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THE FRANCES AND JOHN BOWES COLLECTION

SAN FRANCISCO 20 MAY 2009

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CURPR-618-01

106 **Luc Tuymans** b. 1958

Ballroom

Oil on linen

70.25 x 122.25 in (178.50 x 310.50 cm)

Executed in 2005

PROVENANCE

David Zwirner Gallery, New York

EXHIBITED

New York, David Zwirner Gallery, *Luc Tuymans: Proper*,
October 14–November 19, 2005

LITERATURE

Luc Tuymans: Proper, David Zwirner Gallery, New York,
2005, pp. 22–23, 36–37, 53, illustrated



In the face of the proverbial casualty of painting at the hands of new media, Luc Tuymans made paintings. Having made films for two years on a hiatus from painting, in the mid-1980s he returned to the endeavor with the visual language of photography in motion; his representational paintings took on the cropping, framing, and blurring of film.¹ In his work, he “specifically addresses the challenge of the inadequacy and belatedness of painting.”² Whereas film is instant, capturing gesture and atmosphere in painting takes time. Perhaps compensating for this delay in transmission that is inherent to the medium, Tuymans paints each of his works in a single day, retaining spontaneity and freshness in his oeuvre.

The artist often turns his gaze to the political, speaking from his specific—Belgian, European—location within the global. He depicts the banal but also carefully employs the iconic to address issues such as the incomprehensible horrors of the Belgian Congo or atrocities of the Holocaust. Offering a large painting of a gas chamber or a leopard-skin rug together with one of sail boats or a teacup, Tuymans creates a sense of déjà-vu in the viewer, not unlike our distant understanding of the horrific realities to which he alludes.

Ballroom is part of the larger series entitled *Proper* (2005). In these ten works, Tuymans turns his gaze toward the world’s self-proclaimed superpower to depict individual, apparently autonomous, moments. The series includes the seemingly innocuous—an ostentatious table setting, a bed canopy, tree trunks in a dark park—which begin to take on added meaning when presented with the more overtly political—the smoke of a demolished

building, and a glowering Condoleezza Rice. Cumulatively, the works create an eerie portrait of America now.³ Notably, the inception of *Proper* was engendered by Tuymans’ observation of the recent American and European ballroom dancing trend. “It’s a sign of a particular form of regression,” he says of the dance form, “a particular form of conservatism.”⁴ The first painting in the series consequently depicts a couple dancing over the state seal in the Texas capitol rotunda.

Ballroom, contrastingly, shows a deserted, modern dance hall. Along the greater part of the bottom portion of the work, an expanse of ambiguous flooring—really, a pool of paint in Tuymans’ signature nuanced color spectrum rather than a literal depiction of the dance floor—stretches up to shadowy tables and chairs on the horizon. A purple suggestion of either a chandelier catching the light, or balloons abandoned after a wedding, glimmers against the sectioned ceiling. Or perhaps the blob is just a stain. The bareness of the walls, the darkness of the corners, and the vastness of the empty space, all summon images of the past banquets and dances for which the room would have been decorated, lit, and filled with guests. Despite its specific subject, Tuymans’ loose, almost slapdash style here conjures a disembodied global concern for the social effects of US governmental policy, “the drab, underworked painting evokes a mysterious existential ennui...”⁵

A bright light emanates from the center of the canvas, revealing the outlines of palm trees and tables. Perhaps the unseen fourth wall of the ballroom contains a large window through which daylight streams, casting reflections on the floor; perhaps the brightness comes from an artificial

source. The light's intensity is so severe that it effaces its source, thereby denying the viewer a full understanding of the room as a real space. Like an over-exposed photograph, Tuymans' painting offers no additional information. Daniel Birnbaum reflects on the artist's use of light, "[m]ost of us think of light as a positive force—benevolent, beatific, illuminating—even a symbol of goodness. [...] Tuymans reminds us, it can also be harsh and corrosive. In his figurative canvases, an artificial, unflattering radiance, like the glare from a TV screen, seems to flood the imagery from behind. Sometimes," he continues, "the light is so bright that it virtually obliterates his subject matter...."⁶

Exposed to the light, the whole scene takes on the feeling of a dusty, musky hall that has somehow aged—not to the point of uselessness, but clearly past its prime nonetheless. The lowered 1960s-style soffits are undoubtedly meant to evoke the great interiors of the past by creating varied ceiling heights. However, here the feature is disproportionate to the already low-ceilinged room, and its effect is tacky rather than opulent. Similarly, the means by which the ceiling itself is assembled—common two-by-four tiles—makes the imitation elegance all the more palpable. Perhaps a new ceiling meant to update the venue was installed circa 1980s. Tuymans' delineation of several darker tiles interspersed within the ceiling grid suggests inlay acoustical tiles, or grills that circulate air. The repetitive patterns and seemingly common materials of the construction render the hall undeniably mediocre and transparently cheap. When viewed as part of the series *Proper, Ballroom* offers a subtle but cogent commentary on nearly a decade of what is now known as the Bush Era. — J.S.



Luc Tuymans, *The Secretary of State*, 2005. Oil on canvas. 17.91 x 24.21 x 1.57 in. (45.5 x 61.5 x 4 cm.) Copyright The Museum of Modern Art, 2006. Fractional and Promised Gift of David & Monica Zwirner, New York.

NOTES

1. Jemima Montagu, "Luc Tuymans," (London: Tate Modern), quoted at: <http://www.tate.org.uk/modern/exhibitions/tuymans>, accessed February 14, 2009.
2. Patricia Ellis, "About Luc Tuymans and his art" (London: Saatchi Gallery), quoted at: www.saatchi-gallery.co.uk/artists/luc_tuymans_about.htm, accessed February 14, 2009.
3. Ken Johnson, "Art in Review: Luc Tuymans," *The New York Times*, October 28, 2005.
4. Robert Ayers, "Luc Tuymans," *Artinfo*, June 20, 2006.
5. Johnson, *ibid*.
6. Daniel Birnbaum, "Luc Tuymans talks about his 'security' series," *Artforum*, October 1998, 107.