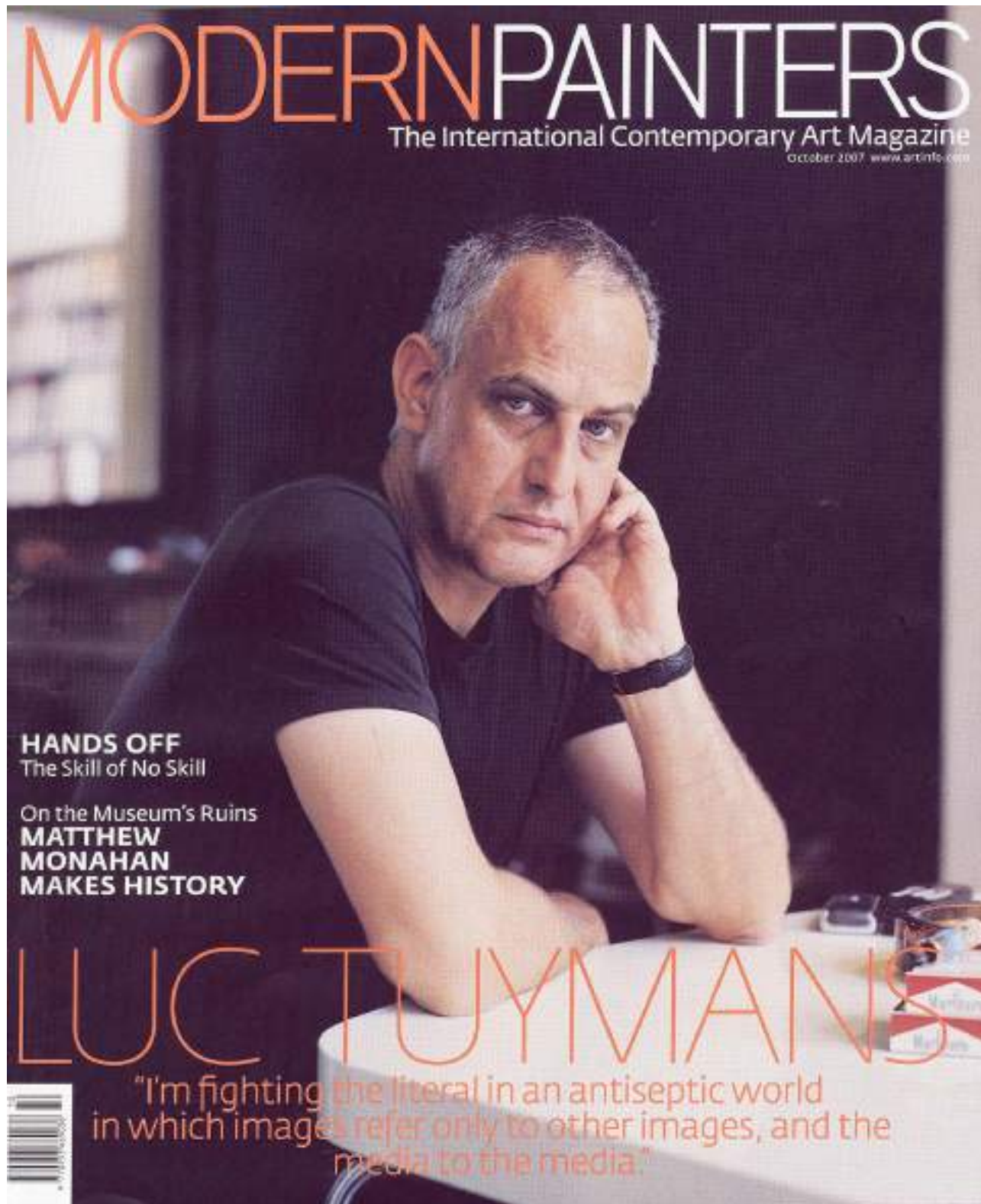


Van Pee, Yasmine, 'Unnatural resources, Luc Tuymans on fighting the literal and mistrusting images', Modern Painters, October, (2007), p.66-75.



