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Three Contemporary Painters: Paulo Pasta/ Sean Scully/ Luc Tuymans

The following text was presented as the final work for the course "The Dilemmas of 20th Century Painting in the Work of Iberê Camargo: Notes for a Comparative Analysis," taught by Sônia Salzstein at the Department of Plastic Arts at ECA-USP, in the first semester of 2008. I sought to develop the theme by bringing it into the present through interviews with contemporary artists. The dilemmas that each of them faces in the field of art—especially painting—with the advent of modernity constituted the main object to be addressed.

Keywords: painting; modernity; history; Paulo Pasta; Sean Scully; Luc Tuymans

This article intends to consider certain issues of modernity, such as the relationship between art and work (the loss of the ethical model of making); between art and technique (technology); the center/periphery relationship (and the concept of cultural dependence implicit in it) and art as an emancipatory experience of the individual, relating them especially to the field of painting, in light of three contemporary painters: the Brazilian Paulo Pasta, the Irish Sean Scully, and the Belgian Luc Tuymans.

The aim is to try to establish how these so-called modern dilemmas remain on the horizon of reflection and production of these artists, and in what way they propose to face them. More than comparing these works under a purely formal bias, this text aims to make perceptible the operations that enable these painters, precisely because of their affiliation (and confrontation) with modern matrices, to establish their own poetics, *pari passu* with contemporaneity.

Starting from the assumption that these dilemmas can be analyzed in a privileged way in the field of painting, precisely because it is a medium historically linked to a humanist tradition that enters into crisis with the new paradigms of so-called industrial society, we perceive the relevance of focusing on the theme today, since we witness an advance and intensification of market systems and technology, further enhancing these modern impasses.

By bringing this reflection to Brazil, a country considered peripheral, these dilemmas gain additional complexity: we are heirs to a tradition that, in itself, already carries the seed of its own discredit. In this sense, we can take the work of Iberê Camargo as being a kind of emblem of the crisis of this tradition, since his painting is testimony of the desire and, at the same time, the impossibility of affiliating with it.

Therefore, I would like to discuss these issues because I believe that many of the modern impasses are still valid for many artists today, especially those who deal with painting. To do this, I will use some topics that will serve as support for the unfolding of the reflection. These will be addressed in the form of questions in the following interviews.

Contained Exuberance

Interview with Paulo Pasta

When discussing painting, it's inevitable to consider it a historical process; painting problematizes a clash with tradition. How do you view the relationship of your painting with the painting tied to the great "tradition"?

I don't have an irreverent attitude towards culture, but I'm also not overly reverent. As I like painting and want to paint, for me, this is already associated with a body of work, with tradition. I can't deny or divert from that. I like art. There are many artists—I see this

often—who have a confrontational attitude towards art. I don't see myself that way. I'm more about synthesis. Modernism for many means rupture; for me, it's more about continuity. I don't see, for example, a break between Picasso and Cézanne. It is in this sense that I speak of continuity. Of course, you are in your era within that. Each artist contributes in their time. So, your era acts on you. Matisse said that we do not own our profession, it is imposed on us. It's a bit like that. Even an artist I adore, Jasper Johns: you see that he operates within the tradition, there is Cézanne. And I would never want this sense of tradition to be understood as praise for pastism, for an ideal place that has been lost. I do not want to place myself in a nostalgic and reactionary position in that sense. But I think tradition is there. Now, how to act in the face of it? How is this tradition for us, Brazilians?

Here you enter a field that I wanted to propose we discuss later, but since you touched on the subject... Do you think about this issue of a specific, Brazilian identity?

It's not even that I think, I feel. When I started painting, I remember, I felt a certain discomfort that is this. Even not wanting to bring it to intellection, this stuff is in you. Who am I? Where am I?

We discussed this issue a lot, during classes with Sônia Salzstein, starting from the work of Iberê Camargo. For her, it is fundamental to situate his work not as being belated within a central process and, therefore, less relevant for thinking about modernity issues. Quite the opposite: it can contribute enormously to a more complex and sharp understanding of the contradictions of this process precisely because it is in a peripheral country. In Iberê, at the same time that we notice a nationalist plea, of a very strong local experience, we perceive his will to link and debate with the modern tradition. How do you see yourself within this reflection?

I think that knot is still in me today, that discomfort.

In a painting like that of Beatriz Milhazes or that of Adriana Varejão, it's easier to perceive this data. But, in a painting like yours, is there something that you identify as specifically Brazilian, linked to your experience as a Brazilian?

Well, in my work, this does not happen in the theme. I think art is very thematic again. And what is not thematic painting is called formalist. The debate is very impoverished. I do not think my painting is neither one thing nor the other. I think these classifications do not account for the work. Iberê is an example. How are you going to fit him in? Indeed, Iberê's work is precisely the effort of a Latin American to take possession of a tradition. That conflict that, in the end, is a defeat. I mean, a magnificent defeat. There is an energy placed to represent that defeat that is magnificent.

Now, in my work, it's very curious; the color, while it asserts itself, it evades; the more power, the more it evades.

This reminds me of Nuno Ramos talking about your work [Paulo's]—he says that we are always less than what we can see, that there is an excessive luminosity that makes reading difficult; it's an ideal world, but also a threshold of death...

