

THERE ALWAYS COMES A MOMENT WHERE DISORDER REIGNS

The painter Walter Swennen on life and work
by Jan Braet (translated by Patrick Verelst)

The 'assistant' utters a welcome with a short bark and an invitation to throw a tennis ball, again and again. Meanwhile his boss silently clears a space to sit down. Two canvasses dominate the Berchem studio, vying with a myriad of miniature memorabilia. There's not much on them as yet. Walter Swennen (at 62) has been busy with too much talking of late. And besides he has held a solo show across two locations simultaneously: 'How to Paint a Horse'. Comic paintings hanging alongside heartbreakingly tender works, executed with cutting lines and howling colours. A part of the exhibition was at Cultuurcentrum Stroombeek and the corresponding part at The Garage in Mechelen. All this at the expense of time spent in the studio. To see clearly we should go back to where it all began.

WS

I used to paint when I was in college in Brussels. I took private lessons with a painter who was contacted by my mother. There was a family legend about an uncle of my mother's, Gaston Wallaert who was a painter. A romantic figure - an artist living in misery. Priests had looked after him, which was à la mode at that time. He lived in penury and lost his sight. *En plus*, he resembled Beethoven somewhat. Perfect. The first paintings that I saw were those by Gaston Wallaert.

JB

What did they look like?

WS

The subjects ranged from young women to death, as well as seascapes, stormy seascapes of course. Yes, there were several stormy landscapes, set in Flanders, or so I believe.

JB

Did painting appeal to you then?

WS

Yes it did. I was interested in painting. Bernard Buffet was an important figure at the time. He was hugely in demand. There was a gallery on Avenue Louise in Brussels in the fifties - an aquarium with plush walls. It showed nothing but flower paintings. Flowers in vases most typically. My mother took me there to look at them but it rather bored me. I examined them at close quarters. They thought that there was something wrong with my sight, but I looked at them from very close to so that I didn't have to see the flowers. From my vantage point I only saw the paint, and that, I found fantastic. These were mannerist paintings constructed with pasta-like layers of paint. I was always doing that; looking at details, and working with the details of things. I live amongst minutiae (*he fetches a big magnifying glass, and a spare as back-up*) I use this daily, to look at images. God as they say, is in the detail.

JB

So - you pressed your nose to the window in the sixties. You met Marcel Broodthaers and made objects, working in the style of Pop Art and participated in Happenings.

WS

It was a bizarre time then - weird. A friend had a white-goods shop in the red light district here in Brussels. He had to vacate his premises. We occupied both the house and the shop for two days, made things and invited the public in. Everything was improvised - there are no images left to show. Poetry. I had made a sculpture that consisted of two sleeping bags; each placed on different floors and connected together by a plastic tube full of fluorescin. In the upper room there was a black light. The tube exuded a fluorescent light up there, but not downstairs. In the bags were two actresses. It was in homage to Wilhelm Reich and Jacques Lacan (*he smiles*). The Police shut the place down. I still have a pamphlet by the poet Herman J. Claeys who had an organisation against censorship. Marcel (Broodthaers) had a show early on in his career where I had to stand at the entrance door and whisper a poem in the ear of every accompanied woman who came in. They are all gone, or almost.

In the window of the shop I had hung two plastic cubes - packaging boxes for washing machines. In one there was a friend who was incessantly applying and then removing make-up. In the other was her boyfriend repairing his bicycle tyre. Those things happened just because one found two pieces of plastic. It could be dangerous at times. People entered the shop from the back via a patio, where my friend an electrician had stacked piles of empties. Another friend sat at the window shooting at the empty bottles.

JB

With a toy gun?

WS

With a rifle. But people like Vito Acconci did even worse things around that time.

JB

Was it a one-off?

WS

Yes, that was. But we had a proactive group called *Accuse*, after Zola. It was a fun time. One would talk over an idea with someone, and two days later it happened. It didn't last long.

JB

After that you stopped making art for quite a while didn't you? What did you do in the seventies?