UN- NATURAL RESOURCES

Luc Tuymans

on fighting the literal and mistrusting images

Interview by YASMINE VAN PEE Portraits by ALBRECHT FUCHS

Next spring Luc Tuymans is turning 50. In lieu of a midlife crisis, he is preparing for two major surveys of his work in 2008, at Haus der Kunst, Munich, and the Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, Ohio. Perhaps in anticipation of those shows, this past summer he organized a smaller, more personal exhibition in his hometown at the Museum of Contemporary Art Antwerp. "I Don't Get It" featured etchings, lithographs, source Polaroids, films, and even a designated smoking room where footage of his murals screened—but no paintings. *Modern Painters* asked his compatriot Yasmine Van Pee to talk with Tuymans in their native Flemish and translate into English his candid sentiments on politics, process, his curatorial projects, and his critics.





YASMINE VAN PEE: You've just made a substantial donation of your Polaroids to the Museum of Contemporary Art Antwerp (MCAA). Why did you choose to do that, and why now?

LUC TUYMANS: Well, because Polaroids are working materials for me. They can't really be sold, at least they aren't intended to be, so I thought it would be fitting that they be put in the care of an

institution. They were donated with an archival function in mind. The timing relates to my exhibition at MCAA, "I Don't Get It," but that is conceptualized more broadly than it would be if it were solely centered on the Polaroids. Its concept clusters around the ephemeral. As you know, no paintings are shown. Instead the show includes prints and multiples I made to raise funds for several nonprof-



its, and also more unique projects using print as medium—lithographs, a series of six color etchings called "The Temple" (1996). There's also a smoking room, which I created so that visitors can smoke inside the museum, rather like those designated rooms in airports. Inside that space there's documentary footage of several of the murals I made which have now been destroyed.

I tried to create chains of recurring images in the show, not so much concerning myself with the idea of being straightforwardly didactic, but rather giving viewers some kind of a way into the process of painting.

YVP: It struck me that "I Don't Get It" also seemed to allow for a certain literalness, I mean, being able to see for example the Polaroid you used to make *Duizet* (1998) and compare it to a print version of the work itself seems to run counter to the more oblique nature of most of your previous work.

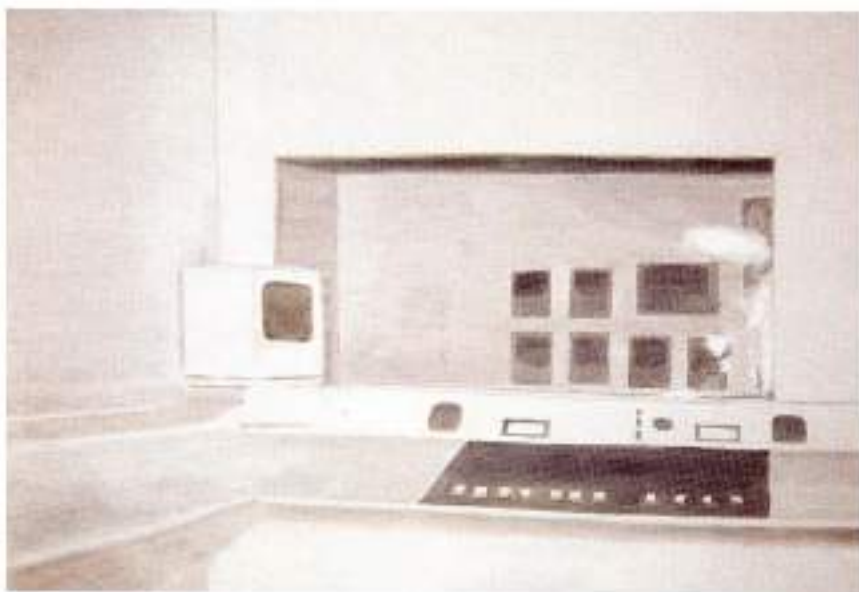
LT: *Duizet*'s the most literal example from the show. It's a monochrome, strongly abstracted, and plays more off the color nuances of the Polaroid, all the hues tending towards violet. There are of course other paintings that can be directly related to the Polaroids shown, because I use them as working materials. There's a work in the exhibition referencing that working process. First I built a scale model of which a Polaroid was taken, then others were taken of that image, and then I made the painting based on those later Polaroids.

The thing I find fascinating about Polaroids is that they are akin to the way I paint: I start off with the lightest color, then work up to higher contrasts, and in a way Polaroids do the same. A Polaroid is not really a photograph, you see, it's a liquid in which the image appears. One of the attractive things about them is that they are, in essence, tied to an extreme randomness: you never know exactly how one is going to develop, whereas with photography you retain at least some control. And it's precisely this inherent element of loss and possible failure that I value.

