

June 15, 2008

## Figuring Marlene Dumas

By DEBORAH SOLOMON

**MARLENE DUMAS'S STUDIO** occupies an underheated, underfurnished ground-floor apartment on the southern side of Amsterdam. As she sat at her worktable one evening in late March, emptying a bottle of white wine and picking at a plate of almond pastries, she offered an image of contented Bohemianism. Beside her, a red vase held a bouquet of dead white tulips, and beyond an unusually tall window, dusk was gathering in a garden densely overgrown with weeds.

In the [Netherlands](#), people talk about the Dutch light in rapturous terms. It is frequently described with adjectives related to jewelry — “pearly,” for instance, or “silvery” — but Dumas is more of a night person. She can customarily be found in her studio at 2 or 3 in the morning, and her desire to record experience in its most extreme forms — she paints birth, sex, death and violence, for starters — has failed to bring her one inch closer to observing or recording the famed Dutch light. Tellingly, she does not like to travel, even across town.

“I never learned to ride a bicycle, and it is too late now,” she told me with a hint of pride, before going on to list her other negative achievements. “I never learned to drive. I never learned to swim.” At 54, Dumas is a jovial and garrulous presence, with a tangle of blond curls and fair skin. She speaks English with a heavy accent, in a wheezing, thinned-out voice.

“I was so pleased when I read that Rossellini loved to lie in bed,” she continued, referring to the Italian filmmaker, a confirmed hypochondriac who, she discovered, would take to his bed for two or three days at a time, reading thick novels. “Now people do exercise, and they have hobbies, and they take holidays,” she said. “I am not one of those. I don’t go to a psychiatrist. I don’t go to a gym. I run away from my accountant, I run away from my dentist. They are all supposed to help you, but I like to stay in bed, where I have a chance to reflect, like Rossellini.”

As Dumas languishes in bed in Amsterdam, her career in America has been advancing on its own. The first major survey of her art in this country opens at the [Museum of Contemporary Art](#) in Los Angeles next week, before traveling to the Museum of Modern Art in New York in mid-December and finally ending at the Menil Collection in Houston. “Marlene Dumas: Measuring Your Own Grave,” as the show is titled, might sound more like a do-it-yourself funeral than a foray into the optical pleasures of painting, but one trademark of the artist’s work is her ability to conjoin nerve-racking subject matter and elegant brushwork. She is one of contemporary art’s most compelling painters, taking people from newspaper photographs and turning them into agents in a psychological drama who might shut their eyes on us or look out at us with a gaze that says, “Don’t go.”

The facts of Dumas’s biography — she grew up in South Africa under apartheid — can encourage a viewer to read her work as unadorned social commentary. Significantly, the retrospective in Los Angeles, which was organized by the curator Cornelia Butler and consists of about 70 paintings and 35 works on paper, will be arranged along loose thematic lines touching on topics like race relations and terror. Taken together, Dumas’s portraits might seem to constitute the face book of a bungled imperialism. On the other hand, the

figures in her paintings are pleasingly complicated — there are babies who look like dictators and brides in wedding dresses lined up like zombies — and they hark back to the days before big questions about life and death and evil gave way to the drone of gender theory and identity politics.

For all their moral gravity, Dumas's paintings have led a separate, rather flashy existence in the more commercial precincts of the art world. In February 2005, at Christie's in London, "The Teacher (sub a)" (1987) — a large, horizontal group portrait that turns a sentiment-laden class picture from her own childhood into a bruising reflection on authority — sold for \$3.34 million. Virtually overnight, Dumas became "the world's most expensive living female artist," as the blogs reported, a status she maintained for one year, until [Louise Bourgeois](#) sold a sculpture for \$4 million and captured the top-art-girl crown.

