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Portraits of Hubris: Painting Despots in the Contemporary Era

An exegesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

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Abstract

From ancient times political leaders have risen to immense power then suffered dramatic falls. This was no different in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, with the end of various dictatorial regimes across the world. For the current artist, living in Romania before, during and after the eastern European communist period, the experience and memories of watching these falls was made particularly vivid through digital and live televised broadcast. How does one represent this recent history through contemporary painting? How, why and should one depict the duality of political hubris?

From 2010 to 2012 the author painted a series of paintings of dictators, all of them depicted at their deaths. Beginning with a group of black and white oil-based portraits of eastern European leaders, moving on to bright streaks of colour and portraits of notorious fallen world despots, the author addresses various questions around the emotional responses triggered by this specific genre of political portraiture. Taking photographic records as an initial source, the author examines different techniques of representing 'the unrepresentable' through painting. Contrasting responses of absence and alienation, coupled with emotional affinity and identification are explored, in the context of historical events and regimes that were without doubt horrific.

The work of selected contemporary artists, including Gerhard Richter, Luc Tuymans, Marlene Dumas and Wilhelm Sasnal, who have dealt with a similar problematic are set against a detailed exegesis of the author's own approach and techniques. The place and relevance of painting in the contemporary era of digitised and live imagery is affirmed.

Introduction

What moves those of genius, or rather, what inspires their work, is not new ideas, but their obsession with the idea that what has been said already is still not enough.

Eugène Delacroix (1798-1863)¹

We live in the age of images and as a result we experience reality through them. The desire to ensnare and preserve memory is a fundamental human pursuit. Memory is often triggered by the banal, by otherwise vacant or impressionistic details that prompt the senses through associations. Photography has been one of the predominant tools for preserving memory but we still find that the painted image, precisely because it lacks the pictorial authority and truth-telling capacity of photography, is far better equipped to trigger a free play of association or become a catalyst for a web of connections that relate to the viewer's own memory bank.

A. M. Gingeras²

The following essay focuses on the representation through the genre of portraiture of a particular aspect of political power, hubris, with a specific concentration on the representation of official figures, mainly dead dictators and how they can trigger an emotional or rational response from the viewer. This particular subject matter has largely been avoided in contemporary art in large due to its problematic nature. However in recent years a number of artists, some of whom will be discussed later, have engaged more directly with this subject matter.

¹ WELLINGTON, H. (ed) 1995. *The Journal of Eugene Delacroix*, London and New York: Phaidon Press, 41.

² GINGERAS, A.M. 2010. "The Mnemonic Function Of The Painted Image" <http://www.saatchi-gallery.co.uk/current/essays.htm>

Dealing with this kind of subject matter in art poses a great dilemma; on the one hand, there is the threat that in choosing dictators as its topic, art may be reduced to a political banner or simply a way to memorialize such figures. On the other hand, and especially in recent years, art with no reference to context may easily become irrelevant.³

The subjects of my paintings have caused considerable loss of life in their own time, but in their death and fall from power are to some extent also victims. In the process of painting I am interested in exploring the nature of this duality in this context: how to represent both the perpetrator and victim in one. While addressing the risk of glamorization or sensationalism, I also consider the political view from which I am engaging.

Naturally there is a risk of creating a platform for delivering a specific political stance, and I am forced to confront the question of what is the real point of making these paintings.

The broad issue that I wish to explore in my work is centred on the status of contemporary 'political' painting today and what it is that painting can do and can be. This is connected to my attempt at redefining what can be a titled modern political painting today. How can political content as a subject matter be used in the contemporary context? How shall we approach history, distant or recent, and what is our relationship with history? What role does national identity and geographical origin perform in shaping these relationships? Can painting, or art in general, help with the act of mourning, dealing with historical trauma or does it do no more than display the wound, exhibit trauma and convey a state of melancholy?

These are the larger questions that I will attempt to address in my work.

³ ARIELI-HOROWITZ, D. 2008. "Art in the Age of Terror: The Israeli Case, 42

Hubris

On December 21, 1989 Nicolae Ceausescu was President of the Socialist Republic of Romania. In response to the riots that had taken place in the west of Romania, Timisoara, just days before, he organised a rally in the capital in order to restore his authority and cull any idea of more unrest. Some 80, 000 people filled the front square of the Central Committee Building in Bucharest. Ceausescu appeared in the balcony to address the crowd, confident this would go as it always had - by the script. The scripted applauses took place as expected at first, but then the crowd began chanting 'Ti-mi-soa-ra, Ti-mi-soa-ra'. As the crowd grew louder, something incredible took place that marked the true moment of the downfall of Ceausescu.

Before the censor could realise what was happening and pull the plug on the live broadcast we all witnessed something we never had before – the absolute shocked facial expression of our 'leader'. I was 14 when it happened and it has remained to this day the moment when I became aware of witnessing history as it happens. ⁴

This brings me to one of the important conceptual aspects of the current cycle of my paintings, Dead Dictators, – the concept of hubris. That single moment captured on camera exemplifies best the moment of realisation that it is 'all over', as well as the instant metamorphosis– from a deluded dictator just moments before, into a defied and fallen despot. In the end the demise is all that comes out of absolute ambition with power. The entire series are in fact an attempt to create, in an oblique way, a body of work inhabited by the concept of hubris. ⁵

⁴ See further http://www.ceausescu.org/ceausescu_media/ultima-video.html

⁵ A term originating in Ancient Greece, the concept of hubris indicates a person who is filled with pride and feels above all other humans around him and does not hesitate to humiliate them. Hubris is widely used in literary writing and fiction to denote the fall of a character owing to his extreme pride and resulting foolishness of his actions. In John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, the character of *Lucifer* epitomizes the concept of hubris. In *Doctor Faustus*, Marlowe's character is a scholar but it his hubris which forces him to enter into a pact with the devil. His pride eventually leads him to his death and damnation but he wouldn't have chosen it otherwise even if he had the choice.

My cycle of work deals with a specific area that goes under the umbrella of hubris: that which Lord David Owen calls the hubris syndrome; a diagnosable personality disorder which affects elites in positions of power.⁶ Each character who has become the basis of each of the paintings from this cycle, as well as in the preceding one 'Degenerate Realism' series 2010, without exception is an individual that fits this diagnosis. They have been carefully selected because they, and others, embody the best of an excessive hunger for absolute power and control regardless of the cost.

According to Lord Owen, pathologically hubristic politicians have 'a narcissistic propensity to see the world primarily as an arena in which they can exercise power and seek glory'. They have a 'disproportionate concern with image and presentation', and 'a messianic manner of talking about what they are doing'. They 'identify themselves with the State to the extent that they regard the outlook and interests of the two as identical'. They have 'excessive confidence in their own judgment and contempt for the advice or criticism of others'.⁷

They believe that instead of being accountable to the court of ordinary public opinion, they are accountable only to 'History or God', and that 'in that court they will be vindicated'. And to cap it all, they are so obsessed with their moral vision that they completely lose interest in the 'nuts and bolts of policy', which inevitably means disaster.⁸

The characters chosen as subjects that best describe the concept of hubris can be divided into two main categories or groups: the lying in state group, and dead/executed group. The first group presents carefully controlled and staged

⁶ OWEN, D. and DAVIDSON J. 2009 "Hubris syndrome: An acquired personality disorder? A study of US Presidents and UK Prime Ministers over the last 100 years", *Brain* 2009: 132; 1396–1406,

⁷ OWEN, D. 2007. *The Hubris Syndrome: Bush, Blair And The Intoxication Of Power*, York: Methuen

⁸ OWEN, D. 2010. "Hubris and a man who thinks he can only be judged by God" by Dominic Sandbrook. Retrieved from <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-2210164/Hubris-man-thinks-judged-God.html>

images of dead dictators. The 'lying in state' still retains a strong connection with the structure of power; this image continues to empower them even beyond the grave remaining in control of their ambition. For example here we can mention my Stalin, Lenin (Fig.1), Marcos, Evita, Mao and Franco.

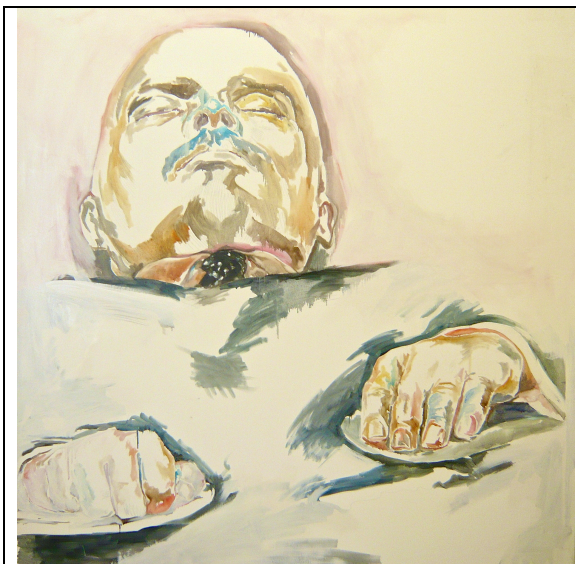


Fig.1 Author - *Lenin January 21, 1924*
-2012

Oil on canvas, 150 x 150 cm Wellington NZ



Fig. 2 Author - *Ceausescu, Târgoviște*
25 December 1989, 2012

Oil on canvas, 150 x 150 cm Wellington NZ

My Ceausescus (Fig. 2), Gaddafi, Goering, Pol Pot, Mussolini and Petacci form the second group – of those dictators who have fallen from power while in office. Goering committed suicide before the death sentence was carried out, and there are still suspicions about the death of Pol Pot. The remaining individuals have all fallen into the hands of ‘revolutionaries’ or ‘freedom fighters’ or ‘guardians of freedom – the military’ and have been summarily executed and exposed to the public as a warning.

What these characters have in common is a particular relationship with ‘power’ and history.

