

# The Anti-Portraitist

**Marlene Dumas thinks you can tell only so much from a face.**

By [Carly Berwick](#) Published Aug 25, 2008



*HET KWAAD IS BANAAL (Evil Is Banal)*, a 1984

Dumas self-portrait (left); Marlene Dumas (right)

(Photo: Gabor Scott/Camera Press/Retna)

**M**arlene Dumas, known as the woman who turns photos of porn stars and babies into expensive, sexy paintings, is talking about a YouTube video of Vladimir Nabokov. She had been looking for the source of a quote, “The primary function of art is to liberate the individual from the tyranny of his culture,” and one link led to another, and there were Lionel Trilling and Nabokov agreeing that

*Lolita* was about love, not sex. “Sex has become a cliché,” she says. “But love—you don’t have to live in [a police state] to know that loving someone is dangerous and tragic and wonderful.”

On the surface, Dumas’s more famous subjects (a dead Marilyn Monroe, a dominatrix with a glowing derrière) make her an unlikely bard of love. Now 55, she was reared on a vineyard in apartheid South Africa. Through films and theater, she first became aware of her government’s censorship of images, and it was, she says, an awakening. (She left at 23 for Amsterdam, where she lives with her daughter and her longtime partner, painter Jan Andriess.) In the fluid dramas of her portraits of children, terrorists, corpses, and strippers, there is always a question that comes from having grown up under oppression: What is the obligation of one person to others?

Dumas is often discussed as a key woman artist, in part because she holds the auction record for a living female artist—\$6.34 million, set in July. (Louise Bourgeois is hot on her heels, though comparisons reveal the futility of judging relevance by price: The record for a living artist is \$33 million, for a Lucian Freud.) Her show at MoMA should make the case that she is above all else a history painter, one who records recent traumas through the human figure. Osama bin Laden, in a painting titled *The Pilgrim*, looks more sheep than wolf. The Dutch-Muslim killer of filmmaker Theo Van Gogh looks like a wide-eyed, overgrown boy.

Tears are her theme lately, especially since the death last year of her mother, to whom she was close. At her current gallery show in Antwerp, there’s a painting of a blurry, teary Ingrid Bergman. “You think, *What happened to tears in modern painting? Why, in the old paintings, was it authentic?*” She uses film stills to give form to emotions: “You know it’s staged. But it’s not only about the stage.”

Dumas often works in loose, broad strokes that give her subjects dreamy looks, and when she talks about terrorists, she talks about Jesus. “I’ve always been interested in

how you identify the criminal in terms of image. People will say, you could see he was the killer. I don't believe that ... When I saw a color photograph of [Theo Van Gogh's murderer], I saw this softness that reminded me of some cliché pictures of Jesus Christ." The point she's making is that you can't read too much from a face—a curious belief for a portraitist. Then again, Dumas notes, she also likes to paint behinds.