

# **Projects 60 : John Currin, Elizabeth Peyton, Luc Tuymans : the Museum of Modern Art, New York, June 24-September 8, 1997**

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60  
projects

john currin  
elizabeth peyton  
luc tuymans

**The Museum of Modern Art**  
**New York**

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## 1778 I. Figurative Art in the Nineties or Love and the Act of Painting

Since the introduction of modernist abstraction, figurative painting, particularly the kind that is illusionistic and narrative, has been considered a rear-guard holding action in the avant-garde march above and beyond mere representation. Like a tourist in the big city, illusionistic realism has returned periodically over the past century, most notably between the wars with European neo-classicism and American regionalism, in the sixties with Pop art and photorealism, and in the eighties with the photography-based paintings of artists like David Salle, Robert Longo, and Eric Fischl, among others. In the eighties, figuration's re-emergence occurred at a moment when painting had become, in the art historian Thomas Crow's words, "a shorthand code for an entire edifice of institutional domination exerted through the collector's marketplace and the modern museum."<sup>1</sup> Eighties realism was self-conscious and removed, constructed from vignettes appropriated from photographs, advertisements, and Western art history. Wielding their medium with an irony suited to its aura of obsolescence, Salle and Longo in particular painted representations of representations—realist paintings that were considered commentaries on the impossibility of capturing an authentic image. As a number of critics commented at the time, this kind of painting was less an affirmation of the medium than an extended wake to mark its demise.

After a decade-long hiatus, during which a hybrid form of narrative conceptualism has held sway among a generation of European and American artists who have come to maturity in the nineties, some artists who choose to paint have returned to figuration, but with a significantly changed attitude from those who immediately preceded them. However much they differ



John Currin. *Ms. Omni*. 1993. Oil on canvas, 48 x 38" (122 x 96.5 cm). Private collection. Photo courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York

in execution and intention, the paintings of John Currin, Elizabeth Peyton, and Luc Tuymans are emblematic of that change, one that has to do with the meaningfulness of the practice of painting itself as well as how it conveys its meaning.

Gerhard Richter, the German painter whose stylistic experiments since the sixties have ranged encyclopedically from expressionist abstraction to photographic realism, has observed that "one of the great dilemmas in the twentieth century [is] this seeming conflict or antagonism between painting's representational function and its self-reflection."<sup>2</sup> The work of Currin, Peyton, and Tuymans acknowledges this "fallacy of painting."<sup>3</sup> Like the eighties painters, they rarely paint from life, preferring instead to use photographs, advertisements, film and video stills, and other media sources as models. But unlike their predecessors, these artists are less interested in painting's inability to tell the truth than in its ability to lie convincingly. Although there is irony present in the impossibly sinuous body of Peyton's *Piotr*, the S-curve of the emaciated frame of John Currin's *Ms. Omni*, or the deadpan colors of Tuymans's *Flag*, there is none in the use of the medium itself. Figurative painting for these artists is more than an act of conceptual art.<sup>4</sup> It is also an act of love. It is this passion that makes their work seem so direct and so shameless,<sup>5</sup> and what ultimately sets their production apart from that of their forerunners and their less adventurous contemporaries.

## II. The Extreme Image: Sex, Horror, and Visual Indulgence

Stendhal, die-hard supporter of Napoleon Bonaparte and *echt* romantic author of *The Red and the Black*, theorized that nobility was a state of mind rather than of blood or breeding. By a process he dubbed crystallization, he avowed, passion alone—"an act of madness in which love begins, and which consists of covering with all conceivable perfections the image one has made for oneself of the being one is going to love"—could transform the Corsican soldier Napoleon into the Gallic colossus Hegel called "the world soul on horseback." For Currin, Peyton, and Tuymans, painting itself is undertaken as "an act of madness," and their choice of figuration at its most extreme—aestheticized pop icons, tainted visions of femininity and masculinity, ghostly banalities—is both a test of their passion for the medium and a bid to spread that passion, the necessity of luring the viewer justifying the use of any means available, whether it be visual seduction, nostalgia, sex, or horror.<sup>6</sup>

