Drawing the Line

The Serious Art of Joost Swarte & Ever Meulen

[DEREK BLYTH]

The comic strip started in daily newspapers as a funny story at the back of the paper. But it has evolved in the Netherlands and Belgium into a subtle and subversive art form.

The people who drew the first comic strips worked at large tilted drawing boards in newspaper offices. Some still do. But others have branched out into record album covers, posters, postage stamps and postcards.

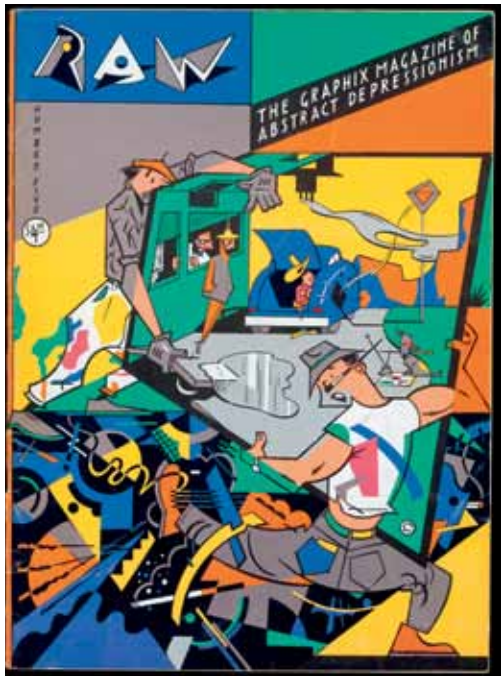
Comic strips are taken seriously in the Low Countries, much more seriously than in Britain or the United States. You realise their cultural weight when you visit the Belgian Comic Strip Centre in Brussels, which is housed in a beautiful Art Nouveau building. As soon as you enter the vast entrance hall, once a department store, you realise that this is not a museum for children, but a temple of fine art where drawings by Jijé or Franquin are treated with the reverence of a Picasso sketch.

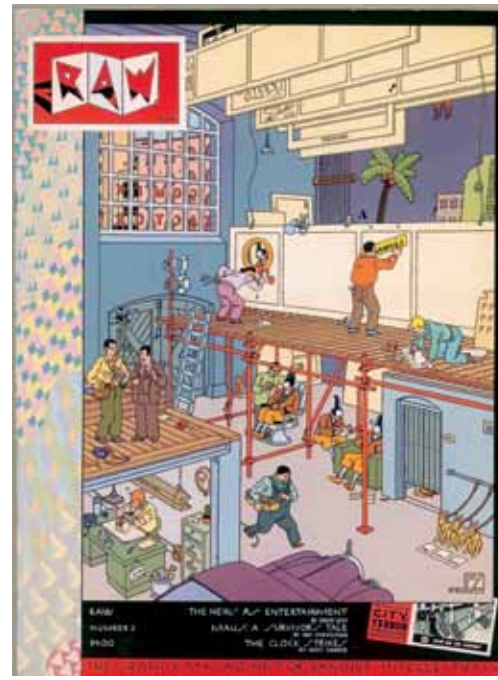
The comic strip is deeply embedded in the culture of the Low Countries. Almost every house in the Netherlands or Belgium will have a tall stack of old comic strip albums sitting around. The comic book sector is a major industry in these countries, providing work for dozens of freelance comic strip artists. In Brussels, bookshops are closing because of competition from the internet, but comic bookstores are still flourishing, along with shops selling Tintin merchandise or Smurf figures.

© Ever Meulen

It doesn't take long in this region to realise that Hergé is the most important comic strip artist the Low Countries has produced, on a level with some of the region's great artists. In 1929, when he launched the first Tintin book, Hergé was just another illustrator working in a newspaper. In 2012, when the Paris auction house Artcurial sold the original hand-drawn cover of '*Tintin en Amérique*', it fetched the record sum of €1.3 million.

Hergé began his career as a comic artist drawing in the rough, sketchy style of American newspaper comics, but he gradually developed a clean, precise style that became known as ligne claire, or clear line. This allowed him to create vivid images on the page in which every element is sharply defined by clean black lines and strong colours.





Left © Ever Meulen
Right © Joost Swarte

Hergé's style has had an enormous influence on illustrators working in the Low Countries. The first generation mainly worked alongside Hergé in his Brussels studio, but a second wave emerged in the 1960s and 1970s. These artists, led by Ever Meulen in Flanders and Joost Swarte in the Netherlands, took ligne claire in an entirely new direction.