Yes, like in the poem by Bandeira. You put everything in place, tidy up everything—what is that? That discomfort I referred to before is resolved like this. There is a potentiality, a will to be, but the discomfort occurs in this impossibility, in this evading. If I ask myself 'what do I want?', I never think I'm doing what I want to do—what, to me, is more a symptom of this discomfort. Then, sometimes I stop and ask myself again, 'but what do I want to do?'. So I keep thinking: this place, which I want to make, is a

conjunction...—but it is ideal. When I go to work it doesn't respond to this. My desire was to make a more assertive painting. Affirm what? Who you are, where you are, a certain clarity of your identity, your condition. Now, I still don't have that. The work is building it gradually. So, the work is slow because my time of conquering things is slow. The density, in my work, would be this, the perception of the construction of that will. I also need to affirm myself for the work to assert itself. I have a projection. I have a will. I go there, but the work does not go to the place where I projected my will; it goes to where it has always been. Sometimes I realize that people look at my painting and ask for a kind of deliberation that I cannot give—if not, it ceases to be what it is. On the other hand, as Nuno [Ramos] says, there is also a measure of excess. I mean, it's not just the place of modesty; and yes, I identify with Iberê—there's the scale, the color, a will. I think it's a bit like what Ronaldo says about my work: "reasoning that does not act by gradations or contrasts, transitions or ruptures. The colors come together and avoid each other: disjunctive conjunction."

Perhaps this connection with something more local, linked to a Brazilian experience, is to feel without solid ground—these opposite, disjunctive things that Ronaldo speaks of. A desire to give the work any substrate that I feel is missing. It's shifting... This issue for me does not occur in the theme. The biggest difficulty for me is in what to paint. What to paint has to be coherent with how you paint. I think I paint schemes, I am not an abstract artist. I construct a place from schematic forms that I unfold in the work itself. Then, this issue of Brazilian identity, of making a story... If you have this great need to make a personal story, it is because you are in a place that does not have much history. I feel that I have this desire for density, in the sense of tying things internally, in the work, to make a story, to make things more well explained, fitted, there... Form pulls form, thing pulls thing. My work has this timing. And, in this sense, I identify with Volpi. But, on the other hand, there is increasingly—and I think this is clearer in more recent works—a more affirmative desire, a more topological and more fluid painting.

...closer to North American painting?

Yes. It is also what happens with Sean Scully: that "paw" of Sean is American, that direct brushstroke way he assimilated from North American painting. He adores the abstract Philip Gustons. If you look at his latest works he is moving toward that. That grid structure he used is becoming increasingly softened by color.

Sean Scully talks a lot about how he likes, in his own painting, the idea that when we look at it, both construction and deconstruction come into play. Therefore, in the perceptive process of the observer, while one wants to have a total reading of the painting, this is never completely possible. Is this type of issue, that is, the way your painting is received, the way it is perceived by the viewer, important to you?

I think my painting is in front of me. And I have to be very careful not to pull it back. It is going to a place and I have to pay close attention to follow, to go to that same place. More topological, less noisy, less matchbox, less still life. I still think I'm making an interior. Iberê made still lifes, I would be an interior painter. You know? That Matisse painting of the window? It has that architectural component—I make a beam, I make a cross, then the column...

Maybe, when we stand in front of one of your paintings, we have an experience that also involves a physical perception and not merely a contemplative one...

Yes, maybe.

In your view, is it still possible to speak of a specificity in painting?

I think so. I think it is dealing with this language that is part of a history prior to you. I do a 'direct' painting, meaning, I use the hand and the brush and the paint on a surface. Daniel Senise uses frottage, and Beatriz Milhazes, something close to the thought of collage. These are more indirect processes. All this signifies, brings significant changes in the nature of painting and in how it is perceived. All this is language and, whether we like it or not, refers to certain historical currents of thought. Many people have asked me why I don't bring my painting into real space. But I have no interest in that, I don't want to move into three dimensions; I want to solve the matter on the canvas, on the surface of the canvas, using the hand and the brush.

I remembered Matisse, now, when he says that the medium employed by each artist should derive from their temperament.

That's right. However, to center the discussion only on language I also do not find good. Tuymans, for example, even though his work is very associated with cinema and photography, declares that this is not the fundamental issue for him. For Richter, who is a reference painter for Tuymans, it is.

Paulo, one last question: in a society where there is an increasing flow of images, how do you operate within this? That is, how do you think about this relationship between art, painting, and technology? Where do you get the images with which you work?

If we still think about Richter's work, I think it discusses this type of thing a lot, the type of work that is in painting, which is different from that of photography, for example. That is, one is 'manual' making and the other is a product of new technologies.

Now, in my case, I used to look for images, at the beginning, there in a somewhat archaeological world, perhaps to find a substrate. There was a pastism, something from a past world—the arches, the columns..., which I think spoke of that desire to build a story. It was not post-modern citationism.

But, in the very beginning, I mean, when I started painting, I thought I was a fauve painter. But that was mental...

Really?! I remember when you showed me some of your first paintings, years ago. I associated them more with metaphysical painting—De Chirico, for example.

