

Nice. Luc Tuymans is curated by Josef Helfenstein and Toby Kamps.

This exhibition is generously supported by Louisa Stude Sarofim; The Brown Foundation, Inc.; Houston Endowment Inc.; The John R. Eckel, Jr. Foundation; Marilyn Oshman; Mark Wawro and Melanie Gray; The George and Mary Josephine Hamman Foundation; Baker Botts L.L.P.; Bank of America; Clare Casademont and Michael Metz; Paul and Janet Hobby; Gensler; Russell Reynolds Associates; Lea Weingarten; and the City of Houston.

PUBLIC PROGRAM

A Conversation

Friday, September 27, 2013, 7:00 p.m.

Director Josef Helfenstein and Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art Toby Kamps are joined by Luc Tuymans in a discussion of the exhibition.

BOOK

Portraits. Luc Tuymans

Essays by Toby Kamps and Robert Storr, with contributions by Susan Sutton and Clare Elliott
128 pp., 62 color illustrations
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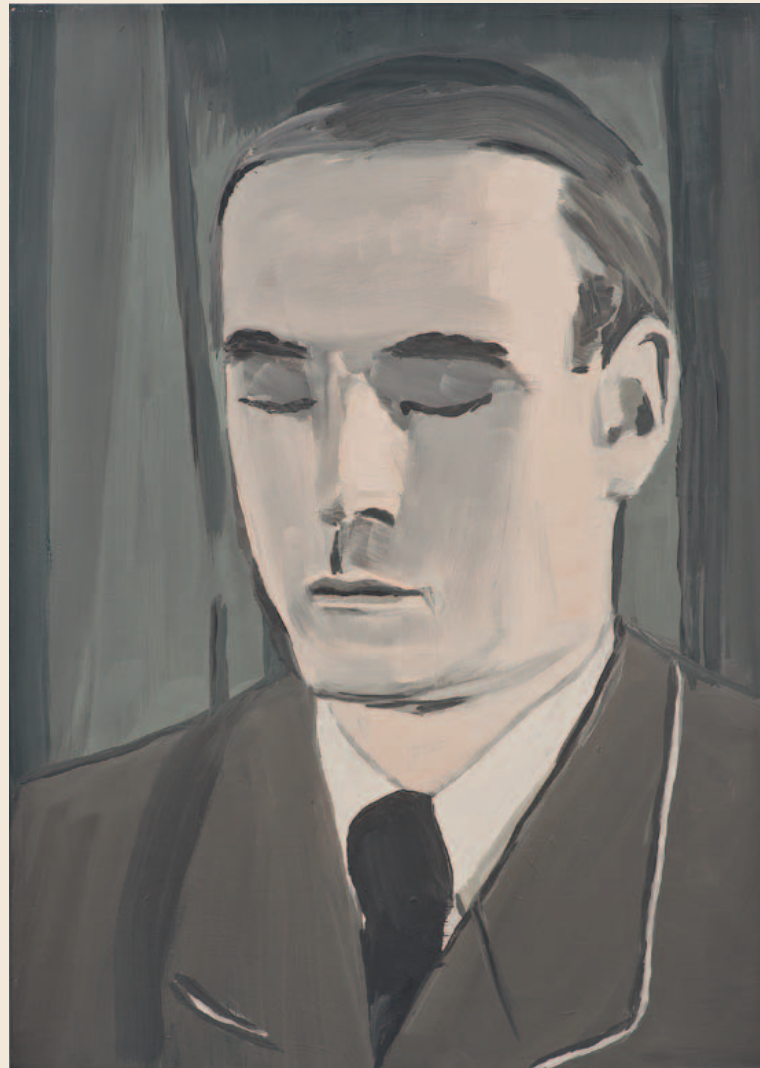
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front cover:
Luc Tuymans, *Secrets*, 1990. Oil on canvas, 20½ x 14¾ inches (52 x 37 cm). Private collection, Courtesy of Zeno X Gallery, Antwerp. © 2013 Studio Luc Tuymans. Image courtesy of Studio Luc Tuymans

THE MENIL COLLECTION

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Nice. LUC TUYMANS

The Menil Collection
September 27, 2013–January 5, 2014

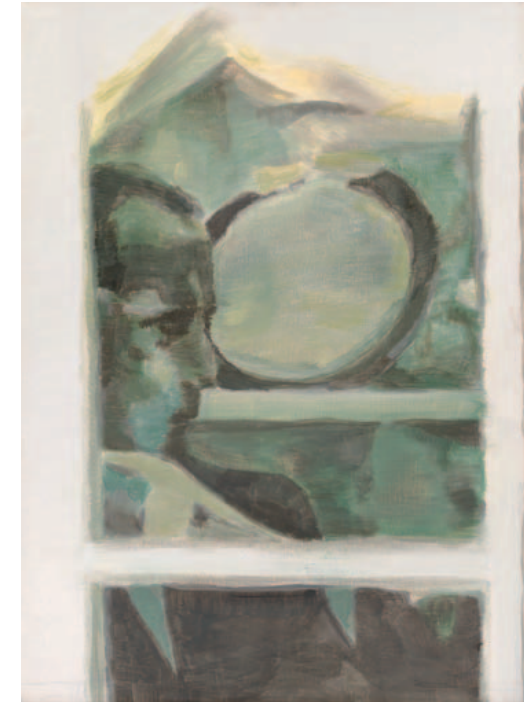
Belgian artist Luc Tuymans is widely regarded as one of the world's most important painters of modern life and memory. Painted thinly, usually in his signature palette of milky yellows, grays, and greens, his realistic images explore fraught political and psychological topics. The artist fearlessly tackles a broad range of troublesome subjects, from the Holocaust to Flemish and American nationalism to post-9/11 paranoia. He continually reaches into the sore spots of contemporary consciousness to create images that have been described as dream-like or haunted.