Happy Ever After

'I love beautiful things; cars, houses, women,..' Ever Meulen declared in a recent interview. His offbeat enthusiasm for automobiles and modern architecture may seem a little dated, his fondness for leggy blonde women even mildly incorrect, but this modest Flemish illustrator is much loved for the way he brings lightness and humour to modern times.

He was born Eddy Vermeulen in Kuurne, a village in West Flanders, in 1946. The war in Europe had recently ended and there was an infectious mood of optimism in the air. The postwar sense of innocent optimism reached its purest expression at Expo 58, when 50 million people flocked to northern Brussels to see the latest ideas in architecture, transport, furniture, food and music.

The mood of the age was captured by the Atomium, that strange building in the form of a molecule of iron. With its nine spheres of gleaming steel, it looked rather like a space craft that had landed from another planet. Everything at

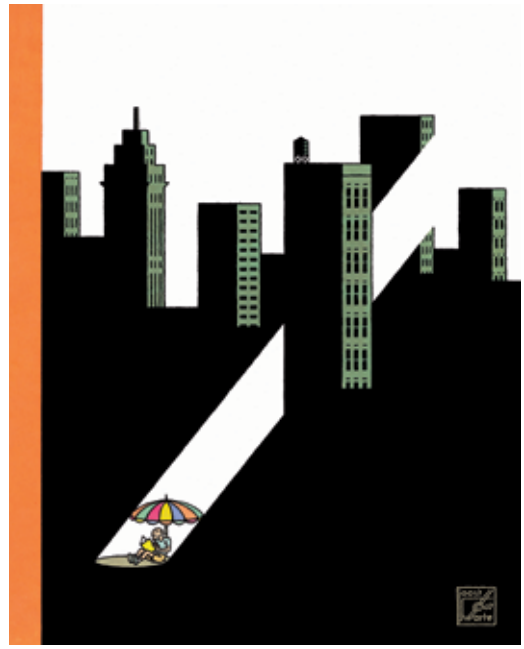
Expo 58 was fun and futuristic, from the cheerful cable cars that floated above the site, to the fragile architecture of steel and glass.

Vermeulen was just 12 at the time, but he was profoundly influenced by the spirit of '58. After studying graphic design at the Sint-Lucas Institute in Ghent, he moved to Brussels in the late 1960s and slowly picked up design commissions for record sleeves and posters.

His career began to take off in 1970 when his graphic art began to appear on the covers of the Flemish TV listings magazine *Humo*. At the time, this was one of the most popular magazines in Flanders, admired as much for its radical journalism as its TV coverage. By getting onto the cover, Ever Meulen's joyful images could be admired on coffee tables throughout Flanders.

Eventually, Vermeulen's drawings began to appear on the cover of *De Standaard's* weekly magazine, taking his art to a new audience. He also designed posters for the Beursschouwburg theatre in Brussels and the Brussels metro system, as well as creating artwork for records by the Belgian group Telex.

Covers for *The New Yorker*
Left © Ever Meulen
Right. © Joost Swarte



Ever Meulen's style owed a great deal to Hergé's clear line, but he also found inspiration in the whimsical cartoons of Saul Steinberg. Like the American cartoonist (whose mural *The Americans* appeared at Expo 58), Meulen liked to show people in modern environments where they were not entirely comfortable. But the Belgian was more than just a funny cartoonist. As Paul Gravett argues in his essay *In Search of the Atom Style*, he also found inspiration in contemporary artists such as Giorgio de Chirico, Magritte and Picasso.

