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Faculty of Fine Art Painting

DOUBLE EXPOSURE: AMBIGUITY AND DESIRE IN

THE PAINTINGS OF MARLENE DUMAS

by Katy Simpson

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Plate 1: *The Painter*, oil on canvas, 1994.

INTRODUCTION

Purity and impurity, innocence and guilt, good and evil, the beautiful and the ugly - civilised society tells us to reach for one while straining to escape the tarnish of the other. An easy sorting of our subjectivity into binary oppositions where one side is good and the other bad. Ever searching for perfect wholeness, the Ideal, we seek to escape our feet of clay rooted in the sins of man and his messy earthiness. This straining toward a pure absolute reality, however, can bring about an isolation of self from where it is really situated - on the ground, among all the richness of diversity that is humankind. Primo Levi, in *The Periodic Table*, describes the praise of purity as that "which protects from evil like a coat of mail", and the praise of impurity as that "which gives rise to changes, in other words to life" (1985, p. 34). By constructing a protective coat of armour around the self over time we have drawn a line, created a frontier between what we perceive to be normal (and good), and the abnormal, the foreign, the outside. The other we have created we give many names to, in order to tame what we fear to acknowledge - our own incompleteness. Paradoxically, however, through this desire for the Ideal, we have fostered our own construct and our guilt. To feed a justification of self-worth we have sought to make negative that which we are not, distancing ourselves from the other and making victimhood a spectacle of weakness that we view from afar. This position, however, is resistant to "changes, in other words, to life".

The work of South African-born artist Marlene Dumas brings us face to face with these questions of purity and impurity, of innocence and guilt. In paintings that depict the human figure she explores conceptual notions of identity and its representation. Some of these problems are exemplified in her work entitled *The Painter*, 1994 (Plate 1). In the painting, a naked child stands resolutely centre canvas looking out at us with a baleful, broody glare, one hand dripping red, the torso a deathly pallid blue. Our eyes look for benign innocence in pictures of children, but here that expectation is subverted. The innocence of the title is contradicted by the image's connotations of blood - is it really the aftermath of paint play or is this a monster child, bestial and post-kill? The child in the painting seems driven, a manifestation of appetite and desire normally reserved for adults. It is not innocence we see here but rather guilt, our own guilt in

seeking out comfortable distance. Instead, in this painting, we are confronted by overwhelming presence.

This ambiguity of meaning and psychological intervention is central to Dumas' work. It is reflected in her subversion of traditional painting conventions and connected to her deconstruction of historically and socially determined views of identity including that of the controlling gaze. In canonical discourse art is presented as a pure and perfect object and the artist as the perfect imperial subject. Dumas, as with much post-modern discourse, focuses on deconstruction rather than reinforcement of the ideal, pure subject. There are a number of writers who enter into the realm of identity as construct or socially determined. One of these is Michel Foucault who, within his explorations of how power shapes our knowledge of ourselves, isolated the role of the confessional society in the construct of the other. For Foucault there is no universal identity, everybody's identity is a site of struggle between conflicting discourses.

In much contemporary thought, the subject is shown to be inscribed upon by, and fragmented by cultural texts and readings, thus subscribing to the post-modern tenet of plurality over autonomy. Dumas also, however, seeks to reinvest our representations with new possibilities, of individual significance within the collective diversity of humankind. We are formed by our constructs, our myths, by our reflected desires.

As a relatively young artist beginning to attain an international reputation there is limited in-depth resource material on Marlene Dumas. As part of her art production, however, she also writes and publishes text in tandem with or as part of her paintings. Using her comments and poems, and drawing on contemporary philosophical and psychoanalytical writings, combined with a personal viewing of her work in exhibition, this thesis will explore some of the questions she raises for the viewer/reader on subjectivity and its dynamics. Her world view is, for me, a very interesting synthesis of contemporary discussion on identity and representation and also, perhaps, an illustration of our own complicity in seeking self-identification through the eyes of others.

CHAPTER ONE

The power discourse in revelation and subjectivity

woman is the other of man, animal the other of human, stranger the other of the native, abnormality the other of norm, deviation the other of law-abiding, illness the other of health, insanity the other of reason, lay public the other of the expert, foreigner the other of state subject, enemy the other of friend.

Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence*, 1991

*In place of a hermeneutics
we need an erotics of art.*

Susan Sontag, *Against interpretation*, 1964

The power of the invisible

In 1984 Marlene Dumas made three portraits of three different Marthas. *Martha - My Ouma*, *Martha - Die Biedende*, and *Martha - Sigmund's Wife* (Plates 2 and 3). Unified by name, at the same time they hold three very different meanings. The close-up portraits hold a certain intimidating intimacy that, combined with the similar titles, create a sense of discomfort. We are not being allowed to stay in a comfortable zone of distance where traditional portraiture is believed to be a true record of a unique subject (Buchloh, 1994, p. 55). In these paintings the representation of the intimate, the true, "confessed" individual is robbed of its revelatory power. The comfortable duality of Subject and Other where we can recognise the essence of ourselves through the essence of the other is undermined. Carrying the same name the three different faces intimate the improbability of one essential reductive portrait and at the same time the multi-faceted possibilities that one "individual subject" can contain. Throughout her work Dumas infuses her images with an ambiguity of meaning which refuses our attempts to domesticate the other through an easy division into binary opposites, a generalisation where the is/is not



Plate 2: *Martha - Sigmund's Wife, Martha - die bediende, Martha - my Ouma*, 1984.

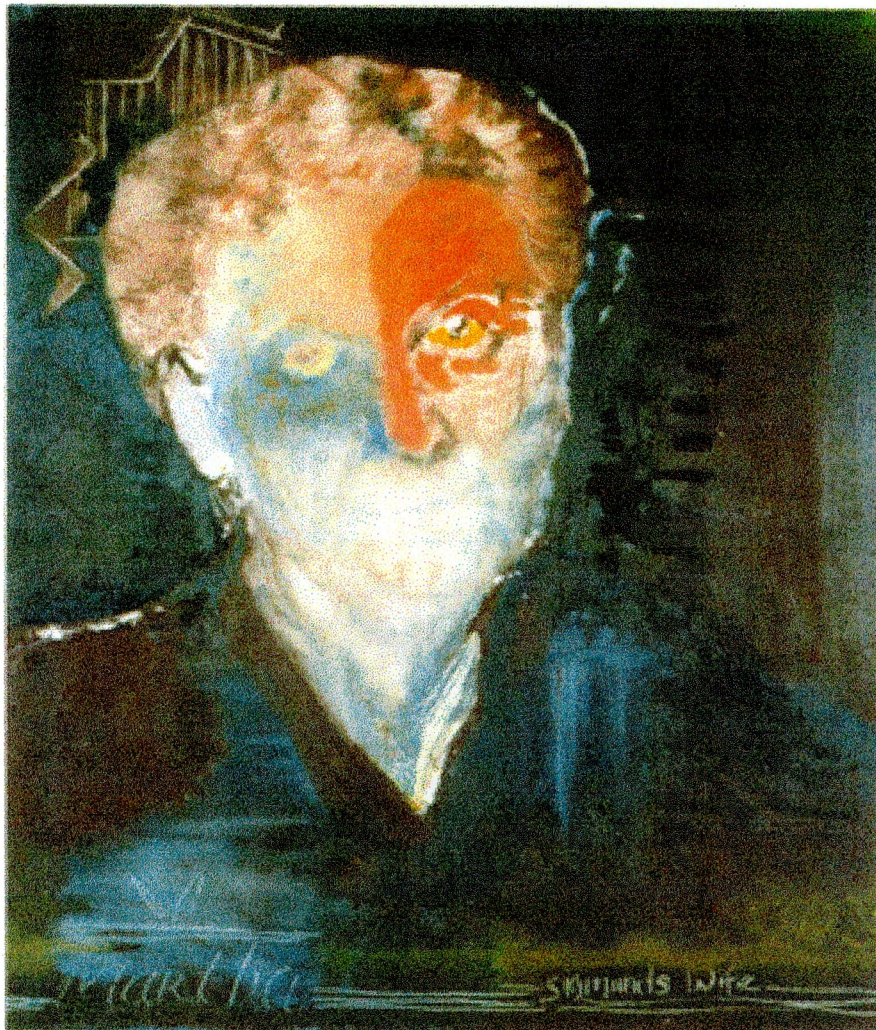


Plate 3: *Martha - Sigmund's Wife*, oil on canvas, 1984.

dichotomy serves to empower the one through the marginalisation of the other. Through this marginalisation we render the other invisible. Dumas would stress that the other is always there, however. In *The Eyes of the Night Creatures*, on "Couples" she points out "I did not paint Freud, instead I painted his wife" and goes on to quote from Alice Jardins in "Death Sentences: writing couples and ideology" (1983):

Western Thought has always worked by oppositions. The law organises the thinkable through oppositions. (Whether as irreconcilable dualities, or in comparative uplifting dialectics.) We think in couples even when we try very hard not to - based on the force of the copula, of copulation.
(Dumas, 1985, p. 34.)

"The force of the copula" and its oppositional power is what Michel Foucault examines in his *History of Sexuality*. He identified two historical ways of seeing sexuality. In China, Japan, India and the Roman Empire it has been seen as an "ars erotica", erotic art, where sex is viewed as an art and a special experience and not something dirty and shameful. It is something to be kept secret, but only because of the view that it would lose its power and pleasure if spoken about. In Western society, on the other hand, something completely different has been constructed, what Foucault calls "scientia sexualis", the science of sexuality. It is originally based on a phenomenon diametrically opposed to ars erotica: the confession. This is not solely the question of the Christian confession, but a more general urge to talk about it. There arises a fixation with discovering the "truth" about sexuality, a truth that is to be confessed. It is as if truth did not exist unless it is confessed. Foucault writes:

We have...become an extraordinarily confessing society. Confession has spread its effects far and wide: in the judicial system, in medicine, in pedagogy, in familial relations, in amorous relationships, in everyday life and in the most solemn rituals; crimes are confessed, sins are confessed, thoughts and desires are confessed, one's past and one's dreams are confessed, one's childhood is confessed; one's diseases and problems are confessed;...(1978, p. 59).

