

Walter Swennen *Ein perfektes Alibi (A Perfect Alibi)*

Kunstverein für die Rheinlande und Westfalen, Düsseldorf 28 November – 14 February

Walter Swennen's large painting *Labyrinth* (2015) depicts a maze, most likely copied from a children's activity book (the original page is also on display, together with other archive material, and features on the invitation card). It is painted onto a mottled blue-grey ground and at its centre is an elephant. A wavy hand-painted red line, contrasting with the stencilled-in grid, enters the maze at top left, heading downward only to quickly upswing into a dead end. It leads the eye, shows the hand of the artist and, one might conjecture, provides a neat suggestion of Swennen's philosophy or self-invented logic concerning painting.

This and the 35 other paintings in *Ein perfektes Alibi (A Perfect Alibi)*, which date from 1980 to the present and are hung across two galleries, form a succinct miniretrospective. At first glance it would be easy, given the predominance of loosely painted figurative imagery here, to classify the Belgian, now turning seventy, as a neo-expressionist. However, like his friend and mentor Marcel Broodthaers, Swennen, who first studied philosophy and psychology, was a poet before turning to art. Yet instead of directing

verbal and visual play towards the institution as Broodthaers did, Swennen's approach to painting seems to be that of a poetry of corrections – or stalled corrections, like leading his viewers through a maze only to deposit us at a dead end.

In a 1990 interview, Swennen noted that he had no aptitude to be a philosopher, while poetry for him equalled nostalgia, hence his turn to painting. Two early works on large paper scrolls, nailed to the wall, depict roughly illustrated animals and objects in black oil paint with words next to them. Next to the oilcan in *Alphabetum* (1981), for example, is the word 'rabbit'; a rabbit sits beside the word 'glass', an elephant accompanies 'oil', and finally appears a crocodile with 'secret love' painted in a pale pink. If paintings such as this are Swennen's most Broodthaers-inspired in their play of word and image, they connect with his other works via their unlikely juxtapositions. The later combinations, though, rest more on roughly scratching out a space between the painterly ground and – at times – imagery, in the form of cartoons or ideograms drawn from popular culture. Their murky fields suggest

that Swennen constantly edits and reworks, as if trying to find the right fit.

Take *Zes min vijf (Six Minus Five)*, 2010, which depicts a series of six rectilinear cartoon faces in black outline on a flat, pale greyish, lightly brushed ground. Five of them are crossed out with a red X. The result is at once humorous and numerical: a process, as its title suggests, of addition (of faces) and then negation (crossing out). Could Swennen be teaching us to count? More likely, I imagine, he's figuring how many crosses are required to make the right painting. In *Untitled (Room)* (2001), he paints the letters 'm o o r' diagonally across the painting, and provides an arrow pointing the other way that suggests, as per the title, that the reading may really be 'room'. That is reading while seeing, which may offer another way to look at his paintings. Swennen's, then, is a poetry of materiality, like that celebrated by the Nouveaux Réalistes, but his easing together of words, images and materials seems altogether less festive than theirs. 'Stupidity', he has written, 'is the name of the real with which the thinking is in dispute. Painting has to do with the real. So I keep myself busy with stupidities.' *Sherman Sam*



Labyrinth, 2015, oil on canvas, 170 × 150 cm.

Courtesy Kunstverein für die Rheinlande und Westfalen, Düsseldorf