

When
Luc
Tuyman
Wilhelm
Sasha...

How to get a big canvas through a small door,
what a cramped, dirty studio does for your love life,
resisting the stupidity of art critics, a pro-smoking campaign
(and other secrets of painting)

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INTERIOR, NIGHT. Luc Tuymans's high-ceilinged flat in the centre of Antwerp. There are no paintings on the walls, but a faded photograph on a shelf bears a close resemblance to Tuymans's *Der Diagnostische Blick 1* (1992). Tuymans and Wilhelm Sasnal are seated across from each other at a glass-topped dining-room table. A digital voice recorder sits between them, next to an overflowing ashtray, two packs of Marlboros, a pack of Kents and a Zippo lighter. The Marlboros are Tuymans's; a notoriously heavy smoker, he just bought a share in a late-night bar in Antwerp as a hedge against stricter anti-smoking bylaws. The Kents are Sasnal's, bought at the corner shop. He only smokes when he's nervous.

Wilhelm Sasnal: We were talking about Jordan Kantor's *Artforum* article ['The Tuymans Effect', Jordan Kantor, *Artforum*, November 2004; Kantor examines Tuymans's 'profound influence' on the works of Sasnal, Eberhard Havekost and Magnus von Plessen].

Luc Tuymans: 'The Tuymans Effect' – basically, it's ludicrous. Is it a way to promote things? Is the art market behind it? If you look at each painter in that article individually you see enormous differences. When I started I had the same problem – the first thing they came up with was Gerhard Richter, which is not the case. OK, I don't dislike Richter, you could say that he opened the way, and that has an art-historical value, but in terms of the painting itself, and in terms of process, I do not see the resemblance.

WS: Comparing painters is stupid, but people in places like *Artforum* need to look at different artists through one set of glasses. I think he wrote it to help people understand, but people came away only looking at our work through your work. I really struggled with this three years ago, when you had the show at Tate [Modern] and I had a show at Camden [Arts Centre]. The article had just come out and I spoke to Kantor, and in fact, his intentions were good. Have you seen his paintings?

LT: No.

WS: His work is very close to yours. Perhaps even a tribute.



LT: A piece of yours that struck me in *The Painting of Modern Life* group show at the Hayward Gallery [October to December 2007] was the ski jump [*Kielce (Ski Jump)*, 2003]. It has a different sensitivity and feel because of its stylisation, which is different to some of the harsher ones. I could see how it could remind people of other paintings [of mine]. What was interesting was to finally see the scale of your work. I had never actually seen them before. Like with *Airplanes* (1999), for example, the size of it is really important. The show is well thought out but would have been stronger with less work. But again, I was not the curator of the show, but I think the juxtapositions could have been sharper, more legible.

WS: Have you curated?

LT: Yes, and will again.

WS: Honestly, I don't like hanging a show, putting works up on the wall. The work I like the most is in the studio.



LT: I have hung every one of my shows, and I have done about 75.

WS: I hang my own, of course, but never a show of other artists.

LT: An artist-curated show is dynamic, very immediate and direct, with completely different propositions. And it's essential, too, as so often shows are conceptualised, and the artist is reduced to the illustrator of a concept.

WS: Sometimes I curate, but only in my head, and not necessarily with art – sometimes with music and films. I guess I find this a way to link to the other disciplines. Do you take photographs?

LT: Never, because they distort my memory too much. Or rather, I like the distortion of my memory. I would rather have the inconsistency of the memory as I have the inconsistency within the work.

WS: Where do you look for subject material?

LT: Most of my thoughts come in the shower. I take a long time to wake up, two hours of drinking coffee, thinking, smoking. Smoking is very important. Then ideas sort of formulate, and I look for them, for possible leads, everywhere. Sometimes things just come through

accidentally. There are also images that I didn't understand at the time, which weren't painted until, say, five or six years later.

WS: That delay in understanding why an image strikes you happens to me, too.