YVP: Presumably filmmaking also lends itself to "possible failure." Most people aren't familiar with your film work—I know I wasn't before I saw *Fa d'artificier* (1982). Could you talk more about that?

LT: Yes, its title, which means "firework," again

PREVIOUS ISSUE
 2007
ARTIST'S ROOM
 IN ANTWERP, AUGUST 2007
 PHOTO: A. BRUNDT
FACING PAGE
 DREAMSET FROM
 2007
 2007
STUDY FOR DREAMSET, 2007
 POLAROID, 135 X 114
 PHOTO: M. VAN DER
THIS PAGE
 STUDIO, 2002
 2002
THREE STUDIES FOR FLUIDE,
 2002
 POLAROID, EACH 118 X 141
 2002



refers to the ephemeral. It was shot on 16 mm film and documented a performance which was in itself the culmination of two or three years of working in Super 8. It was filmed in collaboration with a friend who's an actor. We created a sort of tableau vivant inside the Royal Galleries (a covered walkway bordered by a row of columns) of the Themsonpaleis, right on the beach in Ostend, which was a public performance—I think we even organized breakfast afterwards. The whole event lasted a little over half an hour and was timed to coincide with the sunrise. It was a collage of different elements: my own texts, fragments of writing by Joseph Conrad, Fernando Pessoa, Michel de Ghelderode, and others, but also film footage shot by my friend and me, which was projected on a screen in the background. Everything was condensed so that it had a theatrical feel. The performance was explicitly conceptualized to concretize, then disappear again. *Fes d'artifice* contains a lot of influences that I feel might provide a radical way of rethinking my work now.

YVP: Thinking of *Fes d'artifice* in relation to a shorter film you made more recently, one you shot of a developing Polaroid, might it be a medium with which you'd like to start working again?

LT: The developing Polaroid was more an idea I was attracted to on a pragmatic level, to underscore the way an image appears, so I don't really consider it a film piece. It's different. It's more like an object. Film is of course something that's still in my gut, and maybe that will concretize at some point in a project again, but not in the immediate future, because film and painting are hard to combine. Both are very intense, demanding activities.

YVP: What exactly do you mean by "hard to combine"?

LT: Well, they are more or less similar. Some might argue that they are diametrically opposed, since one is a moving image and the other is still, but that's about the only really significant difference. Painting is the process of manufacturing an image, of approaching it, and filming is that too. Both are unlike making a photograph, where you are in the moment. You have much more time when you're considering and approaching an image than you do with photography, which is why I often say I could never be a photographer. Because of all this, film-

making and painting's interference with one another becomes too strong, so I couldn't pursue both, with the two different types of attention they require, at the moment.

YVP: There are some obvious relationships between your work and film, but I'm interested in hearing more about the role certain concrete cinematographers have played in your thinking, and about the affinities between your work and films by Hans-Jürgen Syberberg and Peter Weiss.

LT: Syberberg was someone I encountered in 1978 first by reading the script of *Hitler: ein Film aus Deutschland* [1977], then seeing the film on three consecutive nights on television—a black-and-white one if I'm not mistaken. The fascinating thing about him is the way in which he, in a manner of speaking, dreams history. The way he approached the war, and in particular Nazism, was very risky for a German at the time. He was the first German to imagine what it could mean to step into the mind of Hitler, without just crudely picturing him. It may seem a bit dated now, but it's important be-