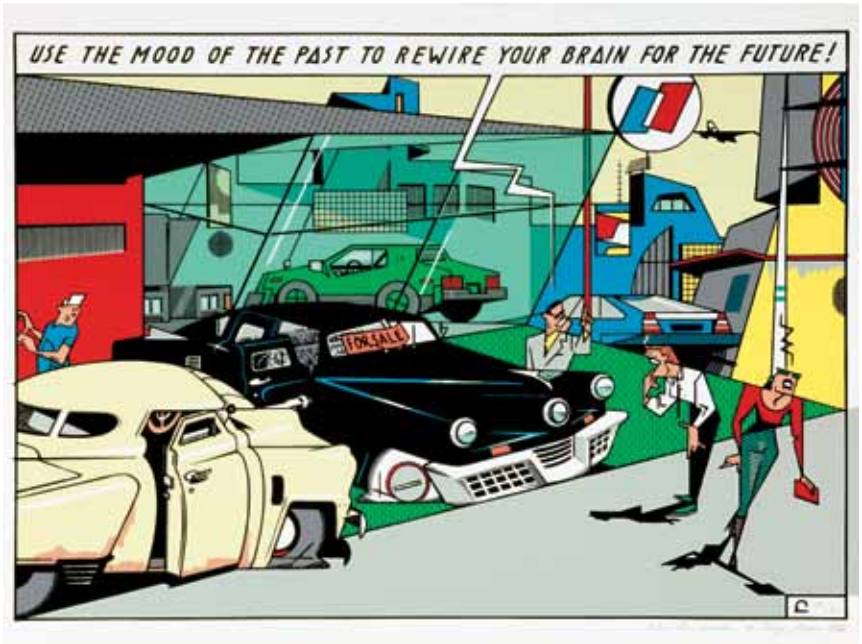
Ever Meulen's illustrations continue to capture the sheer optimism of the postwar world, his precise drawings representing a seductive 20th century utopia of shiny cars, glamorous women and neat apartment buildings.

He illustrated this modern world with an enormous sense of affection along with a certain cool humour. His art might in fact be defined as a comic response to Belgian Modernism. Look, he seems to say, the modern movement is smart and cool, but the people are vague and awkward.

His style found an enthusiastic audience in the United States after the illustrator Art Spiegelman invited him to contribute to his alternative comic magazine *RAW*. 'I wish I could live in Ever Meulen's garden,' Spiegelman wrote in the foreword to *Verve*, a compilation of Ever Meulen illustrations. 'Witty, cool and somehow sensual, these images offer a place that overflows with whimsyness, harmony and intelligence.'

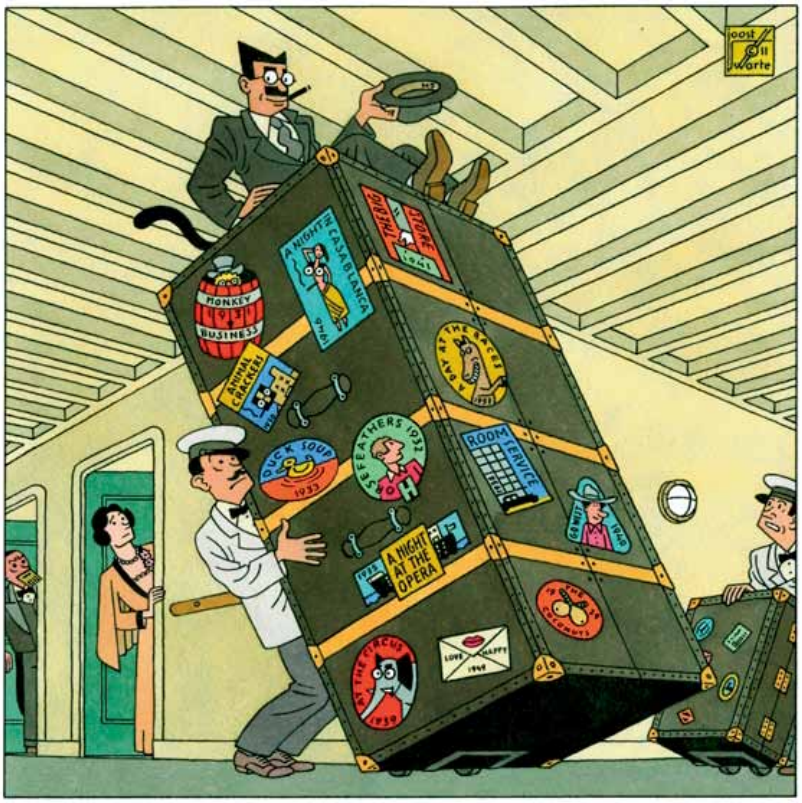
Meulen was later commissioned to design *New Yorker* covers by Spiegelman's wife, Françoise Mouly, art director at the magazine. 'His lines quietly call attention to themselves,' Mouly observed.

Now regarded as Belgium's greatest living illustrator, Meulen has exhibited in New York, Amsterdam, London, Helsinki, Angoulême, Tokio and Geneva.