The transformative results of passionate painting are illustrated in Elizabeth Peyton's willfully idealized portraits of royalty, pop stars, and artists. A painting like that of a fresh-faced, sparkly-eyed Kurt Cobain, a musician known for his premature death by suicide, has the fervent idealization of an homage—not to Cobain himself but to his image as a tragic poet. *John Lydon*, a small full-length portrait of a wispy youth, hips thrust forward, shoulders slouched with

the unmistakable air of a late-nineteenth-century dandy, is similarly romanticized. Modeling a cherry-red pullover, which plays fetchingly off his shock of yellow hair and his bee-stung lips, the figure is everywhere accented by washes of red, giving the whole a rosy, nostalgic glow. That this adorable figure is Johnny Rotten, the infamously snarly lead singer of the Sex Pistols, might seem startling at first, so convincingly has his punk bellicosity been translated into foppishness via whorls of delicately tinted oil glazes. Yet this work is neither a willful historical revision nor a parody, though elements of both are at play. Drawn with a concentration that reflects an utter seriousness and trembling emotion, *John Lydon* is not so much a portrait of a particular individual as it is a wildly idealistic celebration of an individual image, embodied, in this instance, by Lydon. Lydon the man never looked like this. Lydon seen through Peyton's adulatory eyes always did.



Elizabeth Peyton. *John Lydon*. 1996. Oil on canvas, 20 x 16" (50.7 x 40.7 cm). Private collection. Photo courtesy Gavin Brown's Enterprise, New York

For Peyton, figuration is the vehicle by which she compounds the visual seduction already at play in her glittering and juicily colored surfaces. John Currin's paintings, often individual images of fictitious women rendered with great attention to detail, also give us the visual satisfaction of an expertly painted surface, the virtuosity of his paint handling clashing merrily with the pin-ups and ads that are his inspiration. Going eye-to-eye with a Currin picture, however, is frequently uncomfortable in a way akin to a confrontation with someone we know intimately and wish we could ignore but can't. Like Peyton's quaintly anachronistic dandies, Currin's figures, like the blow-dried *Ann-Charlotte* seductively parting her polyester jumpsuit, strike a chord of collective memory but recall a past that is too recent to have lost that embarrassing sense of the passé. This excruciating familiarity is further enhanced by their almost pornographic intimacy. Embedded in surfaces as airless as Naugahyde and as solid as a Donald Judd cube, figures like *Ms. Omni* or the *Moved-Over Lady* stare brightly at us, unaware that their clothes, their bodies, their haircuts reveal every detail of their sordid stories as surely as if they were recounting them on a television talk show.

"Vulgarity and stupidity are two very vivid facts in modern life," wrote Oscar Wilde in *The Soul of Man Under*

*Socialism*. "One regrets them, naturally. But there they are." As the critic Dave Hickey perceptively observed in a discussion of Robert Mapplethorpe's sexually explicit photographs, what often makes us uneasy about a lurid image is not that it might be familiar, but that it might be celebrated. In the past, hackles have been raised because of a perception that Currin's work betrays a hostility toward his female subjects, but this criticism is the result of only the most cursory visual investigation.<sup>7</sup> A more complex reading focuses on Currin's fascination with and compassion for them. Laboring to find the saddest yellow for the somnambulant *Pelletiere* and the most bruised-looking blue for that aging soldier of fashion, *Ms. Omni*, Currin is more empathic than disdainful. Vicious irony gives way to sincerity in his work.<sup>8</sup> "Ultimately, I think what I do is find a cliché and try to believe in it, try to get to where I don't laugh at it," Currin has said.<sup>9</sup> If Currin's paintings recall the crassness of debased tastes, they look at it not with cruelty but with tenderness and a sense of shared culpability. This makes his work more difficult to assimilate than that of artists who appropriate already degraded mass-culture bric-a-brac simply in order to mock it. In the final analysis, Currin's criticism is directed toward himself and, equally importantly, toward us as the viewers for whom these paintings offer the challenge of looking until we see their sincerity.

