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ARTIST'S QUESTIONNAIRE

As Far as Luc Tuymans Is Concerned, Nothing Is Original

In advance of a new exhibition, the acclaimed Belgian artist discusses his process and how the pandemic has shifted his perspective.

By Jameson Fitzpatrick

Oct. 20, 2020

The celebrated Belgian painter Luc Tuymans is best known for his uncanny renderings of existing images. Often working from photographs or film, Tuymans does not paint straight reproductions, but disquieting versions of characters and scenes from cultural memory — at once familiar and made strange by his signature muted tones. His work “The Secretary of State” (2005), which is in the Museum of Modern Art’s permanent collection, is a desaturated and tightly cropped close-up of Condoleezza Rice, squinting as though she has been caught with the sun in her eyes or in a moment of deliberation. Many of Tuymans’s notable early paintings concern the Holocaust, including “Gas Chamber” (1986), which he adapted from a watercolor he painted on-site at Dachau, and “Schwarzheide” (1986), based on a background detail of pine trees from a 1945 drawing of the titular concentration camp by survivor Alfred Kantor. Alongside the horrors of war and imperialism, everyday objects and popular iconography have recurred in Tuymans’s paintings throughout his career.



The artist's broken-down but beloved armchair, which he moved from the live-work studio he left in 2005. On the wall behind it is his painting “Projector” (2019). Mieke Verbijlen



Tuymans brings three or four sandwiches to the studio every morning when he's working and keeps plenty of water on hand so he doesn't have to interrupt his process. Mieke Verbijlen

“I work from a reaction upon images that are already represented,” he told me over the phone in May, “because I believe nothing is really original. But then I have to make my take on it — and figuration in that sense becomes rather abstract, because everybody can have different connotations.” Indeed, though he is one of the artists often credited with bringing figurative painting back into fashion in the 1990s, the decade during which he rose to international prominence, Tuymans is less interested in representation than in evocation, or how his images are activated by both individual experience and the collective unconscious.

Tuymans, 62, took my call at his Antwerp home, where he and his wife, the artist Carla Arocha, had been sheltering in place since mid-March. An exhibition of his new work at David Zwirner Hong Kong had been postponed twice — first because of the protests there and then again because of the pandemic — and is currently scheduled to open next week. Tuymans believed the content of the show (which, in a nod to the protesters, he titled “Good Luck”) would still be relevant, though he said he was wary of “ambulance chasing and trying to be topical.” A thematic through line of the 16 works to go on view is trade between East and West — not only of goods, but also of art and culture. This idea is perhaps most explicit in the first work he completed for the show, a triptych of large canvases that riff on the color and illustration style of Delft porcelain. “In the 17th century, the Dutch were the first Europeans who had the opportunity to work with the Japanese and also with China,” he explained. “Under the Ming dynasty, they had a big supply line for Chinese porcelain — there was a specific blue that they were after. When the emperor died, this line dried up. In the meantime, there was an Italian in Antwerp who tried to develop the same procedure to make the porcelain — and the blue — much cheaper. And the Dutch stole that and re-exported it back to China.” The painting on the left side of the triptych, which features a man in 17th-century dress peering at what his telltale posture suggests might be a smartphone, connects this history to the present-day reality of Chinese manufacturing's global reach.



This triptych, reminiscent of Delft porcelain, was the first work Tuymans completed for the Hong Kong exhibition. The paintings pictured, from left to right, are “Delft I” (2019), “Delft II” (2019) and “Delft III” (2019). Mieke Verbijlen

In addition to 15 paintings, the exhibition will also include a silent animated film of an owl that seems to descend upon the viewer, darkening into vividly shaded detail as it continually approaches on a three-second loop. “The owl has a way of moving through space that you can’t hear,” Tuymans said, “so before you know it, it’s too late. It’s the ultimate predator in that sense. I thought that was an interesting remark on living: how fast things can change, and the fact that you can be surprised.” Tuymans credits seeing Disney’s “Snow White and the Seven Dwarves” (1937) as a child with his lifelong fascination with animation, a medium in which he has periodically worked. In the months that he was unable to visit his studio — housed in a former laundromat in the city center, a short drive from his home in the bustling Eilandje district — because of the lockdown, Tuymans worked out of his library, where he produced 70 or so works on paper in preparation for three more planned animated films. (This marks a return of sorts, as Tuymans studied filmmaking after abandoning painting for a period in the early ’80s, before completing a degree in art history and returning to the canvas.) These films, which Tuymans is hoping to show online, are to be the first in an ongoing, standalone project called “Seconds”: brief visions of a world from which people have vanished.

He and Arocha took self-isolation “quite seriously,” Tuymans said, and embraced a slower rhythm during their time in at home. But in late May he returned to the studio. Not long after, he answered T’s artist’s questionnaire.

“The process of painting is all about timing and precision,” Tuymans said, “it has to be exact. Sometimes an idea is there but you don’t see it because it’s too close, so it takes time to sink in.”
Pictured here is a discarded portrait of the Belgian curator Jan Hoet. Mieke Verbijlen

What is your day like? How much do you sleep, and what’s your work schedule?

Well, it’s changed. My wife and I cook more. We get up a bit later than normal and also stay up later — we read a lot, do some research — so mostly go to bed around 3 or 3:30 a.m., and get up in the morning around 9 or 9:30.

