

Exhibitions

The cool restraint of Luc Tuymans's paintings is accentuated by the grandiose setting of Palazzo Grassi, Venice

Luc Tuymans: La Pelle

Palazzo Grassi, Venice

24th March 2019–6th January 2020

by JAMES CAHILL

An eighteenth-century palace might seem an uncharacteristic setting for the work of Luc Tuymans. Whereas other artists have embraced the neoclassical charisma of Palazzo Grassi, Venice – Damien Hirst, for example, in his 2017 extravaganza of fake antiquities,¹ or Rudolf Stingel in an installation of Persian carpets (equally ersatz and expansive) in 2013 – Tuymans's work tilts towards understatement, even reticence, of a kind that appears to call for the clinical neutrality of the white cube. And yet the location of this vast exhibition – numbering some eighty paintings – lays bare the subtle, push-

pull relationship between Tuymans's art and the world around it.² His paintings can appear to float loose from context, spectres in search of hard-and-fast meanings; but the Palazzo's historic setting, coupled with the mercurial associations of Venice itself, lend weight to the idea that his images also point outwards and backwards, intimating aspects of human experience and history far beyond their stark and muted contents.

Visitors are faced, on the first flight of marble steps, by an early work that epitomises Tuymans's cool restraint. *Secrets* (1990; cat. p.53) is a portrait copied from a photograph of Albert Speer, Hitler's architect and designer, who died in 1981. Painted in shades of grey, it shows him with closed eyes. Given Speer's taste for the grandiose, it is not wholly

1. Installation view of *Luc Tuymans: La Pelle* at Palazzo Grassi, Venice, 2019. (Courtesy Studio Luc Tuymans).

incongruous that the portrait hangs beneath an eighteenth-century *trompe l'œil* mural by Michelangelo Morlaiter, showing high society milling behind a balustrade. The picture is one of many Tuymans has made about the Third Reich and its legacy, a subject with personal resonances: he is the son of a Dutch mother and Flemish father whose families respectively opposed and collaborated with the Nazis. A mosaic on the floor of the Palazzo's atrium shows a silhouetted line of pine trees (Fig.1); it is based on a painting by Tuymans from 1986, *Schwarzheide* (private collection), named after an unassuming German town and the forced labour camp that lay behind its trees.

Such images point to the way in which Tuymans's work is itself often an act of deflection or obscurity, withholding as much as it discloses. Although this might seem a pessimistic approach (dwelling on what painting fails to convey), his concern with what remains unsaid – or unsayable – has grown into a masterly sense of the implicit and the unresolved. Tuymans's canvases, each painted in the space of a day ('because my



attention span doesn't go further')³ assume the look of things seen for the first time, before knowledge or hindsight have poured meaning into them. In a sense, the entire show defies the hindsight – the ordering backward glance – of a retrospective, avoiding either a chronological progression or thematic arrangement in favour of a long sequence of stand-alone groupings ('conversations' according to Caroline Bourgeois, who curated the display in collaboration with Tuymans), many of them spanning different moments in the artist's career. Occasionally a gallery houses a distinct series, such as *Pigeons* (2018; p.57), three enlarged views of pigeons' eyes. Here, Tuymans's customarily greyish palette harbours warmer pinks and mauves, fugitive signs of life within the glassy corneas. More frequently, however, the connections between the works are tentative at best. In one gallery, a painting of a bouquet-like effusion of shimmering light, *Technicolor* (p.81; Fig.2), hangs opposite *Hut* (1998; p.78), an image of an origami model on a dark background. The juxtaposition feels as arbitrary as the paintings' contents. And yet, the pairing expresses a contrast between evanescent colour and crisp architectural form, which folds together in a third painting in the same room, *The book* (2007; p.78). Here, Tuymans has depicted the nave of a Baroque church, copied from the pages of a book on religious architecture and enlarged to the scale of an altarpiece from that period. The apse, rendered in blanched colours, breaks apart where the original picture disappeared into the centrefold.

There is a sense, here and throughout the exhibition, of the artist self-consciously distancing himself from his subject-matter. He has often remarked that his paintings are 'not his'. The very act of painting seems to be a means of holding the subject at arm's length; and this is compounded by his use of 'found' images, whether from newspapers, books or the work of other artists. Even where the source photographs are Tuymans's own, there remains an aspect of willed randomness and studied neutrality about his paintings; *My leg* (2011; p.61) is based on a snapshot of the edge of



2. *Technicolor*, by Luc Tuymans. 2012. Oil on canvas, 199 by 150.1 cm. (Private collection; courtesy David Zwirner, New York and London, and Studio Luc Tuymans).

his trouser leg taken by his partner, which looks like something captured by accident on a smartphone.

This dual quality of indiscriminacy and aloofness – whereby Nazi chiefs, pigeons' eyes and trouser legs are subject to the same deadpan, dappled mode of conveyance – is characteristic of several painters of Tuymans's generation of 'painters after photography', most notably Gerhard Richter. Tuymans's minimalism of form and reticence of

mood can seem, at times, too austere and lifeless. *A Flemish intellectual* (2005; p.64) shows a bearded sage resembling Sigmund Freud (in fact, it is the writer Ernest Claes) pasteurised into a scheme of whites and greys, the lenses of his glasses reduced to deadening blanks. And yet the neutrality of Tuymans's work is posed and as wryly disingenuous as, say, Christopher Isherwood's 'I am a camera' or the professed objectivity of *Neue Sachlichkeit*. Everything is the

Exhibitions

artist's choice, mediated through him, however random or inexplicable it appears. Indeed, part of the fascination of Tuymans's work is that his impressionistic visions and revisions (of whatever he has seemingly stumbled across) combine over the course of the exhibition into a kind of *roman-à-clef*.