Contemporary historiography

In the last decade there has been an increasing interest in history, and in reflection on the past in particular. This interest relates to diverse aspects of these phenomena: historiography, the oral tradition, historical consciousness and collective memory. The renewed quest for identity and a more precise definition of what makes this unique for each individual or culture was triggered by the process of globalization that has been a dominant feature of our time. The sense of one’s own history is one essential aspect of that identity. History has become the focus of public attention. The visual media play a large and growing role in the process that shapes our historical consciousness. Visual artists who address these themes find themselves in a highly relevant social context. ⁹

So to what cause or causes do we attribute this new trend? Four possible causes have been identified by the historian Maria Grever: one has to do with sweeping social changes; another with demographic factors such as the ageing population; a third relates to the culturalization of historical studies; and fourth, the increased importance of visual sources. ¹⁰

⁹ GIERSTEBERG, F. “The Big History Quiz” in *Questioning History: Imagining the Past in Contemporary Art*, F. van der Stok et al (eds), Rotterdam, NAI Publishers, 45-46

¹⁰ GIERSTEBERG, F. “The Big History Quiz”, 46

The emphasis that numerous visual artists are now placing on history is part of a long tradition - consider history painting, for instance - but they are also seeking a break with that tradition. These artists are not out to depict historical events or comment on them, but to reflect on the representation of history. Two main forces that influence the representation of history are politics and the media. In response to the official creation of a new national historical canon, artists have taken a different view on the matter, trying to develop new ways of thinking about history and its representation. In this way visual work makes it possible for us to think and talk about the representation of history in new ways. ¹¹

These are issues that will be examined further. We turn now, however, to a few important examples of artistic engagement with politics and history, with a particular focus on the role this played for the re-emergence of painting after the 1960s.

The Auschwitz Generation

The return to painting and in particular to history painting was marked by the emergence of a new generation of European artists in post-WWII Germany—the so-called “Auschwitz generation”. A great challenge for art has been in responding to the Holocaust and the unpalatable, discomforting fact that the nation of Beethoven, Durer and Goethe had perpetuated genocide. ‘How could art console us not for just the death of those millions, but for the extinction of humane culture?’ ¹²

Coming to terms with the past has been the dominant theme in German intellectual life since the early 1960s. The foundational figure of this generation was to be Joseph Beuys (1921 – 1986), an artist who would bridge the pre- with post-war generation of German artists, and who was one of the first to actively try to symbolically heal the wounds of WWII – cultural, social,

¹¹ VAN DER STOK, F. et al (eds), 2008. *Questioning History- Imagining the Past in Contemporary Art*, Rotterdam, NAI Publishers, 9

¹² GODFREY, T. 2009. “Death and Life” in *Painting Today*, London; New York, Phaidon Press, 272

political and spiritual. His concept of Social Sculpture would have a major impact on many of the new comers to art such as Anselm Kiefer, Jorg Immendorff, A.R. Penck, Georg Baselitz, Markus Lupertz, Gerhard Richter and Sigmar Polke, to name but a few. Beuys insisted that art could deal with politics, spirituality and consciousness, and that art has transformative power capable of changing people's lives.

If Georg Baselitz (1938) expresses the misery of the human condition in his upside-down pictures, Jörg Immendorf (1945 – 2007) takes on the multiple roles of jester, storyteller and historian, while Markus Lüpertz (1941) projects a “drunken, rapturous” feeling of life with his dithyrambic paintings, and Anselm Kiefer (1945), who according to Simon Schama is “incapable of producing trivia, explicitly examines the act of mourning with what it encompasses: loss, despair, pain, melancholy, remembrance, reintegration in the world, reparation.”¹³

For Kiefer, what is important are not the facts of memory but the act of memory, the act of reparation, the belief that painting could bear witness, indeed could heal. In contrast with those that sought to implement Beuys's believe in absolution, Sigmar Polke (1941- 2010) and Gerhard Richter (1932) created a new viewpoint in 1968 by questioning the basic structures of painting and abstract art and ironically commented on this with their pictures.

For this dissertation I have focused on several major artists whose work will be analysed in order to position my work in relation to the questions posed by their work and the questions that I am trying to answer. The first is Gerhard Richter.

Gerhard Richter

Gerhard Richter is relevant in this context because a particular body of his work has informed the start of my personal inquiry into the representation of traumatic events.

¹³ GODFREY, T. 2009. “Death and Life” in *Painting Today*, London; New York, Phaidon Press, 272

Two works provide the best opportunity to discuss some issues present in my work: Richter's '18 October 1977' series and 'September'.

Gerhard Richter: *October 18, 1977 (1988)*

1988. Fifteen paintings, oil on canvas, Installation variable.

The Sidney and Harriet Janis Collection, gift of Philip Johnson, and acquired through the Lillie P. Bliss Bequest (all by exchange); Enid A. Haupt Fund; Nina and Gordon Bunshaft Bequest Fund; and gift of Emily Rauh Pulitzer. © 2013 Gerhard Richter



Fig. 3 *Confrontation 3*

Oil on canvas 112 x 102 cm

The Museum of Modern Art, New York, USA

Fig. 4 *Youth Portrait*

Oil on canvas 67 x 62 cm

The Museum of Modern Art, New York, USA



Fig. 5 *Dead*

Oil on canvas 62 x 67 cm

The Museum of Modern Art, New York, USA

Fig. 6 *Man Shot Down 1*

Oil on canvas 100 x 140 cm

The Museum of Modern Art, New York, USA

Perhaps the most famous paintings made from photographs are the '18 October 1977' (Fig. 3, Fig. 4, Fig. 5 and Fig. 6) series of the infamous Badder-Meinhof terrorist group. Although they seem to offer no opinion of the actions of the group, it remains a problematic and inimitable series. Painted in 1988 they comprise 15 paintings of which four were pairs or suites and the five remaining canvases were standing alone with the larger group. Produced during a prosperous, politically conservative era eleven years after the events, and insisting that this painful and controversial subject be remembered, these paintings are widely regarded as among the most challenging works of Richter's career. The central theme was the controversial lives and death of four German social activists turned terrorists: Andreas Baader, Gudrun Ensslin, Holger Meins and Ulrike Meinhof. Their terrorist activities, their unparalleled pursuit by the police force and their joint suicides provoked heated discussion in Germany for a long time.¹⁴

The paintings were created in different formats, but the consistent reduction to tones of grey underlines their conception as a series. The grisaille palette refers also to newspapers of that time, which were mostly printed in black and white. All paintings, except *Youth Portrait* (Fig. 5), are based on documentary photographs, including press photographs and pictures taken by the police.¹⁵ The October series brings to the fore three key themes in painting: our attitude to death and mourning, our approach to history and our relationship to history. Richter brought high seriousness and conceptual strategies to painting.

¹⁴ STORR, R. 2000. "Gerhard Richter : October 18, 1977," New York, Museum of Modern Art . The Collective title of these works commemorates the day the bodies of Baader and Ensslin, along with their comrades – the dying Jan-Carl Raspe and the wounded Irmgard Moller, were discovered in their cells at the high-security prison in Stammheim, near Stuttgart, where they had been incarcerated during and after their trials for murder and other politically motivated crimes. Holger Meins had died almost three years earlier on October 2, 1974, from starvation during a hunger strike. Ulrike Meinhof was found hanging in her cell on May 9, 1976, shortly before she and the others were sentenced to life terms. Her death was ruled a suicide, as were those of Baader, Ensslin and Raspe, although there was widespread suspicion that the four had been murdered. (Storr, R. 2003. *Gerhard Richter: Doubt and Belief in Painting*, New York, London, Museum of Modern Art, 198)

¹⁵ Retrieved from http://www.gerhard-richter.com/art/paintings/photo_paintings/category.php?catID=56

Ceausescu pair and Romanian artists

My first attempt to deal with these key issues is visible in the two paintings that represent the executed bodies of the two Romanian dictators, '*Nicolae Ceausescu I, Romania, 25 December 1989*', 2009-2010 (Fig. 7) and '*Elena Ceausescu I, Romania, 25 December 1989*' (Fig. 8). These paintings are based on two photographs taken after the summary trial and eventual execution by firing squad on the 25 December 1989, the year when the 'first live broadcast of a revolution' took place in Romania, one of the countries in the Eastern Bloc.¹⁶

These events provide for my generation and me the first real encounter with the power of media. Although I was present at the time in Romania, my entire experience of this event was intermediated by the televised reports. This was so overwhelming that one felt in fact a 'real' participant in the event. But that was of course the grand illusion created by this particular situation. However despite understanding that these events were experienced through an intermediary it did not diminish the feeling of 'active participant'. These two pictures were painted in 2010, twenty-one years after the event. The timing and the place where this took place are crucial in this case. The concept and execution of these works took place outside the country, completely removed from any relation with the current local situation.

Many commentators have suggested that contemporary Eastern European art, particularly that from the Balkans, is still in the process of expurgating decades of trauma. The generation of Romanian artists who grew up amid such uncertainties certainly document these tensions. Mike Brennan considers that for a number of new Romanian artists who spent time abroad - Serban Savu in

¹⁶ The Romanian Revolution of December 1989 was one of the most momentous and controversial events in recent European history. Approaching the Revolution of 1989 as a televisual phenomenon sheds a different light on the germinative moment of the cultural history of post-communism, while also discerning an important moment in global media history: the first live broadcast of a revolution. See Konrad Petrovsky, Ovidiu Tichindeleanu (ed.s), *Romanian Revolution Televised. Contributions to the Cultural History of Media*, Cluj-Napoca: Idea Design & Print 2011. This book seeks both to reevaluate and critically celebrate this notorious event in recent European history

Italy, Adrian Ghenie in Austria, Victor Man in Israel - the geographical and temporal distancing are key phases in their artistic careers, and have contributed to a more neutral – even sympathetic - investigation of their recent history.¹⁷

These two types of ‘distance’ are also relevant for Richter, who moved to West Germany, and others whose work will be further discussed below.