LT: Painted time is like a different zone. This is why I don't believe that a painting – although I have been accused of it many times now – can be truly topical. A painting's physicality gives it a different persistence and a different perception. If you ask people to remember a painting and a photograph, their description of the photograph is far more accurate than that of the painting. Strangely enough, there is a physical element intertwined with the painting. It shakes loose an emotional element within the viewer, which is different than with a photograph.

WS: Painting from a photo makes it anonymous. It lets us look at it honestly, not as a particular. Photos are everywhere, of and by everyone.

LT: That is similar to a remark Richter once made – that painting in that way liberated him from the subject. By using photography, he was liberated by its banality. To a point I think that is true, but I am also very sceptical. Because you do, or at least I do, want to get across the main meaning of what that painting is about, what the image is about. Not that I want to ram it down anybody's throat. This is another accusation. People say that without my explanations you can't understand the work. I am accused of being arrogant. It is very strange. Journalists love you to talk about your work, and then they sort of hate you for doing it, probably because you did it better than they did. Sometimes the themes I take on are reduced to personal history, which is another deluding process. And then you have all the 'failing' of the imagery,

“I won't do these interviews, because they just backfire”



the 'representation of representation', the negatives accumulated by critics, ranging from 'sinister' to 'cynical'. These are the 'glasses' people like Kantor wear.

WS: The title is a hint. There is a certain poetry between the image and the title.

LT: When I started out, it was not done. Some of the criticism comes from this, that the work should speak for itself. Of course, as contemporary artists, you have to position yourself within the social, because contextualisation is what makes art contemporary. But when confronted with the stupidity of nitwits trying to find the 'real' honesty or the 'real' person behind it, I go ballistic. I came to the conclusion that I won't talk anymore. That I won't do these interviews, because they just backfire. What I say is not my work. I am not my work. And I think that is a self-evident and basic understanding of the visual. You are not the visual.

WS: But I wonder if you can deny what is said about your works? Mostly I am misunderstood, and people put words in my mouth, things I hadn't even thought of. But I don't deny them. I let people think what they want.

LT: As long as it concerns the work. As long as it doesn't concern all the other things.

WS: With me, this misunderstanding happens when everything is put in the context of communism. Which is bullshit. Here is this Polish artist, exhibiting in Europe, he must deal with communist issues. But I don't. Art doesn't 'deal' with anything. It is about asking questions and getting answers.

LT: Exactly. Life is politics, basically, but you don't just go to a gallery and put the words 'art' and 'politics' on the wall. An artwork should point in more than one direction, not be this sort of placating, self-demonstrating, witnessing element. It is not important to convince people; they should convince themselves, they should look with their own eyes. A painting is not this type of bucket spiel that you deliver. It is far more complicated than that.

WS: There are some issues you can't be indifferent about. Whenever I drive through Poland and see its monuments, I am aware of how its soil is soaked with blood. But some issues are hidden or not hidden, ▶







disclosed or not disclosed. I'm from the Eastern Bloc, yes, but the music I listened to, the films I watched, were the same as for Westerners. I don't think art is the best medium to, not indoctrinate, but to tell people your opinion. But you can't be indifferent.

LT: Art should be localised. I have strong chauvinistic feelings for Antwerp, because it has been the city of the smart-arses since the sixteenth century. But I could see myself working in a city like Krakow, or Warsaw, because of the quality of light.

WS: Light doesn't matter for me. When I worked in Marfa, Texas, it didn't make a difference. The pieces didn't have anything to do with the place. The way I worked, Googling, it was the same thing I did at home. And honestly, I don't like winter in Poland. You just wait for it to be over.

LT: When I was younger I used to work a lot at night, but daylight gives me the reality of things, a sharper, clearer understanding of the visual. Even if you work from a photograph during daylight, you will see different things. But painting for me is a habit, a very obsessive occupation, 24 hours a day.

WS: Yes, making painting is not just touching the canvas.

LT: No. It is continuous. But once you create a style, you lose this habit,



the natural element. That is why I get fed up with the whole discourse about painting being legitimate, being dead or alive. Of course it is very much alive, because people do it.

WS: You once said to me that you want your works to look like they were painted 50 years ago. But I think also, it is sort of about being styleless, making things look timeless.

