

frieze

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Walter Swennen

Nicolas Krupp, Basel, Switzerland



Walter Swennen, *Châlet* (2009), oil and charcoal on canvas

'I never saw an ugly thing in my life,' John Constable once opined. Two hundred years later, his rather romantic claim found its way into a sketchbook of Belgian painter Walter Swennen, scrawled in red, uppercase letters. Tellingly, the line could apply as much to Constable's genteel, dappled landscapes as to Swennen's more shambling works, though the wit of its application is perhaps more pronounced when considering the latter, which often feature vaguely cartoonish visual motifs on messily abstract grounds. Born in Brussels in 1946 and now based in Antwerp, Swennen first came to prominence in the '80s in Belgium, and his paintings still carry traces of that decade's flamboyant laconicism. Unlike other European painters of the period who found fame in the US, Swennen never quite broke out. This is odd, considering that his untailored style of neo-expressionism seems closer to the New York artists of that time than that to their European counterparts. Nevertheless, a recent string of shows – including one now on at Nicolas Krupp in Basel – has brought his oddly current *oeuvre* back into the light.



Hélice (2009), oil on metal

The paintings at Krupp, all from the past five years, immediately establish their maker as a kind of studious slacker. Swennen's sketchy, improvisatory technique often begins with a vaguely familiar visual motif, such as a bulbous aeroplane, a bluish wine glass, a cartoonish ghost. He then employs this image like a melody, letting it float loosely atop a ground made of more allusive elements, including spectre-like blocks of colour, dripping and scratched paint, or rough terrain that seems to have been baked in the sun. *Verre et parapluie* (2007) places a wine glass and an umbrella – each featuring blue, willowy stems – on top of a pale ground crossed by a geometric length of faded pink, like a red carpet stretching off into the distance. In *Hélice* (2009), a blue propeller hovers from the top of the painting over a hazy violet field that seems to indicate a vague crop of buildings. The oil painting – made on metal, as are several of the works in the show – seems like nothing so much as a single frame plucked from a larger cartoon, its larger narrative lost forever. In *Chalet* (2009), a blue serpent wearing big '80s headphones looms over a simple red house, its split tongue flickering toward the roof. Both beings, the snake and the home, seemed suspended in a kind of pale, dreamy space – there is no real ground, or grounding, in sight.



Untitled (2008), oil on canvas

In other works, Swennen dispenses with figurative iconography; ground becomes all. Without any narrative signifiers, one becomes weirdly attuned to the paintings' formal qualities: colour,

line, surface, perspective. Surface in particular seems key: an untitled work from this year features thick, clotted paint in pale tones, with only a loosely architectural pattern appearing in one corner. Another untitled painting, this from 2008, has a creamy veneer with rainbow undertones that evokes a brick wall if it were made of yoghurt. One of the best works in the exhibition is also the largest, an Aegean blue painting over which is laid a kind of web or net, the Greek letters of its title painted in the top right-hand corner. With its aerial view of watery, cerulean hues, it oddly recalls a minimal '70s-era travel poster for some island destination.

Nevertheless, each reference I alit upon eventually seemed forced. Taken together, the works are inconclusive, their overall sensibility defined by a sly, seemingly defiant indefiniteness. Yet, despite being so aloof, these paintings – both wry and inscrutable – are oddly personable. Their mucked-up surfaces, blasé palette and jazzy visual vocabulary have a sweet jocular quality despite the grubbiness. Perhaps it's this sensibility that leads us back to Constable's earnest assertion that he's never come across an ugly thing, not in his whole life. Easy as it is to find comedy in that statement, it could also hold true for Swennen, even though his *oeuvre* proves that he's no faint-hearted aesthete who has little regard for the hierarchy of aesthetic subjects. Instead, the world of the cast-off and the incomplete is invited in and asked to take a seat, wherever and whatever that may be.

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