

LUC TUYMANS

AN INTERVIEW BY STEEL STILLMAN

Luc Tuymans is widely considered one of the most important painters of his generation. Born in 1958 in Mortsels, Belgium, he has lived and worked in nearby Antwerp for his entire career, a period of more than 30 years. Taken as a whole, Tuymans's oeuvre constitutes a personal reflection on the circumstances of what was once called Western civilization. He is an artist who starts in his own backyard, in the psychological residue of World War II, and gradually enlarges his view, moving from mass horror to domestic noir, from the entanglements of politics, religion, entertainment and war to the queasy uncertainties of today's virtual reality. European in tone—redolent not just of history but of enduring painterly grammars—Tuymans's work summons a precisely calculated mood that seduces visually as it intrigues intellectually. It is work that, in every sense of the word, concerns us.

Tuymans first garnered attention in Belgium and Germany in the late 1980s. Since then he has had dozens of solo exhibitions—and has been included in countless group shows—in galleries and museums worldwide, notably at the 2001 Venice Biennale, where his show "Mwana Kitoko" was installed in the Belgian pavilion. His current American retrospective, curated by Madeleine Grynsztejn and Helen Molesworth, is, surprisingly, his first. It was shown at the Wexner Center for the Arts last fall and opens at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art on Feb. 6, before traveling to Dallas, Chicago and Brussels.

I visited Tuymans in Antwerp last November. Known initially for easel-scale paintings, all made in the tiny studio that he occupied for 25 years, his work has since grown in size, and he now paints in a large, skylit space in the same working-class neighborhood. But the studio is just for painting, so our conversation took place late one afternoon, not far away, sitting opposite one another at a worktable in his comfortable townhouse, as darkness fell.

STEEL STILLMAN Since the mid-'80s you've organized your shows around thematic concepts and have maintained firm curatorial control. This time you've turned over the reins to a pair of art historians. How does their approach differ from what you've done in the past?

LUC TUYMANS Madeleine and Helen have decided to show the work in chronological order. That might seem an obvious choice, but it's never been done. They chose to reconstruct three entire exhibitions—"At Random" (1994), "Der Architekt" (1998) and "Mwana Kitoko" (2000)—plus a large part of the "Proper" exhibition (2005). These shows establish a thematic framework through which selections from other painting series can be viewed. The beauty of this more art historical approach is

that you can track the changes in my painting style, and also see the gap in the early '80s, when I stopped painting for three or four years to make films.

SS The earliest painting in the show, *Hands* (1978), is a portrait of a man with his face painted out.

LT My idea was to mask the image, to devour the visuality of the face. Years later, in 1997, I returned to this approach in the painting *The Architect*, in which the face of the skier, who happens to be Albert Speer, is again blocked out. I've only kept a few of my earliest paintings. Most were destroyed because they felt too existential—I was having trouble distancing myself enough from the imagery. After *Hands*, the show makes a jump to *Correspondence* (1985), which was the first painting I made after the filmmaking adventure. It was based on the true story of a writer who, living in a foreign city, sent daily postcards to his wife from the restaurant where he ate his meals. This is an important work because with it I began building the paintings from back to front, starting from the background and working toward the viewer using transparency, in this case provided by the bourgeois, patterned wallpaper.

SS What was the crisis that made you stop painting and sent you into film?

LT It was just the feeling that my painting wasn't going anywhere and that it had become too claustrophobic. I had to let loose or find another way to get at it. At first, I wasn't sure I would paint again because filming took all my time. But I continued making drawings and watercolors, and slowly went back to painting—in the end, out of necessity, because filmmaking costs became unbearable.

Luc Tuymans in his studio.
Photo Grant Delin. All photos this article
courtesy David Zwirner, New York, and
Zeno X Gallery, Antwerp.

CURRENTLY ON VIEW

"Luc Tuymans" at the San Francisco
Museum of Modern Art, Feb. 6-May 2.
"Against the Day," Dec. 26, 2009-
Apr. 25, 2010 Moderna Museet Malmö.



"I FIND IT ESSENTIAL TO DISTANCE MYSELF FROM WHATEVER SUBJECT MATTER I'M PORTRAYING. OTHERWISE IT IS JUST A PERSONAL STORY."

SS You've included a compilation reel of this work in the retrospective. What were you shooting?

LT I was working with an actor friend who had a camera and we started making a diary, shooting nearly every day. It was obsessive. We were shooting everything and anything, without narration or any other structure.

SS There's a seedbed quality to this imagery—as though prefiguring paintings that were yet to come. Have you ever referred back to the film material when making new works?

