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Walter Swennen Finds Maturity in Belated Return to New York

By ROBERTA SMITH OCT. 22, 2015



Walter Swennen's "The House of Jan" (2015) at the Gladstone Gallery in Chelsea. The Belgian painter is able to extract a maximum of beauty and humor from a minimum of paint. Credit Walter Swennen, Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels

Walter Swennen hasn't rushed. At 69, this Belgian painter has waited 23 years for his second solo show in New York, presenting a dozen new paintings that are a wry, fastidious form of Process Art. At first they seem to have been slapped together, cartoonish joke paintings and rather familiar. They're indebted to the German painter Sigmar Polke, and similarly strive to avoid a fixed style. Americans may catch whiffs of humor and rudimentary rendering (stick figures) reminiscent of those in William Wegman's paintings.

But things quickly get strange. For all of their casual charm, these canvases are indirect, deliberately but mysteriously made from thin layers. Crudely painted subjects have unexpected details, like the red-to-gray lit end of a fat brown cigar. There are expressionist scumblings but also carefully colored letters ("Feed the Fish at your own risk," announce red and pink letters on bright blue and marigold yellow). You may start wondering if Mr. Swennen trained as a sign painter. The sequence of layers is not easily deduced, though some have clearly been rubbed away to reveal earlier ones. (Consider the blue in "Nan's Still Life.") The phrase "My Disinclination Remains Free," rendered in near-identical scrawl on two paintings, suggests that some elements are painted on plastic that is then pressed to a canvas, or even two, and sheds light on parts of other paintings.

Mr. Swennen seems to have found maturity in a determination to extract a maximum of beauty and humor from a minimum of paint. One of the best works depicts a thatch-roofed cottage and is titled "The House of Jan." I like thinking of it as a homage to the Low Countries' Jan Van Eyck, arguably painting's most inspiring craftsman.

Correction: December 2, 2015

An art review and headline on Oct. 23 about an exhibition of work by the Belgian painter Walter Swennen, at the Gladstone Gallery in Manhattan, referred incorrectly to the show. It was Mr. Swennen's second solo show in New York, not his first. The critic discovered the error this week.

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