Yes. But it's that when you really start painting, that thing that you think it is (in my case, that I was a fauve) has to be subjected to what it actually is. That's where you have to continually keep painting to conquer, build something. But I think I'm still going to turn into a fauve...

I think you can see that through the color. I felt a significant change in the treatment of the surface and in the construction and reverberation of the color in your latest works. That was clearly seen in that exhibition at the Pinacoteca in 2006...

Yes, I think there's an attempt to affirm more, the desire to bring the painting more into the present.

The Contingent Pulsing of Abstraction

Interview with Sean Scully

How do you situate your work in relation to history and the tradition that painting inevitably carries with it?

What I try to do is a kind of emotionally charged classical art. I like the fact that my painting relates to other paintings from the past. For example, one of the first paintings I made in my new studio was a painting marked by strong brush strokes, which gave it a quality of light and air. I immediately related it to Monet, Bonnard, and Abstract Expressionism. On the other hand, I find my paintings quite direct, so the mystery in the paintings is not the mystery of romantic painting, which comes from the mere manipulation of light. I think that is an inadequate kind of beauty. So what I do is try to feel modern life, where we are, because obviously our environment is what we make and expresses what we are—and we have to deal with that too. I try to do something about modern life, and that brings with it a very strong connection with the past. It has an eternal truth, just as modern truth—in a way, I'm paraphrasing what Cimabue did. I want to express the fact that we live in a world with repetitive rhythms and that there are things side by side that seem incongruent or difficult. Yet precisely because of that, it is our truth. It expresses where we are. Therefore, I would say that my work is not a rejection of influences, nor a rupture with tradition, but much more an incorporation of anything that interests me and is useful to me. I 'ate' them and now I am them. However, my deepest purpose has always been to delve deep into the soul of painting; to classicize it to some extent. And to build a lasting emotion. I am involved in the reconstruction of painting. It is a historically quite complex task.

If we think about the art/industrial society binomial, it is inevitable to also think about some issues, such as, for example, the fact that art is no longer the privileged field in the creation of world forms or the collapse of the ethical model of making. How to find the dimension of experience in a society saturated with images? Do you think painting enables this meeting?

I have the impression that one can speak of painting as a redundant form of art—and I understand this very well, because, in a way, if you look at history and the way our society has moved from the singular to the mass-produced and to the technological, painting forms a stubborn opposition to that. But it seems to me that, as the world became more technological, the human need for mystery and for an individually authentic experience became more desperate. And painting, by being outside the technological evolution loop, can deal with that.

[...] In my work, I propose to take my painting to its own history of expressiveness and humanism, away from the direction of the mass production world. It can be argued that this world is inhumane, although this depends on how we use it and where we create our areas of freedom. My work is tirelessly emotional and whenever I paint I surrender to the emotion made by the hand, therefore, in this sense, I am a resistor. I make an opposition or romantic complement.

But do you see relationships between the act of painting and other forms of conforming images? Or do you believe in a specificity of pictorial language?

I think the great quality of painting is its potential to be humanistic, expressive. Giving up on this would be a tremendous mistake because then what you would be doing would be imitating technological forms of expression that could be manifested more directly, more efficiently, and more beautifully in their original form. In this sense, I think my work has moved quite far from contemporary painters, because it is more focused on expressiveness or on life than on another art. In other words, I don't care if a painting

looks like a photograph. Or if an abstract painting looks like a photograph of a painting. These might be interesting questions for some, but for me, they are academic. And they are probably temporarily interesting questions, but, in my opinion, not the most urgent.

[...] But, if I were not a painter, I would be a film director. I watch many movies. [...] There is something in my way of making painting—not the way I paint, how I apply the paint—that we should mention. The way I perform the relationships is quite cinematic, has a strong connection with working in an editing room, when you cut the film, remove what you don't want and then put it together again. And that's exactly what I do when I join the panels.

You often declare that your paintings long, above all, to relate to life—relating them, even, to certain determined events of your personal life, people, or events. Do you see any contradiction in making an 'abstract' painting, which can be labeled 'formalist', and your statements?

It is true that I have often longed for a return to figuration. Perhaps one day I will be able to reconnect with the appearance of the world and its events. But, at the moment, my need to paint everything, more than anything or a single thing, makes this impossible. I am always trying to paint the whole thing, the whole world. But, at the same time, I long to be figurative.

This reminds me of an idea by Arthur Danto when he defends abstraction not anymore as a historical process (in the Greenbergian sense), but freed from the narrative of modernism, in a 'post-historical' era. What would make it possible "to impregnate abstract paintings, and even stripe paintings, with the deepest moral and personal sense, when one is Sean Scully."

That's what I try to do. I use horizontal and vertical bands, basically. I conceive them within symbolic and psychological principles. Horizontals are the horizon, where we see the limit of our own world. Verticals are assertive, like us, human beings, standing. There are many references to figures and to nature in my work; therefore, naturally, there is a psychological aspect present, where the assertive and affirmative action comes into contact with the permanent.

It is common to come across, in interviews and testimonials, your self-definition as being a "romantic and idealist" individual. Aren't you afraid of appearing anachronistic?

