

## IN PRINT

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## THE TUYMANS EFFECT

Jordan Kantor



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Luc Tuymans, *Himmler*, 1998, oil on canvas, 20 1/4 x 14 1/8".

Luc Tuymans has been the European painter of the moment—for several years. With a national pavilion at the 2001 Venice Biennale, a prominent place in the 2002 Documenta, and a full-scale retrospective co-organized by the Tate Modern and K21 Kunstsammlung Nordrhein Westfalen, Düsseldorf, where it is now on view, the forty-six-year-old Belgian is, by all accounts, a midcareer artist in full stride. Yet a slew of top-tier exhibitions does not fully measure the impact of his painting on the artistic landscape today. Perhaps even more revealing is the pervasiveness of different aspects of his art in the work of many younger European painters. Not unlike Gerhard Richter two decades ago, Tuymans seems to have tapped into a particular mode of seeing and depicting that has unusual resonance. Indeed, these days one can hardly walk into a gallery or art fair with an eye peeled for painting without seeing the "Tuymans effect"—the profound, if sometimes ineffable, way in which the look, subjects, and even fundamental painterly approach of Tuymans's work has saturated a large and increasingly significant territory. And while the primary hallmarks of Tuymans's art have been well-rehearsed in the ever-growing literature on the artist—including his distinctively crude rendering, his chalky palette and limited chromatic range, his use of photographic and filmic sources and cropping techniques, as well as his particular engagement with historical subject matter—the most salient interpretations of his art have come from those younger painters who flesh out these signature devices in their own work. Members of this next generation of painters, including some of Europe's most promising emerging talents, appear to have Tuymans's spectral oils in mind as they squeeze out blobs of paint, mix up some turpentine-heavy medium, and take brush to canvas.



Left to right: Wilhelm Sasnal, *Untitled*, 2004, oil on canvas, 27 1/2 x 19 5/8".  
Magnus von Plessen, *Felicity*, 2002, oil on canvas, 26 3/4 x 20 1/2".  
-year-old Polish painter

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Wilhelm Sasnal, who, perhaps more than any other artist, has inhabited Tuymans's pictorial world and operational approach as a means to forge a distinctively individual body of work. Not only in visual terms, but also in his relationship to source material and in his conception of his painterly "project," Sasnal's still-young career can be understood as a kind of working through of the implications of the Tuymans model. From a formal perspective, Sasnal's canvases come closest to Tuymans in overall "look" and painterly touch. This is perhaps most plainly evidenced by the similarities between a canvas like *Untitled*, 2004—which depicts a standing man in a navy uniform, face blotted out with quick strokes of wet-into-wet paint—and a work like Tuymans's *Himmel*, 1998. This kinship stems as much from the essentially monochromatic palette, specific material execution, and nearly equivalent size and scale of the paintings, as it does from the militaristic subject, the detached use of anonymous photographic source material, and a general menacing air. These works share a very similar pictorial language—one that foregrounds painterly facture and emphasizes speedy execution. (In fact, in almost identical statements, both painters have professed to never spending more than a single session on any individual canvas.) For them, a specific kind of representational shorthand reigns supreme: A group of wonky brushstrokes can stand for "face," while abstract, almost formless blotches read as "hands." At first this pictorial shorthand might be explained as a simple consequence of working from photographs, which already reduce a three-dimensional scene to a flat constellation of dark and light shapes. Yet by divorcing the painterly touch from the mimetic task alone—and undermining the very idea of technical expertise by highlighting "dumsy" brushwork—Tuymans has pointed toward new ways of working from photographic sources that do not rely on dated or ideologically laden ideas of craft and skill. In part because they so obviously court formal "failure" in this way, Tuymans's paintings have provided a model and encouragement for younger artists to plunge liberally into the medium, freed—even if only with false confidence—from fears of technical inadequacy.