Much has been written about Tuymans's thematic exhibitions and his roles as a catalyst for the revival of history painting, an icon for artists exploring realism, and a social provocateur. Yet to date there has been no comprehensive look at an important and multifaceted subject recurring throughout his work: the portrait. By placing the artist's portraits in dialogue with a selection of related works from the Menil Collection, *Nice. Luc Tuymans* investigates the human likeness as a critical component of Tuymans's oeuvre and examines the subject's larger role in art history.

Since the start of his career in the late 1970s, Tuymans has painted hundreds of likenesses—of himself, family members, characters from films and plays, anonymous individuals, and all manner of historical and public figures, major and minor. Superficially, most of these images hew to traditional ideas of portraiture. They are representations of specific individuals highlighting the face that contain clues about his or her character, time, and social status. In spirit, however, Tuymans's portraits, like all his images, are enigmatic and contrarian from both visual and moral standpoints. They defy definitions and expectations.

Adapted from photographs, films, and print and Internet sources, most of the artist's portraits are eerie re-imaginings of subjects already interpreted by his own camera or by other artists—painters, photographers, movie directors, or actors. The source material is subtly transformed through disjunctive crops, blurs, and compositional and narrative shifts, and the depictions become unsettling entities that seem to exist outside of time and place. Most uncannily, though, these likenesses coolly resist delivering what we crave from the genre: a glimpse of inner life. Instead, they replace emotional and pictorial depth with the artist's own brand of factuality and flatness. Of his dispassionate approach, Tuymans says:

I don't want to make portraits on a psychological level. I take all the ideas out of individuality and just leave the shell, the body. To make a portrait of someone on a psychological level, for me, is an impossibility; I am much more interested in the idea of masks, of creating a blindfolded space of mirrors.¹



Luc Tuymans, *Self-Portrait*, 1994. Oil on canvas, 25% x 18¾ inches (65.1 x 46.4 cm). Private collection, Courtesy of Zeno X Gallery, Antwerp. © 2013 Studio Luc Tuymans. Image courtesy of Studio Luc Tuymans

Tuymans admits, however, that his portraits are not entirely without emotional content. The painter, who usually serves as his own curator and interlocutor, organizing, installing, and naming his solo exhibitions, sees his career as a sustained investigation of the uncomfortable aspects of civilization, with projects concerned with, for example, the Holocaust (*Disenchantment*, 1991) or Belgium's colonial embroilment in the Congo (*Mwana Kitoko: The Beautiful White Man*, 2000). Much of the unsettling effect of his images stems from these overarching projects that occur both on and beyond the canvas. The people portrayed are simultaneously individuals and set pieces in the dramas of the modern age.

Nice brings thirty oil-on-canvas portraits (some fit the definition more traditionally than others) by Tuymans together with twenty-five portraits, masks, carved heads, funerary images, devotional figures, and abstract paintings from the Menil Collection. Tuymans's paintings were made between 1990 and 2012 in studios in his hometown of Antwerp. The Menil's works date from around 1200 BCE to 1968 CE and come from the ancient Mediterranean Basin, Africa, the Pacific Islands, Europe, and North America. Placed in dialogue with one another, the works illustrate both the incisive vision of one of today's most important painters as well as the manifold significances of the human face and

form. The artist’s goal is to create what he calls an “image engine,”² a complete environment and a unified picture from many images.

Tuymans, who conceived the exhibition layout, places the works in affinitive groups that, he says, explore primary themes in his work: death, power, politics, altruism, and religion and ritual. Among the many striking juxtapositions in *Nice* are the pairings of two mummy portraits in wax-based encaustic paint from Roman-occupied Egypt with Tuymans’s images of an unknown man and woman derived from funeral cards he found on the street; a group of four carved African heads with blank, shut, or reflective eyes believed to function as spiritual conduits with the artist’s portrait of a girl based on a speculative image of a serial killer’s victim created by Soviet forensic scientists (*Evidence*, 2005); and French painter Jean-Baptiste Greuze’s lively portrait of Enlightenment philosopher Denis Diderot from the 1760s with a self-portrait, *Iphone*, 2008, in which Tuymans’s face is obscured by the flash of a smartphone camera.