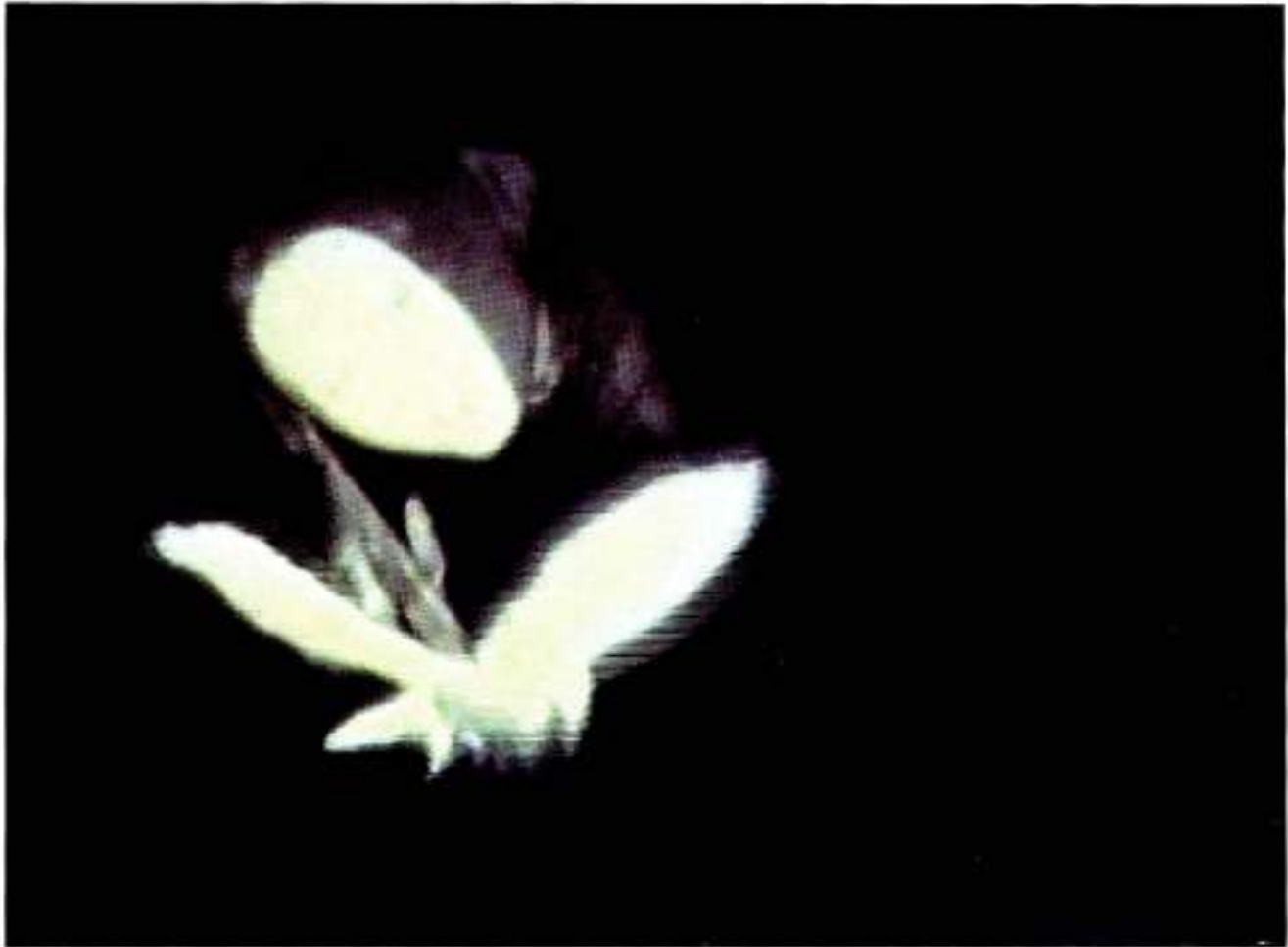
cause he starts to unravel the whole of German fascism from a cultural standpoint. A lot of what I was thinking about at the time ran parallel to what Syberberg was working through in his movies.

Weiss is an entirely different story. Those works are short films, and there the affinities lie more on the formal level of making images, the often awkward and impossible angles that are taken, and especially the way the image is often masked or cloaked, even though he's dealing with moving images. Also how he succeeds in marrying them with a type of immobility—which was already visible in his earlier prints and paintings, of course. You can really see a painter at work there, which is also the case with *Erzählend* [1977], by David Lynch, who I wasn't surprised to learn also started out as an artist before moving on to film.

YVP: Weiss often makes use of a type of Chinese box system in his works, putting narratives within narratives, which is presumably something you can relate to.

LT: Yes. It is a way to be able to work on the level of

Polaroids are akin to the way I paint. They aren't really photographs; they're liquid in which an image appears. It's precisely their inherent element of loss and possible failure that I value.



An image is never something that just falls out of the sky; its choice is always directed by existing elements, and those can take on several layers of meaning, distorting themselves in the process.

understatement, which I think is very important within the visual. It is something that, because of an oversaturation of images that already circulate within the media, and a media that now often largely deals with itself, is increasingly rare.

