

All The Brutes
by Radek Szlaga

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From June 6th to July 11th 2015
at Harlan Levey Projects

Who was it again that wrote every time he came to Brussels, he had to think of the plundered richness of the Congo on which this city was built? From Park Cinquenaire, to the stately avenues Louise and Tervuren, King Leopold II's Museum for Central Africa, there are countless buildings, sculptures and squares across town, which directly or indirectly remind us of the country's colonial past. This makes the capital of Europe a perfect setting for Radek Szlaga's (°1979, Warsaw) exhibition *All the Brutes*. The show consists of a selection of works from his on-going series, which digs into Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness* (1902); a work that has become the textbook example in colonial studies of a caricatured depiction of Africa.

Szlaga hasn't followed Conrad to the Congo, but spent two months in Brussels on a residency this year exploring the links between the heart of Europe and the heart of darkness. In case any Belgian viewers might object to a body of work dealing with the Congo that's painted by an artist who has never been to Africa, let's remind ourselves that Leopold II never placed a foot on Congolese soil as he uprooted it. Besides, Szlaga's aim is not to present some anthropological view on Congo, but to explore, in a pictorial way, how the novel is engrained in our collective imagination, whether that is through literature, cinema, painting or in daily life (like the all too often quoted: "The horror! The horror!").

The best-known adaptation of the novel is of course Francis Ford Coppola's cinematographic masterpiece *Apocalypse Now* (1979), which trades the Congo River for the Nung, and searches for the heart of darkness in the jungles of

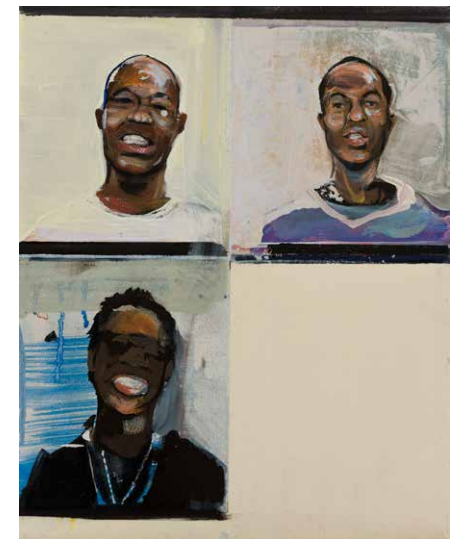
Cover image
Unknown Painter, 2015
Oil on canvas,
70 x 60 cm

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Radek Szlaga and HLP

Vietnam. Szlaga drags Conrad's narrative back to Brussels where the less mythical Senne river has been covered for nearly 150 years. The fact that the artist is Polish might be an autobiographical detail, but to some extent explains his fascination with Joseph Conrad, born Jozef Konrad Korzeniowski, a Pole who wrote better English than most native speakers and reinvented himself - just like his character Kurtz did in the novel as an ivory trader, and in Coppola's translation as an exemplary officer who becomes a sectarian war poet/demigod.

In one of his paintings, a diptych, Szlaga tries to catch the enigmatic character that could have been Kurtz, depicting an ivory trader shielded by two giant tusks and surrounded by his private troops. The trader's image is painted three times in similar compositions, as if to evoke the impossibility of fully grasping the complexity of this character. Next to this, Dennis Hopper, Martin Sheen and other Coppola recruits are recognizable in an image taken from the movie. The first work might evoke a movie scene as well. It is based on a picture of an archetypal English colonialist however, whom Szlaga imagined Kurtz might have looked like. This approach illustrates the variety of sources he brings together in this body of work: from old colonial footage, stills from the movie, external references like mug shots of convicts in Detroit (where his parents emigrated) and the documentary that brings forward the behind the scenes 'making of.' This last source includes a moment where we see Coppola holding a gun to his head. Szlaga makes it into a portrait and presents it next to those of historical figures like Leopold II and Conrad himself, but also to portraits of for example Kurtz and the actor Robert Duvall playing Lieutenant Colonel Bill Kilgore. It's another way of blurring the line between reality and fiction as various layers of representation are filtered through it.

The left side of the diptych is covered in a thick layer of white paint that says: "ALL THE BRUTES." This is a quote Szlaga borrows from the title of a book by Sven Lindquist, which is taken from a scene in *Apocalypse Now*. The words are rendered in a style of text driven stencils most often attributed to the aesthetics of American painter Christopher Wool. In other works, Szlaga paints one of Wool's paintings into a painting. The original work takes a quote from *Apocalypse Now* ("Sell the house, sell the car, sell the kids") and puts it to



Leopold II, 2015
Oil on canvas,
33 x 27 cm

Them, 2015
Oil on canvas,
40 x 50 cm

Nuns, 2015
Oil on canvas,
16 x 24 cm

Portraits, 2014
Oil on canvas,
34 x 27 cm



All the Brutes, 2015
Oil on canvas,
160 x 280 cm



Coppola, 2015
Oil on canvas,
40 x 50 cm

canvas, something Szlaga in his turn appropriates in several of his paintings in movements that lead from a book to a movie to a painting and back to his other paintings. Quite a journey!