LT Not consciously. Until recently I hadn't seen this work since it was made, and had written it off as a juvenile mistake. T.J. Clark, in our public talk at the Wexner, was fascinated by what he thought were echoes of my early cinema, and you're right, there do seem to be hints of imagery that would one day be painted. Looking back now, that whole endeavor makes more sense.

SS One of your most important paintings from the mid-'80s is *Gas Chamber* (1986).

LT *Gas Chamber* was a representation of a drawing I'd made years before, standing in a shower room at Dachau. I made the drawing just to remember the space, not thinking that it would end up as a painting, but knowing that none of the people who'd gone through there had been able to tell their stories. The painting is basically a copy of that drawing, which had been lying around on my studio floor, and takes its background color from the yellowish paper of the original. This is one of my most conceptual works. Without the title you wouldn't know what the subject is, but remember, the space itself had been masked—what had seemed to be a shower was not a shower at all.

SS A lot of your work from the late '80s conjured psychological situations, with references to the war giving way to more figurative and domestic subjects.

LT That was most explicit in a series of works from 1990 that were based on German-made model train dioramas. I used the most real-looking human figurines and houses, and painted them from above, from a somewhat omnipotent perspective. About the same time I also made the painting *Body* (1990), which is an image of a doll's torso.

SS By embedding human references in period settings, you began to construct comprehensive yet abstract narratives, fictions of a sort, grounded in an atmosphere of historical authenticity.

LT Right. It was a bit more involved than just appropriating images and copying them. To find the perspective to create a show, I had to make choices about what seemed relevant. From my second show on, all my exhibitions have been made thematically. Each has been its own entity.

SS What kind of work did your parents do?

LT My father was a clerk at the port of Antwerp, and my mother was a housewife. Later in her life, my mother worked in nightclubs and discotheques, taking coats and doing cleaning.

SS I've heard that your parents were from families that were on opposite sides during WWII.

LT They are both dead now, but my father was Belgian and my mother was Dutch. My father came out of a nest that sided with Flemish nationalism. His own father had been a soldier in WWI, and his mother was quite a fanatic—she sided with the occupying forces in 1940 and forced her three sons to be educated within the new order. Of the three, my father, the oldest, was the least fanatic, and was sent to a farm in Poland. But one of his brothers—they were all in their early teens—was more extreme, and was sent to an Adolf Hitler school. At the end of the war, my father, seeing that everything had gone wrong, tried to save his two brothers, but only





Above, *Gaskamer* (Gas Chamber), 1986, oil on canvas, 24 by 32½ inches. The Over Holland Collection (in honor of Caryl Chessman).

Opposite, *Hands*, 1978, oil on canvas, 39¾ by 31½ inches. Collection Jan Wouters.

one would accompany him. They gave themselves up to resistance fighters and returned home through Switzerland, only to be turned away by their mother. The third brother, my uncle Luc, completely vanished. My mother's family was all in the resistance. They lived on the border between Belgium and Holland, and helped hide Jewish people on various farms. When I was five or six years old, there was a moment when all this history, which had remained hidden, suddenly came out. At a family gathering, a photograph showing my father's brother Luc doing the Hitler salute accidentally slipped out of an album, and everything

exploded. My parents' marriage was not a happy one—there was never enough money—but from then on, whenever a problem came up this history was inevitably thrown into the mix.

SS Wow! Here's a photograph that changes the psychodynamics of your family. I can't help but think about how important photographs and history have been in your work as points of departure.

LT This was why it became necessary to delve into that mystery, to penetrate the taboo. Eventually, as I grew older and learned more, the picture widened and gained historical weight.

SS In 1992 you made a series of paintings of people and bodies called "The Diagnostic View." How did it come about?

LT I was trying to find a way back into portraiture when a Swiss psychoanalyst sent me a medical textbook—at that time still in use—called *Der diagnostische Blick* (The Diagnostic View). The images were mind-boggling, but they enabled me to finally paint people

in the kind of detached, less psychological way that I'd been seeking in the late '70s. For the paintings, I avoided using the most horrible skin diseases. Instead, I took the more normal-looking imagery, shifting the eyes of the subjects away from the viewer, except in the case of one young boy.

SS Detachment seems central to your approach.

LT I find it essential to distance myself from whatever subject matter I'm portraying. Otherwise it is just a personal story. I'm after a broader context. Detachment comes up in the way the figurative is abstracted, in what needs to be done to give something another relevance or purpose, and I'm sure it is why I wasn't able to be an abstract painter—direct mark-making was always too emotive for me.