"The Teacher (sub a)," as it turns out, was purchased by the Acquavella Galleries, which occupies a stately town house on the Upper East Side of Manhattan and, three years later, still owns the painting. "We bought it for ourselves," Nick Acquavella, who is 30, told me, explaining that he and his art-dealing father attended the auction not to bid on behalf of a client but rather in the hope of adding Dumas's painting to the family collection, which abounds with Picassos, Giacomettis and other staples of European modernism. "It is difficult to find Marlene's work on the market," he said. "She is not very prolific, and most of her work is in European collections where people don't want to sell."

A few weeks ago, it was announced that Dumas is leaving her longtime dealer in New York, Jack Tilton, and signing with the David Zwirner gallery. "It literally took four years before Marlene committed fully," Zwirner told me, during which time he visited her in Holland on two occasions, met her in Venice on two others and assembled an ambitious show of her older works. In the end, Dumas was probably won over less by Zwirner's charming attentions than by her affinity with the artists he represents. They include art stars like Luc Tuymans and Neo Rauch, who possess a seemingly inborn talent for depicting nightmares, particularly of the political variety, and have made European painting feel newly urgent in New York.

**A DUMAS PAINTING** is easy to recognize. It typically shows a face or a figure in dramatic close-up, isolated against a neutral ground. Put another way, the people in her pictures are not sitting in a cafe or strolling the avenue, and they seem to have sprung from some infernal realm where personal memories are constantly colliding with public traumas. Her subjects include her daughter, her mother, terrorists, drowning victims, hanging victims, [Emily Dickinson](#), the South African poet Elisabeth Eybers and the model Naomi Campbell. In addition to her oil-on-canvas output, she is prolific on paper and specializes in inky watercolors that use a meltingly sensual style to conjure disturbing scenes, among them strippers standing with their backsides shoved at us or the impassive heads of blindfolded male prisoners who may or may not be alive.

In conversation, Dumas denies that her driving themes are sex and violence, presumably because she does not want to have the content of her art reduced to so many plot points. When I asked her what to make of her frequent use of pornography as source material, she showed me a kinky liquor advertisement she clipped from a magazine and said in her defense, "I haven't got one painting where the breast gets this much attention."

Additional evidence was forthcoming. She left the table and fetched a book on [Lucian Freud](#), riffling through the pages before stopping at a reproduction of a painting from the early '90s in which two female nudes rest on a rumpled cot. "That's his daughters lying there like that, all spread out," Dumas said vehemently. "I wouldn't pose for my father like that. Not that I am saying therefore that he is a bad man. Why do my pictures have that reaction when I would think that is very peculiar — a father painting his daughters totally lying like that? That is strange."

She once saw a film about Freud that was set in his studio in London, where [David Hockney](#), a friend of his, was posing for a portrait. “You see his process,” she recalled. “He goes up to the face, he looks where the light falls, he looks at —” she made a funny squinting face to suggest the practice of direct observation that remains so essential to the realist school.

Dumas, by contrast, does not work from models, and most of the people in her pictures have already posed for someone else’s lens. She is part of a generation of figurative painters who find their subjects, as if by default, in photographs culled from newspapers and magazines. Still, Dumas manages to put photography to expressionistic ends. If her point of departure is an in-focus photograph, she proves that pixels aren’t everything in paintings that inhabit a realm somewhere between figuration and abstraction, between outer and inner worlds.

I asked her if she saw a difference between European figurative painting and its young New York cousins, exemplified by artists like Elizabeth Peyton, with her dreamy, jewel-like portraits of rock stars and friends. “For me, that is not cruel enough,” Dumas said. “I like it a bit crueler. [Francis Bacon](#) once said that is why he went for figuration against abstraction — he didn’t like Pollock as much because he said abstraction couldn’t be cruel enough for him. I did get things from Francis Bacon — the fact of the figure in an abstract background. It is a figure, but where is the figure?”

Over the years, Dumas’s work has remained fairly consistent. Asked about the trajectory of her development, she mentioned that her handling of paint has grown more assured: she has become adept at making pictures with less and less paint. “It’s almost Alex Katz,” she said of one of her recent works, referring to the New York figurative painter known for his spartan and effortless-seeming surfaces.