If celebratory depictions of taboo subject matter simultaneously attract and repel us, neutral representations can sometimes be equally destabilizing, and seductive. In 1986, Luc Tuymans painted a series of eight canvases depicting concentration camps. Devoid of human figures, these modest-sized pictures conjured gas chambers and barracks with a handful of dark brush strokes on somber, monochromatic backgrounds. Understated and almost tasteful, these works reveal the horrific nature of their subject matter in their mute, abstract ren-



Luc Tuymans. *Diagnostic View IV*. 1992. Oil on canvas, 22½ x 15" (57 x 38 cm). Collection De Pont Stichtung. Photo courtesy Zeno X Gallery, Antwerp

dering of it. Tuymans claims that he painted this series not "to take a moral stance but . . . to oppose the taboo aspect of the subject matter."<sup>10</sup> By taking on the representation of an emblematically inexpressible horror like the Holocaust, Tuymans ups the ante in the already risky game of extreme figuration. Like Currin he does this to prove his moral investment in his work, as well as his passionate belief in the power of his medium to convey it.

In many of Tuymans's paintings over the last several years, figuration and abstraction play a kind of hide and seek, with the subject of the painting, abstracted to an essence, fading in and out of our perceptual field like a vague memory. Tuymans has used the term "unimages" to describe these works, because even as they appeal to our visual sensibilities they also deliberately frustrate our visual expectations. The surprising impenetrability of *Window*, an obdurately opaque surface dappled with darker gray, is mirrored in *Diagnostic View IV*, an extreme close-up of a face, which, despite its scrutinizing vantage point, belies its title by revealing nothing about its subject. In some cases these "unimages" are difficult to interpret because they are presented without visual clues to anchor them to a recognizable narrative. In their allusiveness and lack of specificity, they are meant to excite an endless array of mental images from the viewer's imagination.<sup>11</sup> *Ice I, II, III* is a triptych of a door handle, a glove, and a surgical tray filled with vials. Painted in deadpan hospital greenish-gray, these objects of bodily hygiene conjure scenarios of medical experimentation, dissection, secret fetishes, and torture.

Tuymans's ambiguous presentation of the horrific as the shadowy twin of abstraction imbues his works with an almost supernatural power to represent the uncanny and to somehow humanize it. Despite his belief in the power of painting to express with figuration what might be too difficult to comprehend, the one subject that he claims the medium cannot tackle through representation is passion itself.<sup>12</sup> This, for Tuymans, can only be replicated in the act of painting. "If you look carefully at my paintings there is also pleasure, which may not be apparent but is there in the making of the painting," said the artist recently. "The act of painting itself is so concentrated. It's another type of arousal."<sup>13</sup> It is this almost sexual joy in expression that lends credence to the idea that painting—and figurative painting—can carry meaning over and above that of its own making. "When I'm looking at Tuymans's work," the art critic Peter Schjeldahl wrote in a recent review, "it seems to me absurd that our culture doesn't embrace painting normally and avidly as an enthusiastic matter of course."<sup>14</sup>

### III. Radical Painting and Progressive Passé-isme

In the same interview in which he spoke of painting's dilemma of being caught between representation and self-reflection, Richter also spoke of paintings that he

admired, citing as their common characteristic the fact that they were "unashamed," or, as he added, "radical."<sup>15</sup> Although Richter was referring specifically to the abstractions of Jackson Pollock and Lucio Fontana that he first saw upon his emigration from East to West Germany in 1961, it is this same unabashed quality that, in America at this peculiar time of neither right nor left politics, sets these works apart. "The efficacy of images," Dave Hickey has written about just this kind of work, "must be the cause of criticism, not its consequence."<sup>16</sup> Meant as provocations, the paintings of Currin, Peyton, and Tuymans use the so-called retrograde language of figuration not simply to critique the rhetoric of painting but to challenge set notions of radicalism and reaction, of the avant-garde and the academic. Without proclaiming the virtue of their subjects, or implying that we the viewers are in need of virtue in the first place,<sup>17</sup> these earnestly and ardently rendered celebrations of painting coax us to look, to react, and to match their passion with our own.