SS What followed "The Diagnostic View" series?

LT A show called "Superstition," 1994, my first at David Zwirner [New York], and one in which I was trying to create



Above, *Superstition*, 1994, oil on canvas, 18¼ by 16¼ inches. University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive.

Opposite, *The Rabbit*, 1994, oil on canvas, 23¼ by 28½ inches. Private collection.

a feeling of claustrophobia. The last painting I made for it, also titled *Superstition* (1994), was a key painting.

SS That's the one that many viewers associate with Kafka's *Metamorphosis*.

LT Like the doll painting from 1990, it depicts the outline of a body, but this time a more adult one. And rising out of the genitals you get this strange shape that might be an embryo or an insect, a totally black thing that covers up much of the body. Like the doll painting, this one has no head, just a pulsating shape that brings with it an element of ritual and danger and, therefore, superstition.

SS What was your art education like? Were you a loner?

LT I went to art schools in Brussels and Antwerp, and worked on my own, day

and night, staying a bit removed from the academic bullshit, making 3,000 drawings a year, constantly pushing myself. There was one teacher who was really important to me, a not-so-great sculptor but a great drawing pedagogue, who gave me a good push, saying you don't have to measure to make a good drawing, you just have to look.

SS How much were you aware of the international contemporary art scene in the '70s?

LT There was not a huge gallery scene in Belgium, but I knew the work of Nauman and Buren and others. It wasn't until the early '80s, when I saw big shows like "Westkunst" or "Von Hier Aus," both curated by Kasper König, that I really set foot in the gallery circuit and looked around.

SS It sounds like you were developing on your own, according to your own intuition, finding references where you could, both in art history and in contemporary art.

LT The antiquity of the medium of painting was hard to avoid. And the newer forms—Minimalism, Pop, Conceptual art, and then video and instal-

lation art—all became what I had to position myself against.

SS To return to the retrospective, the paintings in the exhibition "At Random," as the title intimates, were held together by contingency. What else was linking them?

LT My idea was to do a show about the imagery that is transmitted via televisions and computers and is encountered randomly every day. I began with *The Rabbit* (1994), which reminded me of Dürer's famous image, but here the rabbit, which came from a computer screen, glowed with a light from within. For another painting I used a police photograph of a murder scene, rendered in black light, in which the corpse lies like a flattened shape on the sofa between a television set and a table lamp. Other images are fragmentary, cut up, like the leg in *Surgery* (1994), and cropped nearly to abstraction. I was trying to push the triviality of the imagery to the brink. *Self-Portrait* (1994) is almost entirely detached, the image practically slipping off the edge of the painting.

SS The next touchstone in the retrospective is the show "Der Architekt," which revisited the kind of WWII subject matter you'd painted 10 years earlier.

LT But in a very specific way, because "Der Architekt" was my first show in Berlin. In 1997, I'd seen a documentary about Albert Speer, Hitler's architect, and a telegram the Russians had released only that year, which, incredibly enough, constituted the first written proof positively linking Speer to the Final Solution. Speer had sent the telegram to Himmler complaining that the inmates at the camps had too much space, and in the film you see a shot of the telegram dissolving to a shot of Speer skiing downhill and falling, then looking up at his wife, who was filming him. I used that image of Speer for the painting *The Architect* (1997). My idea for the show was to create an almost domestic atmosphere. The portrait of Speer was like a snapshot; the painting *KZ* (1998), of a concentration camp monument, is like a postcard; and the tree, *The Blue Oak* (1998), has a sort of toylike quality despite its strange shadow. And then you have the portrait *Himmler* (1998), based on a framed picture that had been photographed hanging on [SS general] Reinhard Heydrich's office wall, which I enlarged to replicate the size of the original.

SS *The Blue Oak* was painted from a Polaroid you'd shot of a small paper-

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board construction featuring a tree motif based on a Caspar David Friedrich painting. When did you begin painting from Polaroids in this way?

LT I’d begun doing that a few years earlier. There’s a painting in the show—from the series “Heimat,” (Homeland) on Flemish nationalism—called *The Flag* (1995), based on a watercolor I’d made of the Flemish lion symbol, a black silhouette with red claws on a yellow backdrop. I crumpled the watercolor and hung it from a nail on the wall and just by accident took a Polaroid of it. The washed-out color of the photograph gave the image the quality of a real flag. From then on I used Polaroids a lot to achieve that kind of diminished visibility.

SS Is this how you usually begin working on images?