Dumas is inordinately protective of her time, and she keeps her many admirers at bay with the help of two assistants, Jolie van Leeuwen and Rudolf Evenhuis, each of whom is 49 and holds a degree in art history. Evenhuis, who was patiently answering e-mail for Dumas when I arrived at the studio, mentioned to me that he first met her after writing her a letter and asking if he could make a film about her work. “Try me in a year,” she blithely wrote back. The eventual result was two films, the latter of which, “Miss Interpreted,” is an hourlong documentary from 1997. “She was not completely happy with the film,” Evenhuis recalls. “She thought it had too much human interest. She didn’t like that she was shown eating.”

**BORN IN CAPE TOWN ON AUG. 3, 1953**, the youngest of three children, Dumas grew up on sandy farmland, about an hour outside of the city. Her native language was Afrikaans, which was still disdained as a bumpkin dialect of the Dutchmen who settled South Africa in the 17th century. The artist’s mother, Helena, was a homemaker; her father, Johannes, was a winemaker who owned a moderate-size vineyard, Jacobsdal, which is currently run by Dumas’s oldest sibling, Cornelis. Her other brother, the Rev. Pieter Dumas, won a court case against the Dutch Reformed Church in 1988, after he was fired for speaking up against racism within the church.

As a child, Dumas was well aware of the sorrows of apartheid. “We had a lady working in the house, and I would sit with her and read to her,” she recalled. “We were very warm with one another, but we could not sit at the same table. That is horrible to see, how long things took for people to say, ‘It is going to change.’”

Kuils River, the town where she grew up, was an isolated, uneventful place with “one bar, one hotel, one doctor and one church,” as she says. There was no art museum anywhere in the area, except for “a very dead place in Cape Town that showed old colonial paintings of bridges in the landscape,” as she recalls. Even the diversions of popular culture were largely nonexistent; it was not until 1976 that television arrived in South Africa, one of the few countries that did not show live footage of Neil Armstrong walking on the

moon, as if any glimpse of the democratic world would cause apartheid to crumble instantly. Movies were shown in theaters but were heavily regulated for content, and only the most sanitized fluff survived. “We used to go to drive-in movies to watch Tarzan,” she said.

As if to counter the media blackout, the suppression of images, Dumas began collecting pictures. From the time she was 8, she loved drawing cartoon girls, curvy, bikini-clad models of the sort she saw in comics but whose key source was probably her obsessive fantasy life. She still likes to draw girls. To demonstrate, she picked up a pencil and a sheet of paper and conjured in about all of 10 seconds an expertly cheesy nude with a button nose and elephantine breasts. “It was always the face or the figure, even when I was small,” she said. “I never did a tree.”

The relative comfort of her childhood ended at age 12, when her father died of liver disease. “I think I am probably a lot like my father,” she said matter-of-factly. “He would go to the bar. The bar had a bad reputation, but now I go sit in the bar. My father never wanted to leave before the end of a party, and I never want to leave, either. I don’t know if it was worse going to see him in the hospital or seeing him at home in the end.”

As she described the landscape of her childhood — the baking sun, the vineyard with its low-hanging grapes, the farmhouse where she sat and drew her congeries of glamour girls — I wondered to what extent her father’s death shaped her art. Many of her paintings and watercolors depict dead or dying figures, and her work in general can feel elegiac. It was moving to think of her in her studio at night, waiting for a face to reveal itself to her, for a face to swim up to the surface of her art. Maybe it was the face of someone she had loved and lost, or maybe it was the face of a country that she lost. But when I asked her about losing her father, she brushed off the subject, saying only, “Oh, that was so long ago.”