A strong criticism of psychoanalysis is perhaps inherent here, for it represents the modern, scientific form of confession. Foucault saw psychoanalysis as a legitimisation of sexual confession. There, everything is explained in terms of repressed sexuality and the psychologist becomes the sole interpreter of what is revealed. Sexuality is no longer just something people hide, but is also hidden from themselves, which gives the confession a new force. It is in this attention to confessional detail the reason sexuality is given such importance in our society is to be found. Making sexuality something buried, even sinful, did not make it disappear. Quite the contrary : it reinforced its presence and sexuality became something to be noticed everywhere:

We have invented a peculiar pleasure in knowing that truth, and discovering it and exposing (or exhibiting) it, the fascination of seeing it and telling it.
(Foucault, 1978, p. 71)

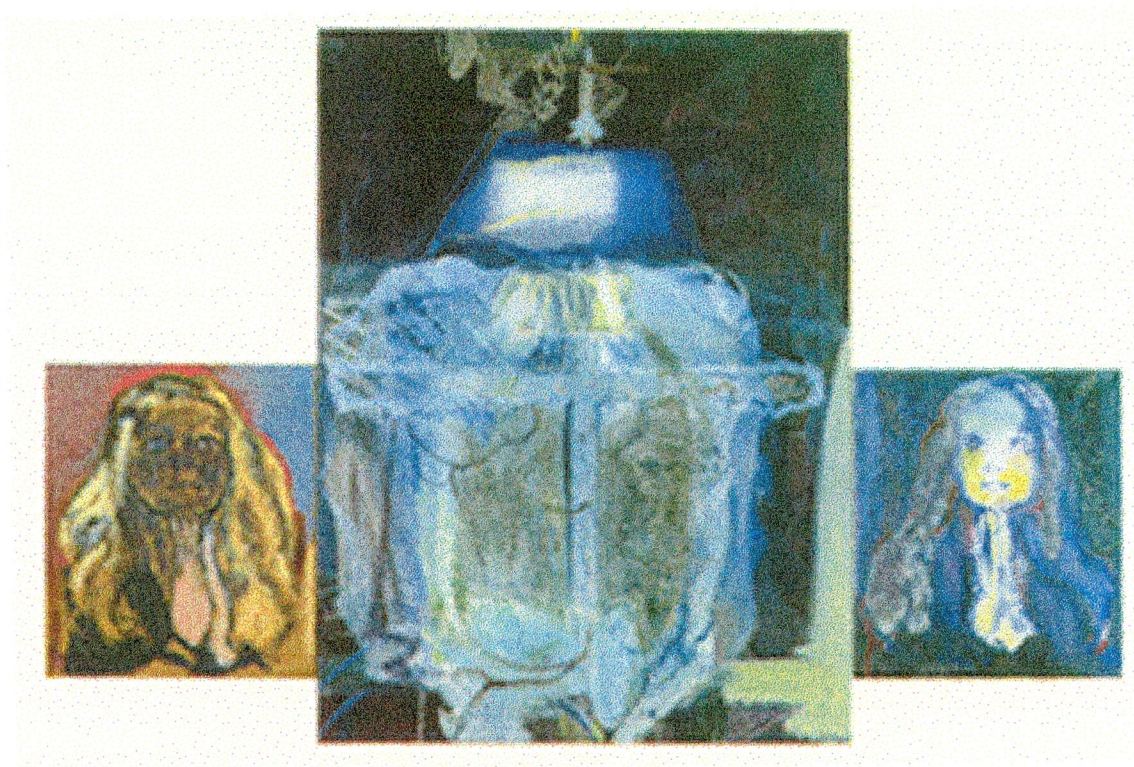


Plate 4: *The Futility of Artistic Confession*, oil on canvas, 1983.

There is an element of social control in this. A power relation was created between the preacher and the confessant, between the psychoanalyst and his patient, the expert and the layman. In the art world this can be extended to the relation between the art historian or expert who interprets and the artist whose intent is being probed. Anne Chave connects the language of art history and criticism to a privileging of hierarchal (masculine) norms: "The language used to esteem a work of art has come to coincide with the language used to describe a human figure of authority" (Chave, 1990, p. 53). Dumas, in 1983, painted *The Futility of Artistic Confession* (Plate 4) from a (posed) photograph of herself as a girl praying, and thus conveyed her own doubts about the validity of personal confession handed over to the public or authority figure - in this case the art historian. The girl in the painting is not really praying, she is posing for a photograph, which in turn has become the source for a painting. To look for a truth in the work of art or a single intent on the part of the artist is self-deceptive - a means of self-confirmation rather than revelation.

To Foucault, power relations were central to any analysis of society, and this was especially true of the area of sexuality. Power relations are formed in all relations where differences exist. This is not, however, necessarily always a negative force, a relationship of oppressor and oppressed,

but rather a visualisation of a social construct and how "power becomes acceptable or tolerable through its spatialisation or the way it was given to be seen" (Rachjman, 1988, p. 103): "Power is tolerable only on the condition that it mask a substantial part of itself...would it be accepted if it were entirely cynical?" (Foucault, 1978, p. 86).

Power, therefore, is tied to what is made visible and what remains invisible, through a sort of consensus of what it is desirable to highlight at any given moment in history. According to Foucault's presentation, by forcing the confession, or the revelation of the invisible, authority (the state, the official), through imposing interpretations, seeks to control the individual. Psychoanalysis is entirely "committed to an *analysis* of representation, rather than its expression" (Forrester, 1989, p. 67). Marlene Dumas in her work situates herself between this analysis and expression. She will not be forced to confess but would rather choose her revelations:

At the moment, my art is situated between the pornographic tendency to reveal everything and the erotic inclination to hide what it's all about
(Dumas, 1986, p. 56)

In a tacit acknowledgement of this interrelationship of knowledge and power Dumas uses this awareness of the tension between the visible and the invisible as a means to wrest power back from essentialist authority and reinvest her subjectivity, in all its mutable forms, with meaning. The controlling gaze is a construct which can mutate, or rather must mutate, if we follow Foucault's idea of "*évidence*" or "self-evidence" to its logical conclusion, and, as will be shown, Dumas certainly brings its construct to the point of rupture that follows on from what is made self-evident. Once that which was previously invisible is revealed it comes into play and must be taken on, or assimilated, and a new phase can be entered into with old complacencies relegated to the shelf.¹

Facing the gaze

In the twentieth century, the ownership of the controlling gaze has undergone close examination. Psychoanalysis has played an important role in its construction and deconstruction, starting with Freud's theories of sexuality. The gaze, as perceived by Freud, is controlling and curious, taking other people as objects. He isolated scopophilia as one of the component instincts of sexuality, the pleasure of looking being an active instinct rooted in the pre-genital auto-eroticism of the curious child. This is later transferred to others by analogy, by using another person as an object of sexual stimulation through sight. In a patriarchal world of sexual imbalance, this pleasure in

¹ The rupture with outside interpretive forces can be liberating. Foucault saw the cure of Freud's Dora as effective. The moment of rupture came when she no longer needed the interpretation of her subconscious to come from the authority figure of Freud to know herself - see John Forrester, 1989, p. 67.

looking has been divided into the opposing active/male/subject and passive/female/object. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure that has been styled accordingly (Mulvey, 1985, p. 818). As elaborated by Berger women are looked at and displayed, their role passive, a receptacle and signifier of male desire. The portrayal of women in images and in literature would have traditionally reflected this: from the supine nudes of classical painting to the “possess me” images of porn, the submissive heroines and the passive victims of fortune in classical literature.

Dumas’ use of the figure, particularly the female figure, comments on one level on the artist’s relationship with her model, and on another level on the nature of the constructed gaze and its implications for control of meaning. Her interest in, and her use of the figure is not, however, to put it on show to reinforce our easy relationship with constructs. She states her aim as one to “‘reveal’ not to ‘display’” in reference to her paintings. Of the artist’s model she comments:

Being a model had become their occupation. They had posed themselves into (stilllife-like) generalised objects, devoid of erotic (or any kind of) energy... Now it seems that it was not the nude I was looking for, nor the posing figure, but the erotic conditions of life that I was after. Two ‘subjects’ confronting each other.
(Dumas, 1987, p. 42)²

The object of the gaze had become a collaborator in its own objecthood, in a perpetuation of the potential “victimhood” of otherness. Dumas, acknowledges the historicity of this construct, and wants to rupture its hold. Thus, instead of the subject/other dichotomy, she seeks to imbibe the ‘other’ with its own subjectivity, through reinvesting the construct with ambiguity. This she achieves not only through the female nude, but equally through the distortion of generalised ‘norms’ in the representation of the figure. In her paintings of children and babies, instead of sweetness and innocence we are confronted by baleful and provocative glares and an element of the grotesque - the bullish stance and blood red hand of *The Painter* (Plate 1) is but one example. In *The First People*, 1990, (Plate 5), an unsettling effect is achieved through the use of colour and sheer scale and verticality. These babies do not lie vulnerable on the horizontal in reassuring pink and white. The skin tones are raw and blotchy - and they are big. The mother’s gaze here is not benign. The figures in the paintings are decontextualized, the backgrounds simple planes of colour. This serves to emphasise their physicality in a near excess of presence. Anna Tilroe in her article *The Unfulfilment and the Surfeit* remarks how this seems to underline an absence of innocence: “For this, their presence is much too manifest, much too immediate, as if that quality

² Linda Nochlin outlines the history of the model in her article *Why Have There Been No Great Woman Artists* and describes the difficulties posed for the female artist using the nude model in that by doing so she enters the realm of objectification, this normally having been a male reserve (Nochlin, 1989, p. 162)



Plate 5: *The First People (I-IV)*, oil on canvas, 1990.

in itself sullies them. This excess of presence...perhaps the void we experience arises there” (1993, p. 94). The void or sense of loss is our discomfort in being confronted with ourselves. The children are guilty of not being of the desired nature, and our own guilt lies in insisting on the innocence of childhood in opposition to adulthood. We are repelled by the association of adulthood with guilt or lost innocence and form the innocent child as our opposite. Hence the unease we experience when what we desire to find is absent: “desire is depicted, deficiency is central” (Dumas, 1985, p. 11). The confrontational nature of Dumas’ images serves to underline our complicity in our constructs - we are not innocent bystanders but like the artist’s model posing in the role of her image or representation, actively implicated in the perpetuation of tidy expectations.

The objectification of the female body has carried through to the present day, albeit undergoing shifts and changes following the heightened awareness of the sub-texts of such dynamics and discourse in the twentieth century. Freud, in his research into ‘female’ pathology of hysteria through psychological study, heralded new awareness of notions of femininity and masculinity.

In contemporary terms, and in Foucauldian terms, his analysis of gender can be seen as fundamentally flawed as “truth”, coming as it did from the context of society in nineteenth century Vienna and the moral, Victorian and misogynist tone of the times. It did, however, facilitate the study of the body as the site of debate and contradiction, and the close examination of human relationships and sexual behaviour. His breaking of new ground in psychology has been adapted to provide a rich cultural critique in many areas including that of the visual arts. Basically, he raised the question of “What does a woman want?”, and identified the female body as the site of protest, female sexuality as the dark continent, the colonised.

The post-Freudian identification of female with the pre-Oedipal, or pre-language, ‘semiotic’ stage of life and the male with the symbolic has furnished rich areas for elaboration and a new non-historical approach in psychoanalytical analysis with Lacan and Derrida in the sixties and French female writers Irigaray, Cixous and Kristeva and their “l’écriture féminine”- writing the body. The feminine is identified with the semiotic by Kristeva as all that is irrational, that constitutes the formless world of the inner self, the instinct and what Kristeva terms “abjection”, that which does not “respect borders, positions, rules”, that which “disturbs identity, system, order”, and is thus by its given nature subversive (Kristeva, 1982, p. 4). The masculine is aligned with the symbolic as associated with the real and the rational, the reasoning man of the Enlightenment, and the maintaining of the status quo.