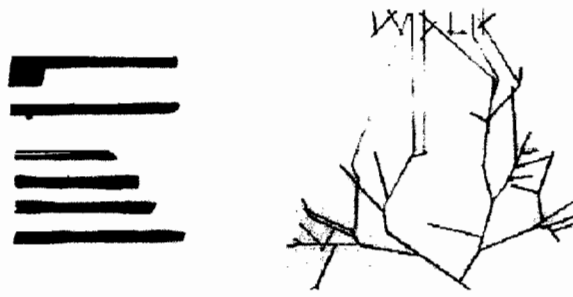
Of course, neither Tuymans nor Sasnal actually fails or paints badly. To the contrary, it is partly the way their canvases coalesce despite such a restrictive painterly language that makes them compelling. However, both painters do deploy the aesthetic of technical failure as a way to thematize the situation of painting today, a predicament in which the very possibility of the autonomous, or even complete work, has been discredited by three decades of postmodern critique. (1) Indeed, painting may be thriving now in part because it was so thoroughly undermined for so many years. The idea that painting was somehow bound to fail—a presupposition that finds formal expression in the now-prevalent "deskilled" aesthetic—is also worked through in deeper conceptual terms in the canvases of Tuymans and those in his wake. That is, beyond using technique to thematize failure, these artists set tasks and projects for themselves that seem doomed from the beginning. Tuymans, for example, has built his career on an attempt to tackle subjects like the Holocaust that seem to refuse representation. (Not incidentally, Sasnal, too, has addressed this topic in a group of canvases from 2003 innocuously entitled "Forest.") This perverse attempt to "picture the unpictureable" (to borrow a hackneyed phrase from the Tuymans literature) has ironically proved immensely fruitful for many contemporary painters, as Sasnal's *A-Bomb*, 2003, demonstrates. A completely illegible image comprised of a white center surrounded by yellow, stuccolike paint that recalls Robert Ryman, *A-Bomb* only "depicts" an atomic explosion by inference. This painting, like Tuymans's seminal canvas *Gas Chamber*, 1986, capitalizes on the frisson—and disconnect—between an almost arbitrary image and an incendiary title. Knowledge of the title not only provides an occasion to look back into the painting with a completely different set of eyes, but also literalizes the limits of the medium and representation more generally. (2) By signaling through its title that a work has failed to represent what it intends, these artists grant themselves space to pursue painting based on an inherent and necessary incompleteness.

Wilhelm Sasnal, *A-Bomb*, 2003, oil  
on canvas, 33 1/2 x 39 3/8.

This concept of painting's "incompleteness" is further developed by Tuymans and younger artists via their deliberate use of vastly different painterly idioms within their respective oeuvres. By nimbly switching from one pictorial mode to another—for example, by painting illusionistically at one moment and diagrammatically the next—these artists demonstrate a flexibility and range that fly in the face of a single autographic style. This effect is evident even in the canvases of painters whose work might not immediately recall Tuymans visually, such as Lucy McKenzie and Kai Althoff. But Sasnal develops this aspect of Tuymans most dramatically, as a quick comparison of his *Widlik*, 2002, with Tuymans's *Writing*, 1988, indicates. In both of these works, the notion of naturalistic (photographic) depiction has yielded to a more linguistic kind of space, akin to the written page. They thereby evoke the shift from the realm of nature to culture that Leo Steinberg pointedly described in his 1968 formulation of the "flatbed picture plane." Tuymans's semiotic strategy of choosing a particular pictorial language based on the specific subject and internal needs of an image is one of the most powerful ways in which he has pointed a path beyond a certain kind of photographically based painting. This is a very different approach than, say, that of Richter, who grinds diverse images down to exactly the same consistency, spewing out paintings, which, though undeniably ravishing and important, all partake of the same smoothed and blurry pictorial language. Quite simply, without the kind of space that Tuymans opened for painting, it is almost inconceivable that a canvas like Sasnal's *Widlik* could sit comfortably within a stream of production that also includes such disparate

