

Luc Tuymans: The Past

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尤伦斯当代艺术中心
Center for Contemporary Art

Engaged equally by the broad sweep of history and the mundane details of daily life, Luc Tuymans (b. 1958, Belgium) explores the unsteady power that images wield to shape the present and give form to the past. One of the most important painters working today, he gained prominence in Europe in the 1980s with a distinctive style that drew both from the grand ambitions of Northern Renaissance painting and the popular culture and media of his youth during the decades after World War II.

“From very early on, my work was born out of an insane and very profound distrust of imagery,” Tuymans has explained. As a young artist, that distrust compelled him to pursue what he called “authentic forgeries;” using varnishes that would crack, he made paintings that seemed to belong to an earlier time. In the decades since, he has come to use events, figures and scenes of importance from various periods, but always at a distance, evading the clarity typically associated with history painting. “Violence is shown as an after-image,” he notes, “in terms of memory and loss.” Working from preexisting imagery, he paints every picture quickly, typically in a single day, creating seductive and carefully worked surfaces that pull viewers in, while disclosing little about his interest or purpose. In his flirtatiously portentous approach to history, Tuymans has become deeply influential to his peers, as well as subsequent generations of artists—including many in China, who discovered his work in the 1990s.

Featuring almost 90 paintings selected from across the full range of Tuymans’s career, the exhibition is organized in loosely chronological fashion, but with the paintings arranged by the artist in specific relationships. Speaking about “the inadequacy of memory” that motivates his work, Tuymans decries the dominant role that photography plays in our daily lives, and argues for the importance of painting’s embodied, shifting image. “I think the way these paintings work with time is completely different,” he explains, “since it is connected to their physicality, which is also something I hope viewers can relate to.”

With stunning silence, his paintings engage the complexity of life today—as they do the grandeur and complicity of the role that painting itself plays in reflecting it back to us. An early critic described how Tuymans’s work contains a sense of “something always true colliding with a consciousness forgetful of it,” and his paintings incisively address that slippery relationship between truth, memory, and power. He reminds us that the past is constantly remade by what the present demands of it.

“Luc Tuymans: The Past” is curated by UCCA Curator-at-Large Peter Eleey with Luc Tuymans. Exclusive wall solutions support is provided by Dulux. UCCA thanks the members of UCCA Foundation Council, International Circle, and Young Associates, as well as Lead Partner Aranya, Lead Art Book Partner DIOR, Lead Imaging Partner vivo, Presenting Partner Bloomberg, and Supporting Partners AIA, Barco, Dulux, Genelec, SKP Beijing and Stey.

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About the Artist

Luc Tuymans (b. 1958, lives and works in Antwerp, Belgium) has been the subject of numerous solo exhibitions worldwide, including those held at Louvre Museum (Paris, 2024); Palazzo Grassi (Venice, 2019); De Pont Museum (Tilburg, The Netherlands, 2019); Museum aan de Stroom (MAS; Antwerp, 2016), which traveled to the National Portrait Gallery (London, 2016); Qatar Museums Gallery – Al Riwaq (Doha, 2015); Menil Collection (Houston, 2013); the Wexner Center for the Arts (Columbus, Ohio, 2009), which traveled to San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Dallas Museum of Art, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, and BOZAR – Palais des Beaux-Arts (Brussels); and Tate Modern (London, 2004), which traveled to K21 Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen (Düsseldorf). As a curator, Tuymans has organized a number of exhibitions, including “The Forbidden Empire: Visions of the World by Chinese and Flemish Artists” (The Palace Museum, Beijing, 2007). He has received numerous awards and honors, including the Medal of Honor, International Congress of Contemporary Painting (ICOCEP; Porto, Portugal, 2019); the Coutts Contemporary Art Foundation Award (Zurich, 2000); and the Flemish Culture Award for Visual Arts (1993). The artist’s work features in museum collections worldwide, including the Centre Georges Pompidou (Paris), The Museum of Modern Art (New York), The National Museum of Art (Osaka), Pinakothek der Moderne (Munich), Pinault Collection, and Tate (London).

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Hands

1975
Oil on canvas
100 × 80 cm
Private Collection



Hands is the earliest painting in the exhibition. Although it is a student work, it already establishes several hallmarks of Luc Tuymans's practice. This portrait was not painted from life but from an image the artist found in a magazine, a choice that underscores Tuymans's tendency to work from mediated sources rather than direct observation. Reflecting on the painting, Tuymans remarked, "My idea was to mask the image, to devour the visuality of the face." The result is an extreme disconnect between the image and its referent: the sitter is barely represented, reduced to a head resembling a potato, with dark clothing roughly outlined, offering no hint of social class or occupation. The hands, as the title suggests, are the most prominent feature, though they are crudely rendered, giving them an almost collage-like appearance. Tuymans deliberately rejects painterly virtuosity here, creating a portrait that subverts conventional expectations. Although the composition, dimensions, and pose of the figure allude to traditional portrait conventions, essential elements are obscured. This painting establishes an approach that Tuymans would later apply to many of his portraits, characterized by the literal effacement of the sitter, the imposition of an impersonal, inexpressive mask, and the erasure of the sitter's identity within the visual confines of the painting.

Refribel

1980
Oil on canvas
Triptych: 100.3 × 119.9 cm,
89.9 × 110.2 cm, 80.3 × 99.3 cm
Collectie Mu.ZEE Oostende -
Vlaamse Gemeenschap



This triptych was exhibited in the artist's first solo exhibition in 1985, which he organized in an empty swimming pool of a disused thermal bath resort in the Belgian coastal city of Ostend. The atypical setting of the show was an early indication of Tuymans's attention to the contexts in which he presents his work. The three paintings depict early 20th-century refrigerated warehouses and train chassis in the port of Antwerp, the artist's hometown. "Refribel" alludes to the name of a company that once operated in the port, which joins together "refrigeration" and "Belgium." The viewing angles and framing of the images are suggestive of early cinema, as is the grayscale palette of the pictures. These buildings and similar scenes from the harbor also appear in an 8mm film that Tuymans made in 1981-1982, during a period where he stopped making paintings and turned to filmmaking.

