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Portraiture
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Marlene Dumas

Marlene Dumas was born in 1953 on a South African wine farm near Cape Town. Her unique upbringing in South Africa has served as an ever-present backdrop to her artwork. Her dark and gloomy work prior to leaving South Africa was “charged with anxiety and despair”, reflecting political and living conditions of the region during the time (Boogerd, 32). *We Don't Need Names Here*, Dumas' piece from 1973, isn't important in terms of the conventions of portraiture, but should be examined to understand her roots in a woebegone land of apartheid. In 1976, as a series of riots broke out between blacks and South African authorities, Dumas left South Africa for the Netherlands at the age of 23 to study.

In an occupied South Africa, widespread censorship was in effect. In the Netherlands, Marlene Dumas found South Africa's opposite: a society with a liberal sense of sexual freedom and a government very tolerant of explicit materials. One would assume that moving into a country with such a rich history of art would inspire an emerging artist, but Dumas found herself disappointed with the art in the Netherlands: “I found the painting was not very inspiring at all, because they weren't interested in anything that was even remotely social or political. For me it was a bit too tame and too formal.” (Enright Interview). However, Dumas found that “when it came to sexuality, books, films and exhibitions of other artists, Holland was very tolerant.” (Enright Interview). This culture shock that Dumas experienced made her begin to ask deep questions about whom she was and the roles she played.

By the 1980's South Africa had become its most violent and dangerous as uprisings led by oppressed black South Africans swelled. Dumas' work during this time period struggled with questions of race and self-identity. The paintings done in response to racism seemed to be a way for Dumas to cope with her guilt and confusion as a white woman viewing the atrocities occurring in South Africa safely from the Netherlands. Several paintings like *The White Disease* and *Albino* speak of race issues. “Here the affliction of the skin represents a much broader tragedy, known in white South Africa as ‘the black problem’” (Boogerd 44). Being white during the South African apartheid therefore meant Dumas was part of South Africa's oppressive regime through association. Dumas' self-portrait *Het Kwaad is Banaal* seems to reflect her uncomfortable confusion and her unwanted identification with apartheid (Boogerd p. 13).

Marlene Dumas' work took on a new bearing. Her paintings began to focus on the subject of intimacy and ask hard questions of identity. Even the title, *Martha – Sigmund's Wife*, begins to trigger questions in the viewer's head about sex and gender identity. The viewer can only imagine how Martha, the wife of Freud, dealt with her own sexual identity. (Boogerd p. 39). It is in the Netherlands that Dumas' work and style begins to change from her earlier pieces done before leaving South Africa. Dumas begins using the aesthetic traditions of portraiture- i.e. face and bust view.

Marlene Dumas repeats the theme of identification and unchosen identity throughout her work. If Dumas wasn't asking questions about race through her work, she was asking questions about sex and gender roles through her artwork. Just as she had been inspired by political context in South Africa, she drew a lot from the politics in her new home in the Netherlands. (Dumas was very interested in the erotic, often clipping pornographic images and pasting them right on to her canvas. A large majority of her paintings are modeled on erotic images, although she somehow managed to

translate them into something completely different and less (or more) disturbing than the original: “Dumas uses pornographic imagery as source material, yet always manages to translate the original which might be sordid or exploitative, into a painting brimming with joy, pleasure and even symbolic power” (Dexter). Marlene Dumas also uses sexual context to explore the corruption of identity, specifically children’s identity. In *Bashfulness* Dumas portrays the child as ashamed or bashful in her scanty outfit resembling lingerie. The bashful child is positioned alone in an empty space, forcing the viewer to focus on this ashamed child in her clothing. By zooming in on the subject and using traditional conventions of portraiture, Dumas forces intimacy between the viewer and the art by giving the viewer an uncomfortable, private view of the subject. She uses the aesthetic norms of traditional portraiture, which we are used to looking at; the paintings look like they could be real portraits of real people. Marlene’s techniques force the viewer to deal with the heavy and sometimes disturbing ideas presented in her art.

