

Walter Swennen

Works on Paper

20 November 2014 – 17 January 2015

Press Release

Xavier Hufkens is proud to present a new exhibition dedicated to the graphic work of Walter Swennen (b. 1946, Brussels). The presentation focuses on the last three decades of the artist's career and brings together over a hundred works on paper in a variety of media.

Walter Swennen is a painter and a draughtsman in equal measure. While his works in oil often engage with the complex questions inherent to the art of painting – its potential and limitations; what, why and how to paint – his works on paper can be read as the laboratory that not only fuels his ideas, but also points to possible answers. Like his paintings, Swennen's sketches take the form of enigmatic compositions of recognisable elements: words, letters, pictograms, heraldic devices, strip cartoon figures, advertising slogans, geometric forms, animals, stereotypical characters and everyday imagery. Although this gives rise to obvious visual correspondences between certain paintings and drawings, and a sketch might form a springboard for a larger work, his graphics are always autonomous creations. Often executed in layers and in mixtures of pencil, ink, watercolour, pen or crayon, they can be viewed as a visual compendium of ideas, insights, discoveries, juxtapositions and associations.

Modest in scale (often no larger than the page of a standard sketchbook), humorous and bursting with life, Swennen's joyful graphic inventions nevertheless point to a greater conceptual significance. To define what they are, it is often easier to state what they are *not*: they do not attempt to accurately represent anything, be it a person, place, situation or thing; nor are they abstract or expressionist; they are not studies of isolated objects, nor evocations of inner emotional states. They do not open up onto a three-dimensional pictorial space that can, figuratively speaking, be entered. In other words, they are not mimetic. Instead, they can be read as complex mental constructions in which images and meanings, ideas and language overlap, intersect or converge.

A poet and philosopher before becoming an artist, language plays a vital role in Swennen's oeuvre. Not only does he incorporate text in his work – blocks of words, individual letters, brand names and sentences – but he also combines it with other visual elements that suggest a 'puzzle' or rebus. Occasionally, letters and images coalesce into a clearly identifiable play on words or phonetics; at other times, they merely allude to a potential 'answer' that might (or might not) be hovering just beneath the surface. In this sense, they are a form of visual poetry, a vehicle for specific observations and experiences of the world. And therein lies the intrigue. Each of Swennen's drawings is a poetic distillation of the beguiling complexity, but essential simplicity, of not just art and language, but life itself.

Recent solo exhibitions include: *So Far So Good*, Wiels, Brussels (2013-14), *Continuer*, Culturgest Lisbon (2013), *Garibaldi Slept Here*, Kunstverein Freiburg (2012) and *How To Paint A Horse*, Cultuurcentrum Strombeek and De Garage, Mechelen (2008). Notable group exhibitions include: *Blue Times*, Kunsthalles Vienna (2014-2015), *De Vierkantigste Rechthoek*, Kunsthal KAdE, Amersfoort, curated by Tom Barman (2014-2015), *La Belgique Visionnaire/Visionair België*, curated by Harald Szeemann, Palais des Beaux-Arts/Paleis voor Schone Kunsten, Brussels (2005), *Voir en Peinture*, Frac Ile-de-France/Le Plateau, Paris (2003), *La Consolation*, Centre National d'Art Contemporain, Le Magasin, Grenoble (1999) and *Trouble Spot Painting*, MUHKA, Antwerp (1999).