In painting these two pictures I had to deal also with the question surrounding national identity and its role in this process. As a ‘Romanian’ mediated participant painting a specific Romanian traumatic event, one could question the objectivity and particular reason for this choice. It is clear that this proximity and intimacy with the subject did play a significant role in the selection, but it must be stressed that I am very resistant to any suggestion of a ‘therapeutic’ approach.

So why would one choose to paint this particular topic, in this particular figurative approach? For me there are no clear answers to these questions but it is possible that one of the reasons behind the choice is connected with our fabricated relationship with history that we endured until 1989. Reluctantly today we do have to admit that this ‘history’ played an enormous role in forming our national identity. Art under the communist regime had only one role to play – to construct our ‘uniqueness’ within the European sphere and the world, through ‘social realism’. Art had a specific social role and was not encouraged to exist outside this agenda.

For my generation the changing of the system in 1989 provided the first clues that it was all a big fat lie. And this indicates the moment when we began tentatively to rediscuss our past and recent history – specifically those aspects that are at the core of our ‘national identity’. Here, the example of the

¹⁷ Retrieved from: Mike Brennan, March 2009 *Romanian contemporary art: Transition, trauma and the Cluj connection* <http://www.modernedition.com/art-articles/romanian-art/romanian-painting-now.html>

'Auschwitz generation' is not only adequate but also relevant if we consider how one can redefine social, political and cultural identity.

The second possible reason is provided by the attempt to 'check up' with the rest of Europe in the sphere of cultural discourse. Putting forward our own artistic view, we believed it to be an integral part of the political discourse proponents in European culture. Most Europeans, but in particular the former Eastern Bloc, have a very strong sense for history and the role it played and still does in social and cultural life. There is no separation between history and life.



So painting the 2010 'Ceausescu' pictures was most likely a response in relation to these factors. On a more human level it was also an attempt to question the way the whole process was directed: a very short trial – approximately 2 hours: the treatment of the accused, and the rapid execution. Returning some dignity to these two 'victims' was another point that the works were trying to make.

My new cycle of paintings continues this discussion – '*Ceausescu, Târgoviște 25 December 1989*' (2012) (Fig. 2) and '*Elena - Târgoviște Elena, 25 December 1989*', (2012-13), with a more specific focus on the concept of 'hubris' and what are its pitfalls. These new images propose again and again questions about how we are to deal with those that have abused power then and now, as in the case of Gaddafi and Saddam. Does it matter how they died? Can violent death be ever right? Shall we bring them to the courts and run long and extensive trials? And so on.¹⁸

Following the strategy used by Richter, the first cycle of 'Ceausescus' were painted in black and white oil paint, but unlike Richter's process there is no blurring. The technical concern moved toward a 'forensic' examination, toward static and detachment; everything is painted with precision and in focus.

¹⁸ BBC, 2011. *After The Dictators: 29 Oct 11*, First broadcast: Saturday 29 October 2011 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00ld1st> BBC Podcasts

The use of black and white sometime puts forward a kind of distance, which can acquire the seductive characteristics of nostalgia. This quality has the effect of ‘concealing the traumatic aspect’.¹⁹

	
<p>Fig. 7 Author - <i>Nicolae Ceausescu I</i> <i>Romania 25 December 1989,</i> 2009-10 Oil on canvas 140 x 120 cm Warsaw, Poland</p>	<p>Fig. 8 Author - <i>Elena Ceausescu I</i> <i>Romania</i> 25 December 1989, 2009-10 Oil on canvas 140 x 120 cm Warsaw, Poland</p>

The figure is not hidden but revealed in full in order to understand to degree with which one can investigate the processes of ‘picture recognition’ and ‘picture making.’ This strategy in the end fails to some extent because by over-painting it the image has lost the ability to leave things open, ambiguous. In essence the painting is overkilled by the overloaded painted process. However the work did provide a chance to perform a type of ‘exorcism’ in order to remove any doubt about approaching this kind of work. And the work perhaps makes even more evident the difficulties of reconciling memory or nostalgia with history.

The other important difference is the type of images used and who are the subjects. My images are carefully selected and not chosen for their banality but for their degree of being specific. Equally the ‘subjects’ are important.

¹⁹ Philippe Piroette, “The Arena” in *Luc Tuymans : The Arena*, Stephan Berg (ed) Ostfildern-Ruit, Hatje Cantz Publishers, 59

Richter's October cycle presents a group of individuals that are against the system; my subjects 'are' the system.

My focus is on a particular group of individuals; some can be categorised as 'dictators', some as mass murderers, where others are more problematic, as in the case of my Ernesto "Che" Guevara, Eva Peron, and even General Franco of Spain. Depending on the political angle, they are both the villains and the heroes.

On the one hand my selection focuses on those specific political figures that we do not normally chose to talk about or represent. Additionally I am also very interested in a number of historic figures towards which we have ambivalent feelings. The fact that they can embody two 'qualities' of political behaviour is one thing that keeps us fascinated and ultimately interested. But they all have one clear thing in common: the 'syndrome of hubris' affects them all, no matter what political allegiance they might favour. Some images show those that are still in control and some show blatantly the fragility and futility of 'hubris'.

Representing the unrepresentable.

For many artists the challenge in contemporary painting is how to represent the unrepresentable. This is the case with the second attempt by Richter to deal with a specific traumatic moment. Richter painted "*September*" in 2005 (Fig. 9), four year after the tragic events of 9/11. This is a rather small canvas that at first glance could be described as type of image that is neither photograph nor painting, yet it contains both.

	
<p>Fig. 9 Gerhard Richter, <i>September 2005</i> Oil on canvas 52 x 72 cm The Museum of Modern Art, New York, USA</p>	<p>Fig. 10 Spencer Platt <i>Moment of Impact 2011</i> Photograph, Getty Images</p>

The magnitude of the 9/11 events unfolded live and in real time as the first, and to date the only, terrorist attacks to be broadcast live, and later, the best-documented event of its type. The tools that made this possible range from cell phone pictures and amateur videos to the lenses of photojournalists and the news media. (Fig. 10)

This is very much reminiscent of the way the Romanian Revolution was played out and recalled via television. Therefore it should not be too much of a surprise that even firsthand experiences are recalled via mass-mediated images. “A catastrophe that is experienced will often seem easily like its representation.”²⁰

Photography plays a privileged role in the construction of memory and often goes as far as to substitute for lived experiences. “Nonstop imagery (television, streaming video, film) is our surround, but when it comes to remembering, the photograph has the deeper bite. Memory freeze-frames; its basic unit is the single image.”²¹

Curator Robert Storr in his essay ‘September: A History Painting’ attempts to

²⁰ SONTAG, S. 2003, *Regarding the Pain of Others*. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 21

²¹ Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 22

answer a very simple yet important question “What is the meaning of a single, small, almost abstract depiction of one of the most consequential occurrences in recent world history?”²² One answer could be that *September* questions whether an event so traumatic and present in the contemporary memory can be used in the realm of art in a very condensed and intelligible way to further impress on us the importance of memory. For Storr, *September* like *October 18, 1977*, is “a delayed response to a powerful jolt to his system, an aftershock rather than a direct transcription of the initial shock itself, reminding us that Richter is, at his most emotional, a ruminative artist rather than an impetuous ‘expressionist.’”²³

Luc Tuymans

Luc Tuymans’s “*Demolition*” (2005, Fig. 11), presents a different strategy but a similar concern.

A simple reading of this painting might give the appearance of a romantic landscape, but in reality it is an avowedly political or historical painting. In contrast to Kiefer’s aim of the possible therapeutic resolution of mourning, Tuymans aim is concentrated on addressing trauma. His painting seems restrained to the point of silence: “pictures, if they are to have any effect, must have the tremendous intensity of silence – the silence before the storm.”²⁴

It is a work in which one can address the traumas of recent history – a beautiful and understated painting that could easily be misread as either an abstraction or an elusive reference to Romantic painting. Only the little detail of the lamppost at bottom left gives us a clue as to what image this is derived from – 9/11. The work is restrained and not grandiosely ambitious. It might seem that the only way in which painters can comment on history is by commenting on the photographic residue of those events.²⁵

²² STORR, R. 2010. *September : A history of painting by Gerhard Richter*, New York, NY, Abrams, 43

²³ Storr, *September*, 57

²⁴ Lawrence Rinder quoting Tuymans in “Interview with Josef Helfenstein”, 1997, www.bamfa.berkeley.edu/exhibits/tuymans.

²⁵ GODFREY, T. 2009. *Painting Today*, 310.



Fig. 11 Luc Tuymans *Demolition* 2005

Oil on canvas, 165.1 x 113 cm

Fractional and promised gift of Leonard and
Susan Feinstein MOMA New York

The strategy employed by Tuymans is not to tell us directly about trauma or madness. The series 'Mwana Kitoko' (Fig. 12 to Fig. 12), exhibited in 2001 in the Belgian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, presents history by blurred, fragmentary memory and a pensive, dulled mood. The series consists of 10 canvases painted in off-key or faded colours. The subject of these 10 paintings focuses on Congo and Belgium's role as colonial power. The name that translates, as 'beautiful white boy' is the ironic Congolese name for Belgian King Baudouin I. Here Tuymans confronts the Belgian colonial past and the crimes it committed. The central figure is Patrice Lumumba, the idealistic leader elected in 1960 who was in the end tortured and murdered by his enemies with the assistance of the Belgians and American CIA.