YVP: I wonder if the way Chris Marker approaches memory and history through his cinematography interests you. For example, are the images of mating cockroaches in your series "Exhibit" a direct reference to his *Sans soleil* (1982)?

LT: Yes, definitely. I think Marker was one of the most important cinematographers of his time; in fact he's still active today. And in a strange way there are links that can be made, albeit indirectly, with my work and the art films from the 1960s of which he was one of the main proponents. It saddened me to read of Michelangelo Antonioni's

death, as he was one of my favorite filmmakers because of his treatment of time and history, where narrative elements fold in on themselves, are turned upside down, and are contextualized through processes that work on an explicitly visual level.

Of course there were certain social motivations behind Marker's work that I find intriguing. Also the duration of his films and the endurance they required are fascinating to me. His work deals in large part with the question of how to remember things in and through film in a particular manner. Syberberg grapples with how to reimagine history in an ethical way and how to be able to dream it. On the other hand his treatment was felt at the time to be transgressive precisely because he used real documentary evidence to shape that reimagining. Marker got to the point where he displayed a certain

wariness towards existing images. This is true of the images I work with myself, and, in the best cases, hopefully leads the viewer to a questioning of and healthy distrust towards them.

YVP: It seems that in your own painterly practice the act of forgetting is a very important element. I'm thinking in particular of how you've talked about the "memory-free zone between conception and execution."

LT: Of course an image is never something that just falls out of the sky; its choice is always directed by existing elements. Those elements are moreover never simply what they are, by which I mean they can take on several layers of meaning and distort themselves in the process. Then you get, well, not really a problem, but you do become faced with the necessity of making choices. What's important in that process, and what I aim for, is doing so in a singular manner – to focus, which is where the act of painting becomes important. You shouldn't forget that painting is a very physical medium that always leaves traces of how something was painted. By the way, I started out as a very gestural, fairly impulsive painter using a dry color palette, which



FACING PAGE
J. J. VAN MARCKE (DREWORK)
THE
FILM STILL
A study for the painting 'Facing Page' by J. J. Van Marcke, 2000. Oil on canvas, 100 x 100 cm.

THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE
FROM TOP LEFT
STUDY FOR THE DWAC, 2000
OIL ON CANVAS, 100 x 100 CM
OIL ON CANVAS, 100 x 100 CM
OIL ON CANVAS, 100 x 100 CM
OIL ON CANVAS, 100 x 100 CM

CHALK 2000
OIL ON CANVAS, 100 x 100 CM
OIL ON CANVAS, 100 x 100 CM

THE DWAC 2000
OIL ON CANVAS, 100 x 100 CM
OIL ON CANVAS, 100 x 100 CM

BOOK 1990
 EUGEN LAMARUS, SUNSHINE IN
 BLUE TO COLOUR AND LIGHT
 PHOTOGRAPHY 1991-1992

EXHIBIT 2006
 OLIVIERO TOSCANI
 SQUARE PULLER
 COLORED CONTACT LENSES
 PHOTOGRAPHY 2007



I reduced precisely because of all those layers of meaning, and also to create sufficient distance from what I wanted to express with painting. Now I've de-emphasized the gestural brushstroke and tried not to cultivate a particular style. Of course after a good 800 paintings you accumulate something akin to a style, but that is not something you consciously aim for. It's more something you need to reduce to the level of habit. That habit is essential, however, essential in its integrity.

YVP: In that context, does the recurring critique of your work as having a certain style that is said to function somewhat akin to a "Photoshop filter"—in the sense that it can be applied to any subject, with the effect of equalizing all subjects—particularly bother you?

LT: It's a very literal critique that stems from ignorance. I'm someone who takes an extremely long time before even starting to paint. The choice of images, the content of those images, is of essential importance for me in terms of meaning. Which is probably the reason why it may seem I can paint just about anything with relative ease. Now, you can indeed paint anything, so this criticism is already a tad odd to start with. At the same time, exactly because you can make an image about anything, I am making a choice by painting the things I paint, and that choice is always determinant. It determines the way the picture shows itself, and even pragmatically the way it is concretely made. It's a type of critique that emerges from a consciously inflated discourse that juxtaposes new media with a very archaic understanding of painting. But that is not my discourse.

YVP: On the contrary, it often feels like paintings of yours that depict subjects that could be classified



as banal sometimes seem more horrific than the actual horrors you paint.

