

PORTRAIT LUKAS DUWENHÖGGER

There's a hole in my heart

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Lukas Duwenhögger makes paintings that play with the tangled connections between the visible and invisible, desire and distance, transparency and opacity - all at the same time. Infused with a freewheeling nostalgia, his works convey the sense that there is always something else within what seems clear as day.

The paintings Lukas Duwenhögger has been making for the past few decades are infused with an energy that can barely, if at all, be grasped, but is nonetheless specific. It gets me every time I see his work, even on a screen.

His pictures are masterpieces of sensitivity, stage sets for a theatre piece that is never spelt out but only ever hinted at, or for desires that oddly end up being expressed in the form of a very concrete as-if. Everything here looks so stylishly sublimated that even improbably disparate motifs are combined with seemingly effortless ease. Bodies melt into textile surfaces where, as surfaces, they convey a sense of diffuse longing. The atmosphere of this work might in general be described as a sort of dreamy enchantment that summons its driving force from no-holds-barred nostalgia and unfulfilled yearning - these are pictures full of feelings, but without fear.

Duwenhögger makes figurative paintings that function in an almost narrative way, but nevertheless they cannot be resolved through a story. Rarely does anything become manifest in his work, even if it is right there in front of your eyes, while a great deal is latent without having been hidden. In terms of storytelling, it has the effect that things don't have just one meaning and can be interpreted one way or another. «My work has often been described as 'coded' or 'enigmatic'», the artist once said in an interview. He continued, «But in my opinion it would

make more sense to speak not so much of an enigma as of *opacity* - in relation to the idea of information as transparency.» Concluding these thoughts, he wondered «whether a learning process fueled by the wish for opacity is so uncomfortable because it desires difference and eccentricity instead of affirming them as objects of study.» This prioritisation of desire over affirmation gets right to the heart of Duwenhögger's practice. And needless to say, desire, too, is molded and engendered by the social, and hence it is legible, like all that is social. And yet it cannot be reduced to this.

Perusal of Ill-Begotten Treasures is a painting from 2003. Four men have congregated in a park on a hill. A lake or strait looms in the background, with a city on its shores (presumably it is the Bosphorus; Duwenhögger moved to Istanbul many years ago). The four lie, sit, stand; they play cards, let a necklace slide through their fingers, fiddle with a lighter or some other object, gaze at the ground or into the distance, smoke. A newspaper has been spread out on the grass. An opulent vase is near the edge of the canvas; a painting, or perhaps a mirror, is propped up against it (we see it only from behind). A large rolltop desk is at the center of the scene; its lid, adorned with diamond shapes, is closed and locked. Whatever it contains is inaccessible.

The four men are dressed in various styles, but mostly in unremarkable clothing - one wears a classic workaday suit that's almost a bit oldschool; another a wool pullover over a shirt; the third a V-necked sweater and a coat with the collar turned up. Only one stands out, proudly raising his head, hand at hip with index finger splayed. Dressed in a pair of blue jeans, a checkered shirt, and a red jacket, he has slung a flamboyant white fur coat over his shoulders. At the far edge of the picture is a fifth man, leaning against a listing yet carefully pruned tree in a rather elegant pinstripe suit. The viewer sees mainly the back of his neck, which is neatly shaved; his head is turned toward the four men to his left. A chair that's also at an unusual angle has been placed somewhere on the lawn between them. No one is sitting on it.

We might begin to unpack this picture, to wonder, in view of the title, which «ill-begotten gains» have been laid out on the lawn to be perused, or about who is inspecting what stolen property, or adorning themselves with whose borrowed finery. But we could also interpret the entire scene as a kind of magical cruising area, a place where, leaving room for ambiguity, men wait for other men because they want something from them. Some make it more explicit, some less, but they all have a role to play, from the elegantly blasé gentleman in the white fur coat - a getup that many would say lets him be decoded without further ado as «gay» - to the middle-aged family man or the balding office worker who is popping to the park during

his lunch break and acting as if he has only come for a breath of fresh air. We might also talk about their more or less overt glances - or their deliberately averted eyes; how they refuse the observer's gaze even as they present themselves to him, a bit anxious or bashful, not quite sure, what might elicit which response. We might, finally, note how this ambiguous blend of showing and concealing extends to the props, which are turned away from the viewer or, like the desk, closed. They look displaced: objects from a realm of intimacy, a private setting usually exempt from the public eye, that has here been relocated into a park, dragged into the light - all these ill-begotten treasures.

