

" ... not harmful to man or beast."

Some thoughts around the paintings of Walter Swennen.

The title of this text is taken from a book published in 1948 by Winston Churchill, entitled 'PAINTING as a pastime'. Both Winston and Walter, it could be said, did not go into full painting production at a young age. 40 and 35 respectively and in taking up the brush in earnest at this stage in life, Winston says, "...the first quality needed is audacity"... "There is no time for the deliberate approach."

Audacity, is Walter Swennen an audacious painter? I would say so. For a start he knows that the world finishes at the pictures edge. He knows that the corners have to be strong. He believes that as a painting does not move – the contents must. He knows these things and then gets on with the job of being a painter. When he is lucky he creates a valuable experience, he gets lucky more than most. Is this because he is a clever man? I am not sure. His knowledge only seems to be present as a kind of residue left by invisible particles. He has said some nice things about painting like – 'Every painting is a story set in the present'

The colour has a softness, which is hard to explain and the painted words that sometimes appear, seem meaningful, but are they trustworthy? Best to enjoy them, rather than rely on them too much. This residue, I can't think of a better word, also shows signs of a painter who is thinking and feeling. But lets not get carried away with praise; I have a complaint (WS has written on a number of works 'never complain, never explain') – but here goes. He paints as if he is running out of paint – he is messy or one could even say scruffy – he is neither figurative nor abstract – but against my better judgement/taste, he goes and makes all this work. Art, I have to admit should be mysterious and his paintings certainly are.

Audacious, well he makes paintings he hasn't seen before and this is not an easy task. He ends up with a picture that does not speak, but he will expect you to trust this silence. And lets not forget that this painter once introduced a talk about his work by referring to a Cops and Robbers film in which the habitual words 'You have the right to remain silent' are spoken.

Sometimes, we the audience get lucky and find ourselves in the studio to witness the raw materials of a painters profession. Although this seems valuable it cannot compete with standing on your own in front of a painting in a strange gallery somewhere and just looking. As a fellow member of the Uccello fan club, the highest praise I can give this wonderful painter, Walter Swennen, is that he knows that he doesn't know what he is doing and so just lets battle commence.

I would like to finish by quoting Winston Churchill once again, as a way of welcoming Walter's painting to these shores and to wonder if perhaps he may have read 'Painting as a pastime' as a young child.

'To have reached the age of forty without ever handling a brush or fiddling with a pencil, to have regarded with a mature eye the painting of pictures of any kind as a mystery, to have stood agape before the chalk of the pavement artist, and then suddenly to find oneself plunged in the middle of a new and intense form of interest and action with paints and palates and canvases, and not to be discouraged by results, is an astonishing and enriching experience. I hope it may be shared by others. I should be glad if these lines induced others to try the experiment which I have tried, and if some at least were to find themselves dowered with an absorbing new amusement delightful to themselves, and at any rate not violently harmful to man or beast.'

Gerry Smith, London 2010