**IN 1976, AFTER PORING OVER** countless pictures in art magazines, which provided her only glimpse of the latest art coming out of New York, and earning a degree in art at the University of Cape Town, Dumas left South Africa to study abroad. She had won a two-year scholarship to Ateliers ’63, a small, progressive, unaccredited art school in Haarlem, now known as de Ateliers and located in Amsterdam. “I moved to Holland because I wanted to see American art,” she has said, lest anyone accuse her of embarking on a sentimental search for her Dutch roots.

Ateliers ’63, one of whose founders was Jan Dibbets, the influential Dutch artist fond of measuring the movement of shadows and other fastidious calculations, was a bastion of conceptual art, and Dumas tried to play along. “I was quite fascinated by all these conceptual artists,” she said. “It looked so intelligent. It looked like modern art. Who wanted to paint a naked figure?” Most of her early work consists of abstract drawings and collages that incorporated bits of text: it is defined as much by the media she chose to work in as the ones she rejected — in particular, oil painting, whose history can be a bit overwhelming for a young artist in the Netherlands, the sort of place where it is possible to go to the grocery store to pick up some milk and pass Rembrandt’s brick house.

After leaving school, she exhibited intermittently in group shows and eked out a living cleaning houses. “I was never really a good cleaner,” she recalls of that period. “I would put the vacuum cleaner on the leaves of the plants, and if they didn’t fall off, they were really strong. I had no experience at all. I had never cleaned anything. My brother Pieter would say to me: ‘What are you doing? Come back. If you want to clean houses, we have plenty of houses in South Africa.’ But for me, to live in my studio was wonderful.”

In 1984, Dumas did something radical — she started painting heads and figures. She was hardly the only painter in the early ’80s to go back to traditional figure motifs; many artists were then trying to find an

alternative to the paper-white coolness of conceptual art. But unlike Francesco Clemente, Georg Baselitz and the other neo-Expressionists who were causing a sensation in New York, Dumas was in no hurry to exhibit her work in America, and she wasn't part of any group. Her first all-painting show was held in 1985, at the Galerie Paul Andriessse in Amsterdam, and it brought together nine portraits. Three of them, curiously enough, depicted women named Martha — one the artist's grandmother, another Martha Freud, the third a servant. "Instead of calling them portraits, she called them 'situations,' as in 'the situation is "evil," is "banal,"' or 'the situation is generic homesickness,'" recalled Paul Andriessse, a bookish man of 53 whose gallery continues to represent the artist in Amsterdam.

**FOR 20 YEARS NOW**, Dumas has lived with her Dutch dealer's first cousin, Jan Andriessse, himself an artist, whose work she describes as "abstract painting, but you can't really call it that." His spare, ethereal, carefully calibrated surfaces are rooted in the tradition of painting the Dutch light. His studio is situated on two adjacent houseboats on the grand Amstel River, which feeds the city's network of canals; on the afternoon I visited him, the indoors were as squinty-bright as the street. He and Dumas raised their daughter, Helena, who is 19, on "this floating dump," as he called it, and now they live in a slightly larger house nearby.

Sitting down at a table heaped with books, Andriessse poured himself a glass of gin. "The only reason I am alive is because of my love of alcohol and cigarettes," he noted in his amused baritone, as he reached into a bag of Van Nelle tobacco and rolled a cigarette.

Andriessse is an engaging, well-read man of 57, a commanding presence who can recite long passages of Nabokov from memory. When he reflects on his life story, he emphasizes the turn of events that propelled him into exile when he was 6 years old. He was born in Jakarta, Indonesia, and he had just started school when President Sukarno, who helped the country win its independence from the Netherlands, demanded that Dutch citizens be expelled. Andriessse became part of a "colonial diaspora," as he put it. He said that his life as an exile — his life of painful separations, and the memory of those separations — is probably the most important bond he shares with Dumas. "The only reason that Marlene and I are together is that tie," he said. "When I first met her, she was speaking Afrikaans, and I thought she was out to lunch. But then we realized we had English in common."