When looking at the array of painting we might be confronted with a sense of randomness, but that is only an appearance. In fact images are like an index of things to look up: colonial exploitation, modernity as a sign of bringing ‘civilisation’, colonization through the Church, tourist tat, the murder of Lumumba, Moise Tshombe, an exotic trophy mouldering in a museum.²⁶

Luc Tuymans: *Mwana Kitoko: Beautiful White Man* cycle 2000

David Zwirner, New York



Fig.12 *Lumumba*

Oil on canvas

62 x 46cm





Fig. 13 *Tsjombe*

Oil on canvas

73 x 108cm

²⁶ Godfrey, T. *Painting Today*

	
<p>Fig. 14 <i>Mwana Kitoko</i> Oil on canvas , 208 x 90 cm</p>	<p>Fig. 15 <i>Statue</i> Oil on canvas ,155 x 64cm</p>

	
<p>Fig. 16 <i>Leopard</i> Oil on canvas 142 x 129 cm</p>	<p>Fig. 17 <i>Chalk</i> Oil on canvas 72.5 x 61.5cm</p>

If we had at work the muralist Tubke or Rivera we might have had a revealing painted history, but with Tuymans we have a strategy of concealing more than revealing. The viewer is presented with the job of reconstructing what happened from these fragmentary clues. The whole construct is elusive and

patchy. It has no coherent aesthetic effect, and it does not offer any sense of harmony or catharsis. The crucial factor here is the sense of incompleteness because it relates directly to the symptoms of trauma, of unacknowledged guilt. Everything is presented in a problematic and incomplete way.²⁷

The painting that depicts a room in the Mauthausen camp, 'Gas Chamber,' 1986 (Fig.38) has become an icon both because of the pathos of the object and because of Tuymans's direct approach to an unspeakable subject. As distance strategies he uses both the bleaching out of colour and synecdoche, the fragment standing for the whole.²⁸

Hitler's remains



Fig. 18 *Adolf Hitler I 30 April 1945*

Fuhrerbunker Berlin 2010

Mixes media on canvas

120 X 120 cm, Warsaw, Poland

²⁷ GODFREY, T. *Painting Today*

²⁸ GODFREY, T. *Painting Today*, 274

	
<p>Fig. 19 <i>Adolf Hitler II 30 April 1945 Fuhrerbunker Berlin</i> 2010 Mixes media on canvas 120 X 120 cm, Warsaw, Poland</p>	<p>Fig. 20 <i>Adolf Hitler III 30 April 1945 Fuhrerbunker Berlin</i> 2010 Oil on canvas 120 X 120 cm, Warsaw, Poland</p>

In my paintings from the '*Adolf Hitler II 30 April 1945 Fuhrerbunker Berlin*' series (Fig. 18 to Fig. 20), in 2010 I was experimenting with a similar issue. The main question posited was on the possibility of painting an image if not of an 'un-paintable' subject, then at least of considerable risky one. I imposed a simple restriction at the beginning of this assessment: painting a traditional portrait-image was not an option. As an image it still remains extremely problematic in considering it as a source for painting. There were two options available: firstly abandon altogether the project or paint him indirectly. The final solution was provided by an image of the segment of Hitler's upper teeth brought by the Russians along with other remains, back to Moscow in 1945.²⁹

In total three square canvases were painted using this photograph, each in a different stylistic manner. The first one is created in a Francis Bacon-esque style, recalling his 'Study after Velázquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X' both in structural approach and colour palette, the second is approached monochromatically and the last of the series brings forward and explosion of colours dominated by the intense yellow that stands as a background.

²⁹ See a series of collated articles about this issue at - <http://greyfalcon.us/restored/myPictures/Hitler%20teeth.htm> - accessed Sept 2012

These paintings present an antithesis to the 'relatively elegant' earlier portraits of dead dictators, suggesting that the approach towards the representation of death does not only consist in experimentation with media, but also with context. Using the words of Tuymans these paintings "are more about raising questions than pointing a finger. That's what makes a work political."³⁰

One is confronted with an image that has no relation with a person. The painted teeth make more an allusion to a romantic landscape.

They are about 'the staging of terror as vacancy; the investment of that which is banal and innocuous with latent implications of a threatening, catastrophic entity that impinges on our reality like a relic of the repressed; and the associated reinterpretation of the present as a shadow of a past in which actual reality and power truly reside.'³¹ Here the subject is 'poised on the boundary between concealment and disclosure, undermining every attempt to identify the work with a determinate content.'³²

The body as corpse

One of the questions that has come about in the course of my paintings, and needs answering, concerns the use of the 'corpse' image. All the images that have been selected as sources for my painting cycle are depicting dictators in a 'dead' state. The state of 'dead' brings two key points into discussion – one concerns the representability of dead and the other is the 'why' of presenting power figures in this state. Some have met a violent death –Gaddafi (Fig.21), my Ceausescus, Petacci, Guevara; some have committed suicide – Goering (Fig. 22); and some died in their own beds – Lenin, Stalin, Pol Pot, Mao, Franco,

³⁰ GODFREY, T. *Painting Today*, 277

³¹ BERG, S. 2003. "Twilight of the images" in *Luc Tuymans : The Arena*, Stephan Berg (ed) Ostfildern-Ruit, Hatje Cantz Publishers, 15

³²BITTERLI, K. 'In the Light of painting An attempt to see Luc Tuymans's work...' in *Luc Tuymans: The Arena*, 85

Marcos and Evita. A number of them have ended as mummified relics that can be called upon still today.

	
<p>Fig. 21 Author - <i>The Battle of Sirte, Gaddafi October 20, 2011- 2012</i> Oil on canvas 120 x 120cm Wellington NZ</p>	<p>Fig. 22 Author - <i>Capsule October 16, 1946 - 2012</i> Oil on canvas 120 x 120cm Wellington NZ</p>

In the figure of the corpse, the process by which the body evolves into an image becomes perceivable to the senses. Helpless and frightened, the viewer attends the moment of transformation from human to image, both seeing and feeling the disappearance of a human being into the sphere of the purely visual. Hans Belting believes that we make images of the dead body in order to counter a traumatic experience of loss. This is the original impulse behind the genesis of images. “The image of a dead person,” writes Hans Belting, “is not an anomaly, but rather the original meaning of what an image is per se. (...) The horror of death lies in its propensity to suddenly transform what only moments before was a speaking, breathing body into a silent image – right before our eyes.”³³

³³ Hans Belting, “Aus dem Schatten des Todes”, in Constantin von Barloewen (ed.), *Der Tod in den Weltkulturen und Weltreligionen*, Munich: Diederichs, 1996, p.94 – Cited in LUTZ, H. 2006. “Doubly Dead: The Dead and their image”, *Six Feet Under, Autopsy of Our Relation to the Dead*, Kunstmuseum Bern, Kerber, 2008

A dead person in an image seems doubly dead, and this can entail a greater distance. Does the double negation open up the possibility of portraying the dead person as a “monster of presence” (Lacan), as something that questions the dictum of the non-representability of death? Both photographs and paintings parade the very “deadness” of the dead, almost obscenely exposing its traces and inscriptions to our gaze.

Again we return to the question raised by this type of representation: how can the non-presentable be made present in such pictures? One of the oldest examples of this kind of mediation is Holbein’s ‘The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb’ (Fig. 23), painted in 1521 in Basel. Klaus Kinski noted: “My thoughts repeatedly returned to the oil painting by Holbein depicting Jesus in his tomb: stiff, dead, his face greenish, his beard pointed upwards against the earth that was shovelled on top of him. Dead. Perished. Decaying. Dostoyevsky was deeply shocked by this picture. He was afraid that believers might lose their faith in immortality upon seeing such an image.”³⁴

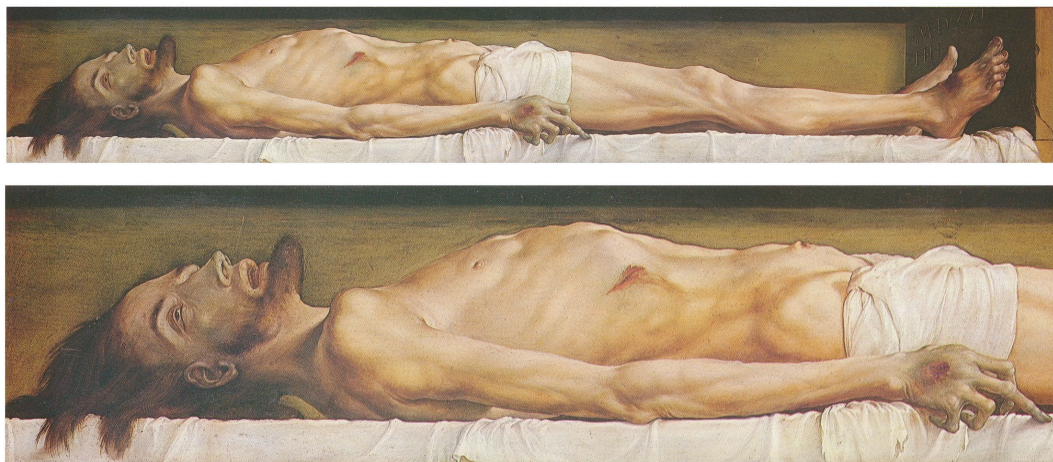


Fig. 23 Hans Holbein the Younger (c. 1497- 1543)

The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb 1521 (and detail, lower)

Oil on canvas 30.5 cm × 200 cm.

Kunstmuseum, Öffentliche Kunstsammlung, Basle, Germany

³⁴ Klaus Kinski, *Ich brauche Liebe*. Munich: Wilhelm Heyne, 1989, pp.123-124.

The figure and the body should not be considered as one; the figure is what we might think of as an ideal form outside ourselves, were the notion of body is more connected with how we experience our own physicality.³⁵

My own rationale in using 'corpse' images centres on another notion – that of 'quietness'. In presenting them in what I call 'absent' state (they are no longer alive) I remove the loudness associated with their previous state. The power once associated with the 'live' image is no longer present. This way I can provide a new reading of these characters, no longer being a threat the viewer could read the image without fear. This remains an issue with those images of dictators who have not come to an abrupt and violent end and whose images – 'laying in state', still preserve their powerful authority. Presenting these pairs together is preposing a double-sided view here – one of what 'hubris' looks like and the other what happens as a result. The horror itself is not on display, but rather exhibits its subtext as the symptom of an uncorrectable structural disturbance and disorder.