Yet he lives a rather quiet life in a Brussels suburban house with his wife and four cats. Here he works in a bright studio filled with drawings, framed posters, books and drawing instruments. He also has several antique cabinets filled with shiny model cars. In an interview, he confessed to a fondness for the fast streamlined cars of the Fifties, like the Citröen DS, the Lancia Aurelia B20 and the Oldsmobile Rocket V-8. But his favourite, he said, was the 1950 Studebaker.

In the 1980s, the owner of the Brussels art shop Plaizier spotted Ever Meulen's work and brought out a series of postcards. In 2012 he created a series of stamps for the Belgian post office. Illustrating the theme 'visit Belgium', the stamps are gently mocking of famous Belgian motifs, like Magritte's pipe and



Groucho © Joost Swarte

rainy skies. The Atomium is placed in the middle, with the spheres redesigned with comic symbols like Tintin's quiff.

It might seem as if Ever Meulen's time is over. We are no longer obsessed with sleek jet planes or modernist skyscrapers. The world has grown old. But Ever Meulen remains the eternal optimist, the child who never grew up, still in love with fast cars and unattainable women.

The art of Swarte

'I try to combine the freedom of the underground movement with the craftsmanship of the old masters,' claimed Joost Swarte in his book *Bijna compleet.* His graphic finesse has earned him many admirers and countless awards, including most recently the Marten Toonder Prize, awarded to a comic artist who has made an exceptional contribution to graphic storytelling.

'There is no one in the Netherlands who hasn't seen a drawing by Joost Swarte,' the jury said. 'He has designed postage stamps, posters, watches, houses, stained glass windows and phone cards. He combines a very creative approach to content with a strongly traditional graphic style.'

Born in Heemstede in 1947, Swarte is just one year older than Ever Meulen. They both share a passion for streamlined cars, cool modern buildings and the lifestyle of the 1950s. They might almost be brothers.

After studying industrial design in Eindhoven, Swarte took up comic illustrations in the late 1960s. He launched his own comic magazine *Modern Papier* in 1971 and built up a young fan base with his stories involving Jopo de Pojo, a hopeless musician with an enormous quiff that looked like Tintin in a rock'n'roll phase.

During the big Hergé exhibition *Kuifje* in Rotterdam in 1976, Swarte coined the term *ligne claire* to describe Hergé's distinctive style. His own style drew inspiration from Hergé's technique, although Swarte eventually went in new directions that no other comic illustrator had ever attempted.

The Dutch comic artist first gained an international following in the 1980s when he exhibited at the Angoulême international comic show. His reputation grew further in 1984 when the French publisher Futuropolis brought out the first survey of his work. One year later, Swarte set up the publishing house Oog & Blik and began to publish his own books. In 1992, he founded the annual comic strip convention Stripdagen in his home town of Haarlem to promote comic art in the Netherlands.

Like many comic illustrators, he has provided covers for magazines like the Dutch *Vrij Nederland* and the Flemish *Humo*. He has also turned his hand (like Ever Meulen) to record covers, posters, cards and even postage stamps.

In the 1990s, Swarte developed a new audience in the United States after his cartoons began appearing in the alternative comic magazine *RAW*. Like Ever Meulen, he raised his Transatlantic profile further by providing cartoons and cover illustrations for *The New Yorker*.

Like Ever Meulen's, the world according to Swarte is a cool modern environment where the individual seems to have lost his way. Swarte once said that his favourite film was *Playtime*, the 1967 Jacques Tati classic in which Tati plays a helpless individual in a modern world that he is powerless to control.

At a certain moment, Swarte's career path began to veer off in a different direction from Ever Meulen (or any other comic artist, for that matter). In 1991, Swarte turned his hand to music in an unusual collaboration with the Dutch experimental singer Fay Lovsky. For her album *Jopo in Mono*, Lovsky composed a series of songs inspired by Swarte's Jopo de Pojo. Swarte designed the CD cover and inside illustrations, but he also helped to compose the track 'Appellation contrôlée' as well as providing the vocals for two other tracks.

Ever Meulen was obsessed with the mechanical world, but Swarte had a softer side. In many of his drawings, he betrayed a fondness for books and bookish people. In 2009, he created a striking cover for the summer issue of the Canadian magazine *The Walrus* in which a single car stands out in a traffic jam. The other cars are rendered in dark grey wash, but one car is bright yellow. The reason? Books, of course. They are strapped to the roof in a tall pile, and lined up on a bookshelf attached to a trailer.

