

# *In the Dark Regions World*

"Mwana Kitoko, The beautiful White Man." Thus did the people of the Congo address their sovereign, Baudouin, king of the Belgians. Luc Tuymans painted him descending the narrow stairs of his airplane in the mid-fifties, wearing an immaculate white Navy uniform, looking just a little too stiff for the elegance of his slim figure, one hand firmly grasping his sword, his eyes hidden behind sunglasses to protect them from the sun and the intrusive gaze of others. The painting of Baudouin, *MWANA KITOKO* (2000), shows a grand entrance in bright light that oscillates between the dazzling effect of a media event and the light of the tropics. The dark lens gives the figure an insect-like appearance. The classical portrait of royalty is thus subtly undermined, like Goya's paintings of Spanish grandees. Following the composition of the background, Baudouin's tall figure is divided into small segments, painted like cubes, as if each part of this painting could become independent of all the others. The unity of design is played off against this disintegration into painterly segments.

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*My project is an effort to avert the critical gaze from the racial object to the racial subject; from the described and the imagined to the describers and imaginers; from the serving to the served. - Toni Morrison"*

In Tuymans' oeuvre, a painting often acquires additional layers of meaning through the precisely devised context of its first exhibition, frequently involving spaces that require a certain number and combination of works. Even while painting, Tuymans often has a precise notion of how the picture is to operate alone, together with others, and in the room where it is first to be presented. In his most recent cycle for the David Zwirner Gallery in New York, the full-length portrait of the monarch is placed— among others—opposite a slightly smaller three-quarter portrait of a black man titled *STATUE* (2000). The dark, shiny muscular body, clothed only in a loincloth and a turban, suddenly emerges from the darkness at a slight angle in the narrow, tall window of the picture, as if unbidden: "Dark human shapes could be made out in the distance, flitting indistinctly against the gloomy border of the forest, and near the river two bronze figures, leaning on tall spears, stood in the sunlight under fantastic headdresses of spotted skins, war-like and still in statuesque repose."<sup>2</sup>^ Something oppressively alien also overlays Tuymans' figure, as if it were not quite alive. The subject was in fact painted from a mannequin

# LUC TUYMANS' RECENT PAINTINGS

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standing in the middle of a restaurant in Antwerp. The plaster statue is not quite life-size; the subdued lighting bounces off its high-gloss surface. Only through the painting does the statue acquire a body that moves between disturbing rigidity and animation. It finally comes to life through the projections of a white viewing public. Animated by athletic successes or hip-hop, the transfiguration of the black body communicates a mood of both erotic and demonic effect.

Even in the artistic perception of whites, black people generally remain anonymous, like Joseph Conrad's nameless shapes that rise out of the darkness and sink back into it again. The lips exaggerated in size, the gaze painted to look even more "savage," and already our imaginations run wild. Luc Tuymans aims directly at these stereotypes in his picture. But he also goes a step further by not painting the figure as a passive surface of projection but rather making it active. While the king has been made anonymous through the painting, the nameless black man acquires an identity: he casts a scrutinizing and challenging look back at the voyeurs.

These two portraits in juxtaposition allude directly to the colonial history of the Belgian Congo, which recent publications have drawn out of the darkness of its long suppression.<sup>3^</sup> Between the Berlin West Africa Conference of 1885 and the year 1906, genocide, perpetrated in the Congo Free State, cost the lives of some ten million people through murder, famine, and illness. It is one of the most cynical lessons of governmental media control that Leopold II succeeded in establishing and maintaining for decades an inconceivably brutal system of forced labor under the pretext of geographical exploration and the philanthropic claim of putting an end to the slave trade. The native population was coerced into excessive exploitation of ivory and later of rubber for the tires of a nascent automobile industry by means of torture, taking women and children hostage, and deliberate mass murders.

A leopard skin spreads out across the canvas of *LEOPARD* (2000) as a texture of dark dots. As the brushstrokes rhythmically converge and drift apart, the painting acquires a skin of its own, and the legible motif is already enough to indicate that the painting is not tachist in nature but consists of painted

*Luc Tuymans*

spots. The gaze strays along the painted surface, but is then abruptly diverted into spatial illusion through the motif. Fascinated, the gaze is arrested by single spots, begins to drift away but cannot escape. Deep shadows and warming light quicken the flat skin but it seems to elude perception, as if the canvas were only a detail in close-up of a much larger scene that we will never see in its entirety and much less control. In Tuymans' distinctly cropped painting, two black hands that can just be seen at the upper left edge of the painting are spreading out the skin in front of the waiting king, whose feet barely reach into the upper right corner of the picture plane. African potentates once wore leopard skin caps as a symbol of power. Baudouin has the skin laid out like a red carpet, in order to legitimize his position as the king of two cultures. The genocide upon which his rule is based transforms the colonial symbol of domination into an index of the cannibalism of the West. The skinned animal reminds us that "civilizing the dark regions of the world" belongs to the darkest moments of enlightened civilization.