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#### notes

1. Thomas Crow, *Modern Art in the Common Culture* (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), p. 27.
2. Benjamin Buchloh, "Interview with Gerhard Richter," in Terry A. Neff, ed., *Gerhard Richter Paintings* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988), p. 16.
3. See Romy Golan, *Modernity and Nostalgia: Art and Politics in France Between the Wars* (London and New York: Yale University Press, 1995).
4. In a recent interview, Tuymans called his work "conceptual painting with a story behind it." See "Juan Vicente Aliaga in Conversation with Luc Tuymans," in *Luc Tuymans* (London: Phaidon Press, 1996), p. 10.
5. Peter Schjeldahl, "Bad Thoughts," *The Village Voice* (October 8, 1996), p. 86. Schjeldahl uses these words to describe what he calls the "trick" of Luc Tuymans's paintings.
6. These criteria were articulated by Gerhard Richter in Buchloh, pp. 15–30.
7. Currin readily admits that misogyny is a theme of his work, but he points out that a straightforward depiction does not necessarily count as an endorsement.
8. Keith Seward, "Boomerang," *John Currin: Oeuvres/Works, 1989–1995* (Limousin, France: Fonds Regional d'Art Contemporain, 1995), p. 44.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 40.
10. Tuymans, quoted in "Juan Vicente Aliaga in Conversation with Luc Tuymans," p. 25.
11. Dominic van den Boogerd, "Blow Up: On Cinematic Vision and the Paintings of Luc Tuymans," in *Luc Tuymans* (Tilburg, the Netherlands: De Pont Foundation for Contemporary Art, 1995), p. 11.
12. Tuymans, quoted in "Juan Vicente Aliaga in Conversation with Luc Tuymans," p. 22.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 28.
14. Schjeldahl, p. 86.
15. Buchloh, p. 15.
16. Dave Hickey, *The Invisible Dragon: Four Essays on Beauty* (Los Angeles: Art Issues Press, 1993), p. 12.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 63.

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### John Currin b. 1962. Lives in New York

**Selected Solo Exhibitions:** 1997: Sadie Coles HQ, London. 1996: Regen Projects, Los Angeles. 1995: *John Currin: Oeuvres/Works, 1989–1995*, Institute of Contemporary Art, London; Fonds Regional d'Art Contemporain, Limousin, France. 1994: Galerie Jennifer Flay, Paris. 1993: Gallery Monika Spruth, Cologne. 1992: Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York. **Selected Group Exhibitions:** 1996: *aldrift*, Bard College Center for Curatorial Studies, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York; *Sugar Mountain*, White Columns, New York; *Face to Face*, Victoria Miro Gallery, London. 1995: *Wild Walls*, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; *25 Americans: Painting in the Nineties*, Milwaukee Museum of Art. 1994: *Don't Postpone Joy, or Collecting Can Be Fun!*, Neue Galerie, Graz, Austria (traveled to Austrian Cultural Institute, New York). 1993: *One of Us (Since You Stayed Here)*, Kunsthal Rotterdam; *Aperto '93, 45th Venice Biennale*. 1992: *Figurative Work from the Permanent Collection*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. **Selected Bibliography:** Francesco Bonami, "U.S. Pain: New American Figuration," in *Flash Art* (May/June 1992), pp. 100–102. James Hall, "That's Why the Lady Has a Beard," in *The Guardian* (January 2, 1996), pp. 12–13. Waldemar Januszczak, "Goya of the Golden Girls," in *The Sunday Times* (January 21, 1996), pp. 14–15. Stuart Morgan, "A Can of Worms," in *Frieze* (March/April, 1996), pp. 48–51. Keith Seward, *John Currin: Oeuvres/Works, 1989–1995* (London: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1995). Keith Seward, "The Weirdest of the Weird," in *Flash Art* (November/December 1995), pp. 78–80. Peter Schjeldahl, "Screenery," in *The Village Voice* (February 7–13, 1996), p. 77.