The work of Marlene Dumas seems to strive for an open confrontation between the symbolic and the semiotic, of what is perceived as “reality” in the external world of signs and the unstable world of the inner self. That unstable (and female) “wild zone” is what society seeks to tame and name as other. It has been aligned with the grotesque and the freak as an aberration from the normal, or the status quo. By taming the wild and putting it on view as in the spectacle of a freak show, it can be staked out as territory, categorised, thus normalising the viewer (Stewart, 1984, p. 109). Dumas uses the grotesque to subvert our safe distance. In certain works, like *The Human Tripod* from 1988 (Plate 6), this takes the form literally of a human mutant - a man with three legs. We are placed in the disturbing position of viewing what is normally relegated to the fairground side-show in an “art” context. In her own words, this freak “is not really a man...He is a construct. It is a painting relating the world of drawing with the world of photography” (Dumas, 1987, p. 46). The possibilities of distortion are exposed by the artist in the representation of an image and we are guilty of believing what we see, of mistaking the myth for truth. Her use of the grotesque figure seems to embrace its power to celebrate the body and the unconscious mind at the same time. In *Pregnant Image*, 1988/90 (Plate 7) the grotesque is



Plate 6:
The Human Tripod, oil on canvas, 1988

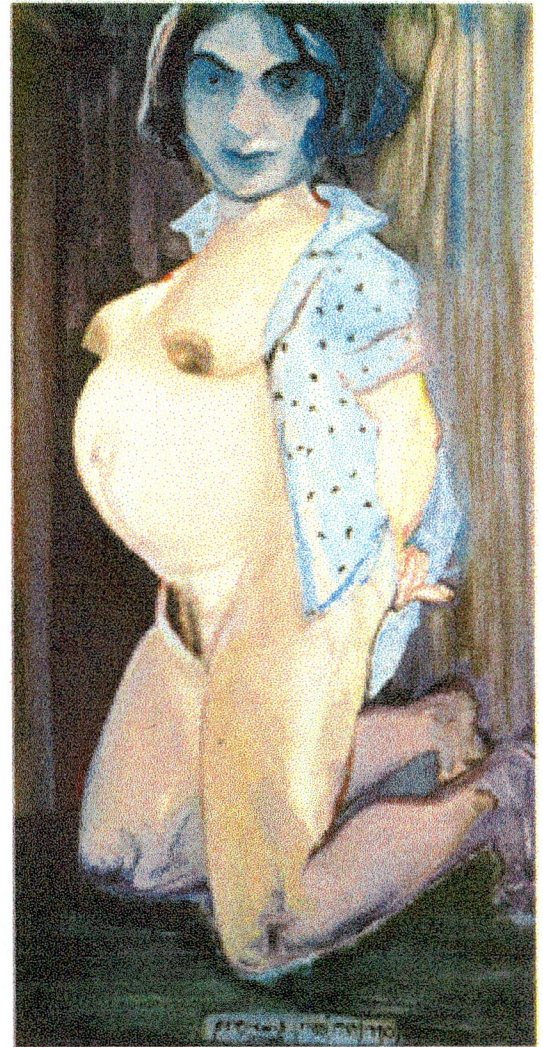


Plate 7:
Pregnant Image, oil on canvas, 1988-90

represented in a less direct way. The image is pregnant - both literally and metaphorically. In the painting we see a woman, her naked, swollen belly and breasts revealing her heavily pregnant state. There is nothing more 'normal' than pregnancy yet here the normal is distorted into a certain macabre monstrosity, the bluish masklike face evoking loss and death, the swollen belly an excess of presence and imminent life. Here the normal is placed in the position of the cultural other, the grotesque. The grotesque, "unlike homogenising, unifying reason" according to Susan Bowers, "seeks out contradiction; in fact it undermines rational thought by requiring the rational mind to grapple with the puzzle of contradiction while the irrational takes the reins" (Bowers, 1992, p. 22). Dumas juxtaposes the public realm (the spectacle) with the personal (and internal) in a way that is a conscious attempt to address or redress the seeming contradiction or incompatibility of the two: "I am an artist who uses secondhand images and firsthand

experiences" (to Jonathan Turner, 1994, p. 99). Her second-hand images are those that can be read initially only on the surface but that first glance is soon subverted by personal experience to reveal that all is not as it seems and we are caught out in our presumptions, guilty of seeking self-confirmation in representation rather than the real.

Psychoanalytic analysis locates difference in the psyche, thus all is seen as gender-based. The gaze and its ownership however, can be extended beyond gender into race and perceptions or namings of the Other, of mortality, of what is perceived as good and what is perceived as evil. In the work and words of Marlene Dumas the challenge and conflict of the imaginary Other in its various forms, including in the area of art production, is raised and met through her synthesis of form and content. Her intent is a confrontation of what Foucault describes as "évidence"- of a rupture with preconception and a reclaiming of her own territory:

...I want to speak for myself...I want to participate in the writing of my own history. Why should artists be validated by outside authorities. I don't like being paternalised and colonised by every Tom, Dick or Harry that comes along (male or female).
(Dumas, 1993, p.41)

Outside authorities can be both art theorists who insist on a schematic adherence to a system of interpretation of the art work and more generally those arbitrators of essentialist thought who would impose a notion of absolute truth on our perception of what is real. Running consistently through Dumas' work is the theme that all art, hers included, is implicated in telling stories in a form that can be misleading. The use of the fairy tale is another strategy she employs to convey that all might not be what it seems:

Pornokitch.
The use of the fairy tale functions as a concealment, a veiling of intentions. The viewer feels as home with the story, satisfied that he knows what it's all about. However - this feeling can't last forever, because slowly - the inconsistency of the elements begins to dawn. It's an euphemistic technique. A sugary way to clothe impure motives. Negativity and anxiety disguised with childlike humour, while the political-sexual attitudes bleed through at the edges.
(Dumas, 1989, p. 34).

Thus art as confession, as "truth" is compromised and the power of revelation is weakened through intentional ambiguity. Her painting *Snow White and the Broken Arm*, 1988 (Plate 8), can be read on several levels with this in mind. The painting depicts a prone female figure (dead or alive?) in a display case who is regarded by seven children/dwarfs from behind the barrier of glass. Her bandaged arm hangs down, a camera and photographs fallen from its fingers. A story, a narrative is hinted at. An insecurity is introduced into our way of looking - the guilt of the voyeur witness to a possible crime. On one hand it can be seen as a critique of the art historian

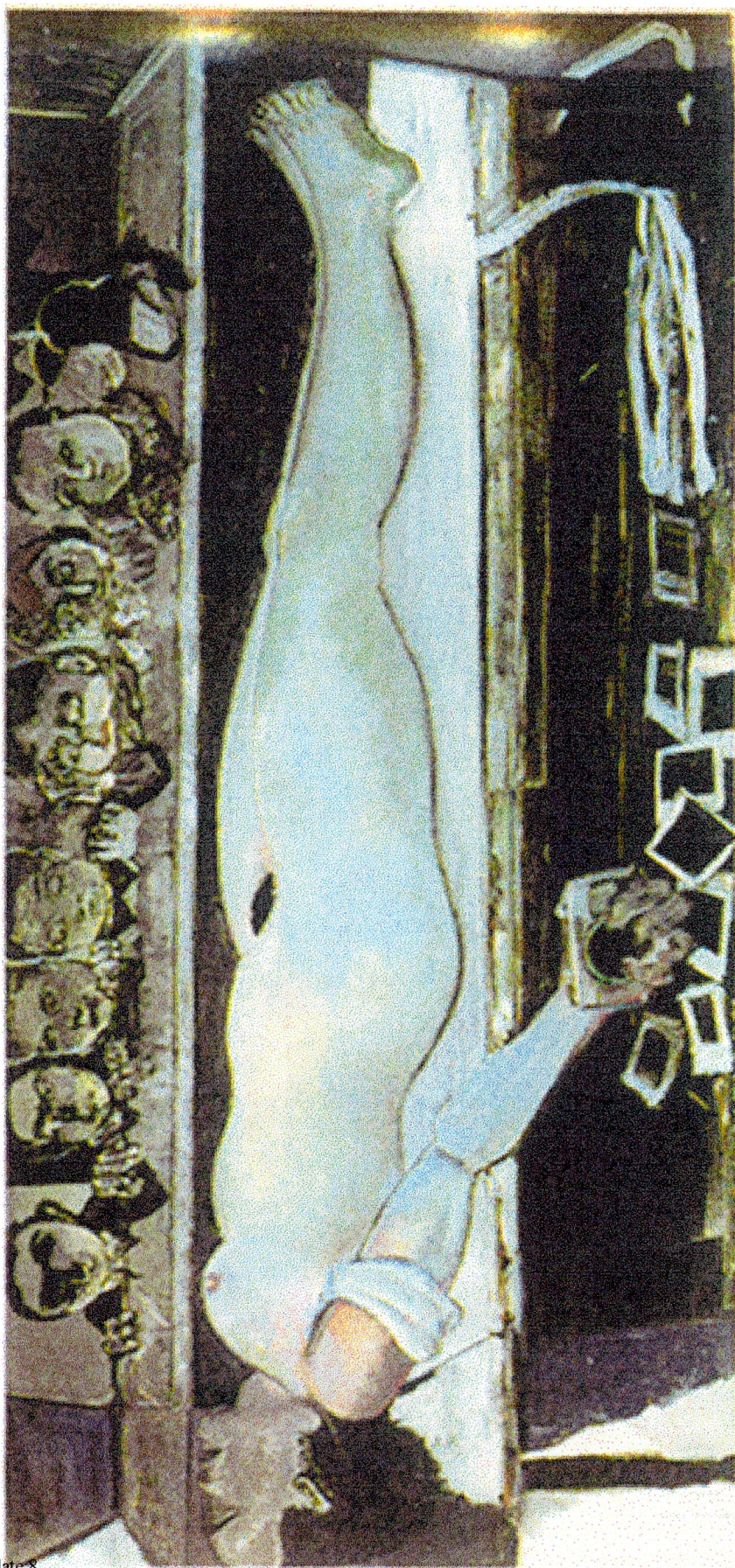


Plate 8

Plate 8. 'Snow White and the Broken Arm', 1988, oil on canvas, 140 x 100cm

as pornographer or voyeur who ignores subjectivity and meaning in subscribing to the static and absolute status of the idealised notion of 'beauty' (Ernst van Alphen, 1996). The dwarf or child figures are those who peer voyeuristically at the damaged muse, ridiculing her imperfection. The photographs represent the various poses she has adopted in the past, and how this faith in her own representations has drained her of all significance, leaving her as nothing but an empty vessel on display. Having given her subjectivity over to the purveyors of the absolute, she has lost her identity. Marina Warner in her essay "Marlene Dumas: In the Charnel House of Love" sees the crime as one of "the female sin of curiosity, perhaps, by gathering evidence, taking photographs" as another possibility (Warner, 1993, p.76). Yet also culpable as accomplices are the spectators, both the dwarfs and us. The title also hints at possibilities. Taking a name from a fairy tale gives a suggestion of fantasy. The words Snow White give an image of icy purity: the myths associated with such an image are manifold - virginity, innocence, truth and cleanliness. In the fairy tale, however, the character of the same name is also associated with poison and death, and a victim of her stepmother's vices of narcissism and jealousy. The wicked stepmother addresses the mirror supposedly in search of truth, but is in fact seeking self-confirmation. The reflection thrown back at us from a mirror may deflect us from the real. Is Dumas' Snow White a victim of misplaced trust in the authenticity of the photographs, the re-presentations of reflected realities rather than her own potential as a subject? Dumas provides us with keys in image and text, enough to reveal not a single possibility of truth but several, yet stops short of full disclosure, retaining for herself the power of the hidden.

