

Rembrandt in South Africa

A profile of painter Marlene Dumas

WHEN SOUTH AFRICAN painter Marlene Dumas first conceded her penchant for the human form, at Capetown's Michealis School of Fine Arts in the 1970's, the figure in art was anything but hip. Abstract Expressionism dominated and Conceptualism was coming on. But Dumas had found her passion early and has followed it ever since.

One Hundred Models and Endless Rejects (2001) invokes the symbiotic artist/model relationship—always a powerful alchemy of ambiguous intimacy, controlled voyeurism, and sexual tension. Dumas' paintings are never strictly portraiture, in the sense of rendering the model's essence. For one thing, her models have already sat for someone else. Dumas paints from images found in newspapers and magazines or television, of supermodels and



The Painter (1996)

superstars, Old Masters on picture postcards or, increasingly, pornography. These subjects have seen and been seen by both primary artists and primary audiences. They have finished posing. And this is where Dumas begins—afresh—abandoning the foreknowledge that informs her “model selection.” London-based critic Sacha Craddock calls this approach “a deliberate quasi-naïve defense of not knowing,” while Dumas explains it as the use of “secondhand images and firsthand emotions.”

When these images reappear in Dumas' work they have a seen-somewhere-before quality, because they have been. Thus the impact upon the viewer resembles that of film, where images extant in the culture predispose the viewer to an illusion of intimacy, unearned. Dumas then folds that familiarity into her subject, raising questions about the impact of human form as image—shaped by human predisposition, consumed by humans who participate, not only empathically, but also having “native” experience of Dumas' source material. Dumas explains: “There ain't no virgins here.”

In traditional materials wielded with expressionist abandon and perfect control, the signature sepia tones of her works on paper and canvas evoke the Dutch Masters of Dumas' adopted home in Amsterdam, “as though,” suggests ArtForum magazine, “there were a layer of ash” in the pigment. Still, the crippling culture of apartheid that Dumas knows by birthright resonates profoundly in all of her work. Adding monumentality of scale and her own poetical

texts as titles and analysis, Dumas achieves a conceptualist hybrid that powerfully voices themes of gender, identity, sexual and ethnic violence, oppression, and the plight of women, children, and minorities.

In the 1992 documentary film, *Miss Interpreted*, Selma Klein Essink says, “as a very young white in South Africa, Marlene was already aware that she was one of the oppressors. Even as a child she had evil inside her. She consequently ceased to believe in absolute truth.” In Dumas’ *The Painter* (1996), a full frontal toddler has plunged little hands wrist-deep into paint: the right, venous blue; the left, bright arterial red.

Dumas’ written texts are indispensable in understanding her work. The writing has a stature and range that can stand alone, and does, in a volume published separately as *Sweet Nothings* (1998). In “Women and Painting,” Dumas tells us: “I am a country girl . . . I grew up on a wine farm in Southern Africa. When I was a child I drew bikini girls for male guests on the back of their cigarette packs. Now I am a mother and I live in another place...and...I’m still busy with those types of images and imagination . . .” In “The Private Versus the Public” Dumas writes, “I am against: general ideas / the nude / the appropriation of images / the mystification of the untitled / the glorification of artistic doubt / the fuzzy edges of sensitivity / old sins / and useless guilt.”

Marlene Dumas has participated in numerous solo and group exhibitions internationally. *Name No Names*, organized by the Centre Pompidou, Musée National d’Art Moderne and De Pont Foundation for Contemporary Art in The Netherlands, is a broad survey of the artist’s works on paper—nearly one hundred drawings, collages, and watercolors dating from the late seventies to 2002—toured to Tilburg, Paris, and New York.