ret for all their stylistic inconsistency and diversity of media, Sasnal's paintings are one another by clearly defined "interests" or "projects." By adopting a network of concerns—which may be germane only to a single series of works or just one exhibition—Sasnal can justify the connection of works that on the surface may not seem intrinsically connected. For example, a timely or sexy rubric, such as nostalgia for discredited utopianism, allows Sasnal to join paintings of the Concorde, 1970s Eastern bloc book covers, and Robert Smithson all under a loosely thematic umbrella, despite their radically different styles. Indeed, even beyond the strong visual impact Tuymans has had on a younger generation of painters, this strategy is one of the Belgian's foremost legacies. Trailblazing the thematic exhibition with series that announce themselves to be "about" African colonialism or xenophobic nationalism, Tuymans has opened the door for myriad painting projects that rely, in the words of one of his chief proponents, Ulrich Loock, on "extra-painterly discourse" for justification. (3) Ultimately, this is what makes Tuymans's fundamental strategy so flexible, and so relevant to younger painters. Now, to prepare for an exhibition artists need not invent an entire pictorial universe but simply insert an interest and go.

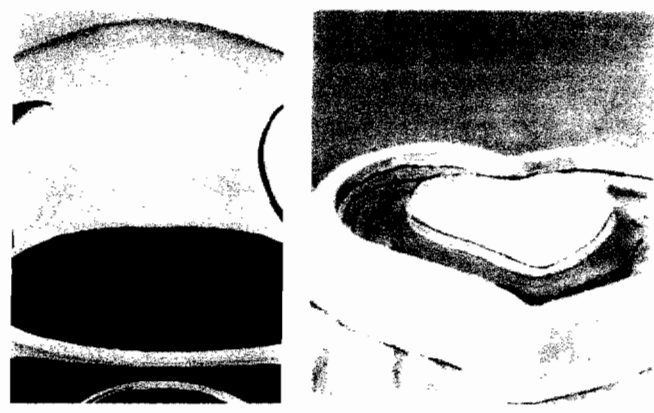
Left to right: Luc Tuymans, *Writing*, 1988, oil on canvas, 31 1/2 x 31 1/2". Wilhelm Sasnal, *Widlik*, 2002, oil on canvas, 47 1/4



criticize this "extra-

painterly discourse" as a crutch (and claim that Tuymans masterfully plugs into hot-button issues and unassailably "important" subjects), one could conversely view his engagement with subject matter as a further means by which to grapple with the dilemma of postmodern painting. For, much like the lack of formal resolution or coherent style, this extrinsic relationship to subject matter can be understood as a commentary on (or symptom of) painting's failure to provide a coherent worldview. By making individual paintings part of a larger whole in which backstory informs interpretation, these artists present fragmented visions that thematize their ineluctable contingency.

If Sasnal's art can be read through Tuymans in such general strategic terms, thirty-seven-year-old German painter Eberhard Havekost's relationship to the senior figure has more to do with the nuts and bolts of painting. Early canvases like *Lokalisieren 2*, 1998, and those from the series "Sympathie," 1999, for example, are very similar in pictorial construction to those of Tuymans, and not simply because he employs photographic subject matter in many of the same ways. Instead, their affinity is strongest at the level of technique and form, especially in their straightforward compositions and paint-handling and their aggressive engagement of the viewer. In *Lokalisieren 2*, a single male figure squints as he points a gun scope at us, while in *Sympathie (2/5)* a woman with pinup crimson lips hulks forward, as if lurching out of the frame. The directness of these pictures is indebted not just to Havekost's radical cropping but to the very specific ways in which he applies paint to canvas. Here, as he typically does, Havekost has laid in relatively large, flat, opaque areas of solvent-rich paint to create a shallow pictorial space. With very limited painterly incident and no gloss, these matte, unmodulated planes of color—like the background in *Lokalisieren 2*, or the face in *Sympathie (2/5)*—read as congruent with the surface of the canvas, severely constricting representational depth. Havekost's technique of painting wet into wet, brushing new layers onto the canvas before previous ones have dried, not only contributes to these paintings' sense of "speed" and even immanence, but it also unifies the colors and tones in the image, flattening it further.