Marlene Dumas' work takes external themes and the myths around them on which our society has based its assumptions and truths and deconstructs them, but in an entirely painterly way that manages to combine social and moral deconstruction with a fidelity to painterly concerns of medium and flatness. "The world is flat", she says, giving her reason for why painters still paint. The phrase indicates her predilection for the paradox, her untroubled appropriation of the "flatness" of modernist, autonomous painting with the antithetical referencing of the external world. She exposes, as with Foucault, the contingency of subjecthood, and the power behind the visible and the invisible.

CHAPTER TWO

Representation and the sign

All art is at once surface and symbol. Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril. Those who read the symbol do so at their peril.

Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 1890

The deconstruction of significance

One of the posits of postmodernist theory in its rejection of essentialism and embracing of plurality is the re-emergence of representation in painting, of references to the external world, a moving away from the subjectivity and purity of high modernism. This is not, however, simply a return to a faith in the representation as holding a valued truth or essence but rather an emptying of its significance. Foucault and others have set about showing that there may not be just one “truth” but many “truths”. From here arises the questioning of meaning and of its significance, or lack of the same. If meaning is not reflective of an essential, universal truth but reliant on its historical and social context and on what is foregrounded by a society at any given moment, then if an idea is taken out of that context it loses its power of communication, its meaning. That Dumas addresses this question of multiple truths and realities and the possibilities of meaning is fundamental to a reading of her work. She does not adhere to the “sign as meaningless” school of thought, however. On the contrary, she seeks to regain control of the sign system, to reinvest it with significance. This does not take the form of constructing new truths but rather of asking questions, of refusing imposed closure on the subject. Her work re-examines the portrayal of the individual as a mediated image in which the effect of representational composition is already inscribed and which reveals itself in the discursive dynamics of looking and being looked at, of revealing and concealing, of the pornographic and the erotic. She draws attention to the historicity of individual experience within collective experience through her portraits and other

works. In her subversion of our faith in representation, of the image, including text, she multiplies possibilities of meaning, pointing us in several directions within the image and then again through the title.

A signature hallmark of artists who sought to break with modernism and its tenets of purity has been the referencing of the external through the appropriation of images from their original context and their juxtapositioning with images from other contexts. For many young artists, particularly of the 1980s, this appropriation of images has been an enthusiastic embracing of the idea of the subject in dispersion, or dissolution, of the obsolescence, according to such postmodern theorists as Baudrillard, of the notions of subject and object, reflexivity and autonomy which characterise the modern understanding of the subject (Baudrillard, 1983). Taking up Lacan's definition of schizophrenia as the breakdown of the relationship between signifiers, the postmodern theorist generalises this model to be the basis of all identity where the notion of temporality, as a construct of language, has broken down into the constant present of the schizophrenic, where distinct moments have no connection with each other (Jameson, 1983, p. 118). Out of this Lacanian notion of the incoherent schizophrenic identity comes the postmodern theorist's category of plurality and heterogeneity. Jameson calls this failure of the innovative subject as manifested in the art world 'pastiche':

Pastiche: in a world in which stylistic innovation is no longer possible, all that is left is to imitate dead styles.... But this means that contemporary post-modern art is going to be about art itself in a new kind of way;...that one of its essential messages will involve the necessary failure of art and the aesthetic, the failure of the new, the imprisonment of the past...
(Jameson, 1983, p. 18).

The use of borrowed, decontextualized images can thus signify a break from the idea of an inherent subjectivity, of the possibility of a singular truth. More recently, Terry Eagleton has called for this plurality to be reinvested with a political vision of a respect for difference and not an abandonment of universality to abstraction set against the particular³ (Eagleton, 1990, p. 414).

The denial of the sign as representative is the theory posited by Jacques Derrida, the French post-structuralist often seen as the founder of deconstruction theory. He refutes the idea that a signifier (a word) is coupled to a signified (a defined idea of that word) so that signifier and

³ Eagleton reacts strongly against what he viewed as Foucault's determinism or lack of the possibility of ideology within his denial of the subject (Eagleton, 1990, p. 385). On The Use of Pleasure, however, he acknowledges the emergence of an autonomous individual from the aestheticisation of life as an alternative to humanist morality in Foucault's thinking (idem, p. 389).

signified converge into a meaning (Merquior, 1986, p. 215) According to the radical starting points of deconstruction the signifier is a sign without reference, even to its own signified. The signs have an independent existence; they are incapable of referring to any reality. They refer, as in a closed system, only to one another. Meanings are undone rather than made: in Dumas own words it is a perpetual 'waiting for meaning'.

Regenerating meaning

Dumas' paintings on one level seem to follow this postmodern idea of the empty sign in so far as they are constructions of decontextualised image elements. As she says in the *Marlene Dumas* catalogue, all her source material is from photographic material:

*My people were all shot
by a camera, framed
before I painted them...*
(Dumas, 1993, p. 22.)

Yet her use of appropriation is not a strategy for showing the bankruptcy of the systems of reference as the work of the painter David Salle, for example, could be said to do. On the contrary, for her, the use of the borrowed image to deconstruct its iconographic significance is more a means of generating meaning than otherwise. Her painting *Snow White and the Broken arm*, as already described a, is proof of that. Elsewhere, a work like *Losing (her Meaning)*, 1988 (Plate 9), highlights the dilemma posed by the loss of significance in the represented sign. The painting shows a female figure, her face submerged in water as if searching for her lost identity. Another work *Waiting (for Meaning)*, 1988 (Plate 10), would seem to express a stand against this contemporary nihilism. The painting depicts a dark lifeless (female) figure prone on a white-clothed table, legs hanging limply. She is perhaps the model tired of collaborating in her own objecthood. She is the exhausted, overexposed, overworked muse of the critical, enlightened subject - emptied of identity on the altar of postmodern deconstruction. This is even more explicit in her 1988 series of drawings entitled *Defining in the Negative* (Plate 10) where Dumas makes clear she does not want to be aligned with those who would refuse meaning to her model. In eight drawings she depicts people as they would be found in the work of various (male) artists - George Baselitz, David Salle, Balthus, David Hamilton, Eric Fischl, and Allen Jones. On the last drawing is inscribed : "I won't be afraid of misunderstanding". She eschews denying her model an identity for interpretation's sake, refuses to use her work to thwart communication, rather she seems to make a plea for the communicative power of art and its capacity for making meaning : "Through art we talk to strangers"(Dumas, 1982)

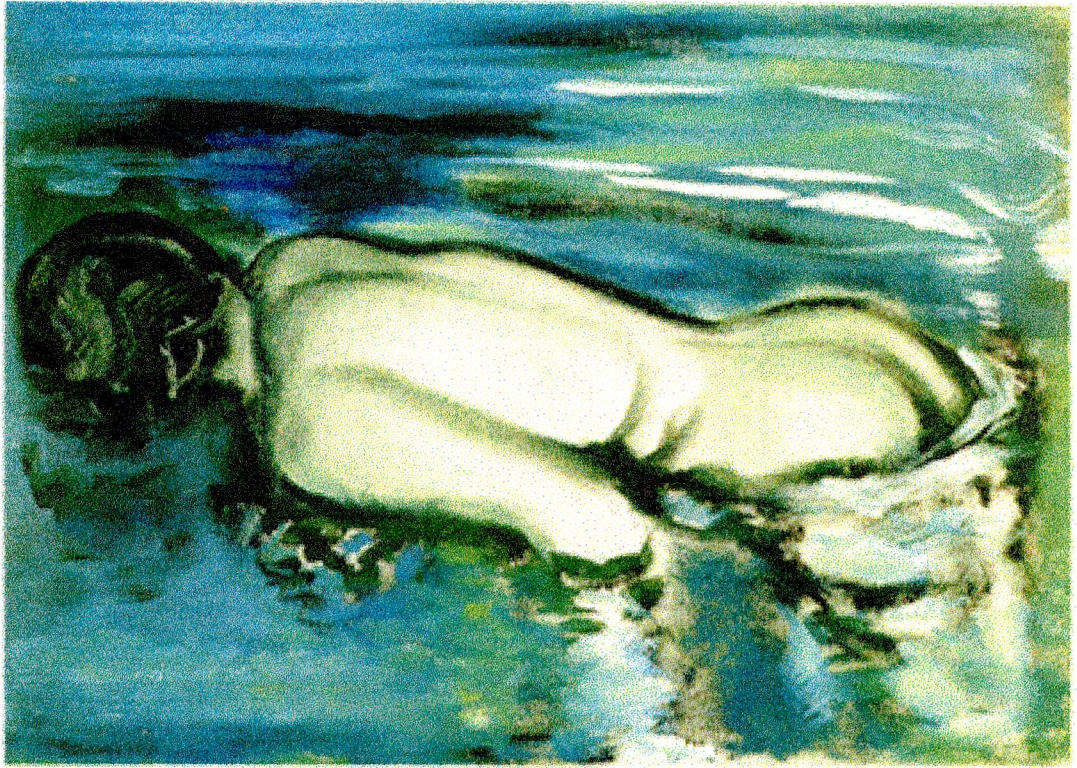


Plate 9: *Losing (her Meaning)*, oil on canvas, 1988.

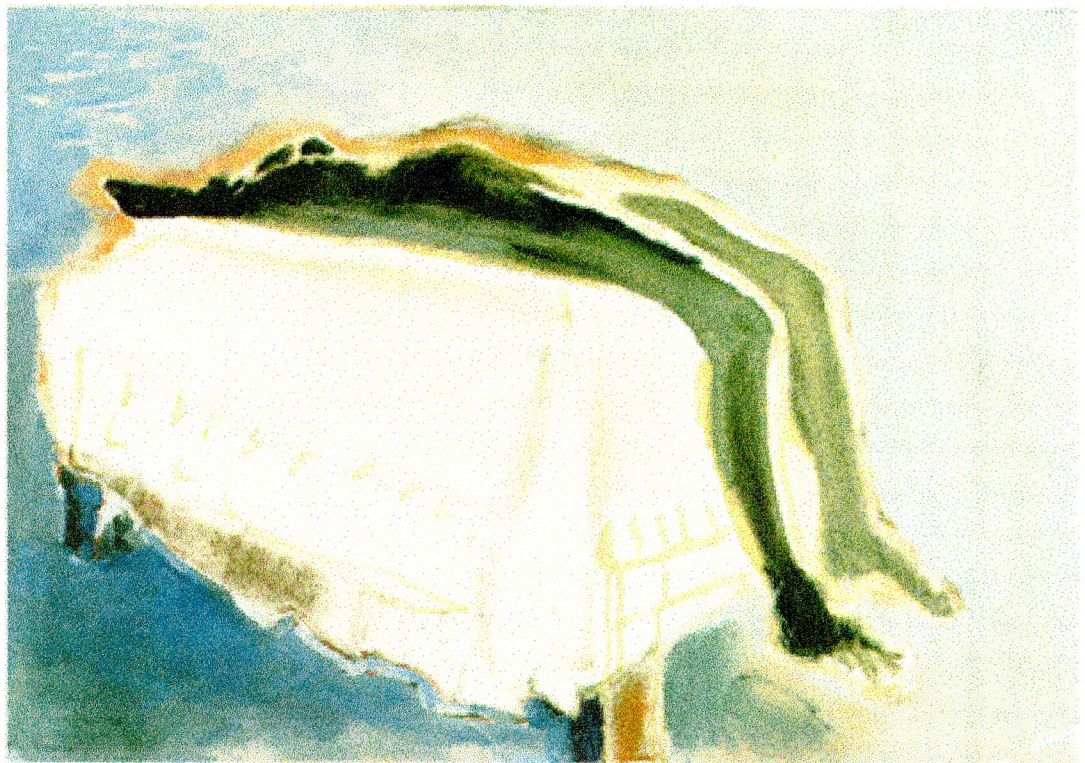


Plate 10: *Waiting (for Meaning)*, oil on canvas, 1988.