It is true that he and Dumas both grew up in countries that had been Dutch colonies. And they each left those countries, she by choice, he against his will. It was clear he felt wounded by the experience, and I suspected that Dumas's art had given nearly perfect expression to his feelings of dislocation. That is "the tie" he referred to. He, in return, provides her with historical context. She claims to be hopeless at remembering dates, and if you ask her when she moved into her current studio, or was tapped to represent Holland at the [Venice Biennale](#), she will invariably say, "Ask Jan."

He comes to the studio every day, and he often sits for hours at a time contemplating the sky and the water. The weather in Holland is extremely changeable, and if you watch the sky for just a few minutes, you are likely to witness a little drama of meteorology, complete with quickly drifting clouds and shafts of sunlight piercing through. Andriessse says he thinks of his studio as an observatory, a place to be intimate with the light. But when I asked to see some of his art, he explained in an aggrieved tone that inspiration has eluded him lately and he had not completed a painting in four years; his output consisted of only a small group of lithographs. "Depression is my middle name," he joked.

There were two chairs at the table, and he insisted that I take the one that faced the Berlage Bridge. It is a prized architectural monument, he explained, but it is also a monument to untold sorrows. In 1940, Holland fell, and the Germans came walking in. During the Nazi occupation of Amsterdam, the bridge was

one of the sites where Jews were rounded up before being forced “east” — east, he explained, being a euphemism for the death camps.

I glanced out the window, and the present seemed to fall away. It was easy to imagine a scene from the past — a small crowd of people milling at the bridge, husbands and wives pretending to be calm, children clutching at their legs. Why did Amsterdam feel so haunted, even in the frank light of day?

“I can sit here and point at that bridge,” Andriessie replied. “You can’t sit in New York and point at Gettysburg.”

Without warning, the sky darkened, and it began to rain, and the droplets made a loud tapping sound on the roof of the boat. I asked him about Dumas’s portraits of the dead, and he replied nonchalantly: “She’s been painting dead people for a long time. Balzac wanted to write the human condition. She wants to paint the human condition.”

When we finished talking, it was long after sunset, and he kindly offered me a ride to my hotel on the back seat of his bicycle. I demurred, envisaging the dark, rain-slicked streets. As we said our goodbyes, he said he hadn’t decided whether he would be going to California to see Dumas’s museum show. “The more people travel,” he said with a straight face, “the less they have to say.”

**IT HAS BEEN 18 YEARS** since Dumas made her American debut at the Tilton Gallery in New York, and the critical response to her work has been divided, more or less, among those who admire her earnest theatricality and those who deplore her theatrical earnestness. An art-world blog, Anaba, has taken to listing the names of Dumas’s supporters and detractors as if they were [superdelegates](#) charged with putting an artist into office. Are you pro-Dumas or anti-Dumas? “All of the anti-Dumasers are men,” the blog noted in 2005, in a reference to a group of influential critics that includes Jerry Saltz, the art critic for New York magazine, who has described Dumas’s work as “flat-footed.” Peter Schjeldahl, the art critic at The New Yorker, says without remorse: “She is a good second-rate artist. I just don’t think it has much that other people don’t have. There is a certain glamour of sexual perversity, but it seems a little thin to me.”

It may be late in the game to accuse male critics of sexism, a charge that smacks of ’70s-style boosterism while failing to acknowledge that women can be as sexist as men. Nonetheless, the charge persists, particularly among Dumas’s supporters. “People either love Marlene’s work or hate Marlene’s work, and I think it’s a sign of a sexist conspiracy,” says Nicole Eisenman, a figurative artist who is now 43 and based in Brooklyn. “There is an aspect of her work that is women’s work. It’s a mother painting her child, which makes it easy to dismiss.” She went on to say that Dumas’s work can easily hold its own beside the best male painters of her generation. “I think she is as good a painter as Peter Doig” — a reference to the Scottish-born painter who receives nonstop raves for his conceptual landscapes — “and actually, I think she is better than Doig.”