La Correspondance (The Correspondence)

1985

Oil on canvas

80.5 × 120 cm

Collection M HKA/Collection Flemish Community



From 1980 to 1985, Tuymans took a break from painting to explore filmmaking. *La Correspondance* is the first painting he made after the hiatus, and its composition subtly evokes a cinematic setting. The painting draws on an anecdote about the Dutch writer J. van Oudshoorn (1896-1951), who, while working at the Dutch embassy in Berlin from 1905 to 1910, sent his wife a daily postcard showing the restaurant where he dined, marking his table in red. Tuymans reimagines this gesture of homesickness as an abstract narrative, depicting the restaurant with simple, diagrammatic lines: an empty room with vacant chairs and with an overlaid wallpaper pattern, punctuated by a single red mark almost reminiscent of a crime scene. The repeating pattern echoes the writer's routine, as if counting down the days. This use of decorative patterns and diagrams is the first instance of what would become a recurring element in Tuymans's work. The title, *La Correspondance*, refers to the exchange of letters but also suggests an analogy—just as the writer adhered to his daily routine, Tuymans approaches his art with persistence and repetition.

Antichambre (Antechamber)

1985

Oil on canvas

69.9 × 80.1 cm

Collection M HKA/Collection Flemish Community



Antichambre presents a tangle of gray and blue lines overlaid on a grid that create the impression of a quick sketch. While the painting hints at narrative intent, no clear story emerges from the depiction of an empty space. Much like a film still stripped of its context, it leaves the viewer with little more than scattered, incomplete interpretations. This sense of interruption, fractured storytelling, and associative layering aligns with Tuymans's interest in cinematic stills and their capacity to suggest rather than resolve a narrative. The artist sought to explore whether the same effect could be achieved in painting.

Completed in 1985, *Antichambre* marks a transitional period for Tuymans as he moved from filmmaking back to painting. The composition is drawn from a preliminary sketch meant for a film shot. That same year, Tuymans gathered earlier works and recent post-film paintings for his first solo exhibition, "Belgian Art Preview," a one-day event held in a disused swimming pool. Though he sent invitations to over a thousand addresses, not a single visitor showed up. Yet, by the end of the day, Tuymans felt confident he was on the right path.

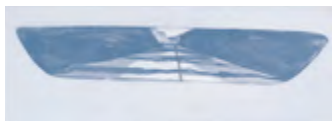
Rearview Mirror

1986

Oil on canvas

68 × 190 cm

Private Collection



The rearview mirror of a car is often called the driver's "second pair of eyes," expanding the field of view. In this work, Tuymans realistically depicts a rearview mirror in which we can vaguely distinguish a road receding in the mirror's reflection, creating what he later described as "a heightened physicality functioning like a funnel." The format, like a panoramic screen, conflates the road ahead with that which has passed behind; the painting gives spatial form to "the past," and frames its unfurling distance against an oncoming future. Considered in this light, the scene can be understood as an allegory of painting's unstable relationship to time, and to history—subjects that have animated Tuymans's work from the start.

Ganzen (Geese)

1987

Oil on canvas

80 × 120 cm

Collectie Mu.ZEE Oostende - Vlaamse Gemeenschap



The visual motifs in this painting echo those of a children's picture book, yet lack the warmth and reassurance typical of such imagery. At the center of the composition lies the goose's black, oval eye, eerily fixated and almost devouring in its gaze. *Ganzen (Geese)* draws inspiration from a painting that once hung in Tuymans's childhood bedroom, and he recalls being frightened by the goose's pupil as a young boy. During this time, his parents—both members of the Belgian Resistance during World War II—often discussed the global conflict at the dinner table, making it a constant presence in their home life. The heavy atmosphere—where the weight of wartime discussions clashed with the mundane rhythms of home—combined with parental neglect to produce a deep-seated anxiety that shaped Tuymans's early visual experience, transforming familiar domestic scenes into something unsettling. This tension, conveyed through the portrayal of ordinary, familiar subjects, would come to reappear throughout Tuymans's later work.

Hotel Room

1987

Oil on canvas

50.3 × 60 cm

Collection M HKA/Collection Flemish Community



Hotel Room presents an interior from an unusual vantage point, as if the viewer is crouched on the floor, looking up into the space. Visible are the backrest of a chair, a bed, a lamp, and a curtained window, rendered in broad, roughly defined smears of paint. The minimal brushstrokes find an echo in the palette itself—composed of muted beige, light brown, and gray tones—which creates a bland, desolate atmosphere. The indistinct and blurred scene feels less like an actual hotel room and more like the artist's receding memory or a vague impression of the idea of hotel rooms. In fact, he created the painting from a smaller oil on paper work that he had made some years before, which had faded.

The painting reflects Tuymans's fascination with the anonymity inherent to hotel rooms—"whenever you leave you leave, the order will be restored so that there is this anonymous element to it." The hotel room is simultaneously fleeting and permanent, its connection with inhabitants defined by brief encounters that neither alter its layout nor disrupt its function. This duality—a temporarily private yet fundamentally public space—anticipates the overlap of individual and collective memory that Tuymans revisits often in his later work.

Child Abuse

1989

Oil on canvas

55 × 65 cm

Lady de Rothschild



The shapes in this painting seem innocuous enough: a rectangle, two squares, two dots and an abstracted tulip. This floral element was inspired by an advertising logo, a blank space within which a vendor would write the price of the item being sold. The rectangle is based on an empty flower box, and the squares are derived from photographs. The image is somewhat unsettling, but the painting's title is shocking. The work is an early example of Tuymans's interest in the disturbing undercurrents that run beneath the veneer of everyday life.

The Murderer

1990

Oil on canvas

32.2 × 28.5 cm

Private Collection



The Murderer, along with the three other paintings here—*The Swimming Pool*, *The Servant*, and *The Cry*—is from Tuymans's 1990 exhibition "Suspended." Unlike his late 1980s works, which are often devoid of figures, this series presents everyday scenes with people in seemingly familiar settings, such as by a swimming pool or in front of a house. The compositions are more varied, and are marked by a richness of color and raking, dramatic light that recalls the American painter Edward Hopper (1882-1967), who Tuymans admires. On closer inspection, the figures appear almost petrified, like plastic toys carefully arranged in a diorama—which, in fact, were the artist's sources, drawn from a model train catalog. Tuymans regularly worked from models, and the nearby painting of a church is an example. This group of paintings, however, draws upon Tuymans's fascination with film, and shaping of visual narrative. While these scenes may evoke the idyllic suburbia of midcentury Hollywood, they also convey an unsettling sense of artificiality and disconnection. The titles hint that their peaceful facades are deceptive, suggesting an underlying menace or impending catastrophe.

