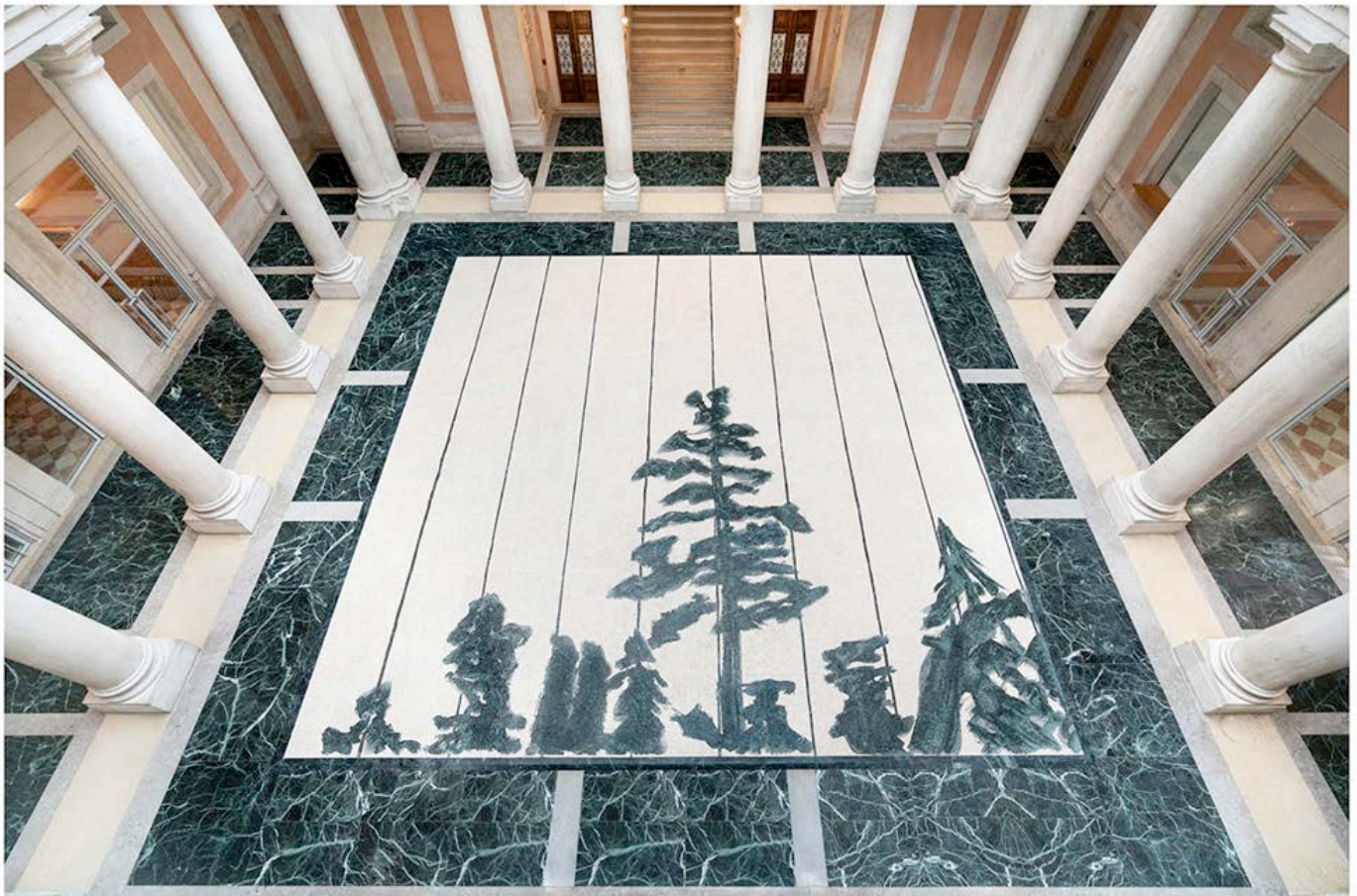


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Luc Tuymans, Master of Moral Complexities, Tries Something New



"Schwarzheide," a marble mosaic by Luc Tuymans, at the Palazzo Grassi in Venice. A major retrospective of the artist's work is running there through Jan. 6, 2020. Palazzo Grassi; Matteo De Fina

This month at the Palazzo Grassi, looking out over the Grand Canal in Venice, visitors will find a beautiful new floor in the atrium, made of thousands of Italian marble tiles.

Only once they're upstairs, looking down on the entire mosaic, will they see that it depicts a cluster of sparse pine trees. And when they read a wall label, they'll learn that the evergreens were planted along the border of a Nazi concentration camp, to hide it from public view.

The mosaic is the centerpiece of [a major retrospective of the Belgian contemporary artist Luc Tuymans](#), opening at the Palazzo Grassi on March 24 and running through Jan. 6, 2020. It is based on Mr. Tuymans's 1986 painting "Schwarzheide," named for a forced-labor camp in Germany where many inmates were worked to death.