### Elizabeth Peyton b. 1965. Lives in New York

**Selected Solo Exhibitions:** 1997: Gavin Brown's Enterprise, New York; Regen Projects, Los Angeles; St. Louis Art Museum. 1996: Galleria Il Capricorno, Venice; Neugerriemschneider, Berlin. 1995: Cabinet Gallery at The Prince Albert, London. 1993: Hotel Chelsea, Room 828, New York. 1992: Water Closet at Novecento, New York. **Selected Group Exhibitions:** 1997: *Site Sante Fe; Longing and Memory*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art; *New Work: Drawing Today*, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. 1996: Kunsthalle, Nuremberg, Germany; *aldrift*, Bard Center for Curatorial Studies, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York; *Universalis, São Paulo Bienal; Wunderbar*, Kunstverein, Hamburg; Victoria Miro Gallery, London. 1995: *Campo, 46th Venice Biennale; Space Odyssey*, Kareneou Gallery, Athens; 1994: *Don't Postpone Joy, or Collecting Can Be Fun!*, Neue Galerie, Graz, Austria (traveled to Austrian Cultural Institute, New York). 1993: *Okay Behavior*, 303 Gallery, New York. **Selected Bibliography:** Douglas Blau, *Hotel Chelsea Catalog* (New York: Hotel Chelsea, 1993). Francesco Bonami, *Campo* (Venice: Fondazione Re Rebaudengo Sandretto, 1995). Joshua Dector, "Elizabeth Peyton," in *Artforum* (May 1995), p. 101. Meicost Ettal, "Ouverture," in *Flash Art* (November 1994), p. 88. Gregor Muir, "Elizabeth Peyton," in *Frieze* (October 1995), pp. 70–71. Jerry Saltz, "Elizabeth Peyton," in *Art in America* (May 1994), p. 122. Jon Savage, "True Brits," in *The Guardian* (December 20, 1996), pp. 2–4. Jon Savage, "Boys Keep Swinging," in *Frieze* (November/December 1996), pp. 58–61. Roberta Smith, "Blood and Punk Royalty to Grunge Royalty," in *The New York Times* (March 24, 1995), p. C32.

### Luc Tuymans b. 1958. Lives in Antwerp

**Selected Solo Exhibitions:** 1997: *Premonition, Zeichnungen*, Kunstmuseum, Bern. 1996: *The Heritage*, David Zwirner Gallery, New York; *Necklace*, Gallery Zeno X, Antwerp; Goldie Paley Gallery, Moore College of Art, Philadelphia. 1995: *"Blow-up" Luc Tuymans Schilderijen/paintings, 1985–1995*, De Pont Foundation for Contemporary Art, Tilburg, the Netherlands. 1994: *Superstition*, Portikus, Frankfurt am Main, Germany; *Superstition*, Art Gallery of York University, Toronto (traveled to Renaissance Society, University of Chicago, and Institute of Contemporary Art, London). 1993: Museum Haus Lange, Krefeld, Germany. 1992: Kunsthalle, Bern. **Selected Group Exhibitions:** 1997: *47th Venice Biennale; Fourth Lyon Biennial*. 1996: *Painting—The Extended Field*, Rooseum, Center for Contemporary Art, Malmö, Sweden (traveled to Magasin 3 Konsthall, Stockholm); *Face à l'Histoire*, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris. 1994: *Unbound Possibilities in Painting*, Hayward Gallery, London. 1992: *Documenta IX*, Kassel, Germany. **Selected Bibliography:** *Luc Tuymans: Premonition Zeichnungen* (Bern: Kunstmuseum, 1997). *Luc Tuymans* (London: Phaidon Press, 1996), with an interview by Juan Vincente Aliaga and essays by Ulrich Loock and Nancy Spector. *Luc Tuymans* (Toronto: Art Gallery of York University, 1994), with essays by Gregory Salzman, Peter Schjeldahl, Luc Tuymans, Robert Van Ruyseveldt, and Hans Rudolf Feust. Charles Labelle, "Luc Tuymans: Back From Death," in *Art + Text* (May 1996), pp. 36–38. Peter Schjeldahl, "Bad Thoughts: Luc Tuymans," in *The Village Voice* (October 8, 1996), p. 88. John Van den Bergh, "Luc Tuymans," in *Artforum* (May 1996), p. 113.