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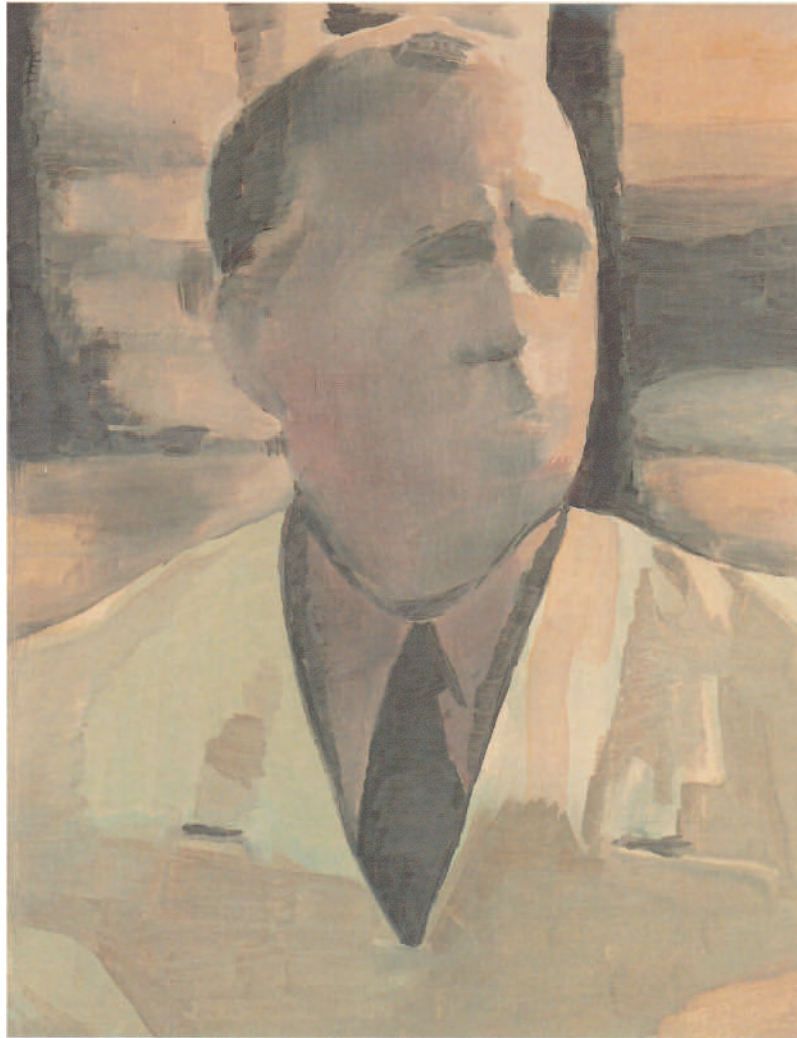
Fascinating Malaise

The Paintings of Luc Tuymans

Among collectors, it is the Americans and Germans especially who show a keen interest in paintings by Luc Tuymans (1958-), an artist from Antwerp who, as Adrian Searle once wrote, *'examines the malaise of European culture'*. The Americans are probably taken with what they see as a typically 'doomed' European atmosphere, whilst for the Germans the paintings express a contemporary variant of the *'Götterdämmerung'*. Searle, who in the spring of 1994 invited Tuymans to take part in his *Unbound* exhibition at the Hayward Gallery in London, saw the value of some of Tuymans' work, describing it as *'focusing on small, even insignificant details, as well as on the traumas of illness, alienation and the past horrors of Western civilisation. Tuymans presents the world as fractured and sick at heart. Even the paintings themselves, with their sickly, jaundiced surfaces and colour, and the almost reluctant application of paint, are suffused with a certain mordancy. The implacable and anguished paintings hover over the details of an empty room, a glimpse of the human face, bloodstains, and the torso of a child's discarded doll'*.

Searle's description applies to all Tuymans' work, with the exception of that produced during the last two years or so. They are on the whole small-scale paintings which are about pain, powerlessness, violence and sickness. Most of the images refer to the artist's own personal experience. The memories are sometimes stored up for a long period of time, but, possibly triggered by certain events, they surface at a specific moment, and are then given the form of sketches, water-colours or paintings on canvas.