One could discuss all this and more. And it is no doubt possible to interpret the painting in this way: indeed, its title is almost too explicit in offering such a key to its decoding. But if it is reduced to this alone, we would indeed «affirm» it solely and entirely as an «object of study». Hidden amid the obvious is in this picture something else, something I cannot decipher. And it is what gives this picture (as every picture) its singular quality: the painter's gaze, his longing, craving, his desire; what he sees in it, which must remain beyond my understanding. I can only sense the presence of these energies as a trace, an effect, can only try to form an idea of his relationship with what he has depicted, but I cannot put my finger on it: it is not my gaze that is desiring here.

As with many of Duwenhögger's paintings, what makes *Ill-Begotten Treasures* so thrilling is that, on the level of representation (that is, the level of the «object of study»), it improbably fuses its underlying logic, which defies extrapolation, with what it depicts. It openly shows what, in the same breath, it conceals. What it actually depicts continues to remain obscure. For the beholder, for me, the implication is that *understanding* must yield to acceptance. To do otherwise would mean depriving somehow of its complexity that insists on remaining beyond grasping distance, stripping it of its specificity and shattering its space, as one might put it with a nod to Édouard Glissant, that most lucid thinker on opacity. Desiring non-comprehension is about encountering the other, as well as that person who I am, myself, whom I do not understand.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick writes in *Epistemology of the Closet*, a book Duwenhögger knows well: «In dealing with an open-secret structure, it's only by being shameless about risking the obvious that we happen into the vicinity of the transformative.» Bearing this in mind, we might turn to a distinction Roland Barthes introduced: that between «studium» and «punctum» -even if it is an idea that is not so evidently applicable to painting, and one that has been used a lot. Barthes' book is usually treated as a theory of analogue photography, which it is, but it is just

as much a book about the desire to be looked at, to elicit a response. It is informed by a certain intuitive feeling for what is concealed in the obvious. Writing from a perspective of yearning - and not just of loss - Barthes weaves a specific history of emotional sensitivity, and discovers *within* the visible a force that transcends the encodable and decodable elements of the visible - a force that is known, yet cannot or need not be spoken; a desire that works to dismantle the ego until nothing is left but the desire of the other. There is a hole in my heart that only the finger of another can stop.

In a fantastic exchange of letters with Bruce Hainley that was published in the magazine *Bidoun*, Duwenhögger paraphrased Patricia Highsmith: «You don't do something with someone else's pleasure in mind - your own pleasure is what drives you.» That interview was where I began my research. So, as we near the end, let me spell it out after all: my own desire, in his pictures. In *One Rehearsal for Four Plays* (1996), it is the flying rubber sandal. In *The Rift* (2004), it is the splayed fingers of the man as he leans forward: I imagine he is a Turkish diplomat pushing down on the table in a moment of utmost concentration and exertion. In *Bedava* (2003), it is not the bottle cap in the man's hand, nor the golden zipper of the cushion, nor the diamond-studded collar of the dog on his lap, nor the frayed curtain billowing in the open window in the background, but the incredible yellow of the shirt collar sticking out between the man's grey pullover and his equally grey hair: this is what makes room for his head, and those eyes that gaze sideways in such profound melancholy. In *The End of the Season* (2007-08), it's the strangely modern, almost ugly flipflop, presumably one of those with an ergonomically molded footbed, on the right foot of the young man lounging on the quay. Under his arm a dog is sleeping on the warm asphalt, and behind him the Bosphorus divides a city into two continents. The peaceful waters cast a veil of spray, meticulously executed in rich detail, into the blue late-summer sky.

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