How we review images that have a negative association in our mind is a response that these works attempt to accomplish. The emotional response is also brought into play; do we feel pity, do we feel guilty, do we still hate and fear them? "Images, when they work, should have this tremendous intensity of silence, a silence or emptiness that is 'full'. The observer should become immobilized or freeze before the image... They should affect the observer like an attack that he does not experience directly but becomes aware of only at a distance."³⁶

This optical withdrawal of the subject is 'proposing' to activate the memory and the critical faculties that strain to bring these subjects back or partly back. In effect we can talk about a summing of the subject by depicting its imminent disappearance, aesthetically transferring responsibility for performing this

³⁵ GODFREY, T. "The Figure" in *Painting today*, 180

³⁶ TURNER, C. 2003. "Luc Tuymans: Premonition – 'the silence before the storm'. Australian National University

task from the eyes to the intellect and the emotions. Thus the process of not forgetting is set in motion, extending and guiding.

I consider my works as anti-rhetorical in their mode of pictorial address. They are also conceived as public works not only because they depict well-known political figures – but because they largely depended for their meaning on the horrid fascination, anxiety, ambivalence, and denial experienced by those that lived under their regimes, and by a generation worldwide for whom Ceausescu, Gaddafi, Pol Pot, and the others were emblematic of the reckless abuse of power and bitter restrictions imposed on their own people.

Photography and the toolbox: Technical considerations

A contemporary issue particularly relevant to portraiture in history painting concerns the place of photography in art. Paintings of photographs ask us to question both what photography and painting are and what they can do, how they relate and how they inform each other. There is no more talk about photography meaning the end of painting or of it not being art. Photography has become confident in its own status as art, and painting has come to terms with its own by now voracious use of photographic images.

Certain contemporary painters have long since understood the mnemonic insufficiency of the photograph and have capitalized on their own medium's strength in this domain. The painted image, with its material sensuality, tactility, and atmospheric possibilities, corresponds more closely to the imprecision of the human brain's mnemonic functions.³⁷

Artists such as Wilhelm Sasnal and Kai Althoff have seized upon the mnemonic potential of painting to weave together hybrid tableaux, conflating personal stories and collective events. Painters like Doig, Marlene Dumas or Luc

³⁷ GINGERAS, A.M. 2010. "The Mnemonic Function Of The Painted Image" <http://www.saatchi-gallery.co.uk/current/essays.htm>

Tuymans make work that is entirely permeated by a photographic reality, that is, a reality composed of detachable appearances; yet in contrast to Richter or Morley, they feel no need to represent the 'look' of the photograph. 'The painting remains painterly.'³⁸

The main source for my work is photographs found through the Internet. They essentially form and inform my paintings. They are an integral part of the process and they are used as tool in the formation of painted image.

Richter painted from photographs simply because of its convenience; it allowed him to avoid the efforts of drawing or thinking up a composition. This too is considered in my process but unlike Richter the choice of imagery is not a banal one, but perhaps like Dumas, a political one.³⁹ The images contain traces of historical trauma. Richter primarily analysed the nature of painting by "copying" photographs. However by blurring them to some extent, made them difficult to read, forced the viewer to aware that this was always a painting we were looking at.

For me the most important aspect in choosing a source image remains the indexical and factual quality and directness with which it connects to reality. The archival, 'matter of fact', documentary and forensic quality are what qualifies an image for transposing it onto canvas. The person behind the camera should not be part of the constructed image. When present it is discarded. This idea is an important aspect of the process that I follow. The use of this strategy is indented to introduce the idea of distance in the work; spatial and temporal distance.

Perhaps the other possible explanation is that painting is simply used as a means to rescue meaningful pictures from the overwhelming mass of images.

³⁸ SCHWABSKY, B. 2011. "An Art That Eats Its Own Head: Painting in the Age of the Image" <http://www.saatchi-gallery.co.uk/current/essays2.htm>

³⁹ BUTLER, C. 2008. "Painter as a witness" in C. Butler et al (eds), *Marlene Dumas: Measuring your own grave* Los Angeles : Museum of Contemporary Art, 45

As mentioned before for Dumas the choice to paint from photographs is a political one. “The source materials are about the political choices one faces. They are of the time they are made in. They are about whose side are you on.”⁴⁰ As a result, by its very nature painting is a decisive moral act in Dumas’s case. This faith is shared with Richter. For Dumas ‘recuperating images by appropriating, projecting, altering and painting them is a way of being in the world, of bearing witness and making contact through the invention of a visual language based on a productive distortion and restoration of still images.’⁴¹

It has been claimed that Tuymans is a follower of Richter because of the use of photography and some of the formulas used by the older artist. But Tuymans paints in opposition to Richter and his method and uses photography because that is how we know our world. Richter has a method, a formula where Tuymans remains in uncertainty with each painting.⁴²



Fig. 24 Jeff Wall *A sudden Gust of Wind (after Hokusai)* 1993

Transparency on lightbox

2500 x 3970 x 340 mm. Tate Gallery UK

⁴⁰ DUMAS, M. 2003. “ Unpublished notes for a talk at the Art Institute of Chicago, 25 February 2003”

⁴¹ BUTLER, C. 2008. “Painter as a witness” in C. Butler et al (eds), *Marlene Dumas: Measuring your own grave* Los Angeles : Museum of Contemporary Art

⁴² Godfrey, T. “Death and Life” in *Painting Today*, 277

If painting meditates on photography, photography has also meditated on painting. The photographer Jeff Walls makes a conscious attempt to make a contemporary 'history painting' as seen in 'A sudden Gust of Wind (after Hokusai)'(Fig.24), 1993.⁴³

For me the photographs provided the starting point in working around a concept or issue that I wish to explore in painting. In the process the original is changed sometimes considerably sometimes less. The types of image used only deal with representation of those dictators as corpses, embalmed or otherwise. This presented a considerable problem since the availability of such sources is rather scarce. Working with amateur snaps or news pictures also helps because they seem in some way incomplete.

Once the selection has been made the next step in this process is the transfer of these specifically chosen images onto canvas. Initially the format of the canvas is usually dictated the compositional format of the photograph but recently the square format has become the standard for this particular series of work. The square framing of the composition removes the work from the standard rectangular format and introduces a degree of abstraction inherent in it. The space created is removed from a localised positioning allowing the work to bring a degree of ambiguity.

The image is first printed on a transparency and then it is projected onto the canvas. The use of transparency is deliberate because in the process there are a number of details that are removed by the printing process. This low quality provides another way to approach Tuymans's idea of "painting a lot away". It's another layer of distance that is added on top of the image. Unlike Tuymans there are no preliminary studies done. This is in order to avoid consuming/pre-painting the first potential final image. This helps me to avoid losing interest in the image altogether. The image is usually cropped and

⁴³ GODFREY, T. "Photography" in *Painting today*, 102

moved until the right composition is achieved. The projection is then traced on the canvas in washable pencil. The details and accidental distortions are marked out with precision. Only then the painting process can begin.

The positioning of the figure has also been experimented with – in some works the ‘horizontal’ is the dominant force line and the ‘quieting’ element, in other the body is slightly inclined in order to add a sense of energy and slight irritation of the horizontal, ending up with the vertical punctures of those figures that face the viewer directly.

Another important consideration is the scale of the work and the compositional format. The intention to retain the large scale associated with history painting is intended to convey a sense of confidence. It’s a statement of confidence in the act of painting and its possibilities and not a reaffirmation of the grand manner. Yes, I want to paint pictures and I am not afraid of size. The intimate scale employed by Tuymans, and to some extent by Richter, disturbs too insistently the connection with the body and returns the image to the sphere of panel painting.

Considering the compositional format and how it will become part of the final composite, the ideas of ‘distancing’ and ‘ambiguity’ suggested/required the use of the ‘square’ format. There are a number of factors that sustain this format – is artificial, creates an abstract space, removed the photographic frame.

Portraiture

The format chosen to frame this topic is based on the genre of portraiture. These repetitive post-mortem portraits are an adaptation of the genre popular during the latter half of the 19th century, when *memento mori* photography, in a ‘carte-de-visite’ style, was at its most prominent.

Our relationship with ‘portraits’ remains part of the response to a changing and challenging world. The symbolism and resonance of representations of specific individuals remains powerful within the media. The toppling of

Saddam's statue was widely regarded as a symbol of the overthrow of both dictator and regime.⁴⁴

The "portraiture" format allows for a much closer examination or scrutiny of the subject – people that the world not want to celebrate in the main which in itself remains a contentious choice. It's a way to get in very close proximity with these characters, an impossible task in real life. The suitability of this is implicit in the fact that the work deals with the abuse of power by specific individuals. Our familiarity with portraiture provides a good platform of exploring difficult ideas and presenting a situation – in this case one determined by the 'hubris'.

Marlene Dumas

When Marlene Dumas (b 1953) painted her own version of the dead Ulrike Meinhof, in contrast to Richter, she used a more specific 'portrait' format. The majority of her works may be categorised as "portraits", but this is not to be understood in a traditional sense, they are not about representation but presentation of emotion or of a state of mind. "For me a good portrait conveys a point where attraction and alienation meet."⁴⁵

Just like Giacometti, Bacon and Golub, Dumas uses the space of the canvas as an arena of psychological tension and the face or the body as a 'container for meaning.'⁴⁶

⁴⁴ NAIRNE S. and HOWGATE S. 2006. *The Portrait Now*, London : National Portrait Gallery

⁴⁵ Dumas, in Hlavajova, "Ik is een allochtoon", page 108, cited in BUTLER, C. 2008. "Painter as a witness", 44

⁴⁶ BUTLER, C. 2008. "Painter as a witness" in C. Butler et al (eds), *Marlene Dumas: Measuring your own grave* Los Angeles : Museum of Contemporary Art



Fig. 25 Marlene Dumas *Stern* 2004

Oil paint on canvas 1101 x 1302 x 24 mm

Tate Gallery UK



Fig. 26 Photograph of *Ulrike Marie Meinhoff*,

'Der Stern', 1976

source: www.badder-meinhof.com

Dumas's version, titled 'Stern' (2004) after the German tabloid magazine *Der Stern* that initially published it, is the same source photograph (Fig. 26) used three times by Richter in his October series. In this particular work Dumas comments not only on the photograph and its subject matter but also on Richter. "I also wanted to see with Stern, if I could take Richter's source out of

its blur.”⁴⁷ Dumas’s version (Fig. 25) is more graphic, more immediate and larger than Richter’s.