Plate 11: *Defining in the Negative*, mixed media, 1988.

Dumas approach to the rejection of the essential, as with Foucault, is one of an investment in the undermining power of asking questions, rather than a deconstructionist annihilation of all meaning. Foucault shares with the postmodernist theorists the rejection of the metanarrative as a justification for a concept of the self, the historicity of identity constructs and that the individual must break down established subject positions to investigate previously unexplored potential in the area of identity. Foucault also, however, refuses to be aligned with a deconstructionist approach that consists of a surrendering of the self to flux, dissipation and fragmentation (McNay, 1993, p. 134). He says:

The theoretical and practical experience that we have of our limits and of the possibility of moving beyond them is always limited and determined; thus we are always in the position of beginning again. But that does not mean that no work can be done except in disorder and contingency. The work in question has its generality, its systematicity, its homogeneity, and its stakes.
(Foucault, 1984, p. 47)

He refutes emptiness as a point of arrival in itself and envisions the exposure of the nature of our multiplicity rather as a point of departure. John Rajchman's analysis of Foucault posits that what Foucault is engaged in is a permanent questioning, a scepticism that does not have a particular end. What he is trying to do is free us from the rationality and subjectivity of modern philosophy. As an alternative he proposes a philosophy that is "neither prescriptive nor descriptive. It is occasion, spark, challenge. It is a risk; it is not guaranteed, backed up, or assured: it always remains without an end." (Rajchman, 1985, p. 123)

This belief in the power of questioning is reflected in the work of Dumas. Her combination of the use of various photographic sources, assorted newspaper cuttings, text written (or not) by herself with and into expressive, sometimes delicate, sometimes forceful paintings show a recognition of the multi-faceted, the flawed and the contemporary. Titles are also important in exposing contradiction: "Titles give direction to the way a picture is looked at ... The whole becomes more complex" (Dumas, 1985, p. 11). Her juxtapositioning of such diverse elements raise rather than defer questions on both subjects political and social such as constructs of race, the imaging of women in art and the media, of the notion of the distanced Other, and subjects more personal such as love, and fleshy longings. These seemingly diverse subjects are unified by an unerring wariness of all that aspires to a definitive answer and an absolute truth on the one hand and that which puts faith in re-presentations of reflected realities, in Baudrillard's simulacra on the other. In a poem in *Miss Interpreted* she says:

*An old love of mine once said,
just give me the one thing
I know you can't give me
give me a simple yes or no.*

*I never liked either of these terms,
and if you're not prepared for a
never-ending answer, don't ask me no questions
I'm not deliberately hiding something.
Take your healing hands off my broken sentences.
(Dumas, 1991, p. 26.)*

Dumas, contemporary in her deconstruction of the relationship between signified and signifier and her exposure of its emptiness, seeks to refill the void left by this state of affairs through questions and ambiguity. In her work we find contradictory meanings - she combines innocence with guilt, life with death, good with bad - and all is imbued with an ambivalence that is prevalent throughout. She reveals how pictorial representation can no longer find its literal equivalent in content.

1. The first part of the report deals with the general situation of the country.

2. The second part of the report deals with the economic situation of the country.

3. The third part of the report deals with the social situation of the country.

4. The fourth part of the report deals with the political situation of the country.

5. The fifth part of the report deals with the cultural situation of the country.

6. The sixth part of the report deals with the environmental situation of the country.

7. The seventh part of the report deals with the international situation of the country.

8. The eighth part of the report deals with the future prospects of the country.

9. The ninth part of the report deals with the conclusion of the report.

10. The tenth part of the report deals with the appendix of the report.

11. The eleventh part of the report deals with the bibliography of the report.

12. The twelfth part of the report deals with the index of the report.

CHAPTER THREE

Subversion of genre, exposure of contingency

There is a compromise in the very act of shooting a person as if her or she were 'really the same as me'. It means a flattening of human experience, a generality that amounts to well-meant condescension.

Robert Hughes, *Time Magazine*, 1972

I want to portray people in all their complexity and never completely definable identity

Marlene Dumas, 1991

Placing the figure

Dumas makes the figure her main site of the exploration of individual and collective identity. She asserts the presence of her subjects, placing them at the centre of her interrogation both physically - her figures are usually centre canvas, with little or no distracting detail around them - and metaphorically - they being the symbols/manifestations of the myths interrogated. This centrality of focus also underlines her gaze as a painter and as such refuses to allow the validity of any notion of one autonomous objectivity, in that her circumspection and underlying drive is what comes across. Using the power of recognition to draw us in at first glance with a comfortable sense of identification with the familiar - the portrait, the child, the nude - we come quickly to realise that all is not what it seems. Questions are being asked, our expectations are subverted, and something is amiss in the picture. Her works refuse us the comfort of closure, and look back at us in defiance as if daring us to hold our distant, spectator stance. Her figures represent what she calls 'situations' - and they seem to be in conflict with the situations they find themselves in, and we are implicated as though in some crime.

The Portrait

In her single and group portraits ambiguous dark pools of eyes pull us in. It was once said the eyes are the mirror of the soul. According to psychoanalytical theory, along with the scopic drive, part of our pleasure in looking is constructed through narcissism and the constitution of the ego, and comes from identification with the image seen. This demands identification with the object of our gaze through our fascination with and recognition of our like. It follows then that we should be pulled in to either objectify or identify with representations of the figure and in this case the face. There is, however, a mask like aspect to the faces portrayed by Dumas, and an opacity to their eyes that defies our penetration of their gaze, that resists any easy appropriation of their identity. In this aspect they connect with their photographic source. To quote Barthes :

...Photography cannot signify (aim at a generality) except by assuming a mask. It is this word that Calvino correctly uses to designate what makes a face into the product of a society and of its history ... the essence of slavery is here laid bare: the mask is the meaning, insofar as it is absolutely pure...(1980, p. 34).

The relevance of the mask as having had an important role of subverting the traditional portrait in twentieth century art is also underlined by the art historian Benjamin Buchloh in his essay *Residual Resemblances: Three Notes on the Ends of Portraiture*:

...both caricature and mask conceive of a person's physiognomy as fixed rather than a fluid field; in singling out particular traits, they reduce the infinity of differential facial expressions to metonymic set. Thus, the fixity of mask and caricature deny outright the promise of fullness and the traditional aspirations toward an organic meditation of the essential characteristics of the differentiated bourgeois subject. (1994, p. 54).

The mask freezes representations of subjectivity, denying our projection of identity, reducing it to a narrow fixity, a parody of our self-deceptions. This frozen, mask-like quality in Dumas' portraits go further than simple caricature, however. By refusing penetration of our gaze, by reflecting it back to us, subjectivity is denied and its death intimated. Ironically, the presence of the figure in her work serves to emphasise the demise of its subjectivity or its absence. This absence or lack reveals an element of the grotesque, of an unspoken fear of the abject aligned with the Other and that which the Subject seeks to expel. This suggestion of death is particularly evident in her group portraits entitled *Teacher (sub a)*, (Plate 12), *Teacher (sub b)*, and *Turkish School Girls*, 1987 (Plate 13), all painted in 1987. In the first two paintings a group of school children are portrayed with their teacher. The children are in uniform - itself a social demand of conformity which refuses difference. This pressure of uniformity, of subservience to authority is reiterated in the empty facial expressions of the children which reflect that of their teacher. Patches of floating colour are repeated on the individual figures, flattening them and highlighting



Plate 12: *The Teacher (sub a)*, 1987.



Plate 13: *Turkish Schoolgirls*, oil on canvas, 1987.

their posed photographic source as a constructed group. In *Turkish School Girls* no teacher is present, the clothes are not identical but versions of the same thing (little girls must wear dresses) and the presence of authority is apparent as they stand obediently in line. Their faces float over their bodies like macabre masks - death masks even, and a definitely sinister question is posed by the viewer - where are they being lined up to go? They carry that already dead effect described by Barthes as "*this has been*" : "By giving me the absolute past of the pose (aorist), the photograph tells me death in the future. ... I shudder ... *over a catastrophe that has already occurred*"(1980, p.96) This sense of transience, of mortality, is particularly vivid in the historical photograph though also discernible in the contemporary photograph. Looking at a (historical) photo of vivacious children their future is before them yet they are already dead. The instance of "reality" and "truth" is imbued with death. In the painting, this combination of photographic grouping and painted conformity, of masks frozen into death-like fixity, evoke images of Jewish children and of what Ernst van Alphen calls a "holocaust-effect".(1996, p.68), which is also perhaps appropriate to the artist's South African origins. It underlines the absence of subjectivity and also the constructs of power and its controlling myths.

The presence of evil in the seemingly innocent and our complicity in subscribing to perceived myths of 'reality' that deny a shifting subjectivity have always been issues for Dumas. As a South African white woman this follows through to questions of racial purity and white supremacy. Whiteness as a connotation of purity is belied by the actual irresolution of white in skin tones of her paintings, including those using the name Snow White in the title. Along with the subject, whiteness is compromised, as is its associated qualities - purity is sullied. Stated realities are myths, contradicted in their visual manifestations. Just as white is not white, black is not black. Thus in her work *Black Drawings*, 1991/2 (Plate 13), the one hundred and twelve separate portraits of black people grouped together show a wide range of nuance possible in what can be described by the signifier 'black' in both colour and diversity within individuality. This is also indicated by the title and the ambiguity of whether it refers to skin colour or literally the colour of the ink used. Here the grouping of individuals is not to demonstrate the de-humanising effect of conformity but the diversity of subjectivity. Homi Bhaba has extended Lacan's remarks on mimicry to show how it can be seen as a form of stereotyping of the colonial Other as 'not quite/not white, rejecting the fixity of (Foucauldian) surveyor/surveyed (Bhaba, 1986). Rather than undermining the connotive construct of White Subject 'I' and Black Other through emptying it of all meaning, Dumas reinvests it with its multiple possibilities. In the same way that Black is freed from its stereotyping as uniform darkness, white as purity is not only no longer tenable, it cannot be trusted, it also corrupts. In *'Evil is Banal'*, 1984 (Plate 14), the corruptive



Plate14: *Black Drawings*, mixed media on paper, 1991-92.