It is not necessary to sustain the majority's view because it is, by definition, established. What is interesting is to go against the current. That's what needs to be done. [...] I am very aware that the concept of romantic has, today, a quite limited relevance. However, I have strived, all this time, to articulate my idealistic sense of romance in the world, as it is, with all current problems, without giving up my true feeling. To sum up: I think not only possible, but important, in a world that has become extremely cynical. I have lived amid many social and political changes that have affected me and transformed me enormously. However, my art tries to talk about something eternal and universal. [...] Yet, I believe that any kind of transcendence, spirituality, and redemption begins in the ordinary, in what is most common and mundane. I grew up amid mundanity. A serious danger I see today for an artist working in the Academy, or in New York or London, is that he can easily construct his arguments excessively based on established opinions and philosophical discourse. This is comfortable, but fatal. And you might end up, inadvertently, as a sophist, constructing and developing arguments comfortably situated in a point of view that has already become a commonplace. That's why I insist on the effort to connect my work with the outside world, beyond painting, through the choice of 'themes' inspired by the streets.

And how do you see yourself in relation to Greenberg's defense that the superiority of abstract art lies in its historical justification, which in his case means saying that only abstract art could save something in the face of the collapse of the bourgeois cultural order? In other words, using Greenberg's terms, abstraction produced a vanguard culture, a superior consciousness of history. What we can read in Greenberg, undeniably as a Marxist critique of society. It's a risky assertion; Greenberg also insists that there are values above aesthetic values and still reminds us of Thomas Mann's argument that turning aesthetic values into moral issues is an act of barbarism. Useful reminder! Can art affect the course of human affairs? How do you position yourself in relation to this?

I see Greenberg as a great man whom I disagree with. Perhaps he is right about the historical position of abstraction, if one considers the work of Malevich, Rosanova, etc. However, he is the same person who said in a lecture I attended, "Dem Ruskies can't paint". Personally, I think that, like Napoleon, Greenberg lost his way. The historical vitality he refers to is not exemplified by the abstract painting that is made (or thought) according to the canons of perfect arrangement or good taste, or, let's say, an intellectually refined taste.

The ambition I refer to when I talk about Rothko has nothing to do with taste: the question of beauty is raised here. However, for me, beauty in art has to be complex as experience and must, therefore, be prepared to deal with pain and *pathos*.

I do not see abstraction in a historically superior position. But then, it is true to say that Greenberg's historical references are very different from mine—I was born at the end of World War II. I think that abstraction, in a certain sense, can be seen in a historically inferior position. This might be much more interesting.

[...] I paint relationships, not abstractions. I think the 'weakness' of abstraction is the center of its expressive power. Historically speaking, it can be said that my work has developed in reverse. Greenberg is right to say that abstraction was born of revolution, but at that time, it was loaded with mysticism and symbolism. In the United States, the experience of abstraction, while it expanded, went through a kind of cleaning, which made it visually and physically more autonomous and self-assured. I paved a way through Minimalism. Today I operate in a reduced syntax that has been related to Suprematism and Minimalism, but it's as if I were filling them in. But I'm restoring the emotion and humanism, and once I have the entire history of European painting as a reference, I use it. It would be different for an artist born in the United States.

Let's talk a bit about the origins. You are an Irishman who migrated as a child to the suburbs of London and then, as an adult, to the United States. Today do you see yourself as more of a European painter or more North American?

I must say that the United States was an extremely important cultural relationship for me, which allowed me, in a way, to be here and be an outsider, to be in the midst of all this great art and have the sense of autonomy that allowed me to make these paintings. But I believe that the nature of my paintings, the personality of how they are painted, the stratification of content, their humanism, their pluralistic quality are quite European.

But you have mentioned, a few times, the difficulty some North American critics have in relation to your painting...

In Europe, people can read my paintings very naturally, whereas in New York it is not possible, because of the history of formalism. [...] There, the fact that something is not definitive, complete, creates difficulty because I use the same language of the definitive that previous art used. But I invert it and turn it completely inside out.

[...] It's very interesting that just in the United States—this does not apply to Europe in general, nor to Germany in particular, because the Germans are very philosophical, very dialectical—two of the greatest defenders of my work, Arthur Danto and David Carrier, are philosophers. It's a very philosophical, vibrant, organic way of looking at things. I don't want people to just look at my paintings and say, 'Oh, this really works'. [...] I'm not trying to make something that works. I'm only interested in making something that doesn't really work—in the harmonizing, classicizing sense.

Curiously, at the beginning of this interview, you state that what you want to do is create classical art...

Yes, but not in that sense. My paintings are not about clarity. They are about revelation. I am still influenced by this *notion* of the way something is painted, having a relationship of great integrity. However, my work is completely open. So, basically, I want both: I want the openness, but also that sense of morality or undeniable presence in the paintings.