Body

1990

Oil on canvas

48.5 × 38.5 cm

Collection S.M.A.K., Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst, Ghent



A close-up of a torso dominates the canvas. Its head and legs are cropped out, leaving the viewer uncertain as to whether the torso belongs to a living body or a doll. Two brown paint stripes across the waist might evoke scars from past trauma or, more simply, show zipper openings for stuffing material. Tuymans embraces this intentional ambiguity, even though the source image is actually a rag doll. In making the work, he selected a paint known to fade over time and intentionally applied a craquelure treatment, giving the painting the appearance of an aged wood panel. As he explained, he hoped the work would "look like a relic, and refer to the votive character of memory, prompting a sense of amnesia."

Disenchantment

1990

Oil on canvas

84.5 × 84.2 cm

Private Collection



This image is based on a design Tuymans found on the top of a cardboard box of painting supplies. But the image also could be a target of some sort. As often with Tuymans, the image that interests him has various potential meanings. It has been linked to the targets famously painted by the American artist Jasper Johns (b. 1930) beginning in 1955, but more easily suggests a series of rotating discs that the French artist Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968) made in 1935 to create disorienting optical experiences, which he also filmed. Tuymans's contemporary Marlene Dumas (b. 1953) described her experience of this painting and those with which he first exhibited it: "I first saw an exhibition of Luc's work in 1991, called 'Disenchantment'. I couldn't place these works in any of the 'isms' that were around at the time. It wasn't about a 'return to figuration', a plea for 'abstraction' or a flirt with 'sensationalism'. It was actually about disenchantment. Not how it looks, because disenchantment isn't a thing, it's about how it feels. It is about universal psychological truths and at the same time it is about the specific and limited meaning of images as images and confronting that understanding."

Heillicht (Curing Light)

1991

Oil on canvas

Triptych: 85.5 × 63.3 cm,

50 × 40 cm, 37 × 40.5 cm

Collectie Mu.ZEE Oostende -

Vlaamse Gemeenschap



The three works that comprise this triptych were painted independently from one another; Tuymans decided later to unite them because of their colors. The central painting is drawn from a 1942 book by photographer Paul Wolff, *Meine Erfahrungen... farbig* (*My Experiences in Color Photography*), which popularized amateur photography in Germany during World War II. The book employed a printing technique that makes colors look painterly, which the Nazis also used in party propaganda magazines. The source image that Tuymans used from Wolff's book shows a doctor treating a young patient with light therapy. The painting on the left is an abstraction based on deodorant bottles, and the right represents a magnified view of a hand going into an orifice.

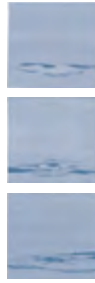
Embitterment

1991

Oil on canvas

Triptych: 38.7 × 41.3 cm, 39.4 × 41.3 cm, 39.4 × 41.9 cm

Pontus Bonnier Collection



A major work in Tuymans's oeuvre, *Embitterment* is emblematic of his interest in the representation of emotional states and moods. He described this work as an "emotional self-portrait that coincides with the body and shows the interior of the body. This work was borne out of a feeling of rage and of being excluded from oneself." Here, the usual horizontal reading of triptychs, from left to right, is inverted into a vertical orientation. Furthermore, it is positioned at a person's height, derived in this case from that of Tuymans himself. The artist's physical and emotional body is symbolized by three shapes, obliquely rendered, that look like flattened, faded flowers. Each has a circle in the middle, which is akin to a spine passing through the three paintings from top to bottom. The dark orange hue of all three paintings suggests flesh and blood, and the three flowers evoke collapsed and damaged bodily organs. "It is a very existential work, a sort of regression... It is not a representation but simply a work that exists."

Memory

1991

Oil on canvas

37 × 24 cm

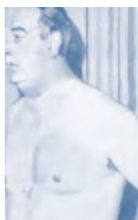
Collection Frank & Eliane Demaegd - Breynaert, Belgium



The American critic Peter Schjeldahl wrote of Tuymans, "He does not paint 'from memory'; he paints memory itself—his own or someone else's, it doesn't matter." The critic's summary is evoked by this painting, which depicts the bottom corner of an old photograph whose subject cannot be discerned; the identity of its maker is similarly not disclosed. However, Tuymans has included the edge of the paper on which the photograph is printed, drawing attention to the object of the picture. In this, the artist anticipates his later use of Polaroid photographs as part of the process of making a painting. Sometimes capturing images from magazines or television, he also photographs models, watercolors and other paintings as source material. "Whenever I talk about the document, I do that in terms of basic material, which is a document, a photograph or whatever, which you fictionalize through the work," Tuymans explained. "It gets distorted and it is no longer a document in the narrow sense of the word. So what you actually do, is to make the document part of a pattern of expectations towards the eventual work. You just use it in the plainest sense."

**Der diagnostische Blick VI
(The Diagnostic View VI)**

1992
Oil on canvas
74.5 × 47.5 cm
Private Collection, Belgium



**Der diagnostische Blick VIII
(The Diagnostic View VIII)**

1992
Oil on canvas
58.8 × 39.1 cm
Collection Heidi & Peter Aaen



**Der diagnostische Blick V
(The Diagnostic View V)**

1992
Oil on canvas
57.9 × 42.3 cm
Private Collection



These three paintings are part of a group of ten that Tuymans made in 1992 titled “Der diagnostische Blick (The Diagnostic View),” which he based on photographs in a German medical textbook that features patients suffering from a wide range of diseases. The manual was published to assist doctors in diagnosing illness from certain visual symptoms. Like the clinicians whom the book helped to guide, Tuymans focused on what he termed “the traumatizing element within the face” or body part that betrayed the underlying sickness. This group of paintings is among the artist’s most significant, for it highlights his central interest in the latent violence that lurks invisibly around us, and in turn, within images—images that may, paradoxically, reveal aspects of broader cultural pathologies when studied carefully. But Tuymans also subtly diagnoses his audiences here: by depicting each subject as a nameless index of infection and illness, the artist implicates his viewers in a callousness and dehumanizing disregard.