Plate 15:
The Banality of Evil, oil on canvas, 1984.

nature of what is falsely valued - in this case whiteness - is indicated in the exaggerated bloneness of the girl represented in the portrait: blond, blue-eyed and pure, the Aryan model, presumed innocent. But in reality evil lurks below the banal exterior, below the white mask. Dumas also positions herself here as both viewer and viewed - it is a self-portrait, thus she is both corrupter (as a white coloniser) and victim of the acceptance of appearance as reality (by making her own image the subject of interrogation, dismantling her own subjectivity).

The traditional genre of the portrait is thus subverted by Dumas as politically invested. She reinvests the controlling individualistic portrait by linking the representational consequences of looking for significant truths in the portrayal of the individual with the political context of her country of origin. The controlling and generalising power of the photograph⁴ is subverted through painterly psychological interference. The self portrait is turned into an exposure of guilt and the banality of self-deception. The homogeneity of the group is splintered into its heterogeneous possibilities.

The Nude

The nude in art has been enshrined as an icon of culture since the Renaissance, and epitomises the objectification of female sexuality. For both these reasons it is peculiarly resistant to change by women artists.
(Rosemary Betterton, 1987, p.218)

The nude in art is another traditional genre in the visual arts that Dumas addresses and subverts, revealing its history and exposing it as a tired model of objectification. The female body has been synonymous with the nude and the ideologically charged iconographic nature of its representation of the essence of beauty and the desired object. John Berger has explained how the looking subject has power over the regarded object. He uses the classic genre of the nude as an example of the non-reciprocity of the female gaze: "...men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at" (Berger, p. 47). Through the history of representation of women the male gaze has held the position of spectator. The myth perpetuated up to the turn of the century is the essentially unchanging nature of this essence, in which Woman is equated with her naked body, untouched by the diverse and multiple experience of real women (Betterton, 1987, p. 230). It is precisely this equating of the female body with 'Beauty' and 'Truth' that upset the traditionalists when confronted with Manet's *Olympia* in 1863, where the averted,

⁴ in her essay 'The Image World' Susan Sontag elaborates on the control the photograph gives over the thing photographed: a potent means for "turning the tables on reality, by turning it into a shadow" (Sontag, 1977, p. 367). Dumas underlines the problem of placing faith in the "reality" of the image.

idealised expression of the classical Venus was replaced with the distancing, aware stare of a flesh and blood model, naked - a stripped private individual on display (T.J. Clarke, 1985).

Dumas' subversion of the genre of the nude is twofold. On one level she addresses the whole concept of the muse, the relationship between the artist and the model, the work of art and the viewer. On another level she seeks to wrest the human body back from the one-dimensional sexually charged presentation that has replaced the generalities of the classical nude. The discourse of the fine art nude has aligned nudity with sexual availability addressed to the pleasure of the male spectator and today representations of the naked body are synonymous with sex. The human body has become a form in a world of forms, disconnected with its interiority, that formless other place that needs the look of the other to take shape. Dumas demands a reconnection between the outer body and the inner body, between what Susan Stewart calls the paradox of what is both "container and contained at once" (Stewart, 1993, p.104). But not before the gaze, after being broken down and revealed in all its totalitarianism is reformed in a more reciprocal, multi-faceted and democratic fashion. What happens when the void left by the absence of the fulfilling gaze is felt is we are left waiting in a perpetual limbo, "waiting for meaning"...

The classical nude functioned iconographically, as a still-life, and the female nude was probably the most reductive icon of all. There are of course nude men in classical, academic or rather pre-twentieth century painting, also icons of truth or symbols of essences, represented in "the vertical, the measure of things"(Dumas, 1985, p. 43) But their nudity is rarely nakedness. Naked is vulnerable, private, and those male nudes hold none of that passivity that has been identified with objectification where the private is available for consumption. Naked is intimate while nude is distant. Nudity does not surrender its subjectivity. The heroic male nude's represented body is active, athletic and erect - vertical; the female nude passive - supine and horizontal. Dumas, of course, does not seek to depict the nude but the naked and she draws inspiration from Berger's definition of the latter:

Apart from the necessity of transcending the single instant and of admitting subjectivity, there is, as we have seen, one further element which is essential for any great sexual image of the naked. This is the element of banality, which must be undisguised but not chilling. It is this which distinguishes between voyeur and lover. Here such banality is to be found in Ruben's compulsive painting of the fat softness of Helene Fourment's flesh which continually breaks every convention of form and (to him) continually offers the promise of her extraordinary particularity.

(Berger, 1972, p.61)

1. The first part of the report is a general introduction to the subject.

2. The second part is a detailed description of the method.

3. The third part is a discussion of the results obtained.

4. The fourth part is a conclusion and a list of references.

5. The fifth part is a summary of the main points.

6. The sixth part is a list of the symbols used.

7. The seventh part is a list of the abbreviations used.

8. The eighth part is a list of the figures used.

9. The ninth part is a list of the tables used.

10. The tenth part is a list of the appendices used.

11. The eleventh part is a list of the footnotes used.

12. The twelfth part is a list of the references used.

13. The thirteenth part is a list of the symbols used.

14. The fourteenth part is a list of the abbreviations used.

15. The fifteenth part is a list of the figures used.

16. The sixteenth part is a list of the tables used.

17. The seventeenth part is a list of the appendices used.

18. The eighteenth part is a list of the footnotes used.

19. The nineteenth part is a list of the references used.

20. The twentieth part is a list of the symbols used.

21. The twenty-first part is a list of the abbreviations used.

22. The twenty-second part is a list of the figures used.

23. The twenty-third part is a list of the tables used.

24. The twenty-fourth part is a list of the appendices used.

25. The twenty-fifth part is a list of the footnotes used.

26. The twenty-sixth part is a list of the references used.

27. The twenty-seventh part is a list of the symbols used.

28. The twenty-eighth part is a list of the abbreviations used.

29. The twenty-ninth part is a list of the figures used.

30. The thirtieth part is a list of the tables used.

31. The thirty-first part is a list of the appendices used.

32. The thirty-second part is a list of the footnotes used.

33. The thirty-third part is a list of the references used.

34. The thirty-fourth part is a list of the symbols used.

35. The thirty-fifth part is a list of the abbreviations used.

36. The thirty-sixth part is a list of the figures used.

37. The thirty-seventh part is a list of the tables used.

38. The thirty-eighth part is a list of the appendices used.

39. The thirty-ninth part is a list of the footnotes used.

40. The fortieth part is a list of the references used.

Hers, too, is “the discourse of the Lover” that embraces the particularity of the naked, and that retains its subjectivity.

In the 1987 painting *The Particularity of Nakedness* (Plate 15), a man lies stretched out, his right arm thrown up behind his head leaving him exposed. His face is turned towards us, his eyes look out at the viewer. In a posture usually reserved for the female nude, his back is slightly arched, as if in the vulnerability of his nakedness there is a supplicating plea for our approbation of his display. The horizontal position reinforces his powerlessness. He is not portrayed in the authority of the traditional vertical format of the portrait that would affirm his “aliveness”, his force. The horizontal has rendered this man vulnerable to impotency and ruptures his construct of the heroic. Here as always with Dumas, questions are raised. This man, a lover, is sexualised yet not in the traditional way where sex in the male is equated with performance. His sexuality is vulnerable and intimate, more an attempt to communicate than dominate. The way forward is through mutual exchange. According to Dumas intimacy comes of engagement with the object of our gaze while on the other hand distance derives from detachment. She also aligns a ‘nude’ with generalities or “‘the Type’” and a ‘naked’ figure with particularities or “‘the Specific’” and a sense of ‘revelation’ (Dumas, 1992, p. 42). She has subverted traditional expectations of the nude genre here by the tactic of role reversal, of deploying representational tools usually reserved for the depiction of the female nude, yet not in a way that is cynical or comical. This is not a man in a parody of a woman but a person freed of his constructed sexuality reaching out for connection and we as the viewer are left to meet the challenge. An interesting point to note is that Dumas describes a reaction to this painting from a woman viewer who called it a “homosexual painting” and that her male was “too passive”. Interesting in that, while this reading of the supine male as homoerotic might apply to the work of a male artist like Bacon or Schiele, it says something if the female artist’s rendering of a passive male nude cannot be seen as coming from an erotic, heterosexual position, that she can so casually be denied ownership of the erotic gaze.

The female nude is used by Dumas in a different way than in her exposure of its constructs through the male nude. The female body/being, she says, is tired of its relegation to muse and model. She is tired of stripping off in order to supposedly reveal her true self, her essence. It is all a perpetuation of a basic misunderstanding:

There is a crisis with regard to Representation. They are looking for Meaning as if it were a thing. As if it was a girl, required to take her panty off as if she would want to do so, as soon as the true interpreter comes along. As if there was something to take off.

(Dumas, 1991, p.28)

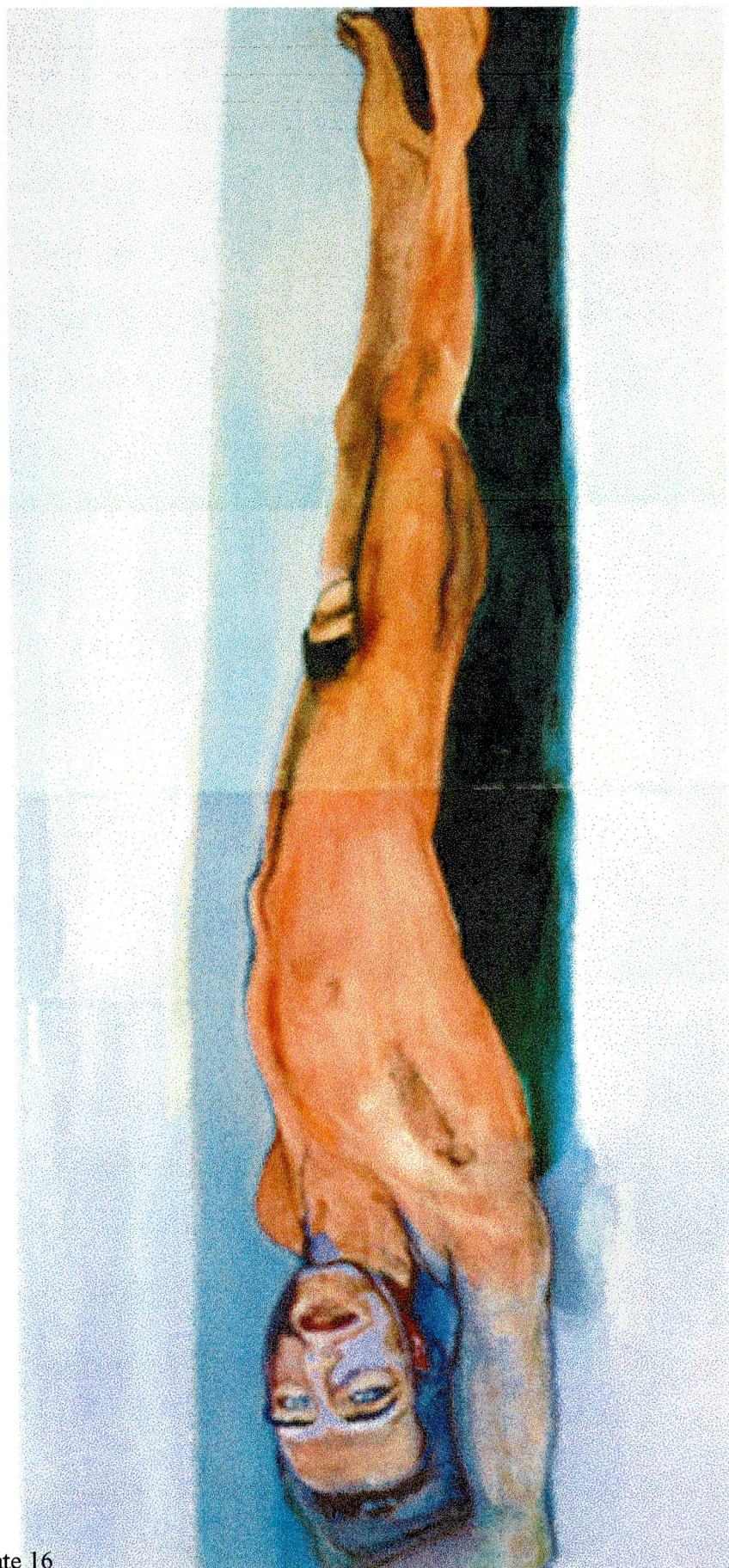


Plate 16

Plate 15: 'The Particularity of Nakedness', 1987, oil on canvas, 140 x 300cm.