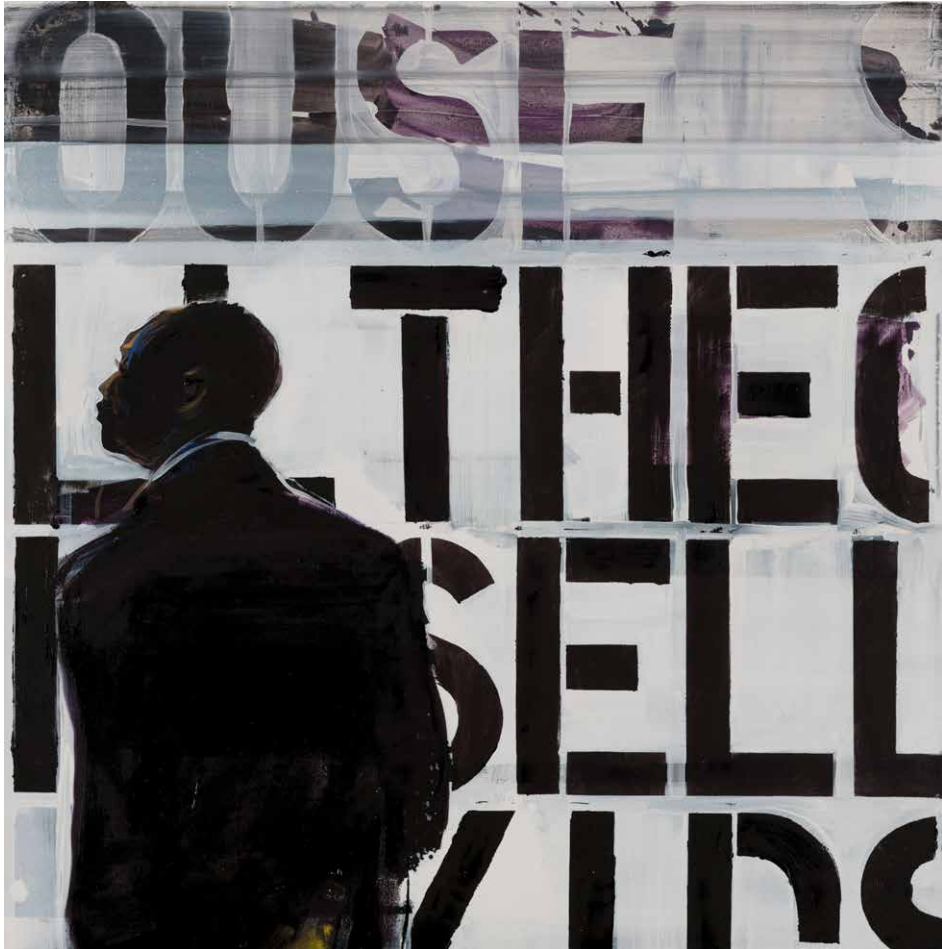
Approaching a subject from its echoes, reflections and various interpretations can be more revealing than going for “the real thing” – which is, by the way, impossible in his case, as he refers to a closed-off historical period that is only reachable through secondary sources. Szlaga continues this game of filtering images and quotes. This approach is crucial to his practice, and has visual ramifications. While in earlier works, he uses green in a gestural way to wrap historical portraits into ambiguous forest landscapes - as a reference to his compatriot Wilhem Sasnal - in the more recent works, he uses a blurry, red filter, like the rivers of blood spilling down the Congo River. This is another way of distancing himself from the original source material, reinforcing the fact that this series is not about *Heart of Darkness*, but rather offers a ‘Luc Tuymansish’ reflection on the medium of painting, the status of the image and the horror of reproduction – whether that is another painting, a found picture from the internet, a movie still or a text that shapes our perception. Though technically he is perfectly capable of doing so, Szlaga is not interested in making identical copies of his source material. He wants to emphasise the materiality of his medium, which explains the many stains, thick layers of paint, expressionist brushstrokes, drippings, cut outs and deliberately unfinished parts of certain compositions.



Flag False, 2015
Oil on canvas,
30 x 25 cm



Leo 2, 2014
Oil on canvas,
30 x 24 cm



Sell the 2, 2015
Oil on canvas,
90 x 80 cm

The action of painting itself is referenced frequently as Szlaga injects paintbrushes, cans of paint, and painters painting, another way to disrupt the mimetic illusions of his medium. This is reinforced by applying different pictorial styles as subjective approaches to different sources; an almost pure abstraction that creates a visual break and opens up the coherence of the body of work, while simultaneously avoiding the trap of making a literal illustration of the novel.

Szlaga goes from the heart of darkness to the dark heart of Europe. His mission is not to capture a derailed ivory trader or colonel, but to face horror while embarking on the adventure of painting. And that is already risky enough.

Sam Steverlynck

Radek Szlaga (1979) lives and works between Warsaw and Detroit, Michigan. He trained at the painting faculties of the Academy of Fine Arts in Prague (CZ) and Poznan (PL) before earning a PhD in painting. His work has been exhibited in the Poland, the US, the Netherlands, Germany, France, England, China and now Belgium, with notable exhibitions including those at the Zachęta - National Gallery of Art, Foksal Gallery Warsaw, the 4th Villnius Painting Triennial and Performa.

For a complete list of works in the exhibition, reviews of Radek Szlaga's recent works or general questions about the artist, please contact: info@hl-projects.com