However, there is more to the painting than just the so-called 'image' itself. To Luc Tuymans the narrative aspect is less important than the essential process which takes place during the actual painting: the image takes on a life of its own so that the memory contained in the painting is completely different to that in the artist's head. Tuymans once described this discrepancy as a memory-free zone: *'A rhetoric develops for the image as well as for what follows. The images can be interpreted in a certain way, also by the viewer. I want to reach a point where any diversion is minimalised. Anything that distracts is cut away, banned, in order to achieve absolute clarity. The result is a so-called naive image, sometimes referred to as narrative. But it contains a vast number of hidden meanings.'*



Luc Tuymans, *Portrait*.
1994. Canvas.
58 x 44 cm. Photo Zeno
x Gallery, Antwerp.

A key concept in Tuymans' work is that of 'movement': *'One of the things that has always interested me most is the fact that a static image, such as a painting by Caspar David Friedrich or by El Greco, has always given me the impression that its size or format is of no importance. And yet within this limitation of size or format (and this is something I have also experienced with Mondrian), one can discern movement within the static image. The fact that there is movement in something which is fixed, has always fascinated me.'*

**The calm before
the storm**

In recent years Tuymans' work has become more distant. Scarle's description of the paintings depicting the malaise of the age no longer really applies. One could regard some of his more recent works as a reaction to the electronic images of our time. In quite a few of his paintings we are increasingly aware of an element of electronic light, as opposed to natural daylight. More metallic, cool in feeling, and more distant.

Luc Tuymans, *The Fence*.
1998. Canvas, 219 x
129 cm. Photo Zeno x
Gallery, Antwerp.



The concept of 'distance' has been present in his work for some time, as is evident in his diagnostic view of a society that is sick or tormented. And yet his work is not always entirely without emotion, even though it is an emotion which is simplified and controlled, as revealed in a series of works dealing with the sexual abuse of power. This brings us to another important idea in his work: that of illegitimacy. Luc Tuymans never paints the predictable image, the answer to the long predicted end of art. His work exudes a controlled despair, producing an image that is at once atmospheric and uneasy, and a mood which sticks in your mind. Someone once described his work as terrible '*because it is all about violence without itself being violent*'.

And indeed there is never any violence as such depicted in his work, but rather the situation before or after the deed. There is a stillness about the work which some critics have described as the calm before the storm. There are times when the charm of a figurative representation is highly appealing, and yet behind the charm there lurks something that is perverse. This is also an indication of Tuymans' artistic interpretation of the world: just as there are no certainties anymore, so there is no longer any such thing as a complete image. What we are shown are excerpts, inserts and details of a larger whole which is difficult to capture. In this sense his work is closely linked to the medium of film: it is the illusion of manipulated units of time that gives life to film. By omitting units in the appropriate way, the impression

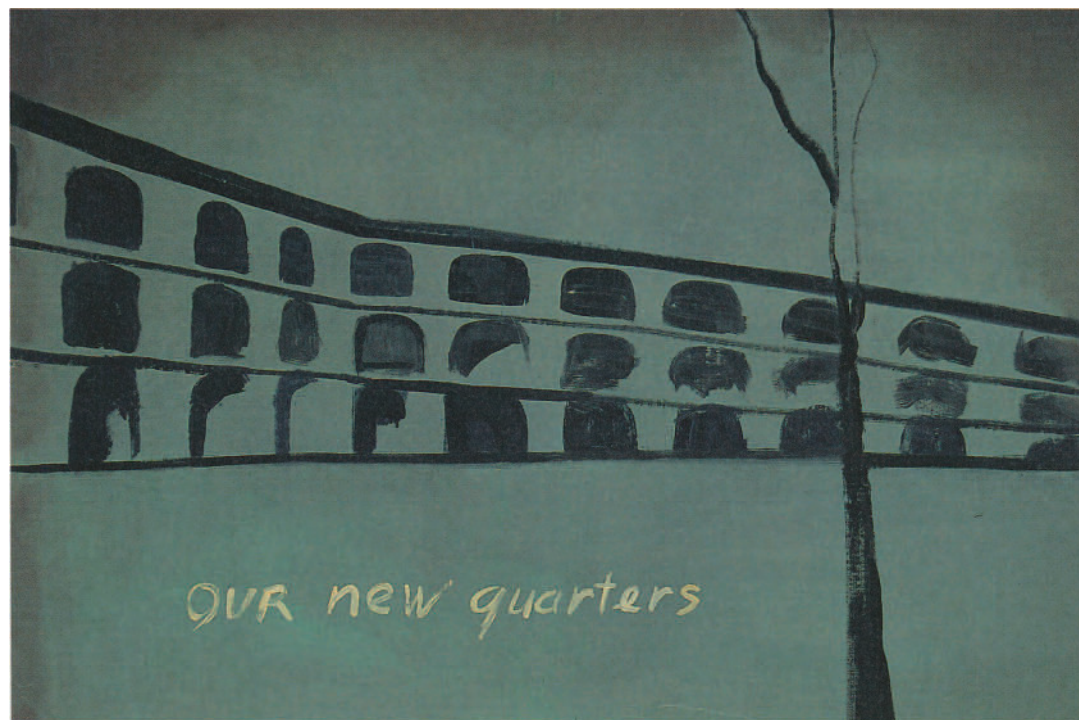
Luc Tuymans, *Our New
Quarters*. 1986. Canvas,
80 x 120 cm. Photo Zeno
x Gallery, Antwerp.