Thus her horizontal female models do not look out at the viewer, begging fulfilment. Rather their faces and eyes are turned elsewhere, weary of being surveyed, or recovering from their own complicity in the game - it is time to turn the gaze away. Anyway, as connectors to the inner world their eyes are unimportant, it is their disconnected outer body that is the vessel for others to fill. These prone figures, depicted in works like the already described *Waiting for Meaning*, *Defining in the Negative* and the *Snow White* paintings, are a direct comment on the state of art and its relationship with its female (model). Her horizontal models are her victims in her position as the artist who is guilty of exploiting them to her own ends - attributing meaning to them as it suits her and which they remain ignorant of. Dumas says in the catalogue to *The Eyes of the Night Creatures* "They harbour (passive) tensions. Mental aggression in a passive body." - the muse is exhausted. Therein lies the paradox : "Woman" as object, as the Other, as model to the creator artist is guilty of perpetuating her own dilemma by buying in to the essentialism of that relegation. And Dumas, as her own muse, as the source of her own inspiration with which she will impart meaning to her model, is also "exhausted - because she has had to pour the water of inspiration, as well as make art herself and bear children." (Dumas, 1991, p. 101)

CHAPTER FOUR

Desire high and low

We cannot remain pure reflections, nor two dimensional flesh/bodies. Privileging the flat mirror, a technical object exterior to us, and the images which it gives back to us, can only generate for us, give us a false body, a surplus two dimensional body.

Luce Irigaray, *A Natal Lacuna*, 1994

*Within its reach, though yet ungrasped
Desire's perfect goal -
No nearer - lest the Actual -
Should disenthral thy soul -*

Emily Dickenson 1877

The Absent Lover

The ecstasy of the unattainable. The exquisite pain of longing, the terrible void of absence. Reaching out for her lover he is not there and suddenly she is emptied of herself. Without his desiring gaze to fill her she no longer exists. His presence fed her and she will fade away without its sustenance. Or so she imagines. Yet that fantasy is more real than life itself. That is the nature of desire. In the last century young ladies seemingly died of lovesickness. At least that was the name given it then. Dumas has produced an exhibition which gives the phenomenon a different title - *Chlorosis*, 1994 (Plate 17). A collection of sickly heads look down on us, ghostly and pale, some perhaps already dead, their longing for *The Absent Lover* draining the life blood away. He is to be found elsewhere. In another series of ink wash drawings, *Jesus-Serene*, 1994 (Plate 18), the object of desire is depicted. *The Perfect Lover*, 1994 (Plate 19), is in twenty one pictures of images of Christ's face. Many different photographic, illustrated and religious iconographies have been used by Dumas to produce the wide range of human experience depicted as the various distillations of a character that we all recognise - Jesus as child, as adult, as vivid preacher, as weary, as pale corpse. Close ups, all we see is the facial expression, the borders between emotional and corporal suffering and religious and sexual rapture are blurred. The most

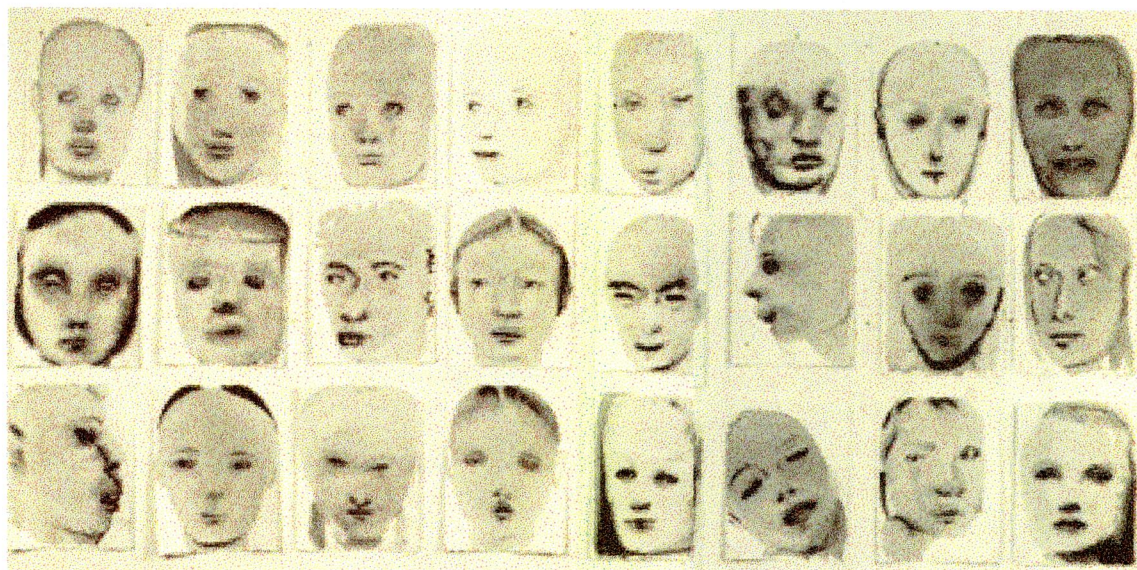


Plate 17: *Chlorosis*, mixed media on paper, 1994.



Plate 18:
Jesus, sketch for *'The Perfect Lover'*, mixed media on paper, 1994.



Plate 19: *Jesus-Serene*, mixed media on paper, 1994.

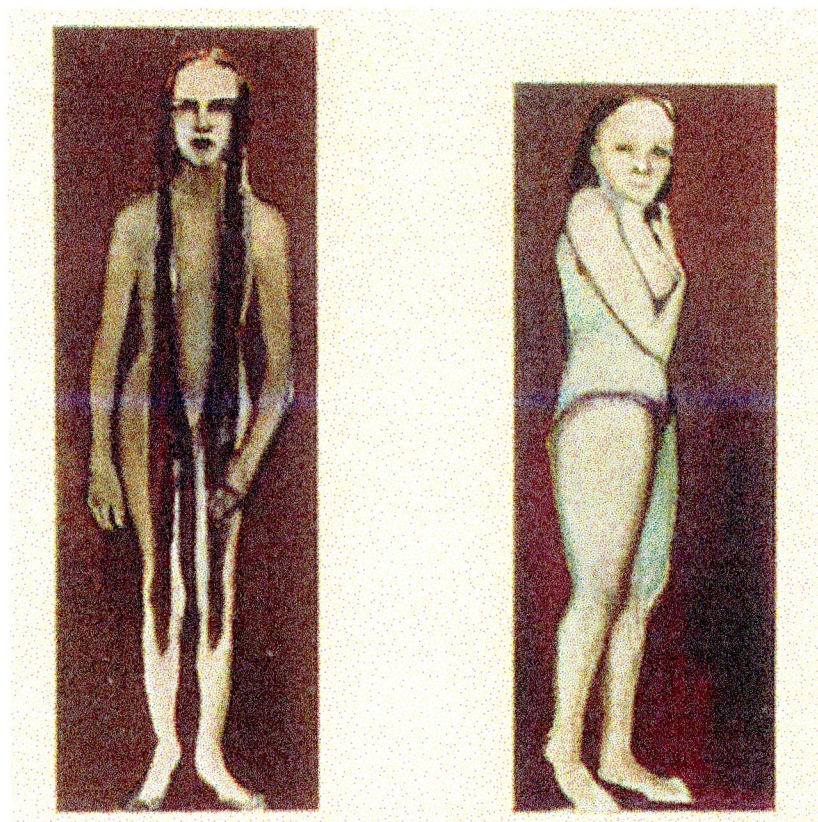


Plate 20:
Magdalena, The Patron Saint of Hairdressers, installation view.

powerful or haunting image, however, is an empty silhouette in profile. Here there are no features, just a symbolic presence that is given its meaning from its context. Not only does this man refuse fulfilment of our longings, he does not exist. In contrast to the lovesick virgins, Dumas has done a series of Magdalena paintings - the *Patron Saint of Hairdressers* (1995), with her flowing hair and *Magdalena from behind*, 1995 (Plate 20), among them. These women are given, in posture and the larger than life format, the dimension of a confident woman whose name is synonymous with the Holy Whore of popular legend. Dumas quotes Angela Carter in the catalogue for the Dutch Pavilion in the 1996 Venice Biennale:

*After she massaged Jesus' feet with her precious
ointment, she wiped them clean with her hair, an image so
astounding and erotically precise,
it is surprising it is represented so rarely in art.*
(Dumas, 1996, unpaginated)

Mary Magdalen is the woman whose object of desire refused her but for whom she performed a profound act of love and eroticism. Dumas admonishes art history and society for ignoring Mary's act of wiping Jesus feet with her hair, for projecting more romance onto the lovesick fantasy than a real act. Dumas says "Jesus is still the most erotic male image in painting today", as if to highlight the power of our fantasies to recharge the reflective surface of desire.

The disruptive embrace

In history's eyes Mary Magdalen was the redeemed outsider, the forgiven deviant. The other, the outlaw, is both suppressed and encouraged in civilised society through an irrepressible curiosity in what does not conform to its controlling authority. What does not subscribe to the normal codes of the dominant culture is distanced and polarised as abnormal (Nead, 1987, p.73). Through the establishment of its Ideal it looks to identify what it is not - the Grotesque. The body and its sexuality bear the weight of this fascination. In her *Porno* series Dumas goes further than a simple representation of the polarities of healthy and unhealthy, of good and bad. Pornography is the other side to the erotic. Her sketches are pornographic because they throw women's sexuality out on display, what should remain discrete is laid out to satisfy (male)voyeuristic urges. In *Porno as Collage*, 1993 (Plate 21), the male voyeur is established in the first image as he receives the attentions of the women. By entering as viewers into his gaze we are compromised and implicated in the act. The all-over treatment given to the images which refuses to highlight the genitals indicates how this exploiting gaze is woven into the fabric of our constructs. We are not, however, left standing in easy righteous rejection of the representation. Through Dumas, intervention as a woman artist in a male dominated genre, a further threat of



Plate 21: *Porno as Collage*, ink on paper, 1993.