Superstition

1994

Oil on canvas

41.9 × 36.8 cm

University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive; Purchase made possible by a gift of Earlene and John Taylor



Superstition shows a human torso on which is superimposed the alarming shape of an insect almost as large as the figure. The scene is reminiscent of the Czech writer Franz Kafka's classic novella *The Metamorphosis* (1915), which tells the story of a man who wakes up one morning to find himself transformed into a huge insect. Tuymans based the painting on an image from a book detailing séances and the conjuring of spirits. Each motif in the painting is rendered with simplicity, yet the unspecified conjunction of elements only heightens the sense of horror, creating a deep discomfort while simultaneously drawing the viewer's attention. From this perspective, the painting can be seen as a meditation on the superstitious power of images themselves: "The insect in *Superstition* sucks you in," the artist explains. "It's almost shamanistic."

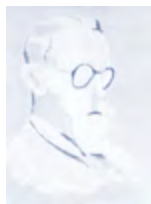
A Flemish Intellectual

1995

Oil on canvas

89.4 × 65.5 cm

Cette exposition bénéficie de prêts importants du Musée d'arts de Nantes



The man portrayed in *A Flemish Intellectual* has an almost generic and archetypal character because of the intentional blurring of the surface and facial contour and the absence of a gaze. First presented in 1995 in Antwerp as part of a show Tuymans designed around Flemish nationalism, the painting does not appear to belong to any age or place. The presence that comes across is more that of an age-old ghost, rather than a flesh-and-blood individual. But this is a portrait of the Flemish writer Ernest Claes (1885-1968), author of famous patriotic and regionalist novels who was exhumed from the realm of literary shadows by Flemish nationalists.

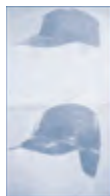
The Heritage I

1995

Oil on canvas

144.8 × 79.5 cm

Philadelphia Museum of Art: Purchased with funds from the gift (by exchange) of Mr. and Mrs. Arthur A. Goldberg and with funds contributed by the Committee on Twentieth-Century Art, 1996



The Heritage IV

1996

Oil on canvas

200 × 125.5 cm

The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Committee on Painting and Sculpture Funds, 1996



“The Heritage” is a series of ten paintings about American culture that Tuymans undertook following a 1995 terrorist attack on a government building in the United States that shocked the country. When these paintings were first shown, a critic likened them to “meaningless fragments of dated advertisements—their colors are faded, their lines blurry—they suggest a skeptical relation to ‘progress.’” In one painting, two faceless heads appear, recalling mannequins in a catalog. One wears a simple baseball hat, while the other models a traditional American hunting cap, with flaps that fold down over the ears. Both are uniforms of national identity and affiliation. Another picture features a factory worker whose face is obscured by a mask; the mask suggests that the man may be handling toxic chemicals. On the occasion of a major survey of his work organized the same year he made “The Heritage”, Tuymans summarized the way violence features in his work, “shown as an after-image, in terms of memory and loss.”

The Heritage VI

1996

Oil on canvas

53 × 43.5 cm

Private Collection, courtesy David Zwirner



What initially appears to be a simple portrait of a pleasant man is, in fact, a depiction of the mid-20th century right-wing American leader Joseph Milteer (1902-1974). He is often mentioned in conspiracy theories about the 1963 assassination of the president John F. Kennedy, but was better known for his involvement in promoting racial segregation and white supremacy. His generic appearance contrasts with the extremism and violence of his activities, embodying what German philosopher Hannah Arendt called the “banality of evil.”

Illegitimate I

1997

Oil on canvas

210.1 × 131.1 cm

Tate: Purchased 1998



Illegitimate III

1997

Oil on canvas

160 × 136.8 cm

Tate: Presented by the Patrons of New Art through the Tate Gallery Foundation 1998



Responding to a curator’s insistence that painting was no longer a legitimate form of artmaking, Tuymans undertook an entire series with the name “Illegitimate.” This desire to make paintings that would justify themselves provoked Tuymans to attempt works that would distance themselves from both their subjects and himself as their maker. The form in *Illegitimate I* derives from an ornament in a wallpaper design, albeit slightly distorted and indistinctly rendered. This motif, notably, is similar to those in a decorative pattern that appears in one of the artist’s most important early works, *La Correspondance* (1985), which dates from his return to painting after a period of making films. The other featured painting from the series is based on a jogging suit from a Barbie doll that Tuymans posed in his studio, an image of “a body equal to its packaging,” as he described it. The headless, ghostly figure recalls another early important painting, *Body* (1990), which Tuymans based on a stuffed doll. These assertions of painting’s legitimacy, in short, draw some of their power from the artist’s own history.

Lungs

1998
Oil on canvas
158 × 95.5 cm
Collection of Beth Swofford



The source image for this painting is a detailed representation of a sectioned lung, specifically the mediastinal surface—the inner wall that encloses the heart—that Tuymans found in an anatomy book. He painted it using anaglyph techniques, which create a three-dimensional illusion when viewed with corresponding glasses. This work amplifies the artist's interest in depicting something of it, but the layers of representation interposed between the thing and our perception.

Petrus en Paulus (Peter and Paul)

1998
Oil on canvas
118 × 86 cm
Coll. Fundação de Serralves - Museu de Arte Contemporânea,
Porto, Portugal. Acquisition 2000



The painting *Petrus en Paulus (Peter and Paul)* is part of a group of works that refer to the Oberammergau Passion Play, which dramatizes the last period of the life of Jesus Christ. The play has been staged every ten years since the 17th century by the inhabitants of this Bavarian village, to keep a vow in gratitude for having been spared the devastations of the bubonic plague. The play became associated with Nazi propaganda and anti-Semitism after Adolph Hitler attended and praised it in the 1930s, complicating its history and tradition. Tuymans recalls having watched the play with his parents in the 1970s.

As with most of the artist's paintings, *Petrus en Paulus* is based on pre-existing visual documentation, in this case stage images taken from a brochure promoting the play. The theatrical setting of the imagery is buttressed by Tuymans's choice of painterly technique, which he intended to emulate that of the Dutch master forger Han van Meegeren (1889-1947). By highlighting a contemporary drama that sits at the intersection of religion and civic history, the artist invites reflection on the complex intersections of faith, entertainment, propaganda, and memory.