LT: What do you mean by "actual horrors"?

YVP: *Body* [1990], for instance. . . .

LT: *Body* is a doll I used to have as a child, which opens up with a zipper and could be stuffed to give the body volume. So that is not something I would classify as horrific. When I first started showing my work, many interpreted it as intimate, withdrawn, introverted, and poetic, none of which it was. Then there was a period when I was accused of nostalgia, which was not accurate either, because nostalgia in my eyes is actually truly a notion related to horror. After that came more perfidious readings, emphasizing negative elements—like the sinister, the surgical, the distanced—which again weren't explanations of the images.

The latest critique is that I take a moralizing stance towards images that have to do with power. I admit power is something that fascinates me—not to have power but to look at the apparatus behind it, how images could exert power, how they could have a certain impact—but that's not moralizing, rather it's an attempt to underscore a of meanings. It's never an accusatory, pointed finger.

The main, enduring criticism of my work is that I have by now already said too much about it. What started as an openness and willingness to accommodate a need for more information has been turned into a type of pedantic egocentrism on my part. That is the type of retrograde critique that springs from the inability of some to grant any importance to the work itself, which is of course an opinion they're more than entitled to. What is not their right, however, is to narrow all of that into a very personal critique that has nothing to do with my work anymore.

It's fair to demand a certain level of abstraction,

which appears to be very difficult when everything else is becoming increasingly literal; that much is clear. But then that's my personal fight in a world that is ever more antiseptic, and in which images only refer to other images, and the media to the media, and in which my pictures end up in this terrifying cycle.

YVP: Disregarding a type of criticism that refers everything back to you personally, it seems that some of your paintings nonetheless contain a very poignant moral critique. I'm thinking of *Mwana Kitoko* (*Beautiful White Man*) and the way it was installed with your other works [in an exhibition of the same title] in the Belgian pavilion at the 2001 Venice Biennale.

LT: "*Mwana Kitoko*" was not an exhibition that intended to point fingers. Because of a confluence of coincidences, it happened to be shown in the year of the Lumumba commission [appointed to investigate the direct involvement of the Belgian government in the murder in 1961 of Patrice Lumumba, the first democratically elected prime minister of Congo]. About a month after the Biennale closed, at a concluding ceremony which I was invited to attend, the commission announced that the Belgian government should issue an official apology, which they duly did. The Royal House did not.

For me the whole experience was a very elementary situation of touching on something, bringing it to people's attention, and visualizing it in a different way. That has of course already been done in documentaries; there's enough factual material dealing with this incident, but there were hardly any paintings about it. By transforming it through a painting into an anachronism, the subject became aestheticized in a way that drew criticism, from the French especially, that certain political content should not be directly expressed in paintings, which

