

## **Luc Tuymans: Premonition – ‘the silence before the storm’.**

**Caroline Turner**

*Pictures, if they are to have effect, must have tremendous intensity of silence, a filled silence or void. The observer should become motionless before the picture, freeze. A kind of picture terror. I show pictures with a direct intention. The effect they should have on the viewer resembles an assault that he or she does not experience directly, but from a distance initially. When he or she comes closer, this assault should loom again, but on a different level. Something quite unmistakable then triggers certain emotions, makes certain demands. This can only come about in a certain silence. I mean the silence before the storm.<sup>1</sup>* Luc Tuymans

The art of Belgian Luc Tuymans is about a silence born of fear. His paintings are based on memories, both personal and collective. They are linked by the hint of something beneath or beyond the surface appearance, intentionally creating in the viewer a sense of anxiety, triggering the fear which the artist has said has absorbed his own mind since childhood.<sup>2</sup>

Regarded as one of the most important younger contemporary painters, Tuymans' work is deeply informed by European tradition and experience, past and present. This is not surprising since Belgium has been historically the arena for great European power struggles and its capital, Brussels, is now the administrative centre of the new European Union. Tuymans' art, while intensely personal, is thus at the same time immensely revealing of the post-postwar European generation – the generation now in their forties and fifties, free from the ideologies and guilt of two world wars but at the same time charged with responsibility for a new Europe.

Tuymans is not, however, at first sight, an obviously political artist. His paintings for the most part appear to depict the reality of ordinary objects: flowers, still life, landscapes and portraits (that are not quite portraits) and people going about everyday concerns. His mostly small canvasses draw on the traditions of Flemish realism and surrealism, although he explicitly denies the latter. There are also strong affinities with the world of photography and the paintings are often based on

reproductions. The colours of the paintings are pale, washed out and the images are often incomplete or cropped in a manner reminiscent of film editing. The effect is psychologically disturbing and disorientating, hinting at an atmosphere of violence; indeed the artist has referred to the underlying structure of violence, both 'physical and detached', linking his work, and to his art as a 'metaphor of violence.'<sup>3</sup>

Allusive titles such as *Superstition*, *Rumour* and *Premonition* for his exhibitions or for individual works such as *Gas Chamber* (a painting showing an empty white room with a drain in the floor) give a clue as to why his art is so unsettling. Several of the paintings with titles related to the Holocaust are based on photos from the concentration camps. Tuymans said with reference to this group of works: 'Western culture, I think, is one of the few cultures that, in order to progress, has incorporated destruction. There is a link between annihilation, hygiene, consumerism, production and propaganda. When you think about hygiene sometimes it can be connected to ethnic cleansing... The final solution is something hidden.'<sup>4</sup> Ambiguity is an essential element in Tuymans' work: he argues that 'when something is not painted it makes it more meaningful ... There is a sort of indifference in my paintings which makes them more violent, because any objects in them are as if erased, cancelled.'<sup>5</sup>

Tuymans' subject matter has focused on episodes of Flemish history, including colonialism in Africa and war time collaboration of Belgians with the Nazis, as well as issues of contemporary relevance such as child abuse. He is also concerned about the rise of neo Fascism, as exhibited by the ultrarightist and fiercely nationalist Vlaams Blok, which has risen in 15 years to be the fourth strongest party in Belgium, with the slogan 'our people first'. All this has encouraged Belgian governments to take a lead on moral issues in the European Union, in an attempt to present their country as 'the earth's conscience.'<sup>6</sup> It is thus significant that Tuymans was selected to represent Belgium at the 2001 Venice Biennale. The exhibition was entitled *Mwana Kitoko*, beautiful boy or beautiful white man,

(the name given to the young King Baudouin by the Congolese). The group of works were in part a response to the allegation aired in a 1999 book by Ludo de Witte that the Belgian government was responsible for the 1961 murder of Congo's first prime minister, Patrice Lumumba, shortly after independence.<sup>7</sup> Tuymans' series *Heimat* (1995) is a quite specific protest against past Fascism and contemporary neoFascism: he says that he has 'tried to rebel against ... this Flemish idea of a mythical, fixed identity. It is not only political but cultural as well. It is not about developing feelings of melancholy, but about a certain form of *deja vu*... Nationalism is for me like a mask, unmoveable and hollow...All forms of nationalism remove the qualities of real life and create a uniformity out of individual differences.'<sup>8</sup>