Plate 22: *Pornoblues*, mixed media on paper, 1993.

complicity in her own exploitation is intimated. The images evoke voyeurism and pornography where the body is kept at a distance, reduced to a surface, kept closed. Dumas manages to subvert this reading into an experience of embrace and lived sexuality where the body of the Other is experienced in parts. The flowing ink refuses the mechanical focused view of the pornographer. We are not in the safe external position of the voyeur but in the disruptive site of the embrace:

I haven't outgrown my tendencies towards uneasiness , anger, aggression, deep and cheap horror, falling in and out of love...

But there has to be a way to make an art about being in love. An art that is erotic, sexy, tender and filled with a darkness that is awesome, but not sick.

(Dumas, 1994, p.8.)

These borrowed snapshots of pornography enter into the politics of porn. Its subjects are reduced to mere spectacles, yet through the fluid rendering of these images she makes sure we are aware of the artist's manipulative presence. She appropriates guilt by participating as author, simultaneously indulging and deriding the pleasures of prohibition.

In *Porno Blues*, 1993 (Plate 22), the women are posed, legs spread apart, over mirrors. In psychoanalysis the vagina is at the centre of masculine desire and repulsion. In these images the *vagina dentata* is flashed back to the viewer. The mirror has been associated with narcissism. If the male look is voyeuristic, taking pleasure from a distance, the female look is characterised by the narcissistic, finding pleasure in closeness, in reflection and identification with an image. In medieval and Renaissance iconography it represented Vanity, however, and Narcissus died of self-love, giving the mirror and its association with the female look a negative connotation of innate frivolity and self indulgence (Betterton, 1987, p.220). Rosiland Coward sees an alternative to this essentialism:

Because desirability has been elevated to being the crucial reason for sexual relations, it sometimes appears to women that the whole possibility of being loved and comforted hangs on how their appearance will be received

(Coward, 1984, p78).

Thus women look at themselves in images for self confirmation, to match themselves to their representations. Yet, as Dumas has already demonstrated, an unease arises when the idealised image and the real do not correspond. The reflection from the mirror may deflect us from the real, and representations of reflected realities may deceive us. Dumas takes her porn from photographic sources. The mirror that throws reflected secrets back at us is itself a representation of itself twice over, so what mystery can one hope to unravel there?

Luce Irigaray follows on from Lacan and defines female eroticism as linked to touch rather than sight where the male controls the gaze. It is thus auto-erotic and women's pleasure in looking is vicarious. They are relegated to always being objects of desire (Irigaray, 1985). Another angle is Mulvey's examination of the structures of spectatorship. She posits a mobility in the female pleasure gaze in Freudian terms of her being caught between her memory of her 'phallic phase' and its repression needed to assume her female identity: "The female spectator's phantasy is always to some extent at cross purposes with itself, restless in its transvestite clothes" (Mulvey, 1988, p.72). Yet Dumas' women seem to be demanding a closer embrace than is offered by these theories of a female lack polarised with male self-sufficiency. In the pictures the faces are either cut off from our view or bear that by now familiar mask that contrasts with the fluidity of the bodies. In porn the woman has no identity except for her body as spectacle. The fluidity here would seem to echo that formlessness of the inner private world, and Dumas seems to bring us closer to a reconciliation of the outer shell of representation and the inner spaces of the abject:

We may call it a border; abjection is above all ambiguity. Because, while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it - on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger
(Kristeva, 1982, p.2).

According to Kristeva the place of the abject is "the place where meaning collapses", the place where 'I' am not. Abjection also occurs where the individual is a hypocrite, a liar. Abject things are those that highlight the 'fragility of the law' and that exist on the other side of the border which separates out the living subject from that which threatens its extinction. But abjection is not something of which the subject can ever be free - it is always there. The subject, constructed in/through language, through a desire for meaning, is also spoken by the abject, the place of meaninglessness -thus, the subject is constantly troubled by abjection which fascinates desire but which must be repelled for fear of self- destruction (Kristeva, 1982, pp. 3-4). Crucially, abjection is always ambiguous. Dumas, like Kristeva, emphasises the attraction as well as the horror of the undifferentiated.

Pornography itself is "a secret sharer in canon debate and a hidden partner of high art/mass culture conflict that rages beyond the perimeters of the canon" (Wicke, 1993, p.69). Dumas has stated her position between the pornographic and the erotic and in these works we can see her stated intent is literal as well as figurative. She explores the realm of both private and public and reveals here how embedded we are in a search for the absolute, that binary conflicts polarise our view of the world and each other, stultifying our possibilities for growth. For Foucault, the issue

1. The first part of the report deals with the general situation of the country and the progress of the work during the year. It also mentions the results of the various investigations and the work done in the different departments.

2. The second part of the report deals with the results of the various investigations and the work done in the different departments. It also mentions the progress of the work during the year and the general situation of the country.

3. The third part of the report deals with the results of the various investigations and the work done in the different departments. It also mentions the progress of the work during the year and the general situation of the country.

4. The fourth part of the report deals with the results of the various investigations and the work done in the different departments. It also mentions the progress of the work during the year and the general situation of the country.

5. The fifth part of the report deals with the results of the various investigations and the work done in the different departments. It also mentions the progress of the work during the year and the general situation of the country.

raised in an essentialism that underlies the search for one pure truth, and the power it gives to the confession of what is suppressed, is that it feeds off the belief in an innate subjectivity. This idea of an innate subject he rejects, but unlike the deconstructionists who empty the sign of meaning, Foucault does not seek closure in his examination of how discourse is constructed through contingency:

The world we know is not this ultimately simple configuration where events are reduced to accentuate their essential traits, their final meaning, or their initial and final value. On the contrary, it is a profusion of entangled events.
(Foucault 1984, p. 89)

Kristeva, like Foucault, also rejects the notion of a pre-existing subject that is the necessary basis of the metalanguage of science and philosophy and she too sees the subject as a construct of discourse:

We are no doubt permanent subjects of a language that holds us in power. But we are subjects in process, ceaselessly losing our identity, destabilised by fluctuations in our relations with the other, to whom we nevertheless remain bound in a kind of homeostasis (1987, p.9).

This can be seen as an a point of departure for Dumas: her explorations also start from a rejection of the authority of the absolute. She goes on from there, however, to open areas for the reinvesting of subjectivity with a new multiple richness and self-awareness in a confident combination of modernist expressiveness and postmodern figuration that brings together the private and the public in a new way.

The particularity of being one

Dumas splinters and fragments the autonomous self, and subverts our subservience to the binary constructs and myths of our world and history through her circumspection and ceaseless, dynamic interrogation of reality and desire. In the words of Anne Tilroe:

Ever-enquiring into what is reflection, what is real, what is love, what is lust, what is pain, what is presence, what is absence, she constructs, like a piece of architecture, a feeling with corridors, doors, rooms, and empty spaces, many empty spaces, but with out a single resting place for the banal which is perhaps the beginning of evil; the banality of self-deception.
(1993, p.98)

This banality of self-deception is our burden of guilt. By insisting on purity, on the beauty of all that is deemed pure and innocent we are ever conscious of our incompleteness, of our failure to measure up to wholeness. We thus seek to relieve ourselves of this burden by projecting it on to another, creating sacrificial lambs, victims who are to bear the collective guilt of the community. The Other can be is guilty of participating in its representation as reality. For Dumas, the

rubbing away of this dichotomy of dominant/suppressed is the way in which all can be reinvested with its own particularity. For her, authority and its notions of what is real and authentic robs us of the belief in the power and validity of our own thoughts. But it is also up to us to have faith in our own worth and not bend to the dictates of another:

ASK ME NO QUESTIONS AND I'LL TELL YOU NO LIES

Intentions unclear (or never trust an artist)

How do you know my love is true?

How do you know I'm not a fake

Why do you insist on my authenticity?

When I warn you against my non-integrity?

Art is a low risk, high reward crime.

(Dumas, 1992, p.76.)

CONCLUSION

Marlene Dumas the artist situates herself between the revealed and the hidden, between what she calls the "pornographic" and the "erotic". Representation and the image has been left empty of meaning through (mistaken) faith in the surface as all in modernist discourse and its reintroduction as empty signifier in some postmodernist practice. In Dumas' works the image is reinvested with historicity, with layers of possibility and resonance. This she achieves by remaining close to her photographic sources and their potentially distancing power of generalisation while at the same time using painterly expression to draw us back in to the particularity of human experience. In her untroubled appropriation of the "flatness" of modernist autonomous painting with the antithetical referencing of the external world, multi-faceted collective identity is imbued with a renewed humanism. Dealing with what still has the power to disturb and provoke in ambiguous images of monster children, exhausted nudes and pornographic drawings, Dumas seems to cross the borderline between what society accepts (as a confirmation of its constructs and its hierarchies of power) as visible and that which should remain out of sight. Her works are firmly positioned within the discourses that analyse gender, race, politics and history and she endeavours to realise as painting that presence that, although not easy to feel consciously, is very much there - the other: the woman, the child, the freak, the black, the victim...Everyone is present in her works, everyone is a subject. Our possible unease or discomfort in what is reflected back to us in her images is located in our own assumptions, and not in the mediated images that we are presented with:

My painting is a democracy. You can fill in your own information. It's how guilty or suppressed you feel that helps place the work in context.
(Dumas to Jonathan Turner, 1997, p101)

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1. The first part of the paper is devoted to a general discussion of the problem.

2. The second part is devoted to a detailed analysis of the results.

3. The third part is devoted to a discussion of the conclusions.

4. The fourth part is devoted to a discussion of the future work.

5. The fifth part is devoted to a discussion of the references.

6. The sixth part is devoted to a discussion of the appendix.

7. The seventh part is devoted to a discussion of the bibliography.

8. The eighth part is devoted to a discussion of the index.

9. The ninth part is devoted to a discussion of the table of contents.

10. The tenth part is devoted to a discussion of the list of figures.

11. The eleventh part is devoted to a discussion of the list of tables.

12. The twelfth part is devoted to a discussion of the list of references.

13. The thirteenth part is devoted to a discussion of the list of figures.

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17. The seventeenth part is devoted to a discussion of the list of tables.

18. The eighteenth part is devoted to a discussion of the list of references.

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20. The twentieth part is devoted to a discussion of the list of tables.

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APPENDIX

Biographical note

Marlene Dumas was born in 1953 in Capetown, South Africa. An artist and sometime poet of growing international reputation, she has been living and working in Europe since 1976. Based in Amsterdam, she represented the Netherlands, along with two other artists, in the Dutch Pavilion at the 1996 Venice Biennale. She held a solo exhibition in Ireland in 1994 at the Douglas Hyde Gallery in Dublin. The exhibition was entitled *Chlorosis* and showed works from that year as well as certain earlier key works such as *Losing (her Meaning)*, 1988.

