

Marlene Dumas

Art Institute of Chicago

Marlene Dumas' paintings look very familiar. For more than two decades she has rendered - and rapidly executed with great facility - hundreds of mostly female figures and faces, referencing models from fashion and art history, merging personal politics and exhausting subjectivity. Dumas' image stock is rich and diverse, from newspaper clippings to Polaroids, and much has been made of her use of antiquated techniques of painting to capture contemporary Conceptual attitudes. On occasion an overload of theoretical nuances and textual sources deflects attempts to confront her direct pictorial vocabulary. Yet our sense of familiarity derives from impulses rooted more profoundly than the ones Dumas divulges; this imagery has emerged from an archive we all collect from the nether world of nightmares, pornography and the antic cruelty of fairy tales.

In contrast to the sprawl of her visual associations and a concurrent textual virtuosity, the immediacy of Dumas' spontaneous brushwork appears uncomplicated and intuitive. It is as if her clever phrases, matching titles to pictures, has provided an armature on which diagnostic observations can be built. Layering Postmodern verbal captions on top of Modern fragmentation, Dumas at first blush is the artificial blonde feminist the art world prefers, a ribald successor to the sober image-text artists of the 1980s. Her biographical displacement from South Africa to Amsterdam thickens the iconographic mixture but cannot explain the work's gnawing recognizability and emotional authority.

'Time and Again', this exhibition of nine new paintings, elaborates the theme of Death and the Maiden, conveying corpses and heads drawn from identifiable art-historical precedents, such as Hans Holbein and Théodore Géricault, juxtaposed with two standing portraits of her daughter Helena. A circuit of polar oppositions is staged in this show: male, female; alive, dead; horizontal, vertical; fragment, whole; model and copy. Even Dumas' material techniques contaminate each other, so that paint is scribbled to depict the emaciated face in *Deceased* (2002) and the texture of the canvas breaks up the scratchy brushmarks. Raw sexuality, one of Dumas' signature themes, is secondary here, yet the attention to orifices - wound, ear, mouth and eye - and a vertical, puffy slit in the noble head resting horizontally register the tragic loss of vitality as well as the ghastly erasure

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of privacy. Similarly in *Dead Girl* (2002), one of the strongest works in this group, Dumas uses a horizontal format to fell her subject, a portrait from a newspaper, but the blood-red paint spreads to enliven the canvas, while the bruised, smeared black mouth connotes the moustachioed cavaliers of Frans Hals. More like Egon Schiele than Gerhard Richter, Dumas' painted calligraphy limns bodies drained of life, while Schiele's pages explore the idea of his own death. Back and forth our readings switch so that the emaciated cadavers squeezed into narrow compositions in *Likeness 1* and *Likeness 2* (2002) are thinly painted and transparent as X-rays of coffins. While the blueish tints and ghostly black outlines themselves describe terminal inertia, the specificity of Dumas' quotation is pointed, drawn from reproductions of mortuary studies recently attributed to Charles Champmartin, one of Géricault's students. His beautiful painting of a severed head enveloped in white linen is installed in the 19th-century galleries in the Art Institute.

Only Dumas' fetching portraits of Helena, a frequent subject, show a softly rounded, standing figure. To quote the artist: 'Politics in the background, love story in the foreground. The girl is growing up. She's looking at you. She folds her white towel like a protective shield around her naked body. The other paintings show faces that cannot see because they are either blind, blindfolded or dead.' Tenderly covering herself, the adolescent is restrained by the vertical geometry of the door, her body animated and illuminated by pale pink and sheer lemon washes. Dumas' preoccupation with the reiterated dualities of flesh and death evokes a more timely dread in the monumental trio of masculine heads whose blindfolded eyes and swollen lips portray lives threatened, about to be snuffed out. The peach-coloured blindfold of the first man becomes the flesh colour of the third. For me this unclear boundary between those living and dead secures Dumas' unsettling vision as hypnotic. Blinded by the fabric coverings, smaller versions of the shrouds that cocoon the figure in *The Body Bag* (2002), these could be portraits of terrorists, hostages or freedom fighters. They recall the panic of ambiguous political crises, implicating viewers as the torturers, victims as heroes. We who can see confront those whose sight - but perhaps not yet their spirit - has been denied. Like the self-contained gaze of the daughter and the concealed gaze of these subjects, the promised inevitability of death is more fearsome than its depiction. Ashen cadavers provoke a cold shiver but can always be relegated to the morgue or museum; the fear of what we have not yet lost, but are about to lose, furnishes the nightmares that Dumas pictorializes. Only painting distinguishes between the depictions of life and death.

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