[...] Americans tend to follow the example of extreme specialization, which is part of the American gestalt. This has to do with the efficiency of art-making: there is an ethic in American art—an ethic of efficiency, economy of means, and extreme concentration and specialization. And that's what the Americans really did with all that European information. They made everything bigger, bolder, and also conceptually and visually more efficient. [...] The model for my paintings, in terms of quality and intensity, with whom they compete in history, is artists like Rothko and Newman. What I add, I think, is the European ambition for art; which implies that lack of efficiency, to use a better term. [...] The North American attitude, on the other hand, is much more materialist, formal. So that when you use a material and the iconography that was previously used in a formal way, and you alter it, Americans are shocked, it disturbs them a lot. [...] For me, art is not about solving problems—and there are many artists who work in that sense, in terms of solving problems, which refers to that notion of efficiency in art. I understand this, but it's secondary, it's secondary art. It's interesting in its time, certainly, and certainly needs to be shown, but it's not what fundamentally remains because I don't believe there's enough human meaning there to create richness, human richness. That is, it's not really possible to say exactly what I'm doing, from a stylistic point of view. It's this and that. It's many things. And I've had many influences, but I don't believe in any of them completely.

An Authentic Falsification

Interview with Luc Tuymans

I would like you to talk a little about what it's like to be a European painter, Belgian, that is, coming from a place where painting has a strong history linked to a humanist tradition: does this bother you, stimulate you, or is it indifferent to you?

My paintings are mnemonic forms—it's as if they are constantly 'reconstructing' themselves, and thus, they have their own 'memory'. Thus, they naturally—inevitably—play a role in the history of painting. This also explains why they are intrinsically linked to power organizations—this influences my perceptions, interests, choices, the meanings I aspire to, and even the mode of execution of the paintings. Which, in return, also frees them from the clutches of intimacy, sensitivity, and exclusivity, which do not interest me. And, of course, my paintings are not solutions. They are provocative.

Belgian art is often remembered for its connection with the surrealist tradition; the absurd in Magritte, Ensor, and contemporarily, Marcel Broodthaers. The materialist aspect of Belgian surrealist art is also linked to the use of wordplay and the scorn of patriotic and moral values. It's an art that emphasizes irony, sarcasm, and irreverence. Do you feel part of this tradition?

We have to remember that the first documentary made in the world was shot in Belgium, in 1913. The idea of reality is very important to Belgians. If you think about Jan van Eyck, we have that same sense of realism, which is very Belgian. We find this also in Magritte, who, by the way, did not see himself as a surrealist. Many of the elements I paint exist in a kind of vacuum. Many of my paintings represent rooms, chambers; but everything has been extracted from the image. I'm tired of Belgian art being associated with Surrealism and the grotesque. I feel much closer to Spilliaert, who was a loner and of a much higher intellectual quality than Ensor. The same way, Magritte in comparison to Broodthaers. In any case, I am opposed to the idea of tradition. We should never confuse the concept of tradition with looking at one's origins; they are two very different things. The only thing I believe can be said about Belgian art is that it does not lend itself to thinking in terms of the collective, of groups. Belgian art has only provided us with individuals.

So you are also opposed to the idea of culture, of a specific cultural identity?

I tried to rebel against a certain identity that is very strong in my country, this Flemish idea of a mythical, fixed identity. I'm not referring just politically, but culturally, too. Fascism also has a cultural base. The issue goes beyond politics, because politics is about agreements, about life. Nationalism, however, does not imply agreements, multiplicity. All forms of nationalism remove the qualities of real life and create a uniformity that does not respect individual differences. In some of my paintings, I wanted to show the relics of Flemish history—monuments, buildings, portraits of illustrious figures like the writer Ernest Claes, recently transformed into a national stamp. I depicted him, however, as if devoid of identity. His face is not really a face; it's more like a mask. Nationalism, to me, is like a mask: static and hollow, false. The same when I painted the flag, for example: I painted it in such a way that the colors were faded to such an extent that it looks like a heap of white dust—hung on the wall, not fluttering in the sky. The whole thing is about emphasizing the emptiness of symbols. Flemish culture wants to emphasize the idea of 'art for everyone'; so I made this series quite typical and popular, but there's something nauseating and even violent about it.

[...] Western culture is one of the few cultures that, in the name of progress, brought with it violence, destruction. There is a link between annihilation, hygiene, consumerism, production, and propaganda. When you think about hygiene today, you can also make a connection with ethnic cleansing. And this idea can be embedded in an economic and seemingly rational perspective. The final solution, in the logic of this thought, is something veiled, and I want to integrate it into cultural discourse. It can be seen as a metaphor for the culture we live in. [...] That's why my work is also a kind of metaphor about violence.

Perhaps this is why your work—although this view may be somewhat superficial—is seen as one of the few examples of contemporary paintings of a political nature. Do you agree with this?

I don't believe it's really possible to instill a political charge in a work of art. It can retain a political sense during a certain historical period, but it should not have that kind of illustrative function. Therefore, when, on some occasions, I wanted my paintings to respond politically to certain situations, I took the opposite approach: I used an

intentionally apolitical formula—I prefer to use sublimation as a method, a type of sublimation so exaggerated that it becomes, simultaneously, a critique of itself.

Much is said about this quality of suspension in your paintings, capable of taking us to the point before the most crucial project in modern art: the break with representation. As Ulrich Loock points out: "Tuymans begins where modernist painting made its fundamental gestures of destruction... His mourning begins anew with pictorial representation itself, trying to bring it to an end, building its failure." Could you talk a bit more about this issue?