LT The source images may go through many stages, over many months, before being painted. A clear, sharp photograph is never a point of departure for me. I have to degrade the

image, to make holes in it, “leap holes” you might say, because what stimulates me most in an image is inconsistency.

SS Are you anxious during the gestation period?

LT My first nervousness is about finding the right material, and getting it to be exactly what I’m looking for—only then will it trigger the painting. And then, because I map out a kind of dramaturgy for the show as a whole, my nervousness is not just about finding one image but about finding them all. Only then can I start to paint, making one painting at a time.

SS You are famous for producing your paintings in a single day. But not everyone knows how you do it.

LT I start in the early morning with a blank canvas nailed to the wall, having already established its approximate size. I begin by painting the lightest color—wet on wet—a tinted white that establishes a tonal zone for the entire image. Then I begin drawing, not by

projecting, but freehand, by looking back and forth at a small image—usually about the size of my hand or a little larger—approaching, in this way, the real size of the painting. And then I wipe the drawing away and begin the first brushstrokes. It is during this period—going from the slightest visibility to the highest contrast, until I get to the middle of the painting—that the process is sheer horror. As I told Peter Schjeldahl, I may not know what I’m doing, but I know how to do it. So it’s a weird, pleasurable experience when it starts to come together. It always feels like a miracle to have pulled it off again. But over the years, I’ve lost my innocence and learned a few tricks.

SS What led to the “Mwana Kitoko” exhibition in 2000, which was shown at David Zwirner and then in the Belgian pavilion at the Venice Biennale the following year?

LT I’d been planning this series for years. It related to a propaganda film called *Bwana Kitoko*, made by André Cauvin in 1955, which I remembered from my childhood. Cauvin’s Technicolor movie about the enigmatic young Belgian King Baudouin I going to visit his African colony combined in my mind with the gruesome history of Belgium’s colonial past, which Baudouin was himself to perpetuate by his role in the murder of Lumumba in 1961. My title, *Mwana Kitoko*, which means beautiful white boy in Swahili, is the expression that the Congolese themselves used to refer to Baudouin—an expression the Belgian establishment recast as *Bwana Kitoko* to mean beautiful white ruler.

SS What is the story behind the painting *Chalk* (2000)—one of the more powerful images from that series?

LT For that painting I staged a photograph



"I THINK VIOLENCE IS THE UNDERLYING STRUCTURE OF MOST POWERFUL CULTURES, BECAUSE SIZE AND POWER BREED CRUELTY."

of my wife's arms sheathed in long black gloves, holding a piece of chalk in either hand. The image came from an anecdote that cropped up while I was working on the series. A colonial policeman who'd had the job of disposing of the bodies of Lumumba and his cabinet in a bath of acid had torn out two of Lumumba's back teeth and kept them as souvenirs until right before he died, when he threw them into the North Sea. The idea of using chalk to stand in for the missing teeth came from another painting in the series, *The Mission* (2000), which is of the school where Lumumba and his enemy Mobutu had studied.

SS You've also addressed American themes. One particularly pointed series was "Proper," shown in 2005 at Zwirner, which took the contemporaneous Bush presidency as its focus. Why that title?

LT The word "proper" immediately implies the improper. I was disgusted with the Bush administration's policies but puzzled over how to address them. To go straight for the throat seemed too literal. So I began to think of Fred Astaire and ballroom dancing.

SS Because you had seen his movies as a kid?

LT Yes. Those movies were so indirect. Though made during the Depression and WWII, they were obviously not representations of real life. I began browsing on the Web, looking for images from that era, and discovered that ballroom dancing has become popular once again, and then, by chance, my wife [artist Carla Arocha] and I stumbled on a photograph of that year's Texas governor's ball. Having found that one image (*Ballroom Dancing*, 2005), I needed a counterpart. Within days, the Belgian minister of foreign affairs was quoted making a sexist remark about Condoleezza Rice, whom he had just met, saying that she was actually quite intelligent and not at all unpretty. So I said, That's it! Ballroom dancing and Condoleezza Rice—both seemed, in quite different ways, anomalous and mysterious. Like Colin Powell, Rice had adapted

to racism in order to succeed. She had learned to be composed, determined, proper. I then went back to a book that has always fascinated me, a book for housewives from 1954, where I found a photograph illustrating the perfect table setting. And for the painting *Demolition* (2005), I used a photograph of a 1995 building demolition in Chicago—yet another way of being indirect. It had nothing to do with 9/11, but resonated immediately in the context of the other images.

