

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

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# Forbes

## Walter Swennen Explores 'Bewtie' At New York's Gladstone Gallery



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“I consider that I became an artist in 1981, when I had a public exhibition. I think that until it’s on sale, you’re not an artist. A bit terse, isn’t it?” Walter Swennen quipped. “It’s what Broodthaers used to call ‘getting laid.’” This early exhibition marked Swennen's rite of passage from poet to artist. Earlier, at university, Swennen had studied philosophy, before moving on to engraving, then on to psychology. In the 60s, he discovered the Beat Generation poets and the *Dada Manifesto*, which propelled him deeper into poetry and early art making. By the 70s Swennen had become a lecturer in psychoanalysis before actively resuming art making in 1980.

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© Walter Swennen; Courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels.  
Walter Swennen. *I do not understand*, 2017.

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All this biography is relevant. One wonders if Swennen made his own winding path in the 60's and 70s to assuage his engineer father, who viewed his son's early poetic life as "dissolute." Swennen's mother, in contrast, wanted Walter to become a painter. Apparently, it was her fantasy, yet she worried about Swennen's future. "The Bohemian is okay, but not for a whole lifetime," Swennen recalled.

His family foundations would seem eccentric enough to allow for a poet, an artist. The family abruptly stopped speaking Flemish, his mother tongue, when he was five, and they began speaking French exclusively. The French half of the Belgian split personality prevailed. With time, Swennen was unable to speak or understand Flemish. This history disrupted his understanding about how language functions. Swennen said, "Because of that change of mother tongue, I realised the world made no sense, and that I shouldn't let that bother me."

Like an incalculable number of artists, Swennen often uses and mixes alphabets and language in his paintings—English, Flemish and French. Language pops up on the surface of different styles, figurative and abstract. Quinn Latimer, essayist and poet, opined "the artist's subjects—so many animals, pieces of fruit, homes, airplanes, bodies, skies, silhouettes, woods, materials—are very much things, things somehow waiting to be named . . . we communicate with Swennen's body of work: it talks to us, we talk to it." But to do so, we adapt to and adopt Swennen's unique vocabulary. His syntax and language can be droll.

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© Walter Swennen; Courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels.  
Walter Swennen. *SNEK*, 2017.

The title of the exhibition—*bewtie*—is neither a Dutch nor Flemish word. It is simply a play on beauty, like some phonetic dictionary spelling. Words and symbols are frequently layered, scrambled or both, inducing a type of gallery-going dyslexia. Three paintings are titled *Too many words* (one is Spanish, *Demasiadas Palabras*.) It can take a few seconds to decipher and interpret the works. *I do not understand* is self-explanatory. Several of Swennen's titles are enigmatic. *DOORN* means thorn in Dutch, but is also the name of a town near Bruges, Belgium. In the world of memes, *SNEK* refers to images of snakes.

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© Walter Swennen; Courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels.  
Walter Swennen. Popeye, 2017.

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Even the works with few (or no) words give pause. They are heavy with suggestive, if not coded, detail. *Popeye* is literally a partial representation of the spinach-eating cartoon character and his gluttonous friend, J. Wellington Wimpy, combined with a ghost-like sketch of Eugene the Jeep. (Some of Swennen's earliest childhood readings were comic books, like *Tintin* and *Spirou*.) *The French Impressionist* caricatures a stereotypical beret-wearing French artiste. *Happy Mothers Day* combines the gray silhouette of a woman with one of a camel, a notoriously phlegmatic and obstinate animal. Is this a reference to Swennen's own mother, about whom he said, "I have no memories of ever confiding in my mother."?

This is not art easily recognized or branded. Swennen's paintings have enormous variety. There is a strong affinity with the visual diversity of Sigmar Polke's career or the small, banal paintings of Jean-Frédéric Schnyder. Swennen is pushing here and pulling there like Belgium's Flemish-French identities. His work caroms from "accident to accident, from repair to repair." The irony is that Swennen asserts, "There's no language of art. Semiotics sank like the Titanic . . . If you look closely, you no longer see the image, but the way it's made." So perhaps these paintings communicate nothing at all; they just work.

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© Walter Swennen; Courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels.  
Walter Swennen. *The French Impressionist*, 2017.