Left to right: Eberhard Havekost, *Face*, 2002, oil on canvas, 31 1/8 x 21 5/8". Luc Tuymans, *St. Valentine*, 1994, oil on canvas, 18 1/2 x 16".

Beyond their compositional and painterly directness, Havekost and Tuymans are arguably closest in their technical reliance on a very narrow range of color and value. Both artists typically use only a couple of colors in a single canvas, mixing them with white and black to create highlights (tints) and shadows (shades) in a constricted spectrum between light and dark. A comparison of Havekost's *Sympathie (2/5)* with Tuymans's *Der Diagnostische Blick IV (The Diagnostic View IV)*, 1992, reveals—beyond an uncanny compositional similarity—how close these two artists' approaches to color and value actually are. In both canvases, a single earth tone—ochre, umber, or sienna—is mixed with a large amount of white to create the dominant, essentially monochromatic, area of the painting. By adding bits of black to this mix (which because it is painted before the underlayers dry, tends to have a feathered edge), the artist renders forms like noses, eye sockets, and cheekbones, while staying within the established color family. The minute tonal differentiation that results gives these faces their pasty complexions and further flattens the claustrophobic space in the paintings. This process imbues these images with the deadened, interior illumination and haunting mood that have become one of Tuymans's most emulated hallmarks.

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Through this extreme cropping and restricted tonal range, Tuymans and Havekost bring their imagery to the very edge of illegibility, as, for example, in the former's *St. Valentine*, 1994, and the latter's *Face*, 2002. These artists make everyday objects strange, thereby raising fundamental questions about the nature of perception. Indeed, in a general way, they are both concerned with how particular formal devices can trigger broader thematic meanings, specifically with regard to the mediation of the image and of vision itself. If Tuymans is concerned with a kind of cultural vision, borne out through his use of public imagery, Havekost is much more inwardly oriented, choosing more personal source material. His most recent work seems to have become more private, often based on family photographs rather than on the found images that caused his early work to bring Tuymans so forcefully to mind.



Left to right: Luc Tuymans, *Der Diagnostische Blick IV (The Diagnostic View IV)*, 1992, oil on canvas, 22 1/2 x 15". Eberhard Havekost, *Sympathie (2/5)*, 1999, oil on canvas, 11 3/4 x 9 1/2".

While Havekost reprises aspects of Tuymans's compositional and painterly means, another thirty-seven-year-old German, Magnus von Plessen, has a more metaphysical kinship to the Belgian. His art and Tuymans's share less a specific "look" than a particular model of visibility based on pictorial ambiguity. By reducing photographic sources to oddly skeletal silhouettes, von Plessen treads a thin line between abstraction and figuration, or, perhaps more precisely, between generality and specificity. His works turn on a dialectic between the mark and its meaning that is closely related to Tuymans's concept of picturing the unpictureable. This somewhat intangible program is often literalized on the level of subject matter. For example, while paintings of mirrors are as old as self-conscious art, von Plessen's contribution to the genre, *Ohne Titel (Spiegel)* (Untitled [Mirror]), 2001, specifically relates to Tuymans's signature play between absence and presence in its refusal to depict reflection (compare it with Tuymans's 1992 canvas *Spiegel I* [Mirror I]). (4) In von Plessen's painting, a huge white blob at the center of the image obscures the reflection of the small figure on the stairway. That blob—which does not so much represent the way a camera's flash is seen as index the hot spot it creates in a photograph—specifically relates to Tuymans's painterly play between seeing and hiding. Looking for his own shadow in the mirror, the painter searches for a new way to work beyond the now century-old preoccupation with photographically mediated vision. And thus the specific thematic and formal means by which Tuymans both acknowledges and refuses photography for painting have clearly charted a new direction for many young artists to follow.