Her work often resembles that of traditional portraiture, perhaps something picked up while studying in the Netherlands; compare Vermeer’s *Girl with a pearl earring* to *Martha – Sigmund’s Wife* (Hobbs). However, her work cannot be called portraiture. Dumas works solely from photographs, newspaper clippings, and magazine cutouts—she never works from real life. Though Dumas uses the conventions of portraiture to help her artwork convey the messages of identity and likeness, she is not, however, trying to achieve a sitter’s likeness.

Dumas’ sometimes anatomically inaccurate drawings represent the way a child would paint a portrait, with the most important parts being the largest (Bloom). Although her probing questions into identity remain constant, her artwork began to change focus and theme in 1990 when she had a daughter, Helena. Based on several images of pregnant women *Pregnant Image*’s anatomically mismatched look seems to represent a mother’s changing identity (Boogerd p.60).

Dumas began to explore the identity of motherhood and childhood more in depth. The four-part series *The First People*, Dumas exhibits paintings of infants in upright position so they “have the look of colossal pin-ups” (Boogerd p.57). Here she explores childhood identity and the loss of innocence, in *Child With Lipstick*, Dumas portrays a child with lipstick – a cosmetic usually reserved for the mature – the child appears unhappy in a forlorn way. *Helena*, a painting of Dumas’ own child shows Helena as irritated and frustrated about being painted, it suggests Helena’s refusal to be corrupted. Another painting of Dumas’ child based on a picture is *The Painter*. *The Painter* resembles Dumas’ first painting of Helena in regards to the dark and powerful gaze from the figure’s eyes. The transparent figure stands two meters off the ground with bright paint spread savagely on both hands (not a brush), this painting speaks of Dumas’ concept of what an artist is at her roots. (Boogerd p.70). Compare this painting with *Drunk*, done 3 years later: The figure in *Drunk* is posed almost identical to that in *The Painter*, it is suggested that this painting is a self-mockery about being an artist forty years later from *The Painter* (Boogerd p.82).

Marlene Dumas has hijacked traditions from portraiture and used them to create meaning in her artwork that the original portrait artists could have never imagined. The viewer can look at her paintings and recognize them as a portrait: they focus on the face, the subject appears as a sitter, and one could probably imagine some of this “sitter’s” likeness. Her framing of the subjects builds an intimacy that makes the art-to-viewer relationship disturbingly uncomfortable. Barriers that often hide a subject’s identity – clothes, background, or detail – are stripped away and an unadulterated private view is created. She refuses to adhere to the conventional norms of portraiture by not working with a model, not using herself as a model, and most importantly she doesn’t “belong to the tradition that defines the artist-model relationship as ‘male painter-female nude’” (Boogerd pg. 70).

Dumas’ 36 piece work, *Het-Hooghuys. Etten Leur*, shows how well Dumas can use the conventions of portraiture without being a ‘portrait-artist’. One might argue that these *are* portraits, however, they cannot be. These paintings do not get at a ‘likeness’ of a sitter, but rather begin to touch

on something more important. These paintings are based on photographs and pictures in magazines, sometimes even multiple images compiled together for the same picture. The people in these paintings may represent people or ideas in Dumas' life, but they however, are not *real* people. (Boogerd p.45). An artist cannot get at the likeness of a person, if the artist isn't painting a person, or if the artist's intent isn't even to get at the likeness of that person. Dumas' intent in her art was arguably even greater than "likeness", it was questioning identity, from her role as a white person during Apartheid to her role as a mother and a woman in an art-world dominated by men. Dumas was using portraiture to undermine the world of image and appearance by uncomfortably exposing the gritty and truthful concepts of what it is to be white, female, and a mother.

Bibliography

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- Interview with Barbara Bloom – discuss works and Dumas' life. Interview is accompanied with Dumas' work.

Boogerd, Dominic van den, *Marlene Dumas*, 1999, Phaidon Press

- Biographical text. Discusses Dumas' history and her works in chronological order. Very useful, it offers insight behind a lot of Dumas' works.

Dexter, Emma, "Painting Fear" *Modern Painters*, Aut 2003, Modern Painters

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- Discussion about Dumas biography and interview.

Hobbs, Philippa, "Marlene Dumas: Intimate Relations" *Gallery Learner Series*, 2007, Standard Bank Gallery

- Originally published as a student-learning guide. Publication is a biography on Dumas and her work. Includes earlier work (1970's) as well as later.