All manner of personalities populate the exhibition. Tuymans’s portraits include identifiable figures such as former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice (*The Secretary of State*, 2005), Belgian nationalist writer Ernest Claes (*A Flemish Intellectual*, 1995), and American white supremacist Joseph Milteer (*The Heritage VI*, 1996). But he also paints anonymous individuals taken from images in medical textbooks, forensic photographs, and ads in sex magazines. The figures in Tuymans’s



Jean-Baptiste Greuze, *Portrait of Denis Diderot*, ca. 1760–67. Oil on canvas, 23 3/8 x 19 1/4 inches (60 x 48.6 cm). The Menil Collection, Houston, Gift of Michael Zilkha in honor of Louisa Stude Sarofim. Photo: Paul Hester



Luc Tuymans, *The Secretary of State*, 2005. Oil on canvas, 17 7/8 x 24 1/4 inches (45.4 x 61.6 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Fractional and promised gift of David and Monica Zwirner, 2006. © 2013 Studio Luc Tuymans. Image courtesy of Studio Luc Tuymans

paintings are reinterpreted with a gimlet eye and reflect his critical take on the state of humanity and the intricate chains of causality shaping world affairs. As complements to his own works, the artist has selected a wide range of portraits from the Menil Collection, including Andy Warhol’s 1965 silkscreen images of Jermayne McAgy, a legendary curator and important mentor to the de Menils; René Iché’s life mask of Surrealist leader André Breton from the 1950s; and French painter Christian Bérard’s loose, colorful depiction of a young ballerina, *Portrait of Tamara Toumanova*, 1931.

To these representations of known figures, Tuymans has added a diverse selection of depictions of the human face from various histories. Masks, busts, and carved heads in ceramic, metal, stone, and wood from Africa, the Americas, ancient Greece and Rome, and medieval Europe testify to the diversity of human self-conceptions and ideas of transcendence and spirituality. Tuymans also includes several twentieth-century paintings that explore abstraction as a means to suggest identity and states of mind. Max Ernst’s *Euclid*, 1945, conflates attributes of two ancient Greek Euclids, the well-known mathematician and the lesser-known, cross-dressing philosopher, to question the idea of depicting long-dead historical figures. Pablo Picasso’s *Femme au fauteuil rouge* (*Woman in a Red Armchair*), 1929, reduces a female nude to a psychosexual jumble of jagged teeth and breasts. And Yves Klein’s *Untitled*

(*Monogold*), ca. 1960, and Ad Reinhardt’s *Abstract Painting*, 1954–1960, 80 x 50, entirely abstract images in glowing gold leaf and dark, smoky blacks and blues, respectively, represent opposite poles in the attempt to conjure absolute states of being, one outwardly and the other inwardly directed.

The title of this exhibition, *Nice*, occurred to the artist during a conversation in the museum director’s capacious, treetop-level office. It implies a larger investigation, one touching on the legacy of the Menil Collection, its founders, and the European-American humanist legacy. It is a typically slippery Tuymansian response to a complex situation. As he elaborated in a telephone conversation:

The Menil is in sharp contrast with the reality around it. It is a kind of theme park where race, cultural difference, gender come together under one roof. . . . *Nice*, which itself is an image with tremendous meaning and also non-meaning, is meant to be an extreme reality check.

Certainly, relatively few of the personalities depicted in *Nice* seem to be enjoying the mythical “nice day” so often wished upon residents of Texas and the United States. Instead, the exhibition’s anti-pantheon of faces serves as a multivalent memento mori. In *Nice*, Tuymans attempts



Head, Nuu-chah-nulth, west coast of Vancouver Island, British Columbia. Wood with paint, shell, and human hair, 6 1/4 x 5 3/8 x 4 3/4 inches (15.9 x 13.7 x 12.1 cm). Rock Foundation, New York. Photo: Paul Hester



Pablo Picasso, *Femme au fauteuil rouge* (*Woman in a Red Armchair*), 1929. Oil on canvas, 25 3/8 x 21 1/4 inches (65 x 54 cm). The Menil Collection, Houston. © 2013 Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: Hickey-Robertson, Houston

to make a kind of “abstraction of the visual” that cannot be entirely formulated in words. His complex and ambitious “reality check” is perhaps best summarized in the exhibition’s ambivalent, potentially sarcastic title. On one hand, the project is a sincere evaluation of the considerable charitable and cultural works of museum founders John and Dominique de Menil. On the other, it is a provocative critique of their efforts—which can be seen as enlightened and generous, high-minded and elitist, or perhaps both—to unify works of art from around the world within a physical space and intellectual framework reflecting their idealistic humanist philosophy. It is in the spirit of Anton Chekov—who described the role of the artist as being to formulate the problem correctly not (necessarily) to provide the solution—that Tuymans raises these issues. He doesn’t give us any easy answers. Instead, he leaves it to the viewer to engage the artistic and intellectual challenges posed by *Nice*.

Adapted from Toby Kamps’s text in the accompanying publication

1. Luc Tuymans, “Juan Vicente Aliaga in Conversation with Luc Tuymans,” in *Luc Tuymans*, Ulrich Loock et al., 2nd ed., (London: Phaidon, 2003), 15.
2. Luc Tuymans, telephone conversation with the author February 27, 2013. All subsequent direct or implied quotes come from this discussion.