LT: Yes, I think that is basically the aim of every painting.

WS: Do you listen to music when you paint? I tried books on tape but couldn't focus. But I listen to music and the radio.

LT: I never bought a record in my life. I never put on the radio. I rented a studio for 30 years, and I used to live there, too. It is very small and horrible smelling because of the paint – so bad that every relationship I had was a one-night stand. And I fucked up many works by just being there constantly, which is suffocating. Now I have a larger studio, and it is fabulous to have all this space. I was afraid it would change my habits, but it didn't.

WS: My space imposes limits – 200 by 220 centimetres – the size of a painting I can get through the frame of the door.

LT: You could paint on unframed canvas, as I do.

“I couldn't look at old paintings after I had finished school... I wanted to burn them”

WS: Do you know from the very beginning what the painting is going to look like?

LT: Yes. I never project anything. When I start to work, I plan it and I paint the lightest colour first. I have the size in my head, so I nail up a prepared canvas that's a little bit bigger. Then I draw the real size of the image, measuring as I go and drawing straight into the wet paint. And then I wipe it away and start to paint. I can change things a bit, a millimetre or centimetre, but the format never changes. And when the image is right, after the day is over, I paint a white ribbon around it to focus it.

WS: How many paintings do you have on the wall at one time?

LT: Normally it is for a show, so ten or twelve. You are influenced by the other works, they help you stay in the same mode, but I never work on two at the same time.

WS: Sometimes the painting paints itself. I don't control it, and it becomes something else, but I don't mind. There are failures, too, of course, but I don't mind failures.

LT: I think failures should be allowed in the process of painting, which for me is largely about timing and precision.

WS: You know when to stop?

LT: You can easily go too far and lose it. The eyes are too cold and black, you know, too prescriptive, they don't function anymore.

WS: Do you wash over them when you are not happy with the work?

LT: I used to, I had to because I didn't have the money to buy new canvases. A painting like *Man Drinking* [1998] or *La Correspondance* [1985], there are about ten or twelve other versions underneath, but now I have the luxury to just throw them away.

WS: The piece can be more timeless when it is washed over and painted again.

LT: When you feel concentrated within the intensity of making paintings, you know exactly what you are doing. When I start to paint, it is real agony, I get nervous. The day before, I am already working up to it. Then I get to the studio, and once the image starts to emerge and come together, pleasure kicks in. And then you can see things that no other person can see. And then the most important things in the painting become these small details. Every painting has a weakness



and a breaking point, where the essence of a painting lies. In my case it is never in the centre.

WS: I'm sceptical about mastery in painting. I couldn't look at old paintings after I had finished school. I think I had three years of not going to any museums with old paintings. I wanted to burn them. Somehow I worked it through. I am freer now.

LT: As you see, I don't have any paintings here, because I can't stand to be confronted with my own work – I just see the mistakes. In a museum, I don't have a problem, but when I go to a collector's home, I sit with my back to the painting.

WS: I once went to a house where there were paintings of mine, and I didn't feel anything but indifference. They weren't mine anymore.

LT: I would like to experience that just once in my lifetime, to go to a show of my own work and look at it as somebody else's.

WS: You never keep anything for yourself?

LT: No. Not very smart, but I can't. I cannot stand to have my own work in my house. I am also not a fetishist. I just don't do that. •

See Listings for current and upcoming exhibitions of work by Luc Tuymans and Wilhelm Sasnal



WORKS
(IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)

Wilhelm Sasnal, *Kielce (Ski Jump)*, 2003
oil on canvas, collection of the artist

Luc Tuymans, *Der Architekt*, 1997
oil on canvas, 113 x 145 cm
courtesy Zeno X Gallery, Antwerp

Wilhelm Sasnal, *Untitled (Hunters)*, 2001
oil on canvas, 150 x 170cm
© the artist. Courtesy Rubell Family Collection, Miami

Luc Tuymans, *Man Drinking*, 1998
oil on canvas, 61 x 46 cm
courtesy Zeno X Gallery, Antwerp