His paintings have also touched on American issues including slavery, race relations and multiculturalism. It is impossible not to link these works to the fading of the American dream for Europeans. *Heritage* (1996) was produced after the Oklahoma bombing specifically to explore 'the fortress mentality' resulting from 'terrorism from within.'<sup>9</sup> The works are of seemingly ordinary images such as baseball caps. One image shows a man apparently working at some mundane task but in actuality mixing toxic chemicals. In the show *Fortune* (2003), 'paranoia' is again a theme. The images are similarly innocuous, such as a storefront, with mannequins or a paintball contest, the latter image drawn from a 'guns and ammo' magazine, but violence is implicit: and in the words of the press release from his New York gallery, the mood and psychological atmosphere of these paintings 'heighten the terror that lies within.' It declares that Tuymans himself states that these are a response to 9/11 and that he sees the images of 9/11 as so powerful because they represent 'one of the most stunning examples of collective memory to date.'<sup>10</sup>

*Maypole* (2000) was displayed in London in the Royal Academy exhibition *Apocalypse*.<sup>11</sup> It is one of the most interesting and largest of his recent paintings with all the elements of his style. We see a group of men, painted with barely sufficient detail to suggest that they may be wearing traditional Bavarian peasant costume, shorts or *lederhosen*, who are erecting a maypole. There is also what could be a group of men in the distance with what could be banners. The maypole is a symbol of ancient

pagan custom, a symbolic festival in Germany when a large tree (and trees and forests are themselves immensely significant in the German psyche), was brought to the village and decorated with ribbons and even sausages. The figures erecting the maypole are viewed from the back. And Tuymans has spoken of the 'fear you have when you see someone you don't know from behind.'<sup>12</sup>

The image may be drawn from a reproduction in the Nazi magazine *Signal*.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, the Nazis expressly used the imagery of the maypole and May Day as part of their propaganda. Historians such as George Mosse have shown how they utilised existing festivals in creating their own mass culture.<sup>14</sup> In 1933 they held a May Day march, a mass rally of workers and the next day replaced the existing trade unions with a Party organisation. One of the most spectacular Nazi ceremonies was held in the Lustgarten, Berlin on May Day 1936 with a speech by Hitler. As an integral part of this highly choreographed event, a large maypole was erected, decorated with swastikas and fir branches. Iain Boyd Whyte provides a fascinating account of this use of the maypole as part of Nazi propaganda in *Art and Power: Europe under the Dictators*. He writes: 'What better symbol ... than the maypole, the traditional symbol throughout Northern Europe of the end of winter and of the reawakening of nature, the focus of communal games and feasts'. Such images he writes, quoting Saul Friedländer, were a significant part of the Nazis' 'kitsch aesthetic': 'On the one side are invoked the tranquil forces of moral values, while on the other side are flickering the fires of extermination.'<sup>15</sup>

In this context, Tuymans' painting becomes immensely sinister, inevitably linked to the Nazis' use of mystic Teutonic and mediaeval legend, and of symbols drawn from pagan times. This was particularly true for the SS, the brotherhood of Nordic men whose masculine ethos was fortified by pagan ceremonies, devised by Himmler. This painting, of course, also shows men working together, a brotherhood specifically excluding women and suggesting the disturbing conformity frequently associated with worlds of men constructed to be exclusionist for reasons of sex, or ethnicity or ideology. Conformity and complicity with evil on a mass scale is suggested by this painting.