WS

I completed my thesis ... finally, quite a while after I had left the University of Louvain. I had been informed that there was a final deadline pending - otherwise I would not have received my psychology diploma.

JB

Did it take you ten years?

WS

Yeah - a fair time (*he laughs*).

JB

How was life then?

WS

I don't know. Do you mean life as a tramp? (*he sighs*).

JB

Didn't you travel the world?

WS

No. I was in Brussels. I moved every six months on average. I survived thanks to friends, odd jobs, painting flats and all kinds of building-site work. I was treated for severe depression. It was an extremely chaotic period to say the least. I married, and then left after eleven months, 'I just went out to buy cigarettes' as they say. And I stopped taking all my medication altogether, at one go. I then had a very euphoric period. Maniacally, I lived in the moment. The seventies were psychedelic years. We tried absolutely everything.

JB

And you had plenty of time on your hands - you wrote, wrote poetry, painted and made sculptures?

WS

I walked around and about. And I was ... stoned, ok? (*laughter*). I thought that I had enough work as it was, just in living my life.

JB

And you did nothing?

WS

Nothing.

JB

Might something of those years survive in the form of notebooks or drafts?

WS

I made a small thin book in 1981. Collected fragments of that time with notes and leaflets. To me it was also a moment of complete liquidation of my old life. It was called 'Roman' ... it disappeared a long time ago. I don't think I still have a copy.

JB

But from 1981, you started painting seriously. Your paintings from those days looked a bit dirty and rough, unsurprisingly, their motifs often sourced from things second-hand and rejected.

WS

Painting is extremely impure actually. Whichever way you look at it, there is always a moment when disorder wins. There have been marked tendencies for pure painting, by the purists. Purity is however a contradiction per se. The tendency of dematerialisation. I find that Jungian. There is a mighty dose of hysteria in purity: a fervent disgust with what exists, with the body, with reality. Many modernists held the female body in disgust. That is really weird. There are few nudes in Modernism.

JB

Does the imagery in your paintings act as your alibi for the rest to be concerned only with matter?

WS

I find that strange, the idea of an alibi. I sometimes get the feeling that people think 'he put an apple there because he needed something green' - that's absurd. I mean, why is it an apple then?

JB

The apple and pear in the painting of that name are there because they have to be there.

WS

Listen, everything that's on the canvas is the responsibility of the artist. If there is an apple there then that's because it has to be there. That is its purpose.

JB

One sees in the details, what the maker of the image tried to do, not always with good results. Smart but not successful.

JB

But, had it succeeded, it might have escaped your attention?

WS

Yes, indeed. In French, they say 'il n'y a intérêt que pour ce qui cloche'. That's a lesson from psychoanalysis: what is interesting is a bit wrong. A disaster for example. They are also on occasions somewhat disarming, such drawings. Have you ever read 'The flying ape'?

JB

By Vandersteen? No.

WS

The baddie has a snake that he directs with his walkie-talkie. The snake has some homing device with a small antenna. At one point, the baddie finds the snake totally flat. He had been shot. At least, there was a hole in his snake. He takes it and repairs it as if it were a bicycle tyre. He puts his snake in a container of water and waits until air bubbles appear (*he laughs*). And in the end he hangs his snake up to dry. So dumb, so absurd. This kind of thing would never have been made if anonymity did not exist.

JB

Integrated in the world of Walter Swennen, as they now are, the images are no longer anonymous.

WS

No, indeed not. A while ago I had a show with Nadja Vilenne in Liege. They told me that a visitor was a bit upset when he was told that it was not a group show. He thought that my name was a sort of a collective name. And so it is. We are not identical to ourselves.

JB

We can perform incognito under our name.

WS

Or: who knows who else is hiding under our name.

JB

Your universe looks nihilistic or absurd, and the accompanying philosophy is existential, rooted in the fifties, 'L'Être et le Néant' and such like.

WS

At University, Sartre was the Devil.

JB

Were you reading him already then?

