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The dark art of seduction: Luc Tuymans in Venice

An important retrospective shows the artist in serious mood yet playing with paint, film and art history



'Allo!' (2012) by Luc Tuymans © Studio Luc Tuymans

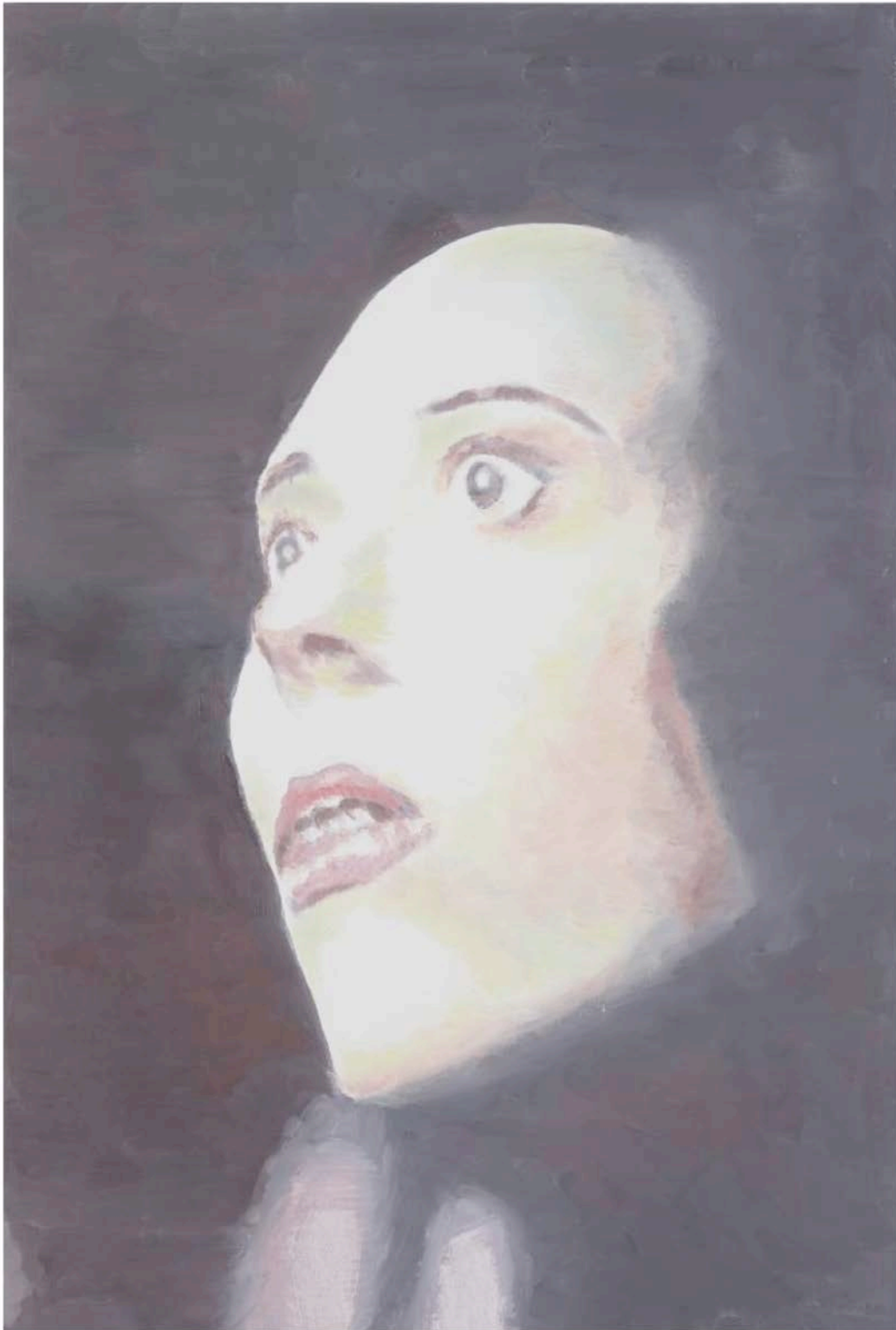
“I hate Venice,” says Luc Tuymans. “Decay, morbidity, memory: it is the most likeable city where you can be uncomfortable — in a comfortable way.”

The grumpy Belgian painter has just finished installing a stunning and unexpected retrospective that opens this weekend at Palazzo Grassi. Any artist would be thrilled to exhibit across this neoclassical courtyard interior and movie-star staircase, and from the first glance at two watery showpieces looking on to the glittery, serene Grand Canal, it is clear how Tuymans — magnificently and menacingly — both exploits and undermines the setting.

“Murky Water” (2015) is a dystopian triptych of acrid yellow-green reflections of street lamp and car in the algae-ridden, litter-strewn surfaces of a putrefying Dutch canal, a composition enlarged from a blurry Polaroid shot. The velvety indigo-violet-black seascape “The Shore” (2014) is more sinister: it features a distant line of blank figures, hands raised in surrender, delineated by wipeout — Tuymans smudged the dark ground and painted the gaps in white blots. They represent submarine crew members about to be shot — the source is a still from Don Chaffey’s 1968 adventure movie *A Twist of Sand* — but the tiny exposed huddle could be any vulnerable people. The painting is Goya-esque in its blackness and expression of terror.

