

Marlene Dumas: Measuring Your Own Grave

On view at The Menil Collection March 27 - June 21, 2009

Exhibition preview: Thursday, March 26, 6.30 - 8.30 p.m.

Public Program

"Bodies of Paint, Bodies of Text: A Poetic Response to Marlene Dumas"

Readings organized by Sasha West

Monday, April 13, 2009, 7 p.m.

HOUSTON, February 11, 2009--On view at The Menil Collection from March 27 to June 21, ***Marlene Dumas: Measuring Your Own Grave*** is the first mid-career survey of the acclaimed artist's work to be mounted in North America. Though Dumas has maintained a high degree of recognition throughout the European art world, her work has not had as much visibility in the United States. Featuring more than 50 works, from intimate sketches and early collages to oil paintings for which she is best known, ***Measuring Your Own Grave*** offers a rare opportunity to view the full scope of the artist's three decades of work. Included will be several large series of drawings, such as *Models* (1994) and *Black Drawings* (1991-92). Other highlights include recently completed works by the artist that debuted in the exhibition's earlier showings. Organized by The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (MOCA), in association with The Museum of Modern Art, New York (MoMA), the exhibition is curated by Connie Butler, the Robert Lehman Foundation Chief Curator of Drawings at MoMA and the MOCA Ahmanson Curatorial Fellow. Said Ms. Butler: "Marlene Dumas is one of the most intriguing painters working today. Her exploration of portraiture and engagement with many of the most difficult social issues of our time is unique, as is her continuing commitment to painting as a relevant and powerful medium."

Born in Cape Town, South Africa, in 1953, Marlene Dumas was raised on her family's vineyard just beyond the city limits in the semi-rural Kuils River region. As a student of painting at the University of Cape Town's Michaelis School of Fine Arts during the early 1970s, Dumas gained exposure to the decade's preoccupation with conceptualism and art theory. It was photography, however – the work of Diane Arbus, in particular – that would have the greatest impact on the young artist during this period, introducing her to the "burden of the image" and the complexities of representing the human form. Accepting a scholarship to study at the Dutch artist-run institute de Ateliers, Dumas moved in 1976 to Amsterdam, where she

continues to live and work. During these formative years, Dumas explored the relation between image and text in collages, combining clipped photographs, text, and gestural drawing movements.

Collages such as *Three Women and I* (1982) offer early examples of this process, hinting at the themes that would later define much of the artist's work. In presenting an overview of her oeuvre, this exhibition focuses on Dumas's continual experiments with notions of portraiture. Stressing both the physical reality of the human body and its psychological value, Dumas tends to paint her subjects at the extreme fringes of life's cycle, from birth to death, with a continual emphasis on classical modes of representation in Western art, such as the nude or the funerary portrait. By working within and also transgressing these traditional historical antecedents, Dumas uses the human figure as a means to critique contemporary ideas of racial, sexual, and social identity. The exhibition is loosely arranged thematically, rather than chronologically, to reflect the artist's continual investigation of similar topics and to realize new juxtapositions between the works and to create new meanings. Through detailed paintings of newborn babies and provocative portraits of youth, to pictures of deceased celebrities and executed criminals, the artist probes a tangle of human emotions—love, despair, guilt, sexual desire, confusion. Dumas uses the often shocking emotional impact of her work to unravel the complexities and intimacies of human relationships.

Working almost exclusively from photographic sources, Dumas draws her subject material from an ever-developing archive of personal snapshots, Polaroid photographs, and thousands of images torn from magazines and newspapers. A painting is never a literal rendition of a photographic source. For one painting, she may crop an original image, focusing on the figures in the far background of a photograph. For another she may adjust the color, using her characteristic palette of grays, blues, and reds. Dumas's portraits remove subjects from their original context and strip them of any identifiable information. This source material allows the artist to capture her human subjects in their own moment in history, yet provides enough distance for the subject to be quietly and respectfully observed: the awkward babies (*The First People I-IV*), a captured man (*The Blindfolded Man*), a posing pregnant woman (*Pregnant Image*), the face of a notable writer (*Death of the Author*), or the artist herself (*Self Portrait at Noon*).

The personal and the historical collide in Dumas's portraits. In *Dead Marilyn* (2008), a female corpse fills the expanse of a small canvas. This work marked the beginning of a group of paintings of mourning and weeping women, made in the year after the artist's mother died. Dumas's treatment of this infamous image of Marilyn Monroe reveals layers of meaning beyond its original source, which was an autopsy photograph. Smearred brushstrokes of white,

blue-green, and gray highlight the subject's blotchy face. The small size of the work and the delicate rendering makes it a portrait of intimacy. Notions of celebrity, sensationalism, and the mystery of the actress's own personal narrative come into question. In *The Pilgrim* (2006), Dumas shifts her critical interests in the public notoriety to an image of Osama bin Laden, whose relatively peaceful eyes and mild smile greatly contrast with the media's typical portrayals. Seemingly cropped from its original photo, we have little sense of context, let alone what lies beyond the borders of the canvas. Stripping her subject of his public persona and historical importance, Dumas leaves us with a critique of both politics and identity.

Marlene Dumas: Measuring Your Own Grave debuted last year at MOCA, where it was on view from June 22 through September 22 before its presentation at MoMA (December 14, 2008 – February 16, 2009). To fit the intimate confines of the Menil Collection, Franklin Sirmans, curator of modern and contemporary art, has worked with Connie Butler and Marlene Dumas to select a condensed body of work from the late 1970s to the present. While formally aligned with 1980s neo-expressionist painters, Dumas's work is also steeped in conceptual art and the distancing effects of painting from an ever-growing archive of photographs and found images. While always attuned to the psychological narratives of her figures, the artist's paintings also reference the events of contemporary history.

Measuring Your Own Grave is accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue, offering an in-depth scholarly examination of the artist's career, with texts by Connie Butler; MOCA Director of Publications Lisa Gabrielle Mark; artist Matthew Monahan; art historian Richard Shiff; as well as writings by the artist.

Marlene Dumas: Measuring Your Own Grave is organized by
The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (MOCA) in association with The Museum of
Modern Art, New York (MoMA).

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In Houston the exhibition is generously supported by Frances Dittmer,
Barbara and Charles Wright, and the City of Houston.

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Monday, April 13, 2009, 7 p.m.

Poet and former *Gulf Coast* editor Sasha West invites a group of writers to read poems that resonate with the Marlene Dumas exhibition. By discovering what writers say about violence and death, sexuality and childhood, the body, racial and cultural identity, the evening will offer a poetic dialogue with the exhibition.

For further information and images,
please contact the press office, 713.525.9469, or press@menil.org

The Menil Collection, located within Houston's Museum District,
is open Wednesday through Sunday, 11 a.m. to 7 p.m.
Admission and parking are free.