

Trouble Spot: Painting

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With the idea of representation in ruins, painting is once again discovering the security of being legitimised as a bourgeois accoutrement. This is not necessarily a bad turn of events - perhaps it has finally been relieved of its political duties and expressionistic authority. Instead, much of contemporary painting is conversing once again with the rudimentary principles of visual language and shacking up with the decorative arts, design and fashion.

Unwilling to entertain its death or hop on a new stylistic band-wagon, the curators of 'Trouble Spot: Painting', Belgian artists Luc Tuymans and Narcisse Tordoir, redirected our attention to the possibilities of various discourses in painting. Contextualising their own work and that of over 50 international painters with Samuel Beckett films, Diana Thater video projections and Xavier Viehan ink jet prints, Tuymans and Tordoir refused to let painting retreat into cultural isolation. Involving both Antwerp's artist-run groups NICC and MUHKA, these two cultural institutions housed the multiple 'constellations' carefully choreographed by the curators to pry open representation.

The exhibition entrance was hung with reproductions of an El Greco forgery, a black and white photo of Robert Rauschenberg standing beside a four-panel white painting from 1951 and a Hans Namuth photo of Jackson Pollock painting in his studio. This didactic arrangement illustrated the broader cultural world to which painting has always succumbed; its myths, lies and valedictions. According to the curators, it is the cultural space between these documents and the rest of the work in the show that is painting's 'trouble spot'. In an obvious yet anachronistic claim, Tordoir reminded readers in the catalogue introduction that 'the art world and the arts are two different things'. By setting up this division between art and its cultural apparatus the curators underscored the integrity and truth of their research by the fact they are artists and not interested in being curatorial players in an institutional framework.

What made the exhibition critical was its irreverence to conventional institutional scholarship and its pedantic rhetoric while remaining resistant to the free-for-all approach of the painting exhibition 'Examining Pictures' which featured many of the same artists included in 'Trouble Spot: Painting'. For example, one constellation juxtaposed two Kerry James Marshall 'Scout Master' paintings with Yves Klein's Resonance (Monogold) (1960) and two Ugo Rondinone optical tondos. The conflation of highly charged social portraits with Op icons and gilded Nouveau Realisme unleashed an outlandish banter between abstraction and design, message and product, illusion and surface.

Other provocative juxtapositions of work included Berend Strik and Michael Raedecker's stitched and embroidered canvases, Paul Morrison's black-and-white graphic landscapes, Arturo Herrera's sunny-yellow wall painting and Elske Neus film projection Mother is Peeling the Apple (1998), an animation of a Vermeer painting of a woman peeling an apple. This domesticated installation equated painting as a craft activity, recognising its decorative value with unabashedly commonplace imagery.

Michelangelo Pistoletto's mirror paintings from the early 60s reflected the profoundly dark psychology of Tuymans' painting *Drum Set* (1998). Carla Arocha's superficially Mod perspex installation clashed with David Claerbout's *Kindergarten Antonio Sant'Elia* (1998), a poetic video projection of a photograph from 1932 of children in a garden in which, with the help of subtle digital manipulation, the leaves on the branches flutter with life. A religious fresco by Gijs Frieling challenged the integrity of Chris Ofili's collaged and painted icons while the painterly swiftness of Sophie Von Hellermann's androgynous figures sporting Nikes and designer satchels were reminders of just how boring and provincial John Currin's figures would be without his gift of ridicule.

Tuymans and Tordoir propose unforeseen criteria for painting's future. With healthy pretence, their self-serving proposition circumvented any further discussion on paintings perennial death, setting the stage for their own interests within the language. Even better is the fact that Tuymans and Tordoir are working on another large painting exhibition. They're going to refocus the trouble spot; narrowing in on its essence and developing its potential.

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