

Luc Tuymans

Eternity

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108, rue Vieille du Temple,
75003 Paris



Luc Tuymans, *Eternity*, 2021
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Courtesy the artist and David Zwirner

David Zwirner is pleased to present *Eternity*, an exhibition of new paintings by Belgian artist Luc Tuymans on view at the gallery's Paris location. Extending his decades-long interrogation of images, in these works Tuymans calls attention to the history of painting and the medium's inherent emphasis on illusion as an analogue for the growing sociopolitical dissolution of Western society, heightening the disjuncture between seeing and knowing that has become a hallmark of his practice. The title of the exhibition references noted historian Timothy Snyder's interconnected concepts of the politics of inevitability and the politics of eternity. For Snyder, eternity represents the collapse of inevitability, a casting off of the guise of progress only to be caught in a navel-gazing cycle of propaganda and half-truths. This is Tuymans's sixteenth show with the gallery and the first solo exhibition of the celebrated artist's work in Paris.

Tuymans is known for a distinctive style of painting that considers the power of images to simultaneously communicate and withhold. Emerging in the 1980s, the artist pioneered a decidedly nonnarrative approach to figurative painting, exploring instead the ways in which information can be layered and embedded within certain scenes and signifiers. Based on preexisting imagery culled from a variety of sources, his works are rendered in a muted palette that is suggestive of a blurry recollection or fading memory. Yet, their quiet and restrained appearance belies an underlying moral complexity that engages equally with questions of history and its representation as with quotidian subject matter. Tuymans's canvases both undermine and reinvent traditional notions of monumentality through their insistence on the ambiguity of meaning.

Among the most vibrantly colored works in Tuymans's oeuvre to date, the titular painting, *Eternity* (2021), features a spherical form that presents as a luminous field of pure color akin to the compositions of Mark Rothko or Kenneth Noland. However, the dome's imperfect, pocked surface suggests a real-world referent, in this case the glass dome made by Werner Heisenberg in his laboratory to model hydrogen bomb explosions. A pioneering theoretical physicist, Heisenberg led the German effort to produce atomic weapons during World War II, though it remains unclear whether he helped or hindered this cause. Tuymans has frequently referenced traumatic history in his work; however, the subject of such paintings is not these atrocities themselves but rather the way in which they are integrated into the historical narrative, as well as into collective memory, through images that have the potential to be indeterminate, multivalent, and ultimately revealing of an underlying glimpse of humanity, here literally foregrounding beauty in destruction.

Likewise, a series of four canvases with converging red and blue starbursts set against a plain white background recalls such varied points of reference as fireworks, viruses, or even any tricolor national flag. Though abstract, the pattern of the paintings has tangible meaning: they reproduce a visualization of data assembled by a team of researchers tracking the polarization of the US Congress over six decades. From this group Tuymans has selected four years that span the project—1951, 1967, 1989, and 2011. While the earlier canvases show Democrats (represented in blue) and Republicans (in red) connected by swaths of gray (denoting bipartisan collaboration), over time, as the country moves toward a strictly partisan government, the gray areas disappear and the blue and red stand starkly apart. In his re-presentations, Tuymans has rotated the infographics ninety degrees, offering a different, monumental perspective on the meaning of this imagery.

The two-part work *Gloves* (2021) also first appears nearly illegible, vaguely resembling a crime scene or laboratory. The source material in fact derives from a YouTube tutorial of a painter cleaning his brushes. Transposed into a palette reminiscent of celluloid film in the midst of a slow dissolve, the figure's sports gloves and apron read almost as a butcher's implements, tacitly proposing an equivalency with the role of the painter in the modern world.

Two paintings ground the exhibition specifically in France, emphasizing the interconnected nature of global politics and current events. A human-scaled silhouette immediately recognizable as the title figure from Jean-François Millet's 1850 painting *The Sower*, a paean to the crucial role of peasants in nineteenth-century postrevolutionary France, is rendered in an unnatural blue palette. A gently curving line just above the figure's head reveals the work as a reproduction of a commercially manufactured plate marketed to tourists. Similarly, a closely cropped portrait of the face of Fantômas, a fictional criminal genius who first appeared as the subject of popular serialized novels in 1911, focuses on his signature blue mask and piercing stare, a depiction debuted in the 1960s that lent the evil-doing character an alien appearance.

Another group of works stands in for the slippage of empirical knowledge, highlighting contemporary notations of opulence and their eventual decay. These include a gilded trompe l'oeil library lit so brightly that it is on the verge of disappearing, a faux castle built as a nostalgia-infused home, a monumentally scaled pile of decaying peaches that are pictorially closer to Cézanne's paintings of skulls than fruit, and a still from the 1962 Soviet film *Planeta Bur* (*Planet of Storms*), in which cosmonauts search for human life on Venus. Also on view will be a rare self-portrait, depicting Tuymans treading water in the sea, looking distractedly out into the distance. Floating aimlessly in the water, his body is refracted within the lapping waves, offering a sense of existential ambivalence in the face of a vast unknown.

Born in 1958 in Mortsels, Belgium, Luc Tuymans is one of the most important painters of his generation. His first major museum presentations were held in 1990 at the Provinciaal Museum voor Moderne Kunst, Ostend, Belgium, and the Vereniging voor het Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst, Ghent. In 1992, the artist participated in Documenta IX in Kassel, in addition to having a solo exhibition at Kunsthalle Bern, which helped cement his growing reputation in Europe. In 1994, *Luc Tuymans: Superstition* debuted at Portikus, Frankfurt, and traveled to David Zwirner, New York; the Art Gallery of York University, Toronto; The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago; the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London; and Goldie Paley Gallery, Moore College of Art & Design, Philadelphia, establishing him as a major influential artist abroad. In 2001, the artist represented Belgium at the Venice Biennale to great acclaim.

Tuymans has been featured in numerous solo exhibitions at prestigious institutions worldwide. Major presentations of his work include those held at 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); 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.

Tuymans 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). His works are featured in museum collections worldwide, including the Art Institute of Chicago; Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris; Fondazione Prada, Milan; Los Angeles County Museum of Art; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC; The National Museum of Art, Osaka; Pinakothek der Moderne, Munich; Pinault Collection; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; and Tate, London.

Tuymans's catalogue raisonné of paintings, from 1972 to 2018, is available from David Zwirner Books and Yale University Press. The three volumes feature full-color images and documentation of more than five hundred paintings.

Tuymans has been represented by David Zwirner since 1994. He lives and works in Antwerp.

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