In his art Tuymans escapes the trap of believing that art can be an adequate response in the face of horror. Instead of explicit horror he explores the psychological

dimension of our collective memories of horror. But this is not as straightforward as merely confronting the past so that its evils may not be repeated. He states he does not take a moral stance yet, despite his claim of detachment, the content is not detached. The artist notes, in relation to the war in the former Yugoslavia, the immediate fear of people that 'it', meaning the wars, ideologies, 'ethnic cleansing' of Europe's past, might be happening again.<sup>16</sup> In so doing, he draws on disillusionment in Europe and elsewhere and the growing belief that it is now impossible to believe that 'it' will not happen again. He has connected this disillusionment to the failure of painting: 'Every art has failed. How we fail is another matter.'<sup>17</sup> In this sense Tuymans' work is an uncanny prediction of the growing paranoia and fear characterising the world at the beginning of the twenty first century and, at the same time, a chilling premonition of the future.

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issues covering several years from a second-hand bookseller. What fascinated me about the colour photographs was how picturesque they were. That, of course, was a result of printing technique, in which various layers are printed on top of each other..."

<sup>14</sup> "I am grateful to Paul Pickering, Glen St J. Barclay and Harry Wise for help with the references on Nazism and their use of the image of the maypole and pagan symbols. George Mosse, *The Nationalization of the Masses. Political Symbolism and Mass Movements in Germany from the Napoleonic Wars Through the Third Reich*, New York, H.Fertig, 1975.

<sup>15</sup> Ian Boyd Whyte 'Berlin, 1 May 1936' in Dawn Ades, Tim Benton, David Elliott, Ian Boyd Whyte, *Art and Power: Europe under the Dictators 1930-45*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1995, pp. 4356; Boyd Whyte p. 46. quotes Saul Friedlander *Kitsch und Tod der Widerschein des Nazismus*, Munich, 1986.

<sup>16</sup> Tuymans interview with Aliaga, *op.cit.*, p. 26.

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Burkhard Riemschneider and Uta Grosenick, (eds.), *Art at the Turn of the Millennium*, Taschen, n.d., p. 514.

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<sup>1</sup> Lawrence Rinder quoting Tuymans in interview with Josef Helfenstein [www.bamfa.berkeley.edu/exhibits/tuymans/](http://www.bamfa.berkeley.edu/exhibits/tuymans/) 1997 website of Berkeley Museum of Art (May 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Luc Tuymans interview with Juan Vicente Aliaga in Ulrich Loock, Juan Vicente Aliaga, Nancy Spector, *Luc Tuymans*, Phaidon, London, 1996, this edition 2001, p. 16.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p. 20; p. 25.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p. 25.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, p. 26.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Tyler, [www.wsws.org/articles/may\\_1999 World Socialist web site](http://www.wsws.org/articles/may_1999_World_Socialist_web_site); Barry James, November 2002, *International Herald Tribune*, [www.ihf.com](http://www.ihf.com) (June 2003).

<sup>7</sup> [www.davidzwirner.com/press/11212000](http://www.davidzwirner.com/press/11212000) (October 2002); [www.labiennaledivenezia.net/it/artistsive](http://www.labiennaledivenezia.net/it/artistsive) (May 2003).

<sup>8</sup> Tuymans interview with Aliaga *op.cit.*, p. 31.

<sup>9</sup> [www.davidzwirner.com/press/082001996](http://www.davidzwirner.com/press/082001996) (May 2003).

<sup>10</sup> [www.davidzwirner.com/press/04032003LT](http://www.davidzwirner.com/press/04032003LT) (May 2003).

<sup>11</sup> Norman Rosenthal, *Apocalypse*, Royal Academy of Arts, London, 2000. Interestingly Michael Archer in the essay on Tuymans does not connect the maypole to Nazi symbols p. 81.

<sup>12</sup> Luc Tuymans, 'Artist Writings' in Loock, Aliaga, Spector, *Luc Tuymans*, *op. cit.*, p. 129.

<sup>13</sup> Frank Demaegd, communication to author: 'Describing his use of photography in the catalogue Premonitions, Kunstmuseum Bern 1997, p. 110 Luc Tuymans writes the following: "Here I used a page taken from a German propaganda magazine called 'Signal'; During World War II this magazine was translated into Flemish, and I was able to purchase the