of a coherent movement is created. At the same time, however, Tuymans puts the medium into its proper perspective: *'Film is a fetish for the masses, whilst paintings are still purely individual and tactile. And yet, like film, painting is a long process involving a great deal of thought and work; it is as if it were premeditated. Both its creation and its observation require an enormous effort of concentration. For years now I have been painting things out just to be able to maintain that level of concentration.'*

Tuymans himself used to film sometimes: *'When you work with moving images, you find that the exact opposite occurs to when you are painting: you automatically look for an image that is static. People remember a film through its static images.'* His recent exhibition of stills revealed both the painter and the film-maker, touching on the whole issue of looking, of images formed by the memory, of isolated fragments and moments which, although losing their clarity, nevertheless remain fixed in the mind's eye. Tuymans' use of colour and application of paint are entirely suited to this sphere of alienation: his canvasses often appear to be drab and sombre, but at the same time he lends a certain brilliance to many of his colours by mixing them with a lot of white.

**A yearning for
that one image**

Although Luc Tuymans has a deep mistrust of man, he is at the same time aware of the fact that man is not the final reality, merely a part of it. The horror and violence of the Second World War are also important elements in trying to develop a real understanding of his work. One of Tuymans' best known works is *Our New Quarters* from 1986, which is based on the memory of a postcard from Theresienstadt which he saw in a book. Theresien-



stadt was not a proper concentration camp, but was used by the Nazis as a diversionary tactic to mislead organisations like the Red Cross. Prisoners were allowed to send cards to their families who had been left behind. On the card the prisoner describes his 'new quarters' (cynically, or desperately naive? We shall never know). Although Tuymans produced only six of these paintings dealing directly with the war, they are of great importance. It is not the anecdotes of war that matter, but rather the whole atmosphere, the feelings of guilt and the collective memory of the cruelty, all of which are to be found in most of his other works as well. Luc Tuymans has this to say about it: *'This irrational war was not only the illustration of an extreme and violent young man's dream, it also had unimaginable repercussions on a cultural level. After the war publicity and the media became extremely important, for the world had learned an important lesson from the whole propaganda concept of the Nazis. When did people respond to the war in ex-Yugoslavia? Only after they had been shown pictures which reminded them of the Nazi concentration camps. At moments like these, it is as if something inside me simply explodes; we seem to need these images as a point of reference, as a warning signal. We are fascinated by them.'* In his work Tuymans expresses the power of memories like these. Images of controlled despair which in one way or another seem intent on self-destruction. We continue to yearn for that one image, for the confrontation with our own memory, for an expression of that which smoulders deep within ourselves and which can be recognised in Tuymans' paintings. But each time the memory is thrown back in our faces like a wet rag: with the artist himself offering us no salvation or release in the form of a moral point of view to soothe our troubled spirits. Rather the reverse, for as far as Tuymans is concerned, artists are in fact no more than 'retarded children'. The image they create only has meaning when it is decelerated, which has the effect of adding to the discomfort of the viewer, whilst at the same time increasing his fascination.

MARC RUYTERS

Translated by Gregory Ball.

Luc Tuymans, *G.I. Joe*.
1996. Canvas, 68.5 x 62
cm. Photo Zeno x Gallery,
Antwerp.