Embroidery

1999

Oil on canvas

143.5 × 183.5 cm

Private Collection, New York



Tuymans based this painting on a magazine photograph of an embroidered tablecloth. From the stylized plant pattern to the delicate embroidered fabric captured in print and finally transferred onto canvas, this decorative motif passed through several layers of media. Embroidery itself involves the repetitive act of piercing fabric with a needle, pulling thread between front and back, and creating a hidden reverse side beneath the visible image. This duality subtly invites viewers to imagine what lies beneath the surface of the canvas. By presenting this embroidery pattern as the sole composition on such a large scale, Tuymans intensifies the sense of contrast and dislocation, intentionally blurring the traditional boundaries between painting and decoration, fine art and craft.

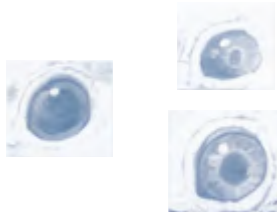
Eyes

2001

Oil on canvas

Triptych: 64 × 70 cm, 58 × 64 cm, 69 × 76 cm

Private Collection, courtesy David Zwirner



Tuymans's *Eyes*, a triptych, shows extreme close-ups of pigeon eyes based on photographs from a book on pigeon racing. Breeders often use such images to evaluate a bird's breed and characteristics. The work itself was inspired by a trip to Brittany, France, where the large dovecotes of local chateaus left a lasting impression on the artist. Before the French Revolution, pigeons were a valued food source, and in many areas, only the nobility were allowed to keep them. The size of a dovecote was a mark of privilege, reflecting the wealth and status of aristocratic families. Beyond food, pigeons were used for racing and as messengers, although when the Revolution broke out, pigeons were some of the first targets eradicated to prevent the spread of information. Historically, pigeons of different colors have held various cultural meanings. While both the white dove and the common gray pigeon belong to the *Columbidae* family, the white dove often symbolizes peace and the Holy Spirit in Christian iconography, while the gray pigeon has come to be associated with urban chaos and disease. In *Eyes*, Tuymans focuses on the gray pigeon, magnifying its organs of sight until they fill each frame. These intensely large, almost monstrous pupils no longer resemble those of the familiar birds we see in squares and streets; instead, their sharp, watchful stares fill the gallery, evoking a sense of surveillance as they seem to quietly scrutinize the viewer.

Slide #1

2002
 Oil on canvas
 203.5 × 134 cm
 The Rachofsky Collection

**Exhibit #5**

2002
 Oil on canvas
 124.3 × 158.4 cm
 Fruchter Family Collection



In 2002, Tuymans completed a series of three paintings based on projected slides on the walls of his studio, with *Slide #1* being the first. The slides themselves show no images; instead, they cast only a rectangular patch of light onto the white wall, symbolizing the absence of representation. As Tuymans explains, “I believe that images continually represent their own endpoint without lending it form.” The artist produced a number of works with artificial light sources during this period, including television screens, fluorescent lights, and neon signs. For Tuymans, light embodies a sense of detachment that continually “eradicates the image,” and indeed his works are often described as bleached out or intentionally faded. This series was first exhibited in the 2002–03 show “NIKS,” a title drawn from Dutch slang for “nothing.” The carefully rendered patches of light in these works serve as tributes to understatement.

Exhibit #5, also from the “NIKS” exhibition, explores a different subject. Here, Tuymans presents a diorama from a Japanese natural history museum featuring taxidermied monkeys engaged in what appear to be mating rituals. While this piece similarly questions the nature of representation, the subject is not absent; instead, it is bathed in an almost overwhelming luminosity. The light creates a blurred, ethereal atmosphere that evokes the Polaroid photographs Tuymans took at the museum, which served as his source material.

The Nose

2002

Oil on canvas

30 × 24 cm

Jill and Dennis A. Roach, Beverly Hills



Portraiture has been a consistent theme in Tuymans's career, whether he is depicting the faces of nameless individuals from medical textbooks, significant historical figures who are reduced to symbols within broader political narratives, or composite, anonymous subjects. *The Nose* is based on an image of a man that the artist subtly altered, transforming a smile into an ambiguous expression that conveys both sorrow and solemnity. Tuymans has described this figure as “almost Christlike,” as it stylistically references a genre of religious painting that emphasizes Jesus’s humanity and suffering. He painted the work shortly after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States, and has noted that the man’s physiognomy could seem to be Middle Eastern. The subject’s indistinct identity in fact seems significant, given the heightened sense of threat that Westerners assigned to certain ethnicities of the region during the period after the terror attacks. The painting first appeared in print, before being exhibited. It was used as the cover of a major monograph on the artist, published in 2003; a Chinese version of the book circulated here, and helped to introduce Tuymans’s work to audiences in China.

Morning Sun

2003

Oil on canvas

156 × 180 cm

Private Collection, courtesy David Zwirner



In *Morning Sun*, Tuymans portrays a scene instantly recognizable to Chinese audiences. At the center of the composition, framed by a dark circular structure, stands the iconic Oriental Pearl Tower, surrounded by the skyscrapers of the Lujiazui Finance and Trade Zone. The Huangpu River glistens in yellow-green tones under the sunlight, while a cargo ship moves through the foreground. The somewhat sparse Pudong skyline hints at the painting’s early date, relative to the area’s subsequent development. In fact, Tuymans painted this work in 2003 after his first visit to China, based on a photograph published in the *Financial Times* newspaper. The title *Morning Sun* not only indicates that the photograph was taken at dawn but also alludes to China’s rapid ascent. At that time, the country had just joined the World Trade Organization and was experiencing major economic growth, alongside extensive urban renewal efforts in preparation for the 2008 Summer Olympics. The photograph itself was taken from the Garden Bridge, a century-old steel bridge symbolizing the beginning of Shanghai’s modernization and industrialization. The circular frame along the edges of the composition likely represents the bridge’s structure, which acts as a telescope for witnessing Shanghai’s development—and that of the country more broadly—at that pivotal moment.