One of Dumas’s most enduring subjects is her daughter, Helena, who was born, as her father told me, “the year the wall fell in Berlin.” Dumas has painted Helena from infancy, at times retrospectively from old photographs, in an intermittent series of portraits that are among her most discomfiting. “The Painter” (1994), which is owned by the Museum of Modern Art, depicts a blond toddler as a miniature stalker. The little girl faces the viewer, nude and glowering, her blue stomach looking less decorated than discolored. Her hands are stained up to the wrist — her left hand carmine red, the right venous blue — and you cannot be sure whether she has spent the previous few minutes finger painting in the playroom or dousing her hands in blood.

You can see “The Painter” as Dumas’s manifesto, a definitive image of ruined innocence, rendered with her customary thin, washy, my-first-draft-is-also-my-final-draft style. The painting is the anti-Cassatt, with none of the sentimentality, the softly lambent flesh, the powdery radiance you expect in a portrait of a child. The little girl, unlike the countless trophy infants and children in art history intended to plug their mothers’ supposed benevolence, knows she’s a morally flawed individual. Even the purest among us mess up, the picture seems to be saying.

By a pleasant coincidence, I was sitting in Dumas’s studio when Helena rang the doorbell. “That’s my daughter,” she said, getting up to answer without interrupting the bright patter of her conversation. The door opened, and there stood a tall, stylish, darkly attractive teenager with lustrous brown hair that fell down her back.

She was wearing gold ballet flats, and a few moments later, when I complimented them, she said, “My mother and I bought them in Italy when we were there” — at the time Dumas was having a show in Milan. “We made a deal. I would go see art and I would get a pair of shoes.”

“She saw ‘The Last Supper’ of da Vinci,” her mother chimed in proudly.

Is Helena interested in art? “No,” Dumas replied without regret. “She wants to work with the psychology of children.”

Dumas returned to the table, and we resumed our conversation, only to have Helena approach a few minutes later. “I’m sorry,” she told her mother. “I don’t want to interrupt, but we had a date.” She said she wanted to go shopping for a watch for her birthday, which was three weeks away.

“Not now, Helena, not now,” Dumas said with a hint of impatience, adding that she was in her studio until 3 the previous night and wasn’t feeling up to a shopping expedition. Then she turned to me and said: “Every time she has a birthday — she still has that from childhood — she gets so into the birthday it overrides everything else. Whatever it is, if it’s a cat, if it’s a watch — can we please not think of that now?”

“I just like the window-shopping,” Helena said, and there was something touching about her persistence. The watch seemed as good a symbol as any for the predicament of a child who wanted more of her mother’s time.

After a while, they stopped speaking English and switched into Dutch, and their tone grew more strident. Unable to make out what they were saying beyond the “ja”s and the “nee”s and the bursts of guttural, throat-clearing sounds, I wandered off to look around the studio.

On a wall where Dumas had pinned up postcards, I noticed a reproduction of a canvas by Ode aan Coorte, a recently rediscovered 17th-century painter of miniature still lifes whose show had just opened at The Hague. It was a compelling image — red cherries and a bundle of asparagus glistening against shadow — and it seemed to say something about the Dutch temperament, with its famous affection for the everyday things of this world.

This, of course, is precisely the world that Dumas has banished from her art. Her paintings can be defined in terms of what she has rejected from her surroundings. She strips away anecdotal detail — the asparagus and the tulips and the light slanting down on red bricks — until all that is left is a haunting gaze. Together her pictures have a cumulative power, and at moments they seem to stare out at us as if emblematic of everyone who has ever disappeared, and with the knowledge that one day, we, too, will be among the missing. Which is not to say that Dumas is ready to completely embrace the abyss. “I still want to try before

I die to do a tree,” she said.

*Deborah Solomon, the Questions For columnist for the magazine, is completing a biography of the artist Norman Rockwell.*

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