The work is much closer to Manet’s manner in its crisp pallor and lush blacks. In this way Dumas makes the image of the dead Meinhof appear less dead. We are in fact confronted with what we can call ‘female martyrdom’, a fallen victim, rightly or wrongly, of a political system. The distance present in Richter’s works is removed here by her extreme zooming on the head.

The portrait format is also used by Tuymans but in a very reductive way. In his suggestively titled work ‘Portrait’ (2000, Fig. 27), he is not striving for a realist representation of the world as we see it, or remember it. Here too his main strategy centres on the act of representation itself, on the disconnection between the image and representation. The subject of this portrait, with his blank face and black, thick-rimmed glasses, is more suggestive of an underlying violence. ‘The somewhat sinister aura is achieved through the use of a subtle chromatic reserve’.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Dumas statement of 29 Nov 2002 to Richard Shiff in *Less Dead*, BUTLER, C. 2008. “Painter as a witness”, 155

⁴⁸ NAIRNE S. and HOWGATE S. 2006. *The Portrait Now*, London: National Portrait Gallery

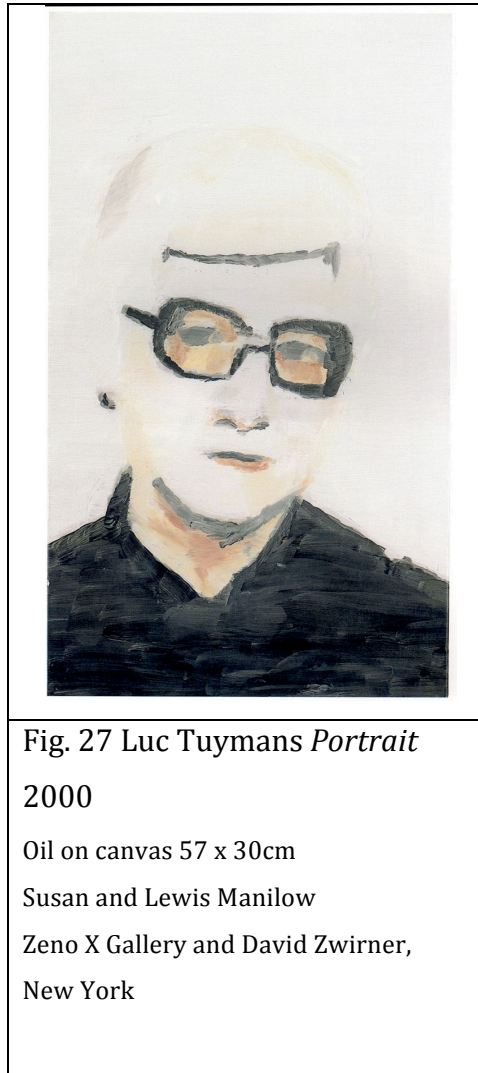


Fig. 27 Luc Tuymans *Portrait*
2000

Oil on canvas 57 x 30cm

Susan and Lewis Manilow

Zeno X Gallery and David Zwirner,
New York

Strategy and engagement

In my approach there are a number of choices that relate to these examples. But there are also significant differences. The cropping and close-up procedures are used in a similar manner to Dumas, but where she paints away any traces of her drawing and fills in the backgrounds with paint, the majority of my works retain the drawing and the white surface of the canvas. The drawing visibility is used in order to talk about a 'constructive' element of the image which in turn is deconstructed and dematerialised by the rapture produced in the why the paint is used. The colours are less emotional or seductive and remain in a state of incompleteness. The intention is to leave them in a 'wanting' position, wanting to become painting, but are yet to reach quality.



This also is trying to undermine every attempt to identify the work with a determinate space. The works that exemplify the best this method include my 'Che', 'Pol Pot', 'Mao', 'Gaddafi', 'Lenin', 'Goering', "Petacci" and 'Ceausescu'.

When discussing the work of Tuymans, critic and curator Helen Molesworth remarks that the painter requires the viewer to 'massively overcompensate' when viewing the work. This is because what it is seen, or what is constructed in the mind is not actually happening on the canvas.⁴⁹ This relationship with the viewer and how it mediates with the work is an important consideration in my current work. The 'tricks' used in making the 'painted image' should point to something that is not visible but only subtly suggested; the portrait-image acts as intermediary between the viewer and the concept behind the pictures.

My works - '*Evita , July 26, 1952*'(Fig. 31), as well as in '*Elena, Targoviste 25 December 1989,*' are dealing with the same concept but they also represent a further exploration of the possibility of making a particular type of political painting. Here the chromatic considerations take a more prominent role.

In the 'Degenerate Realism' the portraits of the last Eastern European communist leaders, '*Gorbachev –URSS*' (Fig. 28), '*Janos Kadar – Hungary*' (Fig. 29), '*Slobodan Milosevici –Yugoslavia*' (FIG. 30), and others, were painted in very strong chromatic palettes. The oil paint medium was replaced with drawing inks and glass paint, but the canvas-support remained the same. The experimentation phase for the new cycle is based on the two main directions used in the first cycle – the photographic monochromatic oil paintings and the chromatic 'dripping' paintings. The monochromatic discussed the relationship between photo and painting where the 'dripping' paintings aimed to explore the process of making.

⁴⁹ MOLESWORTH, H. 2010. *On Luc Tuymans* – Talk/discussions Podcasts, Posted October 26, 2010 Retrieved from <http://www2.mcachicago.org/2010/helen-molesworth-on-luc-tuymans/>

	
<p>Fig. 28 <i>Mikhail Sergeyevich Gorbachev URSS 2010</i> Mixed media on canvas (Ink and glass paint) 140 x 120 cm Warsaw, Poland</p>	<p>Fig. 29 <i>Janos Kadar Hungary 2010</i> Mixed media on canvas (Ink and glass paint) 140 x 120 cm Warsaw, Poland</p>

The use of colour and the way the inks were applied was meant to make the work more accessible for the audience. Further more the ‘decorative’ aspect of the work implied an ironic dematerialising of the power these minor dictators were associated with. The fast execution approach was imposed at the start of each painting session and no corrections were made afterwards. The dripping is a result of the process but it is also the material quality of the medium used. Although there was no intention to connect with the idea of ‘blood’, the end readings remain suggestive of that association. The intention behind the dripping, apart from a technical one, was to suggest a sense of ‘crumbling’, or deconstruction of power. Mimicking the early colour television images and contrasting the ‘greyness’ associated with Eastern Europe, the ‘decorative’ chromatic is also an attempt to unmask and expose the irony of power. Thus exposing the ridiculous and dangerous aspect of ‘hubris’, one is in the position to remove the power from them. The transparency inherent in the medium and the white surface of the canvas are essential in the final result. Here the rapid execution retains the freshness of painting and maximises the power of the image. In retaining the different types and sizes of brush marks, this stresses the importance of the role of the process. No preliminary studies were

done. The colours are specific and their relationship intuitive, creating, immediate and emotional. The figures stare back at the viewer creating a scrutinising intensity.

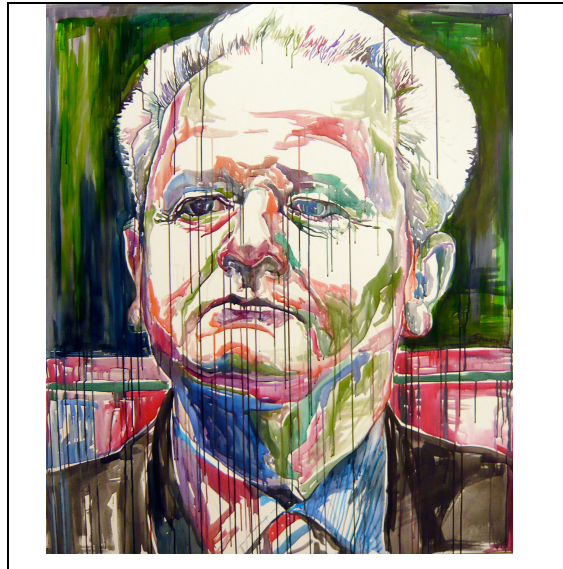


Fig. 30 *Slobodan Milosevici*

Yugoslavia 2010

Mixed media on canvas (ink and glass paint)

140 x 120 cm Warsaw, Poland

The 2012 series, of which 'Evita' (Fig. 31) is part, takes a new chromatic direction. Here the 'decorative' and intense 'in your face' colour is removed in order to bring a concept mentioned earlier – the concept of 'quietness'. The image is peered back, understated. The colour is bleached and tuned down to minimum. The confrontational staring is absent and the figure does not push forward into the outer space of the canvas but instead withdraws in the picture space. This is a staged image where one is only supplied with the sense of power and dominance, to the point where one feels reverence for the subject. Here we see power at its maximum fulfilment. The 'hubris' has not ravished the image or the embalmed body.

Tuymans 'consistently makes a point of employing his pictorial means with the greatest possible economy, an approach that stands vehemently opposed to all

painterly virtuosity.’⁵⁰ Here too in my own series the painterly virtuosity is restrained and avoided by understating it. The chosen compositional format is square and not rectangular. This adds to the distancing effect but also creates a much more ambiguous negative space in the picture. The medium employed this time is oil paint and not ink.

The source for the next painting is a photograph showing the embalmed body of María Eva Duarte de Perón. Usually referred to as Evita, she was the second wife of Argentine President Juan Domingo Perón and the First Lady of Argentina from 1946 until her death in July 26, 1952, at the age of 33 following a battle with cancer.⁵¹ Her embalmed body was put on display to the public, but went missing for 16 years after President Peron was overthrown in a 1955 military coup. It now rests in Buenos Aires’s Recoleta cemetery. Like another legendary Argentinian figure, Ernesto “Che” Guevara, Evita remains to this day a controversial international cultural icon. Locally her status is that of a saint.