The Secretary of State

2005

Oil on canvas

45.7 × 61.9 cm

The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Fractional and promised gift of David and Monica Zwirner, 2006



In 2005, Tuymans painted Condoleezza Rice during her first year as the United States Secretary of State. In this work, he aimed not only to capture Rice's ambivalent presence but also to explore the layers of media discourse surrounding her. As the first African-American woman to hold this position, she was named by *Forbes* magazine as the "most powerful woman in the world" that same year. Tuymans based the painting on an official image he found online, which presents Rice in an unposed, close-up view that contrasts sharply with the polished, press-approved images of her that were typically seen. He remarked that the work "has the feeling of a flat screen and is about the size of a television"—the medium through which images of public figures were relentlessly circulated and scrutinized at the time of this painting, before social media.

Epcot

2007

Oil on canvas

154.3 × 222.9 cm

Private Collection, USA



Turtle

2007

Oil on canvas

3.68 × 5.09 m

Private Collection, courtesy David Zwirner



Tuymans has explored a range of themes in his paintings, and in his 2008 solo exhibition, "Forever, The Management of Magic," he directed his exacting gaze toward the globally influential yet distinctly American culture of Disney. The artist perceives the Disney empire as a "spiritual utopia;" he is particularly interested in how Disney transforms entertainment into ideology, and the hegemonic control over economic and cultural capital that it embodies.

With *EPCOT*, a key work from that exhibition, Tuymans depicts a disintegrating utopia. The painting takes its title from the futuristic urban planning project initiated by Walt Disney (1901-1966) in the 1960s—the "Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow," or EPCOT. Disney envisioned creating a utopian community on a vast, undeveloped tract of land near Orlando, Florida, as a response to America's urban crises. However, this ambitious project was shelved after Disney's death in 1966 and later transformed into the EPCOT theme park, which opened at Walt Disney World Resort in 1982. Here, Tuymans presents an elevated view of the EPCOT model, with the 30-story Cosmopolitan Hotel and Convention Center towering at its center. The model emits a pale, almost UFO-like glow, floating in a dark, indistinct void.

Another key work from this project, also exhibited in this gallery, is *Turtle*, which depicts a now-defunct mechanical float from Disneyland's Main Street Electrical Parade. The largest piece in the exhibition, it starkly contrasts with the vibrant, joyful colors of the parade, casting a ghostly, cold white light against the darkness. This interest in parades, and the artifice and ideology of such civic and commercial pagentry, recurs in other works, including those painted after the flower parade held in Tuymans's mother's village (*Corso II*). But in *Turtle*, as in many of his works with American subjects, Tuymans casts the grand vision of the American Dream as a series of fuzzy, opaque and disenchanting reflections.

Against the Day

2008

Oil on canvas

Diptych: 220 × 171 cm, 232 × 173 cm

Private Collection



Tuymans portrays a mysterious scene: in the dark, a man digs in the ground. The setting is the corner of the garden behind the artist's old home, but the identity of the man and the purpose of his actions remain unclear. The title *Against the Day* comes from Thomas Pynchon's 2006 novel, whose themes of imitation and spectacle resonate with Tuymans's explorations of perception and ambiguity in painting. The artist described it as a work that contains "an interval of time." The two panels show, in his words, "one and the same person, each time in a specific pose, almost like the pause button on a remote control."

Big Brother

2008

Oil on canvas

146 × 224 cm

Private Collection, courtesy David Zwirner



The work *Big Brother* is part of a series by Tuymans that explores themes related to reality television. Adapted from the Dutch reality game show of the same name, the American version of "Big Brother" has been broadcast for almost a quarter-century since its debut in 2000. Participants live in a studio specially designed for the show, monitored 24/7 by high-definition cameras and microphones. They compete and vote to eliminate other contestants until only three remain, who share the program's cash prize. The image selected by Tuymans is a frame he captured from a television broadcast of this show. In a near monochrome scene, the contestants' beds are arranged in a circle within a round hall. The disheveled sheets suggest that the contestants might be asleep at this moment. The perspective, reminiscent of a monochromatic surveillance monitor, is taken from a slightly elevated position in the corner of the hall, transforming a private, everyday moment into a public spectacle.

This piece evokes Tuymans's recurring exploration of power structures in settings ranging from staged entertainments to prison camps. By focusing on an example of popular culture's spectacularization of private life, the artist questions the mechanisms of reality television. Does the exploitation of individual rights in the capitalist market manifest as a voluntary surrender of identity wrapped in the guise of monetary reward? Moreover, are the viewers, hidden behind their screens, colluding with capitalists, satisfying their voyeuristic desires and need for control by commodifying the humanity of others?

Instant

2009

Oil on canvas

103.5 × 70 cm

Private Collection



Instant shows a woman as she is taking a photograph with a flash. The woman, a worker at the The National ArtMuseum of China inBeijing, was visiting Tuymans in Antwerp with other colleagues from the museum; he took her picture in a restaurant at the same instant that she was photographing him. "From the start, my work geared towards the idea of memory and also the question of power," Tuymans explained. *Instant* could be a contemporary interpretation of this. Although taking photographs is commonly considered as a way to keep a trace of a person, a moment, an experience, or an emotion, the vocabulary of photography is similar to that of war and weaponry: to trigger, to take, to capture. Even if contemporary digital cameras do not function like the old analog ones, the ambivalence remains between the photographer's power and the memory contained in the images they obtain.

Technicolor

2012

Oil on canvas

199 × 150.1 cm

Private Collection, courtesy David Zwirner



Technicolor shows a strangely artificial still life, inspired by a 1913 advertising film that Tuymans discovered on YouTube. One of the earliest films to use color, its blurriness and low saturation left a strong impression on the artist. The title references both the Technicolor process and the company that brought color to cinema at the beginning of the century. In this painting, what is immediately striking is the peculiar way in which the artist played with the whites of the image. They produce an almost ghostly halo effect in the whole painting that is reminiscent of the light cast by a cinema projector.