In von Plessen's work, as in that of Sasnal and Havekost, this duality of acceptance and refusal is intricately bound up with painterly technique. The visual signature of von Plessen's paintings is his ubiquitous paint "bar," which functions as his fundamental pictorial unit. This bar, which constitutes all the marks in a typical work like *Felicity*, 2002, is made one of two ways—either additively by applying paint with a flat-headed brush or subtractively through scraping a palette knife of near-identical width. Although apparently singular, the bar loudly announces the back and forth of positive and negative mark-making in the picture, and is clearly of a piece with Tuymans's obdurate brushwork (compare *Felicity* with *Himmler*). Von Plessen's overt facture and conception of painting as an agglomeration of individual units relates to Tuymans's strategy of foregrounding the material substance of paint at the expense of mimesis, and reveals a truly shared interest with regard to the balance between imagistic ambiguity and painterly literalism. This oscillation between positive and negative mark making has another formal effect that provides a final point of comparison between Tuymans and von Plessen, because it creates a specific kind of pictorial space. For example, in both von Plessen's *Raum* (Room), 2002, and Tuymans's *Ankchambre*, 1985, the primary visual tension in the picture is between the depiction of deep space through the use of perspectival rendering and the refusal of that space by the overt display of its painterly construction. Von Plessen pushes that abstraction even further than Tuymans, creating an almost completely illegible image. While this tension may not be new to painting, there is something novel and particular in von Plessen's blithe graphic display of a painted mark that has a diagrammatic quality yet still manages to represent illusionistically.

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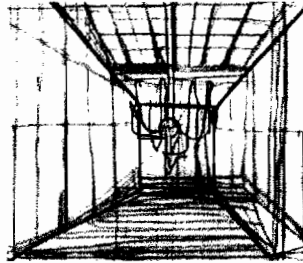
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Left to right: Luc Tuymans, *Antichambre*, 1985, oil on canvas, 25 1/2 x 28 1/4". Magnus von Plessen, *Raum (Room)*, 2002, oil on canvas, 24 3/8 x 29 1/2".

The tension inherent in this formal dialectic serves as a neat analogue for many of the painterly and conceptual concerns at the heart of Tuymans's art and that of other figures working in a similar vein. What ultimately connects these artists is not simply a formal look or strategy but the intensity with which they simultaneously accept and deny painting. Sasnal, Havekost, and von Plessen are but three exemplary representatives in this cause, and, of course, reading them through Tuymans is just one way to approach their diverse production. But this concern, which is intimately connected with forging yet another new path for painting through photography, is specific and resolute. While acknowledging painting's absolute contingency, these artists push the medium forward with a unique admixture of skepticism and faith, and that may be the only conviction that they—or we—can have.

*Jordan Kantor is assistant curator in the Department of Drawings at the Museum of Modern Art and an artist.*

1. For a discussion of Tuymans and the thematics of failure, see Hans Rudolf Reust, "The Pursuit: Luc Tuymans—1996–2003," in Ulrich Loock et al., *Luc Tuymans*, (London and New York: Phaidon Press, 2nd ed. 2003), 162–66.
2. Tuymans has commented on the importance of the title in fostering this disconnect: "The title itself is the heart of the image and can never be depicted: the missing image. *Gas Chamber* is another work that might look warm, but when you read the title it becomes threatening, the whole image changes." "Juan Vicente Aliaga in conversation with Luc Tuymans," in Loock, et al., *Luc Tuymans*, 20.
3. Ulrich Loock, "On Layers of Sign-relations, in the Light of Mechanically Reproduced Pictures. From Ten Years of Exhibitions," in Loock, et al., *Luc Tuymans*, 48.
4. For an analysis of empty mirrors and the absence of the self in Tuymans's work, see Loock, "On Layers of Sign-relations," 79.