The most horrible time for me is actually when I have to figure out what I’m going to paint. That can take months, trying to figure out and assemble the imagery — which I’ve had time to do because of this lockdown.

Over here it’s opening up a bit more than in New York, so I’ve crawled back into my studio. And this is the way I work: I really premeditate, so that when I start painting I don’t have to think about it anymore. I’m not going to think on the canvas. I have to prepare myself mentally, but there’s a moment where the intelligence goes from my head to my hands. I need that intensity, and when I don’t have that, I can’t do it. And that’s not something I have every day. I go to the studio, with a set mind, probably one day a week, usually Thursday or Friday, and then the work is made in one day.

When you start a new piece, where do you begin?

Breaking my head. What would be relevant? What could be interesting? What could be important? What could be meaningful? Because that’s the most important thing: It has to be meaningful for me, otherwise I can’t make it.

What’s the first piece of art you ever made?

It was when I was about 7 years old. In primary school, they asked all the kids to make a drawing about their summer vacation. I was fascinated by the people who collected the garbage on my street, so I made this drawing in color pencil, even with some kind of perspective already, of this big metal truck and these guys in white aprons. I drew that and underneath wrote: “My Big Vacation.” The teacher, who had some artistic aspirations, didn’t believe that I drew it myself and asked me to draw it again with colored chalk on the blackboard, which I did. And again, not knowing this was all very cynical, I finished it with “My Big Vacation.”

"Clown" (2019), from Tuymans's postponed exhibition at David Zwirner Hong Kong.
Mieke Verbijlen

Tuymans has painted a number of spectacled subjects throughout his career, and wearing glasses became the organizing principle behind an exhibition of his work at the Museum aan de Stroom in Antwerp in 2016. Pictured here is "Glasses" (2007). Mieke Verbijlen

What's the first work you ever sold? For how much?

It was a small painting of the airplane with which Charles Lindbergh crossed the ocean, the Spirit of St. Louis. The first person to buy it was Jan Hoet — who curated Documenta in '92, which was very important for me — for 4,000 Belgian francs. That would be a few hundred euros today.

How do you know when you're done?

When I get the feeling that I've done what I could have done — when I've reached my limits. A painting has to stay fresh, decisive. When you work on the painting too long, you kill it. And that happens. There are paintings I had to paint 10 times to get right.

How many assistants do you have?

Three, but nobody paints with me. Painting is something I can only do myself, in isolation. Also without music — there has to be silence.

Is there a meal you eat on repeat when you're working?

I make three or four sandwiches before I go to my studio.

What are you reading?

I recently reread a book that I'd started and never finished — the last book of the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa, "The Book of Disquiet." I thought it was appropriate. Apart from that, I read a whole series by a German writer, Volker Kutscher, which was the model for the "Babylon Berlin" series — one of the more interesting things you can see on Netflix.

Tuymans describes painting as physical work: "I don't sit down. I just walk and stand up, and, when it's a bigger painting, get on a ladder." Mieke Verbijlen

What's the weirdest object in your studio?

There's a chair I kept from my old studio — which looked pretty much like Francis Bacon's and was horrid. This is the only thing I kept from that environment. It's completely decrepit, but it's still my chair.

How often do you talk to other artists?

I talk to my wife, who's also an artist, so she's the first one who responds to my ideas. And then there are other people, other artists, with whom you can talk about these things. Although, with the hectic schedule I've been living for nearly 20 years, it becomes more and more difficult. There's a lot of travel — lectures, workshops, universities, art schools — but that's something else. So the real contact between artists is rather poor. When I meet another artist, most of the time these are brief interactions. They're in between other social events; these people are also mostly overridden with whatever they have to do. It's a pity.

I think an outcome of Covid-19 might be that we go back to what is really meaningful. The way it was going, at that fast a speed and velocity, was a mound of pressure on most of the artists I know. Of course, I work under pressure very well, but nevertheless this made me realize that this element of success also comes with a specific cost.

What do you do when you're procrastinating?

I'm constantly thinking about what I need to figure out. So there aren't many moments of tranquillity. I have to force myself to go on holidays. The thing I really love to do is to swim in the ocean. I don't know if that's procrastinating, but those are the moments that I feel quiet.

What's the last thing that made you cry?

Oh, I don't know. Well, there was a moment in this Covid crisis when my wife and I, we came together very close. And that's more crying out of happiness. You start to understand some basic things.

What do you bulk buy with most frequency?

For my studio, canvases. Luckily in Belgium we have the best linen. I buy mine from a smaller factory in the western part of Flanders and it's fantastic.

What's your worst habit?

I smoke a lot. And with this coronavirus — I used to smoke between two and two and a half packs a day and I've brought it back down to five cigarettes a day now. But I'm not sure I'm going to be able to keep that up.

For me, smoking is kind of an essential element. I'm nervous by nature, so I need something. And my mother was a chain smoker. Before I was even born, I was infested with nicotine. But it's also a transitional thing, a cultural thing. David Hockney, when we met for the first time, at the Royal Academy in 2016, the very first thing he asked me: Do you *still* smoke?

What embarrasses you?

When I talk too much or get a bit too pompous — which is something I've tried to learn not to do. When I was young, I was pretty out there — which is normal — but if you look back, sometimes there's a little shame when it comes to statements you've made that were not correct, or overblown. So, getting older, I've tried to become sharper about that.

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