Tuymans’ unease about Venice mirrors exactly the discomfort created by his paintings. Their themes of disintegration, death and the challenge of collective memory are deeply disturbing — the more so because Tuymans aestheticises trauma with supreme painterly seduction. “Wandeling” (1989), an idyllic snowscape with pine trees and figures like little crosses, is Tuymans’ imagining of Hitler and his entourage strolling outside Berchtesgaden, planning the “final solution”. In “Frozen” (2003), a bright halo glimmering around a gloved hand on what could be a treasure chest signals nuclear breakdown; the hand belongs to a worker cooling a Chernobyl reactor element.

“Strangely enough, people could come out of this show and say it’s beautiful,” Tuymans snarls. “I think that would be funny.”



'Twenty Seventeen' (2017) © Studio Luc Tuymans

Tuymans made his name in the 1980s with tight, drily executed and eerily cropped small paintings in bleached-out tones, based on and affecting the look of old photographs. There were images of hands and eyes archived by a Nazi doctor-experimenter in “Die Wiedergutmachung”; vegetable pellets, soldiers’ food during the second world war, juxtaposed with a portrait of Nazi Reinhard Heydrich, aka The Butcher of Prague, casual in sunglasses, in “Die Zeit”. The banality of evil, along with distrust of the image, are the twin poles of these works, with which Tuymans influentially reinvigorated late 20th-century figuration.

These unsettling, detached paintings still chill here, and the Venice show pays homage to the period with “Schwarzheide” (2019), a vast marble pavement of black trees against vertical stripes, spread over the entire atrium. It is designed after Tuymans’ 1986 painting of that name, inspired by a sketch by concentration camp survivor Alfred Kantor, torn into strips to be hidden, then reassembled. To enter the exhibition, every visitor treads on this image born of horror, which is also a ravishing mosaic, its grid formation elegantly echoing Palazzo Grassi’s soaring columns. Peering down from the staircase is “Secrets” (1990), Tuymans’s tiny, abbreviated portrait of Albert Speer with his eyes closed.

Tuymans says he thus sought to “turn monumentality inside out”, pretending to embrace “humility — behind which is the most gargantuan ambition”. Venice unfolds that ambition as it has not been shown before: whereas early works dominated previous museum surveys — Tate’s in 2004 and the most recent European retrospective in Brussels in 2011, with its emphasis on colonial themes — nearly half the works at Palazzo Grassi are from the past decade. Appropriately too, in the city of Titian and Veronese, this show celebrates Tuymans’ painterly, formal qualities, even bringing out a playfulness.

Presiding over the atrium from the first floor is 2007’s five-metre wide “Turtle”, a maze of lightbulbs treated as sloppy white stains that fuzzily outline the animal as represented in a Disney float. Tuymans casts the American dream as a series of fading, hard-to-decipher reflections — yet the painting has luminosity, wit, warmth, and brightens the entire *mise-en-scène*.



'Isabel' (2015) © Studio Luc Tuymans

Tuymans, at 61, is no longer painting's angry young man, and the subject of the Venice show is how, as a virtuoso of sensuous brushwork, tactile surfaces and a fascination with light, he has come to accommodate beauty within a conceptual practice rooted in political critique and pessimism about the future.

The exquisitely finished “Mother of Pearl” (2018), a close-up of casino chips photographed in Hong Kong, luxuriates in creamy shimmers and iridescent colours: a vanitas about global greed. Hanging alongside, the luscious “Orchid” (1998) zooms in on a bulging fragment of a plant, brutally cut like a laboratory sample, its raw green striking but repellent, artificial: a *fleurs du mal* specimen for the age of genetic mutation.

Such games with paint, art history and film could be pulled off only by an assured master. Three pale characters in hats, lit from below so that their dense shadows are cast on a wall, walk downstairs in the cinematic painting “The Return” (2018), riffing on David Lynch’s recent *Twin Peaks: The Return* and on Marcel Duchamp’s “Nude Descending a Staircase”. The over-lit shocked young face in profile in “Twenty Seventeen” (2017) blends allusions to Caravaggio’s starkness, chiaroscuro and intensity of the ordinary with a shot from a Brazilian TV series where characters gamble at a test promising either wealth or death by poisoning; Tuymans’ figure has just been told she will be killed.



The snowscape of 'Wandeling' (1989) © Studio Luc Tuymans

Powerlessness in the face of absolute power: such is Tuymans' life-long, ever topical theme, filtered through many sources. Tuymans calls his show *La Pelle* (the skin), the motif of several canvases of implied violence and power abuse: the exposed backside filling the picture plane in "Bend Over", the ragdoll torso with zips/cracks in "Body"; the lampshade made from human skin in "Les Recherches".

More obliquely but crucially, the subtitle explains the importance for Tuymans of "Le Mépris"

(2015): a massive fireplace containing a blank square, a window to nowhere. Tuymans' source is the fireplace at a modernist villa on Capri whose windows actually look out on to Mediterranean vistas built for Curzio Malaparte, author of *La Pelle*, the Neapolitan novel of the same title, which deals with postwar Italian desperation versus American naivety. The villa was also the setting for Jean-Luc Godard's 1963 film of betrayal *Le Mépris* (*Contempt*).

What to unpack here? This dark, claustrophobic painting is “about the feeling of contempt”, says Tuymans. It also layers European history, literature and film around an icon of Utopian modernism — Malevich's “White Square”. So Tuymans, fierce, complex and not entirely disillusioned, condenses worlds of thought into an image. This serious, enjoyable show will shine like a beacon for contemporary painting when the Biennale opens here in May.

Luc Tuymans: La Pelle, Palazzo Grassi, Venice, March 24-January 6, palazzograssi.it