

The Body Politic: Gorgeous and Grotesque

Roberta Smith

The figurative painter Marlene Dumas has been characterized as an artist who leaves you either hot or cold, but that's not necessarily so. "Marlene Dumas: Measuring Your Own Grave," a midcareer survey at the Museum of Modern Art, cuts right down the middle. It left me warm.



Marlene Dumas

"Self Portrait at Noon," 2008, by Marlene Dumas.

Ms. Dumas's work tends to aim for the solar plexus, as the show's morbid title suggests. Fusing the political and the painterly, it grapples with the complexities of image making, the human soul, sexuality, the beauty of art, the masculinity of traditional painting, the ugliness of social oppression. How much it delivers on these scores is a question that this exhibition doesn't quite answer.

The show suggests that while this amply talented artist has created some riveting images, her work becomes monotonous and obvious when seen in bulk. She has not substantially varied her subjects or her habit of basing her images on photographs in about 25 years. And when you stand in front of her paintings, far too many other photo-dependent artists come to mind for the pictures to qualify as original. Her work tends too much toward well-done pastiches of ideas and tactics from the last 25 years, primarily Conceptualism, appropriation art and Neo-Expressionism.

Ms. Dumas's stained and brush-worked canvases are lurid in subject or color, and usually both. The subjects include pregnant women; rather monstrous-looking newborns; murdered children and victims of suicide and execution (mostly women); hooded prisoners; forlorn adolescents; bodies in morgues. Each image is served up in a blank, abstract space with handsome trimmings of lush colors and surface action that have their history in Abstract Expressionism and even Color Field painting.

Striking abbreviations and fuzzy blurs make us look twice. Is that woman asleep or dead? Has that naked child been playing with red paint or is that blood on its hands? In many instances such doubts keep you moving between the harsh, suggestive imagery and the brushwork and process, but after a while you may begin to feel a bit manipulated.

Other paintings go for point-blank sensationalism. "Dead Girl" shows just the head and shoulders of a fallen adolescent with blood streaming from her face. Yet in some of Ms. Dumas's portraits suffering is subtle and implicit, a life sentence and therefore more convincing. In "Moshekwa" the resolute face of a black man fills most of a large canvas with an aura intensified by the shifting tones of his skin, which culminates in a gorgeous patch of dark purple glowing from his forehead like a mark of nobility.

Sometimes the paintings convey a raw, existential force, like the shadowed and piercing, slightly animalistic face of an enormously pregnant and mostly naked woman, defiant yet

posing on her knees. Yet, lest we forget that meaning is ambiguous, and that the work is a painting, Ms. Dumas has titled it "Pregnant Image."

Born in South Africa in 1953, Ms. Dumas has lived in the Netherlands since 1976. Although a regular on the must-buy lists of collectors everywhere and the subject of an exhibition at the New Museum in 2002, she is more widely known in Europe than in the United States. This show is her largest in this country and only her fifth solo show in New York. It was organized by Connie Butler, the Modern's chief curator of drawings and an Ahmanson Fellow at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, where it opened last summer.



Marlene Dumas

Subtle or sensational: Ms. Dumas's "Moshekwa" (2006) subtly exudes an aura, intensified by shifting skin tones.

One thing is certain: Ms. Butler has done Ms. Dumas no favors by installing her work thematically instead of chronologically. The arrangement creates the impression of an overlarge gallery show of works done over a few years. It is as if the museum didn't want its stately sixth-floor galleries to feature anything but the mature, finished recognizable product.

The public could be confused by the messiness of early work. So instead the art seems to have sprung from the forehead of Zeus or Gerhard Richter or Luc Tuymans (or Ida Applebroog). Not until reaching the back of the drawing galleries on the third floor do you absorb any idea of development.

Here, in a single vitrine, you'll encounter a very young artist moving very fast out of the gate on her own steam, starting with a brusque crayon drawing of beauty contestants. Ms. Dumas made it at age 10 while growing up on a farm near Cape Town. The earliest pieces broadcast a gift for drawing and caricature; a fierce, inborn focus on women; and a precocious interest in the physical side of life and art.

Close-ups of breasts and the female pudenda from 1972 bring to mind both Eva Hesse's sexually charged abstractions and Joan Semmel's monumental views of entwined naked couples. They could also be simply a young artist's record of her changing body.

The standout is a small, oatmealish oval of canvas, cotton wool and paint on paper titled "Breakfast for Claes Oldenburg." Made in 1975 when Ms. Dumas was in art school in Cape Town, it is an apt homage whose gouges and fluttering marks also suggest a Cubist relief, complete with Pointillist dots, and a natural pictorial intelligence.

A page from Vogue magazine with the fashion model erased in a series of black, smeary strokes dates from 1977, just as young female artists in the United States were beginning to combine feminism and photography; it rawly indicates a refusal to leave painting behind. Then a sudden growth spurt: nearby, a large collage combines scaled-up drawings based on

newspaper clippings of Winnie Mandela; Patrice Lumumba's widow, Pauline Opango; and Betty Shabazz, the widow of Malcolm X. The piece dates from 1982. The first paintings on view date from 1984, and show Ms. Dumas working very much as she does today.

The consistency of this show suggests an artist who settled too early into a style that needs further development. Stasis is disguised by shifting among various charged subjects that communicate gravity in shorthand. Ms. Dumas's painting is only superficially painterly. The photographic infrastructure is usually too close to the surface, which makes it all look too easy. Worse, it makes subject matter paramount.



Marlene Dumas
"Glass Tears (for Man Ray)," 2008

At times her career — including her work and her voluble persona — seems like an extended Conceptual Art project intended to turn painting and its maleness on its head. Yet it is framed in a familiar artistic ego and bluster.

"I paint because I'm a woman," she has said, in a tone that echoes the macho claims of male painters. And in quotations and poems in the catalog she seems just as self-involved and even pompous as many of her male counterparts. Sometimes she can be articulate about painting's physicality and its psychological effects, yet saying it doesn't make it so. Sometimes, when she talks about the viewer completing the art and the ambiguity of interpretation, she fetishizes ideas implicit in all art at least since Duchamp.

Remember Robert Longo's twisting figures and the endless conjecture of whether they were dancing or being shot? The text panel at the front of the show invites viewers to participate in the process of constructing meaning. I thought that's what we always do.

Still, one viewer's stasis could be another's relentless perseverance. Ms. Dumas's emphasis on the naked or otherwise vulnerable bodies of women can read as retribution for centuries of less attuned representations by men and also for the supposed neutrality of abstraction.

Some of her works protect women by making them disembodied, cloaking them in abstraction. The abject female of "Magdalena (Out of Eggs, Out of Business)" is little more than a few cursory features and two knee-length strands of hair enveloped in a Rothko-like field of dark red. Yet she doesn't convince that this approach is all that different from that of Munch.

Ms. Dumas's best work may lie ahead, and in the direction of greater variety. A model is Louise Bourgeois, whose recurring feminist themes have been presented in a succession of markedly different forms. There are hopeful signs in recent works like the "Moshekwa" portrait (2006); the frowsy, Nan Goldin-ish "Self-Portrait at Noon" from this year; and "Immaculate" (2003).

This last, a compact and foreshortened image of a woman's genitalia and torso, goes beyond stain painting and allows for a more textured, controlled buildup of paint. To our benefit, Ms.

Dumas has made several major themes her own, but she has yet to do the same with her beloved métier, painting.

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