ANTWERP, 2000
 OIL ON CANVAS, 55 1/2 x 80 1/2
 2000
 2000

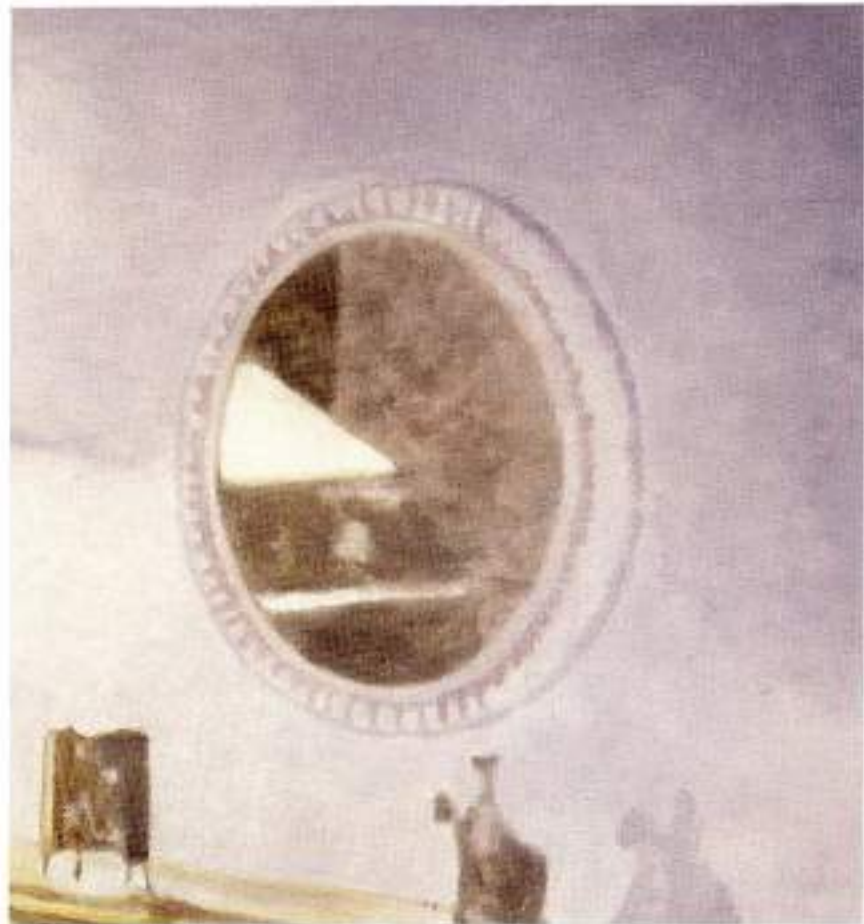
I thought was strange coming from a country that produced the likes of Manet and his *Exposition of Modernism* [1867–68]. So for the first time this pavilion for a country that's normally seen as puny and insignificant was able to generate political content. I still feel it's not possible to simply load any work of art with a particular political meaning; this was an important moment in which something was achieved through my work, but also because of events going on around it. I could just as well have presented a nice anthology of 20 years of painting or something like that, but on this occasion, location, context, and work fitted well through their mutual feedback.

YVP: I was interested in the way you used the idea of the documentary in your reinterpretation of history painting in that show. If I'm not mistaken, certain paintings at Venice, *Chalk* (2000), for instance, weren't based on historical images.

LT: *Chalk* functions as a point of memory for a story. It was a painting that grew from an anecdote I read: the year I was conceptualizing the exhibition was also the year a colonial police officer, who made the bodies of Lumumba and his cabinet ministers disappear by dissolving them in acid, had died. Before doing away with them—and I guess he had an intuition Lumumba would become a mythic figure—he pulled two teeth from Lumumba's jaws, which he claimed he threw into the North Sea just before he died. So that presented the idea—I had also painted the mission post where both Mobutu (who ruled the country, which he renamed Zaire, from 1965 to 1997) and Lumumba went to school together—of the failure of the whole acculturation process within that colonial system, which is why I decided on that title. I chose black gloves and the yellow background to emphasize the whiteness within.

YVP: To come back to the question of horror, for me *Chalk* is one of the most gruesome paintings you've made. I think that's because this immensely traumatic and horrific story can be attached to what at first sight seems an innocuous image.

LT: Yes, that's possible, but the important thing is that this isn't shown explicitly in its entirety. And when it's simply acknowledged, I think it's always more horrific. That's where the idea of nostalgia as pure horror comes in, and that sense of inadequate-



I've tried not to cultivate a particular style. Of course after a good 400 paintings you accumulate something like one, but you don't aim to do so. It's something you reduce to the level of habit. That habit is essential, however, essential in its integrity.

ness, and of missing reality. And it is possible that all those elements come together in something really banal, when, precisely because of its banality, meaning can be directly inverted.

I should add that I don't concern myself with the viewer's prior knowledge of events when I paint. That's something I'm essentially indifferent to. I work from my personal fascination with images, and I've never really believed that same fascination can exist in someone else, or at least not as intensely. Though I don't believe in some singular experience of these images, it is important for me to know exactly what I'm painting, what it is about. Without having that knowledge, it's impossible for me to start creating an image—I suppose that's my own limitation.

YVP: Presumably your fascination with the dual

roles of artist and viewer of other artists' work has colored much of your thinking as a curator. I'm especially interested in your ongoing role within the NICC (New International Cultural Center) and how that feeds back, or doesn't, into your painterly practice.

LT: The NICC was, and is, extremely important to me for a number of reasons. In its early stages, reacting to the closure of Antwerp's original ICC (Internationaal Cultureel Centrum), it was driven by enthusiasm and affirmative action, which led to the existing hierarchies between artists falling away and a type of solidarity forming on two fronts. On the one hand we had an urge to develop and achieve certain artistic goals. On the other there was also strong social activism, which led not only to the creation of a new contemporary arts venue



Although I made studio visits in China and got to know a number of Chinese artists, I wasn't there to prospect. I think it's idiotic to try to do so as a Westerner.

but also eventually to the special [tax and legal] status that currently exists for Belgian artists. The NICC's function has now been more or less transformed into a service-oriented one, but before its existence artists in my country were a lot more isolated; it played a vital part in breaking that isolation down.