I think the crisis of painting, if it exists, has its roots in some taboos that are now attached to certain things. [...] In my paintings, no matter what is being represented, that is always 'broken', interrupted—despite the high degree of sensitivity of the paintings and the sophistication of their execution. There is, in most of my paintings, a quality of emptiness; it seems there is something that is disappearing, fading away, being lost from you. [...] Therefore, the viewer has to deal with a different confrontation. Precisely when the paintings are apparently more naturalistic, the level of predictability falls. They are on the threshold of a strange form of abstraction. They actually try to test the idea of painting as representation.

[...] Therefore, the idea of ambiguity is dear to me. It has to do with Ernst Bloch's idea in his *Aesthetik des Vorscheins* about the future, about what the future holds for us: he points to the possibility of something between what already exists, what could be, and what is not yet. In a way, every aesthetic adventure goes through these various stages.

Your paintings have a strong connection with procedures coming from other languages, like cinema and photography. Did this occur from your earliest paintings or was it a necessity that imposed itself over time?

Among my first paintings, there is one that I highlight, a self-portrait I made at sixteen, seventeen years old. With it, I won a prize: a sum of money and a book by James Ensor. In that book, I came across a self-portrait of the artist, which he had executed around the same age as I was at the time. This caused a kind of shock—I thought of my painting as being something original and then realized that this was impossible. The idea of something original evaporated and after a brief crisis, I had a new idea: all you can do is an authentic falsification. That's why I wanted my paintings to look old from the beginning, since they deal with memory. One of the most significant paintings from that period is the portrait of an uncle, which I made from an old painting of his.

[...] In 1982 (I was then 24 years old) I saw no more sense in continuing to paint. I had another phase of crisis. Coincidentally, I acquired a super-8 camera with which I began to film. [...] There is something similar between painting and making films, in the sense that to approach the image you have to go deep into the process of creating it. The first films were not exactly about anything; they were everyday images that caught my attention. Soon, the process of editing them (thus, in a way, framing them) became more important than the films themselves. This gave me a lot of ideas about framing. After two years, I made my first conceptual painting with a story behind it ("The Correspondence," 1985). During this period of experience with the camera, I read several books about editing, especially those by Eisenstein, in which he explained the editing and framing using the example of a painting, a portrait that he cut into small parts to extract different meanings from them.

[...] For my generation, television was very important. Through it, we have access to a colossal source of visual information that can never be experienced, but can be seen, and whose impact is tremendous. I think it's almost impossible to make a universal image today. One can only make pieces of images. Our existence seems already edited. For an

artist like Gerhard Richter, the struggle of true painting against photography is very important; for me, it's much more interesting to think in cinematic terms, because, on a psychological level, films are much more decisive, impactful. After watching a film, I try to discover which image allows me to remember all the others; that is, what is the key image of the film. Painting does the opposite: a good painting, for me, denounces its own links, so that you are unable to remember it exactly. That is, it always generates other images. [...] Before I paint, the image already exists; sometimes, it's an image that has been memorized, and then there's a mimetic element that can also be very filmic.

Was there any painter or contemporary artist who was a reference at the beginning of your work?

Among the contemporaries, none interested me. I started in a very isolated way. For example, I only came into contact with Richter's work much later. I believe that the most important experience for my formation was seeing El Greco's paintings live. I was sixteen, seventeen years old, and for the first time, I realized the real significance of a painting. El Greco showed me that painting must appear, confront the viewer, and then disappear, in a kind of withdrawal. In El Greco, there is a kind of deconstruction that occurs with the images; it's as if he excluded the middle part of the painting. I cannot remember the entire image.

After all these years since your first 'crisis' regarding the relevance of the act of painting, could we say that today you believe in the experience that painting brings as a possibility to translate and reflect reality?

I know it may not seem so, but there is pleasure when I paint. I would say that if you look carefully at my paintings, there is also pleasure there; although it is not explicit, it exists in the act of painting.

[...] Paintings have a long lifespan, which makes them quite abstract elements. Paintings were one of the first transmitters in human history. No matter how long they hang on the walls of a museum, three hundred or four hundred years, they are still capable of giving you something. Every image has this disconcerting element of entering into time, into a magical time. Some may find it naive to believe that by representing something, you capture its soul or gain control over things. But, indeed, there is a basis of truth in that.

Outline for Some Approximations

Within the auspicious and elastic disjunction, there is certainly room for painting, even for abstract or monochrome painting. To say that painting is dead, in the almost apocalyptic cadences of deconstruction, is not so much to contest modernism as to accept its narrative of progressive development, and to say, in effect, that, with the narrative concluded, there is nothing that painting can be—as if, unless included in the narrative, it could not truly exist.

Arthur C. Danto

I would like to make a final reflection—which is not intended to be conclusive—linking some important points that were addressed in the interviews. It seems enriching to think about the dilemmas of modern painting—and, from there, issues concerning modernity more generally—considering the different local perspectives. I will try to guide this reflection with three main questions that guided the interviews: 1) the relationship of these artists with the tradition that is tied to the very condition of painting; 2) the existence (or not) of a specific cultural identity (linked to the idea of a dense experience of place); 3) the relationship of painting with the industrial/technological world (How to think

about images generated by painting in relation to other images that populate the world? Does pictorial language still sustain autonomy?).