SS The final paintings in the retrospective come from two distinct but surprisingly related bodies of work, one about the Jesuits ("Les Revenants," 2007), and the other about Walt Disney's dreams ("Forever," 2008).

LT My wife was born in Caracas, and she and several of our friends were schooled in the Jesuit system. Indeed a great deal of Latin and South American education grew out of a network established by Ignatius of Loyola in the 17th century, when colonialism and the dissemination of knowledge were walking hand in hand. I didn't come from the right social layer, but in Belgium the power structure has deep roots in the

Jesuit system. And whatever one may think about them, they've been important for image-building in the West—just think of Rubens and the Baroque. Both the Jesuits and Walt Disney were involved with crazy utopian schemes based on taking fantasies and turning them into entertainment. But the consequence of instrumentalizing fantasy is that you delete its content, everything that makes it exciting. One day, as I was working on the Jesuit paintings, my assistant Tommy Simoons showed me some images that he'd found at the far end of Disney's Web site, images which the company has since deleted. They were photographs of the first day of Disneyland's opening, when a lot of things went wrong. In one, of the entrance of Alice into Wonderland—an image I later painted—there had been a gas leak. In another of the Light Parade—represented in the painting *Turtle* (2007)—the structure of a float collapsed. Disney's utopian ambition is best illustrated by one of the last paintings in the show, in which the cut-off figure of Walt Disney himself is standing with a pointer before a map of the site in Florida where he wanted



Left, *Chalk*, 2000, oil on canvas, 28½ by 24¼ inches. Private collection.

Opposite, *W*, 2008, oil on canvas, 74 by 47 inches. Private collection.

"Luc Tuymans" debuted at the Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, Ohio, Sept. 17, 2009-Jan. 3, 2010. The show appears at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Feb. 6-May 2, before traveling to the Dallas Museum of Art, June 6-Sept. 5; the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, Oct. 2, 2010-Jan. 9, 2011; and the Centre for Fine Arts, Brussels, Feb. 10-May 8, 2011.

STEEL STILLMAN is an artist and writer based in New York.



to build his ideal city, EPCOT. There, thousands of people could live and work in a clean, well-organized, crime-free world. The title of that painting, of course, is *W* (2008).

SS Fifteen years ago you said, “Violence is the only structure underlying my work.” Would you still say that’s true?

LT I think violence is the underlying structure of most powerful cultures, because size and power breed cruelty. Think of the Borgias and the Medici.

There are all kinds of violence, from physical to psychological, from active to passive. And all of it produces imagery.

SS What is your role as an artist in the face of such violence?

LT My work comes out of a reconstructive way of working. The images I use are altered in ways that give them poignancy and lead to other levels of perception. In that sense, my aim is to confront indifference. Indifference is a danger with an intelligence of its own.

SS When I think of your work as a whole, I think of the writer W.G. Sebald, whose detached, history-soaked voice seems similar in mood. I know you resist the idea of having a style, but you’ve nonetheless created a body of work that is identifiably yours.

LT Identifiability has more to do with handwriting. I’ve always been against developing a style, because a style lacks the immediacy and the authenticity of handwriting, which is something that is accidental, consistent, evolving, even becoming, in my case, something quite chaotic and illegible. The same thing happens with painting—you can never paint the way you used to. You might be able to fake it, but that would be a style.

SS Often with your work, we wouldn’t know what we were looking at unless we had the title. Are the titles as much constructions as the paintings themselves are?

LT A title like *The Secretary of State* is just what it is, but with *Bend Over* or *Gas Chamber* the title suggests other readings. Titles don’t just superimpose meaning—they also serve to mark the differences between language and the visual. Each in its own way is inadequate, leaving the viewer in a twilight zone, in the gap in between.

SS Knowing that your work is so reflexively sensitive to our ever-expanding image universe, I wonder what viewers 60 years from now will make of your portrait of Condoleezza Rice. Will it have any of the strangeness that your portrait of Himmler has for us? Do you think about your works’ relationship to time?

LT I do. I work in a medium that works with time, over time and through time. Painting is a slow medium—though in my case the production is fairly fast—and it requires slow perception. Painting is all about details—details that are the products of traces trying to hang on to what has been visualized. These traces betray their incapacity. There is something ultimately unknowable about them.

SS Your painting studio is empty now. The most recent series, “Against the Day” (2009), was completed last spring. What will the next group of paintings be?

LT The next series will be tightly knit and will deal with the role of the corporate in our lives, with its pervasiveness and its invisibility. The paintings will focus on the kind of light that shines in passageways and meeting rooms, reducing people and objects to bits of scenery—a light that hovers over us all. ○