⁵⁰ BITTERLI, K. ‘In the Light of painting An attempt to see Luc Tuymans’s work...’ in *Luc Tuymans : The Arena*, Stephan Berg (ed) Ostfildern-Ruit, Hatje Cantz Publishers, 83

⁵¹ EVA PERÓN HISTORICAL RESEARCH FOUNDATION, 2011. <http://www.evita-peron.org>

Fig. 31 Author - *Evita, July 26, 1952 - 2012*

Oil on canvas, 110 x 110 cm

Wellington NZ

There are a number of hidden qualities that are intriguing about an image of this type of character. Firstly, here we don't have a clear 'evil' character as with Gaddafi or Pol Pot, but one that is both revered and loathed, religiously and politically. Secondly, we are not exactly sure what we are looking at – a body or someone sleeping. The appeal rests in the political ambiguity as well as in the unresting feeling that we are not quite sure what state this image depicts.

The understated and light yellow that dominates the painting, with a few blue accents, plays with these ideas, within the format of religious painting. It also adds to the sense of bloodless and lifeless flesh. The light of the painting comes from within the figure and not from outside, creating a very eerie aura. The oil paint does not cover the entire space of the canvas. This fragmentation and incompleteness is intended to avoid 'completing' the painting but to leave things to be revealed much later.

The same contradictory qualities are explored in my painting of Ernesto Guevara (1928-1967) titled '*El Che, La Higuera October 9, 1967*' – 2012 (Fig. 32), which stares out at us smiling. It is in fact an image of Guevara after his execution by the Bolivian Army. Technically and stylistically this painting explores another possible direction. The muddied grey-dominated oil colours are replacing the chromatic values used in '*Evita*'. The earthy colours combined with cold greys are used in a dialogue with the drawing constructed and deconstructing the form. The background remains virginal and elusive and acts as a skeleton for the entire structure. The painting approach is direct, intense and short in duration; the paint is liquid and translucent; the contained forms remain open, unfinished.




Fig. 32 Author - *El Che, La Higuera October 9,*
1967 - 2012

Oil on Canvas, 110 x 110 cm

Wellington NZ

These factors help to retain clarity in the way the picture was made without losing thought of the connection with its source. By leaving the figure in an incomplete, fragmentary state and by placing it in a very ambiguous and artificial space, the work acquires an aura of dematerialisation that helps to contextualise the work. No matter what one might think of Che, he remains controversial and divisive. He also remains problematic within the groupings since he does not fit any of them completely.

	
<p>Fig. 33 Author - <i>The Chairman</i> <i>September 9, 1976 - 2012</i> Oil on Canvas, 110 x 110 cm Wellington NZ</p>	<p>Fig. 34 Author - <i>Pol Pot</i> <i>Kampuchea April 15, 1988 - 2012</i> Oil on Canvas, 110 x 110 cm Wellington NZ</p>

This painting approach is further explored in *'The Chairman September 9, 1976' - 2012* (Fig. 33), which represents the embalmed body of Mao Zedong, China (1893-1976); *'Pol Pot Kampuchea April 15, 1988'* (Fig. 34) - shows the body of Pol Pot (1925 - 1998) of Cambodia; *'The Battle of Sirte, Gaddafi October 20, 2011'*, with Colonel Gaddafi of Libya (1942 - 2011); *'Capsule October 16, 1946'* - dealing with the body of Hermann Wilhelm Göring (1893 -1946) after his suicide; *'Lenin January 21, 1924'* (Fig.1)- the mummified body of Vladimir Ilyich Lenin (1870-1924) as it can be seen in the Red Square, Moscow; *'Claretta Petacci, Piazzale Loreto, Milano 28 April 1945'* - represents the body of Clara Petacci (1912 - 1945), the mistress of the Italian dictator Benito Mussolini, after the execution, alongside *'Mussolini, Piazzale Loreto, Milano 28 April'* which deals with the embittered body of the Italian dictator.

This approach is also carried out in combination with chromatic nuances which can be seen in the works that show the funerals of General Francisco Franco (1892-1975) of Spain and Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin (1878-1953) of the Soviet Union, in *'El Caudillo Franco November 20, 1975'* and *'Stalin Kuntsevo Dacha, March 5, 1953'* respectively, and in the 'portrait' of Nicolae Ceausescu

(1918-1989) after his execution on Christmas Day 1989 – '*Ceausescu, Târgoviște 25 December 1989*' (Fig.2).

Mediating critical response

One critical issue is the way one needs to respond to the accusation of memorialization, sensationalism or 'grand manner'. The inherent danger in using a particular group of unpopular individuals or events can be easily seen in the case of Richter's October cycle. Until 1988 Richter was known as an artist who had never taken any political position. And although the political left challenged his right to use their champions, while the right speculated on the degree of sympathy, Richter remained adamantly clear about his anti-ideological position: there was no intention of making a particular political statement.⁵²

The critical response to this set of works was divided in two divergent, culturally relative directions – a European one and an American one. The totally different reading provided by the American audience would prove extremely important for Richter and for the understanding of these works without the political and cultural partisanship provided by the European intelligentsia.

The interpretation and misinterpretation that developed outside the European context pushed the discussion away from matters of dramatic reportage towards a more general meditation on political violence in the confrontations between rebellious youth and the conservative authority in the 1960's and 1970's. It is this particular shift in interpretation that played the crucial role in deciding the ultimate destinations of these paintings.⁵³

The difference between the generated comments by fellow artists Bazelitz and Serra demonstrates the impossibility of having one single reading or

⁵² STORR, R. & MUSEUM OF MODERN ART (NEW YORK N.Y.) 2003. *Gerhard Richter: Doubt and Belief in Painting*, New York, London, Museum of Modern Art ; Thames & Hudson, 200

⁵³ STORR, R., RICHTER, G. & MUSEUM OF MODERN ART (NEW YORK N.Y.) 2000. *Gerhard Richter : October 18, 1977*, New York, Museum of Modern Art

understanding of these works. Georg Baselitz in a 1998 interview, a decade after the paintings' debut, still reacted vehemently towards these images: "I was ashamed when Richter painted Baader-Meinhof, I was ashamed as a painter because I think that as a painter living today, you can't just paint such a completely distressing image of history because then you are demanding grand subject matter. Richter succumbs, makes mistakes, and in my opinion, stupid mistakes in which he with his sentimentality or senility tosses too much fodder to the masses."⁵⁴

Richard Serra had this to say about the works when shown in the US: "I don't think there is an American painter alive who could tackle this subject matter, and get this much feeling into it in this dispassionate way... These paintings aren't like late Rembrandts, exactly, but they are disturbing in a way the Rembrandts are. There's despair in them. And both the Richters and the late Rembrandts are about people recognising their own solitude through the paintings, which is what we respond to in them."⁵⁵

It was the American critic Michael Brenson who seized upon Richter's desire "to paint the unpaintable", and upon an essential conceptual aspect of the work to which conservatives and leftists were both wilfully blind: 'its fundamental critique of the temptation and ultimate price of ideology, a temptation to which the Baader-Meinhof group succumbed and for which they paid a high price.'⁵⁶

After being on a ten-year loan to the Museum für Moderne Kunst in Frankfurt am Main the pictures were sold to the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 1995, where they have been on display since 2000. The expatriation caused as much stir in Germany and the art world as had their debut. If initially Richter indicated that he expected the cycle's permanent home to be a German

⁵⁴ ELGER, D. 2009. *Gerhard Richter A Life in Painting*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago

⁵⁵ KIMMELMANN, M. 1995, "At the Met and the Modern with Richard Serra: One Provocateur Inspired by Another", *The New York Times* (Aug 11, 1995), C26

⁵⁶ STORR, R. & MUSEUM OF MODERN ART (NEW YORK N.Y.) 2003. *Gerhard Richter: Doubt and Belief in Painting*, New York, London, Museum of Modern Art ; Thames & Hudson, 203.

institution, he had come to think of USA as a hospitable environment for his series, rather than an alien one.

The other important question is the reason/s that artists are so compelled to force back in the main images that we don't want to be confronted with again. Why paint dictators? Why chose the corpse?

In 2012 the artists Jenny Saville, Yan Pei-Ming and Luca del Baldo chose the corpse of the deposed Libyan dictator, Muammar Gaddafi, as the subject matter for paintings. So far there has been no such work produced in Libya. Curator David Elliott sees it as a response to a "shocking and iconic image; also, Western media tend not to 'do' dead people unless they were famous or notorious, so they are a little bit exotic in our everyday experience."⁵⁷



Fig. 35 Yan Pei-Ming *Gadhafi's Corpse* 2011

Oil on canvas

110 × 157 cm

David Zwirner, New York

⁵⁷ HARRIS, G. 2012 "Dead Gaddafi in Triplicate", <http://www.theartnewspaper.com/articles/Dead-Gaddafi-in-triplicate/27237> News, Issue 239, October 2012

For Del Baldo (Fig. 36) the reason is clear, the “image of a dead dictator taken from the media is more powerful, and more shocking, than say Damien Hirst’s shark”. Saville is more shocked by the attendants than by the corpse: “What I found most disturbing about the [press] images was not Gaddafi’s body, or the light, but the telephones. [There was] this incredible body lying out in this cold storage unit with hundreds of hands holding telephones.”⁵⁸



Fig. 36 Luca del Baldo –
Ubu Roi/Gaddafi's Death 2011
Oil on Belgian Linen
40 x 50 cm
Artist's Collection

Finally, and perhaps most surprisingly, Ming argues that his portrait (Fig. 35) restores some of Gaddafi's lost stature. “He was lying on a mattress and there were things strewn on the ground around him. I gave him back human dignity in a way. He’s alone with his death. Alone in his humanity. And he’s a victim of his own victims.”⁵⁹