Repeatedly, Tuymans's intention appears to have been to empty the image of its contextual grit, in a purgative process of emptying as a precursor to making meaning anew. This is clear from the diptych *Against the day I* and *II* (both 2008; pp.90 and 91), two similar views of a man surrounded by high walls, apparently digging in a morass of grey earth. In one painting, his face is an ochre blank and he wears a hat. In the other, there's a vague suggestion of his eyes (two watery grey flecks) and the hat has disappeared to reveal a bald head. The accompanying note explains that the paintings show a man digging at the back of Tuymans's garden, in slightly different poses. But without the benefit of this cursory information (and even, for that matter, with it), the images appear evacuated of meaning in such a way as to invite an influx of associations. Standing before the twin canvases, it is possible to think of the gravediggers of *Hamlet*, the mythic oarsman of the underworld, or the philosophical axiom that (as John Locke wrote) 'Socrates waking and sleeping is not the same person' – the notion that a man inhabits a different consciousness from one moment to the next.⁴ 'What he is looking at', Tuymans is quoted as saying in the catalogue, 'I haven't the least notion' (p.34).

A walk through the exhibition makes it increasingly clear that there are two essential ways of looking at Tuymans's work. Without the background information contained in the printed guide, his paintings are open texts – ethereal semblances that only occasionally yield clues about their origins. Elucidated by these details, they are closer to records of specific places, people or things. Something similar can be said of all figurative painting, and yet Tuymans in particular, with his oblique titles and impassive style, seems to hold out these two forms of interpretation



as parallel possibilities. Usually, something is gained and lost in the same moment by turning to the guide for explanation. Moreover, at times his paintings actively encourage misreadings. Their muffled and muted execution – there is barely a hard edge anywhere in his oeuvre – seem almost to pre-empt a misinterpretation (a creative 'misprision') of what they

show. In *Frozen* (2003; p.136), what might be a box of tissues is in fact the Chernobyl power plant belching radioactive smoke. *Cook* (p.96; Fig.3) appears to present a diabolical wielder of torture instruments, dressed in surgical garments and standing over a prostrate body while pink fumes rise in the air around him. The 'actual' subject, intimated by the title, is a chef

3. Cook, by Luc Tuymans. 2013. Oil on canvas, 229.5 by 169.3 cm. (Courtesy Studio Luc Tuymans).

skinning an animal. Elsewhere, the surface of a silver mine in Niger looks like a piece of brocaded fabric.

Such ambivalence of mood and content is the fundamental character of almost all Tuymans's work. The exhibition's title references *The Skin* (1949), a novel by the Italian writer Curzio Malaparte. Set in Naples after the liberation of that city in 1945, the story relates how the Neopolitans were dually conquered and liberated, and how they were at once co-conspirators and victims. Such a withholding of judgment finds its way into every aspect of Tuymans's work – his style, figuration, even his handling of light – whereby everything seems subject to imminent change, a shift in tenor or timbre. To this extent, the alienating effect of some of his pictures has a rationale within his larger project, however dissatisfying those pictures are individually. A painting that functions in many ways as an emblem of his art is *Instant* (2009; p.85), a potent reminder of how reality exists only in the present moment and how any backwards glance, any attempt to encapsulate it, will be partial or distortive. It shows a child taking a picture, with the camera flash creating a corona of white light at the centre of the rosy image, blanching the human character from view. The impulse to record is also an act of effacement.

1 Reviewed by the present author in this Magazine 159 (2017), pp.848–49.

2 Catalogue: *Luc Tuymans: La Pelle*. Edited by Caroline Bourgeois. 224 pp. incl. 120 col. ill. (Marsilio, Venice, 2019), €48. ISBN 978-88-317-7949-4.

3 Tuymans quoted in C. Ruiz: 'Luc Tuymans: "People are becoming more and more stupid, insanely stupid"', *The Art Newspaper*, 27 March 2019, available at <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/interview/luc-tuymans>, accessed 15th November 2019.

4 J. Locke: *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* II.1.11., London 1690.

North & South

Museum Catharijneconvent,
Utrecht

25th October 2019–
26th January 2020

by MATTHIAS WENIGER

In medieval Western Europe, art and culture were more universal than one would expect. Tradesmen, crusaders,

pilgrims and clerics covered thousands of kilometres. Masons travelled long distances between building sites, even crossing such obstacles as the Pyrenees and the North and Baltic Seas. Around 1400, the language of Western art was so uniform that it has been labelled 'International Gothic'. When in the fourteenth century the representation of Christ's birth changed radically from depicting the Christ Child in a manger to showing him lying naked on the floor, this was adopted within a few years throughout Western Europe, from Scandinavia to Spain. Two generations later, the new compositional formulas for the Passion of Christ and other subjects developed by Martin Schongauer spread with equal speed. The motor of this universal culture was

4. Detail of an altar frontal showing the head of St Olav, c.1300. Oil on pine. (Museet Erkebispegården, Trondheim; exh. Museum Catharijneconvent, Utrecht).

5. Detail of an altar frontal showing a head, 1325–50. Tempera on wood. (Museu Episcopal, Vic; exh. Museum Catharijneconvent, Utrecht).

the Catholic Church, which possibly never again achieved such uniformity of rites as in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

This ambitious exhibition sets out to prove this thesis with works from two of the outermost locations of medieval Europe: Catalonia and Norway. The comparison seems less exotic if one considers that transport by sea was faster and more reliable than travelling on land, and both Catalonia and Norway were major naval powers. In the fourteenth century Catalonia was the cultural heartland of one of the big European players, the crown of Aragón. It ruled over the Western Mediterranean, with important possessions in Italy and for a time even in Greece. At the same time, Norway