Of course I'm not the only artist involved in curating. There are people like Joëlle Tuerlinckx, Michel François, Guillaume Bijl, Philip Aguirre, and others who have also taken on that double role within an experimental framework, not so much to show that curators are unnecessary, or that artists can do these things better, but rather to reactivate dialogue from within the visual field itself. An artist will, generally speaking, take a very different approach to curating. Artists work from another kind of modality, with a different vision: usually one that's a lot more oblique and rooted in the visual than that of curators, who tend to apply concepts in a more literal way. That's the reason why I first started curating.

The first big project I realized, which I experienced as a truly collaborative curatorial experience, one which I still feel is valuable, was an exhibition titled "Trouble Spot: Painting" (in 1999, at *MUSEA* and *NICC*). My colleague, the artist Narcisse Tordoir, and I assembled a fairly big show, including works by 75 artists, that dealt largely with the interrogation of painting as a medium. We tried to avoid the tired approach of just placing paintings next to each other, as has been done ad infinitum in the past, reducing painting to wallpaper. We wanted to generate a discourse by allowing painting to expand into a wider field, by, for instance, coupling it with installation works that in our eyes are also situated within an expanded notion of the painterly but differently concretized on a pragmatic level. Those types of juxtapositions turned out to be well received.

Over the past year I've been working on a project called "Forbidden Empire," which is in two distinct parts; the first was a more traditional exhibition in which classical art from the southern Low Countries was juxtaposed with old masters from China and hung chronologically, from the 15th century to the 20th. It was shown here at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels, then traveled to the Palace Museum in the Forbidden City in Beijing. I believe this was the first time that Chinese old masters and Western old masters—of course only from a specific region but still with enormous potential—were shown in relation to each other. That was a particularly fascinating starting point for me, because it created a chance to reactivate traditional art.

The second part, planned for 2008 and 2009, will be an exhibition that starts from a similar concept but with contemporary art. As with the first show, one of the interesting aspects of the project is that it's between an enormous country and a tiny one. I will choose 35 Belgian artists, and Ai Weiwei, and perhaps another contemporary Chinese artist, will select 35 artists from China. All the Belgian artists will travel to China, and all the Chinese artists will come here and we'll select the works and create the exhibition out of that dialogue. We'll also be collaborating with a range of critics, artists, and curators.

YVP: I know you've just come back from one of several recent trips to China, presumably in preparation for the show. Were you there mainly to do studio visits?

LT: No. Although I made some studio visits when I was in China, and I got to know a number of artists making strong work over there—Zhang Enli and Yang Zhezhong in particular—I wasn't there to

FACING PAGE:
LUC TUYMANS IN HIS STUDIO
IN ANTWERP, AUGUST 2007
PHOTO: ANNEKATRIEK

THIS PAGE:
THE ROOM, 2007
OIL ON CANVAS, 5010 53X1197
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http://www.luc-tuymans.com



prospect. I think it's idiotic to try and prospect by yourself there as a Westerner. They have to organize themselves for the show over there, as we will here.

YVP: In what sense do curatorial projects like this one provide you a different way of approaching painting?

LT: First because they allow me to work with objects I didn't produce myself, and second, in this particular case, because of the opportunity to work with old masters, which are stunning in their qualitative power and became so as we were able to accrue meaning across a time span of centuries. When you recontextualize that differently, it allows you to look at them in a totally new way. The contemporary stage of the project will of course add to that by developing discourse between living artists, but working from a similar dynamic as the first show in that we'll be foregrounding a similar type of questioning that comes from a very visually oriented premise. And that is of great importance for me personally, because I feel that contemporary art is, and always will be, primarily a process of visualization.

Luc Tuymans's work appears in "The Painting of Modern Life," at the Hayward Gallery, London, from October 4 to December 30. He will be the subject of a major survey at Haus der Kunst, Munich, opening February 29, 2008, and a retrospective at the Wiesner Center for the Arts, in Columbus, Ohio, opening September 20, 2008. For more information on Tuymans, turn to *Index*, p. 110.