Initially, I believe there is a close relationship between the first two questions, that is, the relationship with tradition can hardly be understood and faced without considering the position in which the artist is found. It has one meaning for a Brazilian who lives in Brazil, and who carries much of the European pictorial tradition reflected in his own painting; another for a European who lives in the United States; and yet another for a European who lives in the heart of Europe, one of the cradles of painting; and so on. It is curious to note that, for the first two artists, tradition is not something to be broken, but rather, it is continuity. There is no nostalgic sentiment in this view—the tradition seems to be understood in the sense that, by becoming aware of a historical process, we become more capable of situating ourselves and the choices we make in the present. Among Paulo Pasta and Sean Scully there is an agreement in this positioning towards tradition, but it can be understood, perhaps, from a reversal: an (South) American who seeks to understand and incorporate (even critically) the tradition (precisely because he does not have it as a given fact); and a European who goes to America, thus finding the necessary distance to operate more freely within the inherited tradition. Luc Tuymans, by being in his own country, has his condition as a European reinforced—which today perhaps means being heir to more constraints than facilitations.

Being an artist aware of the contradictions of European humanism, and how it often served as a justification for abusive licenses of a mercantilist political nature, he has significant reservations about tradition, which, for him, is burdened with a weight not observed in the other two, even though Sean Scully is European. It is also understandable, his mistrust regarding national identities in a current Europe, where migratory flows have become common and generate numerous ethnic, social, and economic conflicts, giving rise to conservative nationalist movements.

In this sense, it is more than understandable Tuymans' suspicion regarding tradition, as well as the defense of a specific cultural identity. But let us not be deceived by the mistaken idea that he does not maintain a strong relationship with tradition, even if it must be (and more than that, needs to be) the opposite way. As Paulo Pasta rightly observes in his article about Tuymans,

“...his more melancholic imprint does not just reverberate photography and its conceptual status. It seems—surpassing itself—to seek tradition, including transforming the photographic reference into a practice that is already also traditional. Something like reaching again the possibility of painting things through the lens of photography.”

For Pasta and Scully, tradition means a past with which one must and can dialogue. But without great reverence, as Pasta reinforces; like something that is there and can be incorporated when there is interest. Or, in Scully's words (which, inevitably, for us Brazilians, are imbued with an 'Oswaldian' tone): "I ate the influences, and now I am them." These attitudes indicate, precisely, that there is no naivety in these artists towards tradition, as they are aware of its potential pitfalls. It also seems correct to say that, despite the apparent divergence between these two artists and Luc Tuymans regarding tradition, their positions are not, in fact, as opposed as they seem. Because, in the same way that Pasta and Scully—artists who do not have an attitude of rupture with tradition—know of the need to maintain an alert dialogue with it, Tuymans, who claims to be contrary to it, is a painter who shows deep erudition and knowledge in painting. When discussing his own painting and its play with representation, he acknowledges that although there is a sort of break in what we might call the pictorial syntax, there is also "a

high degree of sensitivity and pictorial finesse that cannot and does not want to be avoided in the course of its development."

On the other hand, I would like to clarify that I am not trying, with this reasoning, to erase the evident differences that exist between them, which are responsible for the interest we place in their works separately—they are artists who respond very acutely and particularly to the 'dilemmas of contemporary painting'. In Tuymans, for example, the relationship he establishes between painting and language functions as a kind of safe-conduct for its credibility. This may denote—perhaps contrary to the artist's expectations—a Belgian heritage, as Juan Vicente Aliaga noted in his interview with him, by relating him to Magritte and his wordplay.

In conclusion, what I seek to indicate is that in all of them there is, in fact, a profound awareness of the position of painting and its history, and what they do is, each from the place they occupy in the world, establish possible ways of practicing painting today.

As for the third topic—the relationship of painting with the industrial/technological world—I intend to approach it based on the titles of the interviews. They were given at their conclusion—although in the cases of Scully and Tuymans, the interviews are idealized. The names were taken from the artists' own words—fragments of sentences or keywords that I found significant for understanding their works. Reading the interviews in their final sequence, I realized that the titles always contained an antithesis. As they were not created by me, or at least not entirely (I wanted to avoid a too literary tone), this fact caught my attention. Reflecting on the matter, it seemed to me that, in fact, this may be related to the fact that the three artists emphasize, *each in their own way*, aspects of uncertainty, ambiguity, inconclusiveness in their respective works. Perhaps we can identify here—even if it is an identification based on uncertainties—a 'specificity' relative to the field of painting today: it necessarily involves unavoidable questions in an industrialized and technological world, which, far from making painting unviable, become almost the *sine qua non* condition for its existence. These questions, when faced, produce new forms of pictorial expression. This ends up conferring on much of the current production (or, at least, on that which I consider more consistent) a state of self-criticism that I believe beneficial, as it makes this expressive medium one of the most aware of its potentials and limits, operating in a way (sometimes more, sometimes less) tense between these two conditions.

