

Tobias Hentzer Dausgaard: Each painting of your recent show at the National Portrait Gallery in London was unframed, and many of the motifs in the exhibition appeared to dissolve into the surrounding whiteness of the canvas, walls, and gallery space. How do you work with these thresholds?

Luc Tuymans: That is true. Especially the most recent part of the paintings was almost completely blended out; an image that is over-lit and where the surface becomes partially the portrait itself. For example you have the blank, the white-ish background with (the cannibal) Issei Sagawa which is one of the most recent ones and also the largest painting in that space. The other ones: the lady and the woman are drawn from little postcards, images that were dealt out after a funeral service so it is sort of a remembrance of a person in an instant. Especially with the lady with the orange glasses – which is kind of a poster child of this little exhibition, it was important to nearly physically scrape away what was left of the face and just go for the eyes and the orange glasses which were the main points of interest.

THD: Have you dissolved this border between wall surface and painting completely before?

LT: With 4 or 5 paintings, I made them in a fixed location, reenacting paintings as wall-paintings. This different gesture directly links a painting to the space and changes the way I work as well. First of all I work with a group – I have people from a distance looking at what I am doing so I don't need to move back and forth all the time. And the image is projected – typically, it is either prepared in a watercolour or it is from a painting that exists. But it is put on a completely different scale, so there are different points of intimacy; intimacy between working in the studio and really in-situ: in the space that is there.

THD: Does the frame still have a role to play in your work?

LT: I don't frame my paintings, there are no frames unless the collectors add them. And mostly it is horrible. I usually state in a buyer's contract that the



Luc Tuymans, Gaskamer, 1986.

painting must be taken out of the frame whenever it is exhibited in a show. Because a frame strangles the imagery – it doesn't give it the opportunity to go into the space.

THD: Do you think about how a particular painting will appear in relation to others while working on it?

LT: Yes, this actually nearly goes on simultaneously; we put a show – my assistant and I – in Sketch-Up, once all the images are decided, and then we already start to think about the size even before they are painted sometimes. I don't work on several paintings at the same time – only one – but it takes a very long time to first of all develop what I am going to paint. When I have finally decided upon that I will try to gather all the information for one specific show. So while that is done, the sizes become clear in relation to the other paintings in a particular show: it is like a dramaturgy where every painting has to reverberate with the other images even as each one of them also has to be great on its own. The theatrical aspect might come from the five year long period where I stopped painting and started to work with film. I developed the idea of editing and cropping imagery and making juxtapositions within and with these images. Not so much for the narrative because with a painting, the narrative is very difficult: it can only be within the framework of the fixed image. I am convinced about the fact that since something is so immobilised it will also move in a different way. By freezing imagery, basically, you get a different element of tension within the frame.

THD: Many of the paintings in the exhibition feature sinister content, such as Ku Klux Klan member Joseph Milteer, or the Issei Sagawa. These paintings seemed to provoke potentially disturbing associations rather than possessing an intrinsic vulgarity or ugliness themselves. What is 'ugliness' in the context of painting?

LT: Ugliness in painting is very simple: it is something that goes over its contrasts. That's ugly. Something that becomes an illustration is ugly. I wouldn't use the word vulgarity because there has not been enough interference nor research towards the impact of vulgarity on intelligence. It might be the time now with Trump. Well, Trump is very ugly. This is also why I would never make a painting of him. Not only could I not do it, I also don't think it would bring anything good with it. All the images that have been painted of him are either not making any difference or are making it worse. But he is also a figure that is very much so interested in contrasts. The definition between beauty and ugliness is a very narrow line. In a sense, when things are blatantly too loud it becomes difficult.

THD: What is the political potential for artists in navigating this 'narrow line'? Can platforms like Documenta, Manifesta, and other large biennials and art institutions – or even painting in itself – function as a way for artists to become policy influencers?

LT: It is always a very dangerous game if you talk about cultural politics. On the other hand, as it stands now, in the times we live in, I think a certain type of activism is needed. There are two things I predicted: Brexit and Trump. The second step; if France will fall we will lose the entirety of Europe. So in that sense a certain type of activism – not only the values you stand for but also what we culturally represent – become immanent. So there are times in history where you just cannot do otherwise. And then the idea of making a show similar to Documenta in Brussels, that I worked with Peter Swinnen on, has become obsolete but nevertheless it remains possible.. What is more urgent is to get 50-60-70 people together to make a mission statement that is content driven. There should also be an element of activism in the sense that you have to resist, and you have to persevere. Of course, you have to avoid formulating an excuse; as an artist working on the creative platform, one just has to continue.

From the point I produced a show about colonialism at the Belgian Pavilion (54th Venice Biennale, 2011) I was labeled a political artist. Which I don't agree with – I mean I don't think that an artist is, let's say 'political' or that it is as simple as to go to a gallery and paint "politics equals art", or "art equals politics" on the wall. It is stupid. Complete propaganda. But of course, a specific work of art could get a political stance at a certain given moment in time which is also its relevance, recurring or not. One of the first examples of that would be El Tres de Mayo by Goya which is the first political work not produced for an audience; it had only been shown after his death. Instead, it was mostly an excuse he had formulated to favour the King, to save his neck, basically. This happens to be a masterpiece, which then, of course, influenced people like Manet and others.

THD: Do you believe the production of art can be a form of activism without also being moralising?

LT: It should be.

THD: By engaging directly with Europe's most traumatic memories, whether they be colonialism or those of the world wars, are you in effect working with politics without explicitly stating it?

LT: Probably, the most problematic thing I have ever painted – and will ever paint – is the painting I made of a gas chamber. Without a title it is just a cellar. I didn't paint the corpses, I just painted the empty space which was a stained space. And once you know the title (Gaskamer), it becomes a very conceptual work, but it is also a very problematic one: I did not have the memory of actually being there – and the people who were in the gas chambers didn't have a memory of their experience either as they did not survive it. The interesting part about the gas chamber is that it was disguised as a space where you took the shower which reinforces my sort of born in and sworn in feeling of distrust towards imagery.

This also counters the idea that art is political.

I mean, art is not life. Life is politics. One also makes a difference around time. As an artist, all the different movements – minimalism, postmodernism... do not determine anything. There is just painting and that is also very typical for the region I come from as it has been this region that has been very important to the idea of what is real and what is conceived. In that sense I just took the Second World War as a starting block. Since this was the point where Europe lost its entirety of its powers – its colonial power and suffering from the psychological breakdown caused by the Holocaust.

Art can reenact and can give the illusion that it is alive; it is quite a cynical approach. It is something that has to do with the index, the icon, the symbol. Those are the three symbols of an artwork. This is the language within the visual – when and how they interfere and communicate themselves. I don't say that they are universal. But they come close to a sense of universality – they can be recognised in those three stages. And this is where they become transmitted and can transmit any message.

THD: So not only on a conceptual level, but also unconsciously?

LT: Yes, true.



Francisco de Goya, El tres de mayo, 1814.

THD: Once you mentioned an art collector that very much disliked your art. But one night he started dreaming about your art, and couldn't escape. And he ended up becoming one of your biggest fans.

LT: Yes, very much. It proves my point. It is true that my work sets out to work on one's memory. To the point that it becomes so annoying that the person in question has to give in. ♥

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