In 2011 the Polish artist Wilhelm Sasnal painted a series of pictures based on the same subject matter. In ‘Gaddafi 3’ (Fig. 37), like Ming, he tried to give back

⁵⁸ HARRIS, G. 2012 “Dead Gaddafi in Triplicate”,
<http://www.theartnewspaper.com/articles/Dead-Gaddafi-in-triplicate/27237>
News, Issue 239, October 2012

⁵⁹ SCHULTZ, C. 2012. “In conversation with YANPEI-MING”
<http://www.brooklynrail.org/2012/06/art/yan-pei-ming-with-charles-schultz>

some dignity after feeling embarrassed by the way the Libyan revolutionaries exposed the dead body of the country's former leader, like a trophy at the cold store of a local supermarket to the public. ⁶⁰

Much earlier, in 1988, Richter had this to say about the October series: "The deaths of the terrorists, and the related events both before and after, stand for a horror that distressed me and has haunted me as unfinished business ever since, despite all my efforts to suppress it." ⁶¹



Fig. 37 Wilhelm Sasnal *Gaddafi 3*, 2011

Oil on canvas 160 cm × 200 cm

Artist's Collection

⁶⁰ PREMIER ART SCENE.COM 2012. "Wilhelm Sasnal at Munich's Haus der Kunst"
<http://premierartscene.com/magazine/wilhelm-sasnal/>

⁶¹ G. Richter, *Doubt and Belief in Painting*, by Robert Storr, Page 259/ 'Notes from a Press conference, November-December 1989' in *Daily Practice* ;173-174

Title/naming the work

When viewing the works one wonders what is the function of the titles given to them? In the case of Tuymans, Richter, Dumas and others the titles are not mere designations but elements of central importance to the understanding of their works. They convey conceptual information alongside the visual information of the image and thus open up alternate readings.⁶²

A good example is the case of the *Gas Chamber* (1986, Fig. 38) by Luc Tuymans. Apparently the German collector who first tried to buy this painting did not take any notice either of the title or the subject. He just liked the way it looked – enigmatic, sketchy, muted, and slightly abject – the stretcher was warped and the paint was cracking. When Tuymans pointed out the title the dealer refused to buy it. The painting depicts a room in the Mauthausen camp; it is in fact a painting of a watercolour that was made after a found photograph. In typical fashion Tuymans paints the scene of the crime, not the crime. No one is in there; it is an echo of an echo of an echo.

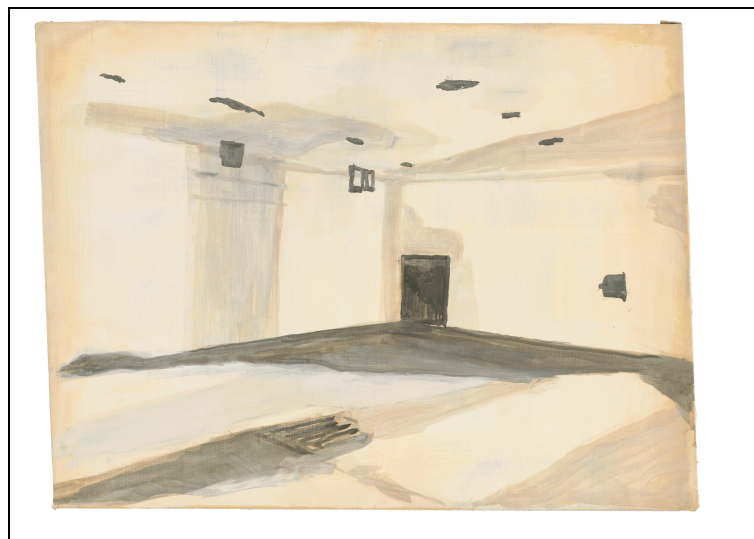


Fig. 38 Luc Tuymans *Gas Chamber* 1986

Oil on canvas

50 x 70cm

The Over Holland Collection

⁶² BITTERLI, K. 'In the Light of painting An attempt to see Luc Tuymans's work...' in *Luc Tuymans: The Arena*, Stephan Berg (ed) Ostfildern-Ruit, Hatje Cantz Publishers, 87

Tuymans does not paint “vaguely” or “out of focus”. His painting is extremely precise, even when the painted image appears in reduced form, like this one.⁶³

The titles for my work are chosen simply as an archiving system, being relatively specific and not poetic. However they are intended to help in the process of deciphering the work and its meaning. I use three main possible key indicators that are interchangeable: geographical location, name or nickname, and date of death – execution, assassination, and suicide. The title is finalised only after the painting is completed, thus playing a direct role in the final solution. This minimalist approach provides the entry point the possible reading and interpretation of the work.

What can we say about portraiture painting in the present day? Conclusion

In my series of paintings of dead dictators I have touched upon and confronted a number of issues of contemporary painting, particularly relating to political painting and modern portraiture. Like other recent practicing artists I have used photography as a source of images, in my case for world political figures whose lives I myself am familiar with only through modern digital media such as the television and Internet. I have considered how to represent these figures in death, aiming somehow to reduce and lessen the essential being of these dictators, while recognizing the importance and impact on the lives of those who suffered under their regimes. In depicting these former leaders in death, using the techniques that I have chosen, I hope to represent the duality of political hubris: the power as well as the fall.

In the process of painting I have come to reflect more deeply on contemporary issues around the representation and impact of historical events in the modern era, what this says for individual and group identities, and how painting has and is evolving to address these concerns.

⁶³ Philippe Pirotte, “The Arena”, 53

In the 20th and 21st centuries, the concept of 'hubris' has been made tangible through the faces of many cruel dictators and despots. Their faces have become modern incarnations of 'evil'. Kept alive through photography and film, the portraits of people like Adolf Hitler, Josef Stalin and Saddam Hussein have become deep-seated in the world's collective memory. To this day we are still wondering how were these men able to reach positions that enabled them to act out their ruthless and often cruel tendencies.⁶⁴

On the other hand we tend to forget that cruel men such Mao Zedong, Ceausescu or Gaddafi were people made of flesh and blood like everybody else, a phenomenon that Hannah Arendt called 'the banality of evil'. And that of course makes them even more threatening, despicable and problematic as a subject. They are not just the abstract 'monsters' we try to disguise, just so we can distance ourselves from them. In confronting them we must confront ourselves as well, since we too play a part in the making and unmaking of such individuals. Their history is our history too.

My work in is not about 'remembering' these dictators, but about 'exposing' the number of faces that are inherently present in them. Depicting my subjects in two distinct, yet connected groupings, one can see the 'abuse of power' presented in two significant hypostasis: firstly we have the images that continue to empower the sitter, and secondly an exposition of the tragedy of 'hubris' and what is ultimately leading to. Through repeated enactment my work is putting forward an insistent discussion around the concept of power, its high and lows, its attraction and inherent danger, its corruptibility.

The question that persists is can painting be with political content? Manet made specific choices when he painted *The Execution of Maximilian* (1867–68) but it is far from clear what was his political aim – if there was one. ⁶⁵ One

⁶⁴ LEHELDT, C. 2008 "Faces of Evil" Exhibition <http://www.faces-of-evil.com/index.php?id=769>, FACES OF EVIL – GESICHTER DES BÖSEN, Hans Weishäupl

⁶⁵ MOLLER, C. 2008 "The Implicated Spectator: From Manet to Botero" in *Terror and the Arts*. Ed. Lisa Muszynski. Palgrave Macmillan, 26

possible answer is that painting is political art when it maintains its autonomy as a work of art, and does not accept one single possible meaning and interpretation: “it complicates not simplifies”⁶⁶, “is not susceptible to simple interpretations, and cannot be easily used for political purposes.”⁶⁷ What is evident is that political history painting of today deals with problems rather than heroism.

‘History? Of course, there is nothing but history’, Werner Tubke remarked in 1982. There is a sense that it was Tubke’s contemporaries who fled East Germany for the West, Baselitz, Polke, Richter and others, who created the true history painting of their time, one that dwelt on the bad faith of the post-war state and its refusal to acknowledge the past.

As for the role of painting in contemporary discourse, is it really the case that the only thing a painter can do is mourn the death of painting, as suggested by Benjamin Buchloh, or is there more to it? Richter’s *October 18, 1977* cycle and its relation to history painting is not, as critics such as Benjamin Buchloh and Stefan Germer have asserted, a demonstration that the genre can no longer be practised but only that it can no longer be practised as it had been before.⁶⁸

The critic Douglas Fogle makes a similar observation: “it has become clear once again that reports of the medium’s death have been greatly exaggerated. In fact painting has never gone away, but rather like a virus exposed to an antibiotic, it has mutated, imprinting its genetic code on an entirely new generation of descendants.”⁶⁹

The choice to present this inquiry through the medium of painting, a bad medium in which to tell a story compared with film or literature, rests in the

⁶⁶ELDERFIELD, J., MANET, E. D. & MUSEUM OF MODERN ART (NEW YORK N.Y.) 2006. *Manet and the execution of Maximilian*, New York, Museum of Modern Art, 44

⁶⁷ MOLLER, C. 2008 “ The Implicated Spectator: From Manet to Botero” in *Terror and the Arts*. Ed. Lisa Muszynski. Palgrave Macmillan, 27

⁶⁸STORR, R. *Gerhard Richter: Doubt and Belief in Painting*

⁶⁹ GODFREY, T. *Painting Today*, 191

belief that it remains a very good medium in which to present a situation and, in the way it is made and presented, create a particular drama for the viewer to enact or re-enact.⁷⁰

The strength of painting is in its ability to simultaneously occupy the past and the present and in its persistence in being an inclusive one, capable of suggesting both the inner necessities of the artist and the worlds in which the artist operates.⁷¹

⁷⁰ GODFREY, T. *Painting Today*, 191

⁷¹ HALBREICH, K. "Foreword" in FOGLE, D. & WALKER ART CENTER. 2001. *Painting at the edge of the world*, Minneapolis, Walker Art Center., 5

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