

Walter Swennen

English

WIELS presents the most comprehensive survey ever of Walter Swennen, one of the most uncompromising and experimental painters working today. Despite being born in a Dutch-speaking household in 1946 – in a house behind the Forest prison – Swennen was raised in French from the age of five onwards. That he considers every artistic gesture to be, in essence, an act of translation is therefore not very surprising. Swennen only decided to become a painter in the early eighties, when he was already 35, after he had initially written *beat* poems and taken part in *happenings* in the 1960s. The transition period from writer to visual artist is very clear in his first large, chiefly black-and-white paintings on paper: a language-laden interpretation of *action painting*. On his fortieth birthday Swennen decided to rid himself of the literary nostalgia of his earlier work. In its place he increasingly took his inspiration from daily life. Above all, his subjects constitute a ‘commonplace’, both public and intimate, even if interpreted differently by all.

Although Swennen is often labelled a lone wolf on account of his intensely individual oeuvre, he often surrounds himself with other artists — both contemporaries and heroes from the past. Paintings devoted to Kurt Schwitters, Kazimir Malevich and Niele Toroni also show that Swennen makes a point to respond in his own voice to the artists he appreciates, rather than merely quoting them stylistically as was the postmodern tendency. Painting continues the conversation, in the absence of the artists.

Separate spaces are devoted to showing a selection from Swennen’s vast production of drawings and sketches, to provide a view behind the curtain of the many-sided development of his painting.

Today Swennen lives and works in Brussels. After initially pursuing etching at the Academy in Brussels, he went on to obtain his master’s degree in psychology. In the second half of the 1960s Swennen was actively involved in alternative collectives with an interdisciplinary literary-artistic bent. He taught psychoanalysis at the ERG in Brussels in the late 1970s. From 1981 onwards, he resolutely decided to steer clear of what he saw as his ‘nostalgic’ poetry and devote himself entirely to painting in the here and now. In retrospect it is clear that Swennen has been perpetually engaged in the steady deconstruction of the specific problems of painting.