WS

Once I was kicked out of college because I was reading 'L'Homme Révolté' by Camus. I read existential philosophy, for example Kierkegaard. I love Kierkegaard. He's a funny man. Now I read Kierkegaard and Spinoza, whom I started to read in the late nineties. I had stopped drinking by then and began to think again, and enjoy thinking again. And so I chose a philosopher whose complete oeuvre consists of four paperbacks. I thought, four paperbacks: that must be feasible. However, I am still at it.

JB

Did you find something special in Spinoza?

WS

No, but a sort of confirmation of a number of things that I more or less already thought; such as the fact that an individual is made up of several individuals, and is himself part of a

larger individual. Spinoza also says: mind and body are one and the same thing, but seen as another property.

He says: all that exists is in thought and in the physical world. Those are two elements, thought and extensiveness. They constitute the only two we know of, but there is an infinite infinity of elements, he says. You experience that sometimes when painting. You have the experience that to think and to do is one and the same. Yes, you feel that sometimes. (*he laughs*).

JB

The canvas here on the floor already has a colour, a tone. Any idea what will happen with it after that?

WS

No. It has already been worked on. It is a very slow improvisation actually. I love improvised music too. I love jazz. I am a jazz missionary in my family and among my friends. I didn't know anyone who was interested in it. I was fourteen or fifteen when I bought my first record by John Coltrane. Followed immediately afterwards Ornette Coleman. And I chose Coleman, there was a polemic in jazz then ... Coltrane's music had a mystical aroma to it; and I didn't like it, I like street bands far more. Coleman is the beginning of free jazz. He's a fantastic sax player. He's a bird. There's also Albert Ayler. And Lester Young, the first great modern jazz musician. Today, everything in jazz has become very classical. No false notes. It has become decent music. (*He gets up and puts on a cd by Albert Ayler*).

JB

A colour in music, and your own colour, do they relate?

WS

Yes. I love all the possibilities that exist between colours.

JB

But you won't analyse and measure tonalities precisely?

WS

Sometimes for the details; no, but I do like contrasts. Rudy Fuchs came here ...

JB

... and wrote a beautiful text on your work.

WS

Yes, a beautiful text. He asked me: 'Why paint darkly?' I answered 'I never think of it as painting darkly'. But it's a good question: 'Why paint darkly?'

JB

The darkness in the Belgian impressionists and expressionists, the clarity of the Dutch abstracts.

WS

You know, I like that love affair of the Dutch with yellow, blue and red. I have that too. But also the rest.

JB

You combine both.

WS

I love rectangular shapes because it's a rational way to put paint on a surface. But I'm also interested in what happens to colours when they get dirty. My youngest daughter, who had always lived in Antwerp, went to the RITCS in Brussels a few years ago. She came back and I said: 'well how do you like Brussels?' - and she said: 'comfortably dirty' (*laughs*). Well, yes, colours, that's an incredible word. Paint. And I must say that for the past few years I use more and more high quality paint. It's incredible. Cadmium red, if you imitate it, then you have that colour red, yes. But if you dilute it, then the red is gone. With a real good colour, when you dilute it, you have a diluted colour, but everything is still there. That colour is there ...

JB

She stays ...

WS

Stays. Cobalt green, fantastic. With a bit of cobalt green in white you have the colour of a Californian swimming pool.

JB

Where does cobalt green come from? When does green turn blue?

WS

That's a good question. There is no answer. (Albert Ayler's delightful street noise gets into the conversation. And definitely takes over).

JB

What did you say?

WS

The world is full. I was once in Turkey, staying with friends. You could see mountains in the distance. And suddenly I saw an enormous shape, like the back of a curled fish, in a valley behind the rocks. It was air, it was a cloud. And suddenly it crossed my mind that everything is full. What we breathe is matter. That was a weird feeling. There is no God, with Spinoza. God is the things.

JB

They get an aura in painting. And suddenly everything is connected with everything.

WS

Yes - as Jeroen Brouwers said - I read it once here in Antwerp in a second-hand book shop - and that was very Spinozan: 'Nothing exists that doesn't touch something else'. It went something like that.

Walter Swennen and Jan Braet were in conversation in the artist's studio in Berchem, Antwerp, Belgium, 2008.

