting in the gallery hallway, *To Mona Mills*, shows an anti-hero persevering in the face of failure: a Stetson-wearing stick figure on a static horse is eager to proceed—a figure of speech peut-être. Several unsuccessful attempts to write "How to Paint a Horse" mark the surface of the canvas epitomizing the conundrum of the painter that is happily a preoccupation of this artist: what, why, and how to paint.

There are several interesting moments of equivalences and exchanges between sign and symbol. For example, the painting of a cartoon ghost hovering in the center of the canvas with the graphic "1" taken from the US dollar bill painted in the top right corner. Jean Baudrillard, the post-structuralist who penned *Signs and Simulacra* once wrote, "Power floats like money, like language, like theory." Lowbrow signs of everyday images populate this pictorial world, but symbols of power creep in among the images of playful houses and wine bottles. *The Red Scarf* hangs in one of the last rooms and depicts a seemingly content working-class cartoon-man wearing a red scarf and carrying a briefcase. He is passing through the frame as if on his way to work. In certain places donning a red scarf signifies sympathy with anti-capitalist beliefs, but maybe he just happens to like the color red and doesn't mind the "isms" it conjures; like a picture that comes to mind only momentarily and then dissolves with the entry of another thought, the man exits. In another painting entitled *Ice Crown*, a life-size, cadmium red crown floating over a Colgate-speckled blue ground recalls the disembodiment of a sovereign figurehead. These new paintings are associative but they also manage to set up or allude to sharp power dynamics—Sigmar Polke's pictorial *Socken* (1963) and notions of post-war Capitalist Realism come to mind. In fact, Swennen will be included along with original members of the Düsseldorf movement, among others, in the anticipated *Painting 2.0* exhibition at Museum-Brandhorst this November.

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Despite being absent from New York for twenty-three years, the artist has had several significant solo exhibitions, the most comprehensive *So Far So Good*, WIELS, Brussels (2013-2014), and the earliest at the Palais des Beaux-Arts/Paleis voor Schone Kunsten, Brussels (1986). The latter of which opened the same year of the artist's first group exhibition in New York called *Young Belgian Talent* at Denise Cadé Gallery-Art Prospect. It is worth noting that Swennen has taken part in a remarkable number of Belgian-themed exhibitions presenting only national artists—including one of Harald Szeeman's last curatorial enterprises *La Belgique Visionnaire/Visionair België* at Palais des Beaux-Arts/Paleis voor Schone Kunsten, Brussels, (2005)—but perhaps his return to the US signals a desired change of context on the part of Swennen.

If you look back at images documenting the artist's last exhibition in New York at Nicole Klagsbrun gallery (1992), not much has changed in the work. But this city has changed and so has the post-Internet, post 9/11 audience that is receiving this show. Operating system-happy New Yorkers in 2015 are more irreverent towards images than those alien New Yorkers of '92. Emoji-using viewers today are regularly ascribing new meaning to hieroglyphic-like signs and the playful flexibility of these signs allows us to participate so freely. Swennen's images have never been mediated by a condition of belonging (such as being red, or being communist for example). It is this apathetic attitude towards subject that allows the work to be about the act of painting itself.

And yet, one cannot resist interpreting this collection of symbols. The content and the installation insist on the futility of a narrative: a cigar, a sigh, a house—these jumps are not entirely sporadic, but they're glad to be hum-drum. It's like opening up a fridge to see what looks good without already having the hankering for anything in particular. Still, there seems to be a series of linguistic harbingers working in favor of the collective body. One brightly colored painting in red, yellow, and blue reads: *FEED THE FISH at your own risk*. In this exhibition, not one but two paintings read: *MY DISINCLINATION REMAINS FREE*. What remains is the overarching title of the exhibition *At My Own Risk. Couldn't Be Better*, which suggests that the stakes for an artist exhibiting in New York are still high.

<http://www.gladstonegallery.com/>

Images 01-09 Courtesy Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels.

Images 10-12 Courtesy Courtesy Nicole Klagsbrun, New York.

WALTER SWENNEN

AT MY OWN RISK. COULDNT BE BETTER.

18.09 - 24.10.2015

Gladstone Gallery, New York

By Lola Kramer

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Installation View: Gladstone, New York. Photo David Regen.



Ice Crown, 2015. Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 50 cm.

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To Mona Mills, 2015. Acrylic on canvas, 170 x 160 cm.



Installation View: Gladstone, New York. Photo David Regen.

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Feed the Fish, 2015. Acrylic and oil on canvas, 100,3 x 80,2 cm.



Installation View: Gladstone, New York. Photo David Regen.

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Ghost Dance, 2015. Acrylic and oil on canvas, 170,3 x 160,3 cm.



The Red Scarf, 2015. Acrylic and oil on canvas, 160,3 x 170,3 cm.

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Installation View: Gladstone, New York. Photo David Regen.



Installation view at Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery, New York, 1992.

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Installation view at Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery, New York, 1992.



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