Mr. Tuymans in his studio in Antwerp, Belgium, in January. Good painting is multilayered, Mr. Tuymans said: "If it's not, you're either making propaganda or you're making an illustration." Mashid Mohadjerin for The New York Times

Mr. Tuymans is credited with bringing painting back in the 1980s, by pioneering a style of figurative painting based on found images. His palette is almost always muted shades of gray, and his forms are blurry and washed-out, suggesting memories of things faded from view.

The mosaic may be a departure from his usual medium, but it is also emblematic of his trademark sleight of hand: Mr. Tuymans gives us an image that may make us feel one way, but when we find out what it is — through a title, a wall text, or, in this case, a new perspective — its meaning changes, often in an unsettling way.

His work has often reflected on history, in particular World War II and Belgian colonialism, but often concerns current affairs, such as the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and the war in Iraq. One of his most famous works is a 2005 portrait of the former secretary of state Condoleezza Rice; another is his 1986 “Gas Chamber,” a blanded-out image of an empty space at Dachau.



“Schwarzheide,” Mr. Tuymans’ painting from 1986 on which the Palazzo Grassi mosaic is based. Studio Luc Tuymans, Antwerp

At his Antwerp studio in late January, just before his works were to be picked up for shipment to Venice, Mr. Tuymans smoked cigarette after cigarette and tried to figure out whether the Palazzo Grassi show, with more than 80 paintings plus the mosaic, is his largest to date, out of some 150 solo shows in the last 30 years. Two thirds of the works on display will be recent, from 2016 to 2018, he said.

“I made it a point not to show the most topical works,” he said. “This is much more about understatement.” (Some of those the more overtly political works will be shown as part of [a retrospective of about 50 paintings](#) at the De Pont museum in Tilburg, the Netherlands, running from June 29 though Nov. 17.)

Bart de Baere, the director of M HKA, the leading contemporary art museum in Antwerp, said Mr. Tuymans doesn't invent images, but rather repurposes them, and his source material is often drawn from magazines, film stills, Polaroids, internet images and his own iPhone photos. “His primary artistic action is in the choosing of an image,” he said. “Part of that is the awareness of the fact that the image is part of a context and that any choice is partial. No choice is neutral.”



“Le Mépris” depicts a still from the Jean-Luc Godard film, known as “Contempt” in English. Studio Luc Tuymans, Antwerp

The exhibition in Venice is titled “La Pelle” (“The Skin”), a reference to the Italian writer Curzio Malaparte’s 1949 novel, which is set in Naples just after the liberation of that city by the Allied forces at the end of World War II. The novel reflects on how residents of the city have been simultaneously conquered and liberated; they were both co-conspirators and victims of the war.

“A lot of Tuymans’s works are about the human paradox of being ‘good’ and ‘evil’ at the same time,” the exhibition’s curator, Caroline Bourgeois, said in an email exchange. She cited as examples Mr. Tuymans’s portraits of the Japanese murderer and cannibal Issei Sagawa, or a smiling Ku Klux Klan leader, Joseph Milteer, painted from photos in faded colors and innocuous poses.

Mr. Tuymans’s fascination with moral complexities may derive from his upbringing. He’s the child of a Dutch mother and Belgian father with conflicting World War II loyalties. His mother’s family worked in the Resistance while his Flemish family were Nazi collaborators. The uncle after whom he was named was in the Hitler Youth — a fact he learned from an old photo.



Mashid Mohadjerin for The New York Times

“It was known and not known,” Mr. Tuymans said. It came up, sometimes, during family arguments, but, “It was referred to as being wrong or being right, and there was a whole moral fence connected to it.”

Mr. Tuymans said that only one painting in the show, “Le Mépris,” is actually a direct reference to the Malaparte book. That work is based on a still from Jean-Luc Godard’s film of the same name, known in English as “Contempt”, starring Michel Piccoli and Brigitte Bardot. The film used Malaparte’s cliff house on Capri, Italy, as the setting for the unraveling of a marriage.

“Good painting is diverse in the sense that it’s multilayered,” Mr. Tuymans said of the work, a painterly representation of an image from a movie, based on a novel. “If it’s not, you’re either making propaganda or you’re making an illustration.”

The Palazzo Grassi mosaic, too, has many layers to it. A reworking of Mr. Tuymans's painting, which he said was in turn based on charcoal drawings made by slave laborers from the Schwarzheide work camp. Fearful of being discovered by guards, according to Mr. Tuymans, they [ripped the images into long strips](#) and hid them, and survivors pieced them together again.

“He has put his finger on problems of our time, by referring to past events or to current ones without depicting them, but rather evoking historical issues,” said the De Pont Museum's director, Hendrik Driessen, who curated the upcoming exhibition there. “They freeze a moment in time in such a way that they evoke a lot more than just that single moment he's chosen.”

Mr. Tuymans has chosen many such reverberative moments in the survey that he co-curated with Ms. Bourgeois. He said they chose then to hang, “in juxtapositions, in a way that creates a kind of tension.” With works on show spanning nearly 40 years, Mr. Tuymans said he hopes the exhibition will give visitors a sense of his overall oeuvre: “The idea of finalizing things, but leaving them open-ended still.”

La Pelle

March 24 through Jan. 6, 2020 at the Palazzo Grassi in Venice, Italy; palazzograssi.it.