Arena I, II, III

2014

Oil on canvas

176.c × 252.7 cm,

182.2 × 253.5 cm,

169 × 242 cm

Private Collection



This series references Tuymans's 1978 mixed-media work of the same title. In that early piece, the artist presented a shadowy voyeur watching a tense, obscure scene composed of collage fragments, somewhat obscured by a translucent screen. He filmed the work in 1980, during the period when he was focused entirely on filmmaking; this footage formed the basis for a series of six paintings that he undertook more than thirty years later. Displayed here are the first three of that group, each illuminated from varying angles by what seems to be a camera flash. In the first painting, a figure in the lower-left corner is concealed in shadow; in the second, he gradually emerges; by the third, he is fully visible. Opposite him stands a group of indistinct figures, all drawn toward a bright light at the center, hinting at a dramatic event whose origins remain elusive. Through varied depictions of the same scene, Tuymans emphasizes the constructed and mediated nature of representation. In reprising a image from his past that had already been expanded into cinema, the artist points to the complex lifespan of pictures more generally.

Murky Water

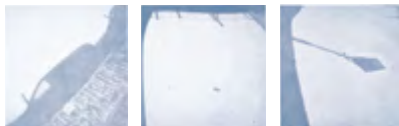
2015

Oil on canvas

Triptych: 235.5 × 235.5 cm,

237 × 232.5 cm, 235.5 × 232.5 cm

Private Collection



The starting point for this triptych was a commission by a Dutch municipality for a tapestry to decorate the town hall. Tuymans found inspiration in the town's canals, whose water is murky, littered and fetid, with a lot of algae on the surface and floating beverage cans and other garbage. As such, Tuymans proposed a theme that is anything but a source of pride for the municipality, even though the three paintings are not realistic enough to shock viewers. The artist managed to convince municipal officials that the reflections on the water (a car, a street lamp, a fence) also tell a story about the town. He first took Polaroid photographs of the canals, and these initial images have a cinematic feel, which is often the case in his work. The color palette is, in part, a reflection of the canal's murky water, which takes on the aspect of an aged mirror. The trio of canvases is also a reflection on time as it passes and "floats." "In painting, the painter's time is different from real time. We could say there is some melancholy and nostalgia, but it is somehow skewed. In this sense, it is torture. For me, torture is only effective when it's really tender."

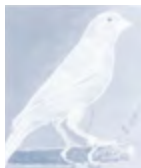
Isabel

2015

Oil on canvas

144.9 × 124 cm

He Juxing Collection/Courtesy of START Museum



Isabel is from a group of paintings that Tuymans made from photographs in a book on canaries that explains, among other things, how they can be genetically engineered to give them a different color. These birds are thus akin to clones, or even taxidermy, in any case more abstract than real since there is nothing real in the book's images. In fact, viewers can better see and feel this reality than in the original photographs, even though they were for documentary purposes. Tuymans deals with the question of the portrait and in particular the bird's eyes, as if the eyes could bring life to the subject portrayed. The paintings were first shown in 2015 in Edinburgh, Scotland, which is known for the taxidermy collection of its University.

Another history that may have been of interest to the artist involves the use of canaries to assist coal miners. At the beginning of the 20th century, miners started to bring canaries with them into the mines to detect carbon monoxide gas. Because the toxins would circulate quickly in the small bodies of the birds, their symptoms provided an early warning of the poison gas before the miners themselves became overwhelmed.

Corso II

2015

Oil on canvas

195.5 × 152.5 cm

Private Collection



Tuymans based this painting on a childhood photograph taken by his father at a parade in Zundert, a town in the south of Netherlands where Tuymans's mother is from. This is one of the few works in the exhibition related to the artist's early life. Every year in early September, intricately designed flower floats are pushed through the streets, accompanied by dances and performances. However, Tuymans's memories of the event are far from idyllic. When the photograph was taken, Tuymans was under the float along with other children. "The floats were quite low," he recalls, "so the children had to run under them and push. It was a bit like slavery." In his treatment of the image, Tuymans diverges from the vibrant colors of the actual floats, reflecting the fading nature of memory. By deliberately omitting certain details, he introduces an unfamiliar quality to the scene, creating a space for contemplation. "In order to show something," Tuymans has noted, "I paint a lot away."

Niger

2017

Oil on canvas

180.7 × 236 cm

Private Collection, Hong Kong



Tuymans has repeatedly engaged with the histories of European colonization of Africa, particularly the Belgian subjugation of Congo between 1908-1960. This painting depicts a uranium mine in northern Niger seen from the air. The country was a French colony from 1900 to 1958, and French companies have operated mines there in the subsequent decades, including at this site. As demand for nuclear power decreased in the early 2010s, however, a number of companies suspended production. By the time Tuymans made this painting, this mine had become an ornamental relic, a sculptural relief carved into the landscape. But more recently, the country's minerals have become a focus of the global competition for raw materials, and the Niger government has reasserted control over the deposits with an eye to restarting extraction.

Mother of Pearl

2018

Oil on canvas

204.6 × 159.7 cm

Elisa Nuyten Collection



Greed and vanity are recurring themes in Tuymans's work. *Mother of Pearl* is derived from a close-up of casino chips photographed in Macau. The southern coastal city was a Portuguese colony for centuries, and is today a globally renowned gambling hub. With the disordered arrangement of chips, Tuymans alludes to the volatility inherent in the "casino economy." By situating them within a black void, the artist highlights the randomness and unsustainability of wealth accumulation, reflecting on the illusion and fragility of capital.

Shenzhen

2019

Oil on canvas

213.2 × 156.4 cm

Private Collection



Tuymans has featured China-related subjects in his paintings since the beginning of his career. *Shenzhen* is inspired by a video of a celebratory event that Tuymans watched on his laptop, in which clusters of balloons drift into the sky above the densely packed skyscrapers of the titular city. Notably, he includes the icons for “rewind,” “play,” and “fast forward” that were visible on the screen when he captured the still image, adding a layer of distance to the image, and making clear its inscription in time.

Tuymans has long been a close observer of China’s development. As one of China’s Special Economic Zones, Shenzhen has rapidly transformed from a remote town in the 1980s to a bustling modern metropolis of 20 million people. Recent years have also seen the city become a major hub for China’s technology and innovation industries, and this association with entrepreneurial advancement lends additional meaning to the “fast forward” icon that appears in the image. Building on themes from *Morning Sun*, Tuymans explores the complex and accelerating interplay between past, present and future in the growth of urban space and China’s economic development.