The group of works on the Congo leads into Tuymans' treatment of the Holocaust and therefore into the representation of the unthinkable. The empty room in *GAS CHAMBER* (1986) does as little to capture the event as the animal skin or the portrait of a statue does to capture suppressed history. Only when we realize what the pictures do not show, do the dimensions of the horror become palpable. Painting, like any memory, always comes too late and too soon. It mediates between the uncatchable moment of the past and a thought that springs from it. Luc Tuymans' pictures show this mediating relationship by including elements of the medial source after which they were painted: the fleetingness and the light of photographic paper, film or video stills. Several works in the current context were actually painted after selected stills from a film on Baudouin's state visit to the Congo. Fuzzy, indiscernible, or deleted areas and a cinematic focus create those gaps in a picture that activate viewers' memory.

Luc Tuymans' oeuvre is still considered largely "psychological," with criticism making use of such words as "shock" and "terror." This attitude overlooks his conceptual work, which is based on a specif

ically European consciousness of the historical determination of mental processes. His earlier work already openly explored political issues. "Heimat" (1995), an exhibition at ZENO X Gallery in Antwerp, explicitly addressed the growing presence of Antwerp's far right party, Vlaams Blok; and "Heritage" (1996) at David Zwirner Gallery in New York examined the American construction of history from a European perspective. The historical and political bias of recent works is unmistakable, as in the portrait *LUMUMBA* (2000) of Patrice Emery Lumumba (1925-1961), the first freely elected prime minister of the independent Congo Republic, who was murdered a few months after taking office by a group associated with Mobutu, which was supported by the West. Here Tuymans contributes to the current debate initiated in Belgium by the latest studies on the involvement of the Belgian government, the CIA, "and the United Nations in the assassination of Lumumba."<sup>41</sup>

Worth remembering in this connection is the fifteen-part cycle of RAF paintings by Gerhard Richter:

18. OKTOBER 1977 (1988). While Richter explicitly wanted to achieve a cathartic effect in his series— "sorrow and compassion" instead of "horror"<sup>5\*</sup>— Tuymans wants to expose what has been left unspoken, making a skeptically ideological incision in the conscious, which keeps both historical and painterly questions open without the distancing of sorrow.

Three days after Lumumba's assassination, Belgian soldiers exhumed his body and dissolved it in an acid bath. One of the soldiers later admitted to having personally saved three of his victim's teeth. The white gloves with the teeth in Luc Tuymans' painting become the *punktum* of a traumatized memory. Genocide is still beyond representation. Thus, Tuymans does not attempt to render the mountains of chopped off hands, which became the symbol of the crimes against humanity in the world-wide campaign against the colonial oppression of the Belgians around 1900. He paints the tiniest, seemingly irrelevant moments that unexpectedly appear and take root in individual memory. The paranoia of the murderers, which led to the annihilation of Lumumba's corpse, has spilled over into the painting.

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The political impact of the Congo pictures also lies in the fact that they intervene in the current debate on art from Africa at major international exhibitions. This debate is unfolding in the context of the recent wave of economic globalization and mirrors its contradictions. The focus on the decline of traditional differences through migration and global communication is juxtaposed with the demand for new cultural identities, critically sharpened by economic inequality.

Luc Tuymans' recent series of works indicates a modification in Western perception. His paintings do not pretend to speak about or on behalf of Africa. By concentrating exclusively on his own Belgian history, he escapes the danger of romanticizing the dark unknown, which typifies the art of enlightened whites. In her essay "Romancing the Shadow" on nineteenth-century American literature, Toni Morrison shows how white writers have imposed their own conflicts of identity and fantasies of liberation on a specific construction of blackness: "Black slavery enriched the country's creative possibilities. For in that construction of blackness and enslavement could be found not only the not-free but also, with the dramatic polarity created by skin color, the projection of not-me. The result was a playground for the imagination. What rose up out of collective needs to allay internal fears and to rationalize external exploitation was an American Africanism—a fabricated brew of darkness, otherness, alarm, and desire that is uniquely American. (There also exists, of course, a

European Africanism with a counterpart in colonial literature.)"<sup>61</sup> In his painting Luc Tuymans demystifies the dark regions of his own perception. The brightness, extreme to the point of painful blinding, that characterizes many of his pictures, proves to be a rejection of the purifying pathos of the shadow. Unrepresentable is not that which remains outside the realm of brightness, but rather that which eludes an overarching construction of "history." Art does not serve to underscore the global evidence of the facts, but instead addresses a particular "memory" that cannot find rest. The great impact of Tuymans' pictures does not lie in determining content but rather in focusing thought on virulent points. Between the individual works in the constellation of Congo paintings begins the process of illuminating another "dark region of the world": Europe.

(Translation: Catherine Schelbert)

1) Toni Morrison, "Disturbing Nurses and the Kindness of Sharks," in: Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York; Vintage Books, 1993), p. 90.

2) Joseph Conrad, *Youth and Heart of Darkness* (London: J. M. Dent and Sons Ltd, 1965), p.148.

3) Cf. Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror and Heroism in Colonial Africa* (Boston/New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1998).

4) Ludo de Witte, *De moord op Lumumba* (Leuven; Van Halewyck, 1999). French version: *L'assassinat de Lumumba* (Paris: Karthala, 2000).

5) Gerhard Richter in conversation with Jan Thorn-Prikker, in: *ParhetfNo.19*, 1989, p. 145.

6) Toni Morrison, "Romancing the Shadow," in: Toni Morrison, op. cit., p. 38.

LUC TUYMANS, *STATUE*, 2000,

oil on canvas, 61 x 2.5% / 01 auf Leinwand, 155 x 64 cm.

(PHOTO: FELIX TIRRY)