Consider the case of Sean Scully. Even though he is a painter convinced of the potentialities of pictorial language in a technological world, he seems profoundly aware of the existing impasses and his own choices when facing them. It is not by chance that he admits a "lack of efficiency" of his painting compared to North American painting, and a disinterest in qualities that refer to the order of the finished, the complete. In his words: "my paintings are not interested in defining." This can be verified in the way he conceives and structures the different panels of the works: they are fragments that are constantly being constructed or redoing their relationships. Also, through what he calls "the use of forms that escape categories"; they can be designated as stripes, lines, bars, blocks. The same applies to the color: the way he works with layers and overlays, allowing the traces of earlier layers to interfere with the perception of the last one, makes it "very difficult to say what it is." Therefore, there is a constant intention to make painting an ambiguous experience, something that we can relate to his "fascination for mystery," "fascination for not being able to see everything."

It is also curious that Sean Scully defends a transcendence in his painting that is established only through his contact with the real. He emphasizes that "any kind of transcendence, spirituality, and redemption begins in the ordinary, in what is most common and mundane." There is in him a dual desire, to engage in the modern world, but

also to resist its automating character. Hence his need to transcend it. But for this, he resorts to kinds of opposite/complementary binaries, such as spirituality (sublime) and matter (the 'beauty of the real'), European humanism and North American materialism, abstraction and figuration, fragments (parts) and the whole, construction and deconstruction, discontinuity and harmony, permanence and ephemerality, order (geometry) and uncertainty (*pathos*), realism and romanticism, past and present.

Paulo Pasta's painting, although less ostentatiously, also carries contrary elements seeking coexistence. In it, the presence of an intrinsic lyricism to the texture and intensity of the color is undeniable, but he sustains it precisely through the rigor of imprecision. The color is skillfully constructed to a fullness that is never fully graspable. Behind the harmony his painting also aspires to, there's an impossibility. If, for Scully, as he himself says, beauty is found in the real, for Pasta, it seems to be in an ideal that is never reached. It is potentiality that evades.

It is interesting to note that both— one through the 'real' and the other through the 'ideal'—claim the fact that they are not abstract painters: "I don't paint abstractions; I paint relationships"; "I think I paint schemes, I am not an abstract artist."

Meanwhile, Tuymans, a painter known for working with figuration, asserts that his paintings are on the edge of a "strange form of abstraction." "Precisely when the paintings appear more naturalistic, the level of predictability falls." Again, the ambiguity.

If the uncertainties and antagonisms that populate the works of Pasta and Scully are subtle—perhaps they are not evident at first glance—in Tuymans they are more readily apparent, perhaps due to his choice of themes. When facing them, we get the sense that 'something is not quite right', although we cannot exactly pinpoint why. What occurs is, once again, an operation in reverse: he chooses to work with seemingly banal themes and, by exposing them, we are forced (as spectators) to confront this banality and perceive it as such. By going through this process, it is as if we were redeeming it from its condition. This 'game of opposites' is recurrent in his work, as we could see in the series he presented at the 26th São Paulo Biennial, where he chose the theme of carnival to be shown in the country of carnival in the least spectacular way possible: muted tones and a kind of white veil covering everything. Or in his painting "Still Life," a still life of 347 x 500 cm, where he subverts the traditional concept of the genre by presenting it in an oversized format. In his words: "my largest painting is the one that represents the least, [...] it refers to something so familiar that it ends up seeming completely strange." It is curious that Tuymans made it for Documenta 2002, where works were expected that critically responded to the terrorist attacks of the previous year. Instead of a politically charged painting, he presents a massive still life. "In 'Still Life' the idea of banality becomes larger than life itself, it is taken to an extreme possibility." It is in this sense that it can be understood: "[...] as an icon, a virtually abstract painting, with no moral appeal." It can also be said to inhabit a somewhat vague threshold, not falling into actual abstraction, but also not settling into the comforting and familiar genre of a still life. On the contrary, it is an image (like many others by the painter) in which one notices a latent violence.

In Tuymans, we perceive a way of dealing with painting that is quite cerebral. There is what could be called a 'reductio ad absurdum' in his works, which reveals this operation of taking something to such an extreme that it ends up reversing its meaning. This break in the message of the works, caused by the way the artist continually puts painting as representation to the test (through a peculiar arrangement between form and content), is also largely responsible for the air of strangeness we feel when observing them. Generally, these works refer to an idea of negation, interruption, emptiness.

—a kind of paradoxical anti-painting that is acutely aware of its role as a keen commentator on the world, yet it does not confine itself to being mere illustration.

Finally, I would like to conclude with a last statement from Tuymans, for its seemingly contradictory and unexpected nature:

"More and more I try to group qualities in a painting—both in terms of its content and the issues involving the pictorial language itself. This has to do, in part, with the fear of wasting time. Compared to my earlier works, where I suppressed the virtuosic element in favor of content, now, the pictorial aspect of my work might be the main focus. But, at this current stage of my long development, it serves a certain 'self-aware non-clarity.' You could describe it as aesthetic. And although I have always avoided developing a particular style, by definition, an aesthetic, I now see it clinging to me with teeth and nails."

The recurrence of ambiguous, contradictory, and uncertain elements does nothing but highlight the difficult construction of a painting that establishes itself in its own time. Reviewing and reversing models, it simultaneously continues and questions what we call tradition, without, however, completely detaching itself from it. This might be the very calling of the three artists presented.

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