Abe

2022

Oil on linen

154.94 × 117.48 cm

Glenstone Museum, Potomac, Maryland



Abe shows a ghostly, mask-like figure rendered in soft focus, resembling a hollow skull illuminated by bright light. The image is derived from a mechanical figure of the American president Abraham Lincoln (1809-1865) that features in the stage show “Great Moments with Mr. Lincoln,” which has been performed at Disneyland since 1965. Following upon his works *Turtle* and *EPCOT*, Tuymans once again turned his attention to Walt Disney and his legacy. Lincoln is often considered to have been among the most important American leaders, and was particularly admired by Walt Disney. As president, he led the United States through the Civil War, abolished slavery, strengthened federal authority, and advanced the modernization of the American economy. In Disney’s stage show, the animatronic figure of Lincoln reenacts his famous Gettysburg Address speech, which the president delivered in the aftermath of an important Civil War battle. This work was originally made by Tuymans for his solo exhibition in New York in 2023. The degraded and indistinct representation conveys an unsettling atmosphere, highlighting the complex interplay between historical memory, heroic imagery, and spectacle.

Bell Boy

2023

Oil on canvas

157.2 × 93.2 cm

collection museum Voorlinden, Wassenaar, The Netherlands



Bell Boy draws from found footage taken in Dresden, Germany in the late 1930s. While the title suggests the figure is a bellboy—a hotel attendant who provides services such as carrying guests' luggage—his stance and uniform quietly hint at a military posture and attire. Consequently, the painting also echoes the recurring themes of sublimated violence and trauma present in Tuymans's previous work, despite the figure's detachment from any specific historical context or location. The artist's focus on the elements of the worker's dress continues his longstanding interest in the ways that uniforms efface individual identity and communicate characteristics of class, political, religious and national affiliation. *Bell Boy* shows the unidentified man turning toward the darkness—is it a traumatic past he's confronting, or an uncertain future?

The Barn

2023

Oil on canvas

319.8 × 254.2 cm

collection museum Voorlinden, Wassenaar, The Netherlands



The Barn is one of the newest works in this exhibition. Placed near the entrance to the exhibition alongside his earliest paintings, the arrangement establishes a cohesive narrative that is traceable throughout Tuymans's career. Despite the painting's title, it is based on an image of an American covered bridge that the artist encountered on YouTube and later photographed. Though covered bridges originated in Germany, they are an evocative symbol of the American landscape; most were built in the mid-19th century. Tuymans's schematic approach to the picture evokes the "paint-by-numbers" kits that offer simple instruction to amateur artists and craftspeople—a vernacular pastoral image in a popular form. Reinforcing these characteristics, Tuymans includes in the composition the archive of his iPhone camera that appears at the bottom of his phone screen. "I don't think it's smart for artists to fight new media," the artist has said. "Why should you? You can't win, so it's much better to work it into your toolbox."

Texts by Peter Eleey and Jiehua Huang, with support from Jiashu Zou and Jennifer Kwong, and thanks to Caroline Bourgeois and Palazzo Grassi / Pinault Collection.

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“Luc Tuymans: The Past” Public Programs

UCCA has curated a series of dynamic public programs in conjunction with the “Luc Tuymans: The Past.” In the exhibition’s preparation phase, artist Luc Tuymans delivered a talk at Peking University’s Yenching Academy, which was followed by dialogue with a literary and visual arts scholar. On opening day, Peter Eleey, UCCA Curator-at-Large and the curator of this exhibition, will introduce the works and curatorial concepts on-site, offering insights into the process of organizing the exhibition in collaboration with the artist. In January 2025, UCCA will collaborate with Cici Xiang and art platform “C for ABC ” to host a discussion on “Painting and the Everyday,” in which interested speakers active in artistic creation are invited to participate.

Luc Tuymans’s work consistently examines the theme of images. The public programs during the exhibition will further delve into his research and creation in this field. Thematic conversation will feature scholars of visual culture and art history to discuss Tuymans’s innovative visual strategies. A Cinema Arts program themed “Images and Mirrors” will showcase his cinematic works, presenting films directed by the artist himself, as well as documentaries chronicling his artistic career and major exhibitions. A special guided tour will provide visitors with intriguing perspectives on Tuymans’ painting world. For the latest information on our events, please refer to UCCA’s official website and social media such as the UCCA official WeChat account.

Schedule

Artist Talk

📍 Yenching Academy of
Peking University
2024.11.12 Tue 18:00-20:00

Opening Guided Tour

📍 UCCA Exhibition Hall
2024.11.16 Sat

Conversation

Exploring Visual Strategies in
the Art of Luc Tuymans
📍 UCCA Auditorium
2024.12.1 Sun

Cinema Arts

Images and Mirrors:
The Film World of
Belgian Artist Luc Tuymans
📍 UCCA Auditorium
2025.1.4 Thur

Special Program

C for ABC: Painting and the Everyday
📍 UCCA Auditorium
2025.1

Special Guided Tour

📍 UCCA Exhibition Hall
2025.2

UCCA Kids

Inspired by the current exhibition, UCCA Kids presents a special series of art workshops for guiding children in appreciating the unique artworks of Belgian artist Luc Tuymans. These workshops are designed around Tuymans's distinctive artistic style, characterized by muted tones, blurred imagery, and rich emotional depth, these themed courses encourage children to explore the subtle and complex layers of emotional expression in art. Guided through Tuymans's works, young participants will discover the extraordinary within the ordinary, grasping how pale hues and blank spaces can express powerful and deep ideas. The workshops are divided into four thematic modules, each focused on exploring a different aspect of Tuymans's artistic approach and expression. Through hands-on projects, children will experiment with oil painting techniques to appreciate the diversity and depth of art. Throughout this process, they will not only gain insight into Luc Tuymans's artistic language but also develop their own unique style, creating artworks that reflect their individual creativity and vision.

For more information, please visit the UCCA Kids official WeChat account.

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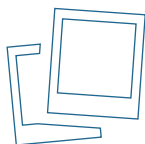
UCCA membership offers the perfect opportunity to more deeply experience all that China's leading institution of contemporary art has to offer. Our membership program offers access to our many locations without the purchase of additional tickets, special welcoming gifts, priority exhibition entry, members-only events, great savings and discounts, exclusive benefits for families, and more. When you become a UCCA Member, you are making a significant contribution to our mission of fostering the development of contemporary art in China.



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