

MATHEW CERLETTY / WALTER SWENNEN  
OFFICE BAROQUE GALLERY / XAVIER HUFKENS, BRUSSELS, BELGIUM

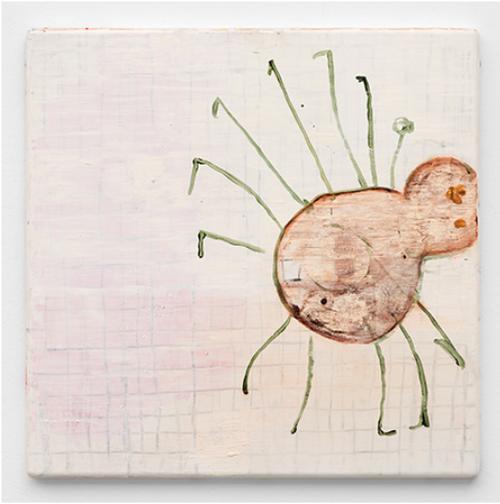
By Ellen Mara De Wachter



Mathew Cerletty, *Current Resident*, 2014, oil on linen, 122 × 86 cm

Of all the paintings in Mathew Cerletty's show 'Weird Vibe' at Office Baroque Gallery, *Milky Glances* (2013) was the most immediately attractive. That's not surprising – it is a portrait of a beautiful girl with long brown hair drinking milk from a large glass. The glass is slightly tilted and the milk has only just touched her lips. Her grey eyes stare into the middle distance, as though she can't swallow until she figures out what's on her mind. The painting's realism is striking: the girl's hand is anatomically exact, the sheen and draping of her blouse are just so, and there's enough ambiguity in her eyes to hold our attention. But *Milky Glances* evokes a feeling of otherworldliness that plays through much of the artist's work. In some cases, it's the lack of context that produces this uncanny effect: *Current Resident* (2014) depicts a US Postal Service worker, leaning forward slightly to hand the viewer a letter sealed with a little pink heart. The background is a deep blue and stark lighting curiously hits the man evenly from both sides.

Along the gallery walls, small watercolours interrupted the steady procession of paintings, acting as visual non sequiturs: a running tap, the words 'Oh, Hello', and, in a nod to local surrealism, the eggs, cloudy skies and painted texts that were the hallmarks of Belgian master, René Magritte. In a text accompanying the show, Cerletty provided a link to a YouTube clip of comedian Jerry Seinfeld explaining the rigorous – and not particularly funny – process that goes into writing one of his jokes. Cerletty's text takes its cue from Seinfeld's analytical approach with a series of questions about his own painting process, asking: 'Is it funny? Does it work?' and concluding that, 'Paintings talk slowly, so humor inevitably gets warped and transformed, often exposing underlying feelings.' This warped quality is what produces the surreal sense that wafts off his paintings. It's hard to pin down, but it might be summed up as a mixture of directness, levity and an almost-but-not-quite photorealist style, and the way these come through in the range of oils and watercolours in the show. If, as Cerletty claims, paintings do in fact speak in a language twisted out of straight humour, what do they actually say?



Walter Swennen, *Spider (small)*, 2014, oil on metal, 53 × 53 × 3 cm

The girl in Cerletty's *Mutual Friend* (2010–14) stares out from the picture plane with a frank and mildly inquisitive air. It's a small portrait painted with arresting clarity. The image is tightly cropped, cutting off the sitter's shoulders and framing her face. Her hair is cut in the same blunt bob as Hans Memling's *Man with a Roman Coin* (c. 1494); indeed the entire composition echoes this jewel of early Flemish painting. Cerletty started *Mutual Friend* several years before his impending show in Brussels inspired him to finish it. It's tempting to imagine that those neglected years spent in a corner of Cerletty's studio imbued the painting with the gravitas that produced quite a different effect from the more playful works on view. Across town, an exhibition of recent paintings by Walter Swennen at Xavier Hufkens displayed a seemingly more liberated and childlike levity. In *Spider (small)* (2014) a sketchy brown spider seems to cartwheel off the side of the painting, but the maths is all wrong: it has 12 spindly legs and its body is a brown mesh of scratchy brushstrokes, which have picked up the texture and dried flecks of older layers of paint like a rubbing. Swennen copied the image from a drawing his grandson had made when learning to count. This sampling of existing signage, advertising, comic books and assorted images is the artist's version of realism. Throughout his career he has painted from images rather than from objects. This strategy produces a double mediation and presents us with a subtle paradox: Swennen's imagery feels familiar because it is highly processed and seemingly straightforward, but the works retain an element of mystery because what they depict is often culturally specific or personally significant.

Swennen came to prominence in his native Belgium in the 1980s, as Europe quivered with the punkish anarchy that drove painters like Martin Kippenberger and Albert Oehlen in Germany and René Daniëls in The Netherlands to eschew the solemnity of conceptual and minimal art. Tangled up in the post-modern repudiation of grand narratives, Swennen also produced work that was reactionary in its humility and domesticity, not least because of the materials he uses. To this day, he still rummages through flea markets for unusual supports to use instead of canvases. *Spider (small)* is painted on a square of enamelled metal, possibly the discarded lid of a top-loading washing machine. *Untitled (Portrait)* (2014) uses a wooden cabinet door, a favourite support. It's a beguiling image, approximating a face that fluctuates from benevolent to maleficent, activating the imagination. It's playful and unpretentious – hallmarks of Swennen's work – calling to mind childhood games of revealing and concealing. It comes as little surprise that Swennen, who originally trained as a psychoanalyst, later rejected this ponderous discipline in favour of making pictures that might better convey the workings of his imagination.

If Cerletty's *Mutual Friend* speaks slowly with direction and precision, Swennen's *Untitled (Portrait)* prattles in an enigmatic but consistent language. Its layers stratify the moments in which Swennen laid down the paint, recanted and repainted. Like many of his pieces, it shows an enviable control over its own internal conflicts and unashamedly conveys the rigour with which it has been worked and reworked. These two exhibitions show that the dialogues between painters and their works – and those we, as viewers, may have with the finished paintings – are inevitably distorted forms of conversation. In the best of cases, this chattering invites us to contribute our own narratives about what we see and imagine within the picture plane.