Swarte returned to his love of books in a series of drawings for a publisher's calendar on the theme 'Reading can damage your health'. One drawing illustrated the health warning by showing a car driver so engrossed in a book that he doesn't notice a train approaching down the line.

The bookish people in Swarte's drawings are often solitary souls in a forbidding grey environment. For a 2007 *New Yorker* cover, he drew an isolated woman sitting in a Manhattan street with a book on her lap. It is a gloomy city, but the woman is illuminated by a single shaft of brilliant sunlight that passes between the skyscrapers.

© Ever Meulen

© Joost Swarte (detail)

Swarte is constantly experimenting with new ideas and overturning conventions. In the full-page comic strip *Incredible Upside Down!* he created a conventional strip which ended in the last frame with the instruction to turn it upside down. The reader is then immersed in an entirely different story that explains certain details that seemed puzzling on the first reading.

In 2012, Joost Swarte published a book titled *Is that all there is?* This brought together in 120 pages all his comic art from 1972 onwards. But the title was misleading. It was far from everything.

Is that all there is?

In Swarte's work, a fondness for modern architecture and transport permeates every frame. He lovingly recreates the progressive modernism that emerged in European avant-garde circles in the 1930s and returned on a mass scale in the postwar boom of the 1960s.

In 1996, Swarte made the leap from the page to reality when he was commissioned to draw a design for the Toneelschuur theatre building in Haarlem. In a single sketch, he created a complex building with bold colour accents and modernist details like ladder windows and thin concrete struts. The Delft architects Mecanoo carefully followed the drawing to create the final building, which in photographs looks very like a comic book illustration.

Such was its success that other architecture commissions came his way. In 2001, Swarte was asked to take charge of the interior design of the new Tintin Museum in Louvain-la-Neuve. For the next eight years, he planned out the different rooms where Hergé's comic art would be displayed.

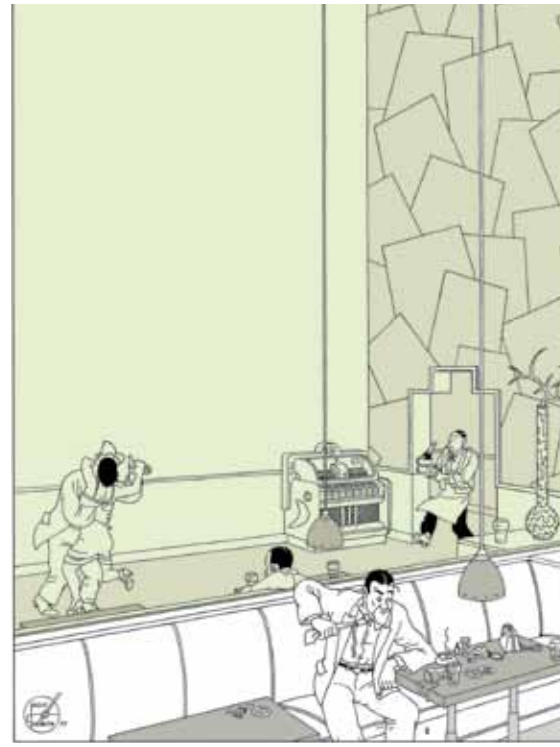
In 2010, Swarte added to his architecture portfolio by designing a low-cost housing project on Willemstraat in Amsterdam's Jordaan district. Here he created a witty modernist building with a bright yellow stairwell and bathrooms fitted with an odd jumble of exposed pipes.

Is that finally everything? Not quite. In 2010, Swarte was commissioned by the French publisher Glénat to design a series of stained glass windows for the old Sainte Cécile chapel in the heart of Grenoble, which was to serve as a library for the publisher. Here the bookish Swarte was in his element. He designed eight allegorical scenes representing 'the life of the book,' the first showing a book lying in a cot while the parents, both with books for heads, admire their offspring.

There is still more. Swarte has also designed furniture for children, including a brightly-coloured stool with two seats. Turn it one way, and it is the right size for a small child. Turn it the other way, and it is perfect for an older child.

But possibly his most pleasingly absurd design is a table with four enormous carrots as legs. Like Ever Meulen, Swarte is slowly transforming the world, one frame at a time. ■

© Joost Swarte



The Mirror © Joost Swarte