

A Study on the Painting Language of Marlene Dumas

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Published: 30 October 2021

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Abstract:

Nowadays, traditional painting is strongly shocked. In this context, Marlene Dumas explores characters' complexity and marginality with vivid portrait painting language. This study investigates the expressional language of Marlene Dumas' works of portrait, who unveils an array of social and moral thinking concerning racial discrimination, wars, terrorism, etc., by presenting marginalized groups via using images, unique strokes, and thin paint.

1. Image Borrowing and Transformation

Most of Marlene Dumas' works are easel paintings, themes of which mainly come from Polaroid pictures, personal snapshots, notes, drawings, and thousands of accumulating media images in her album. If the distance from an object is too long or too short, it cannot be seen clearly. Marlene Dumas' creative methods have resolved this problem, due to which, she is able to capture the delicacy of a newborn, the stoutness of the bodies of children toward puberty, and wrinkles on grandmother's neck. She can also capture the face of a terrorist, a hero, or a boy next door.

Dumas draws on images for her paintings, which is a way to participate in the disturbing appeals in contemporary social life. "Primary source," said Dumas, "is about the social choices one

faces.”¹ [Lisa Gabrielle Mark.2008, p45.] She consciously organizes her photo albums. It is suggested from her consciously organizing of the photo albums that her image archives are used as a filter. Those photos are constantly reorganized in her imagination and awakening, and the photos she selects enable viewers to have a collective understanding of the era. She repeatedly organizes her collection of images in terms of genre or visual resonance, which constitutes years of research and the foundation of her works. Therefore, Dumas describes her use of images as taking advantage of “second-hand images” to create “first-hand emotions”.

In Marlene Dumas’ view, images are no more than a medium for her art making, not the antithesis of painting. She said in an interview, “This is an era loaded with all kinds of images when people are looking at pictures and images rather than paintings, or looking at paintings through images. Images can represent anything.”² [Lisa Gabrielle Mark.2008, p147.] We are observing and discovering the world with an array of electronic devices almost every day. But it is undoubtedly that images have intervened in and disturbed the vision and subjective consciousness of artists and viewers. Just because of this, Dumas proposed another provocative idea: It is not that media have disappeared, but that all media have become suspect. All media are unstable, unreliable, and susceptible to manipulation, which is, certainly, not the only reason why they are suspicious. The same situation applies to other media which can be used for controlling or limiting meaning. This difference is caused by the fact that photography-based media have long been providers of images acknowledged by cultural editors and institutions, in contrast to painting, which, with less restriction, is likely to produce fewer clichés than images. Unlike photography, the painting process doesn’t have key moments of stillness. Although it retains the traditional characteristics of painting, it is not confined to a fixed mode. Irrespective of the status of source images, Dumas is making active alterations in her painting, shouldering her obligation as an artist, instead of being merely confined to imitating or copying.

Borrowing of source images can be directly found in Dumas’ artworks, while some are indirect, using lens language and effects of photography, which, however, doesn’t cause confusion between her works and images. Contrarily, through her secondary creations, viewers can have a more intuitive feeling of emotions, states even the life and death of the depicted objects. The traces of her screening, adoption, inquiry, and creation of source images can be identified in her composition, the marks left on the pictures, and the choice of colors, rather than the superficial stillness confined to a certain moment presented in the images. These traces not only make her works more than mere imitations but also thoroughly go beyond the question of whether the works resemble the source images or not. Meanwhile, it is the huge difference between what the artist sees with the naked eye and what she thinks in her mind. Therefore, viewers, from well-known international celebrities to obscure groups of people, can feel a heartfelt resonance in her works. Dumas borrows and transcends the source images in the presentation of figures, to make the physical and mental status

¹ Lisa Gabrielle Mark. *Marlene Dumas Measuring Your Own Grave*, D.A.P./Museum of Contemporary Art, p45.

² Lisa Gabrielle Mark. *Marlene Dumas Measuring Your Own Grave*, D.A.P./Museum of Contemporary Art, p147.

of the depicted objects beyond appearances, and enable the viewers to explicitly feel the emotions contained in the works.

The best example of Dumas' image borrowing is her work *Jen* painted in 2005 (Fig. 1), depicting the head and upper body of a Japanese woman. The source image of *Jen* is an illustration of a black and white film shot printed in a book, the moment of which comes from the movie *Fly* directed by a Japanese female director Yoko Ono³ in 1970 (Fig. 2). This experimental video, in an extreme close-up shot, explores the naked body of the anesthetized actress Virginia Lust, who, according to all signs, may have died in the movie. Due to the similarity in this painting, viewers can easily recognize which image she has borrowed from, and even regard *Jen* as a mere sketch based on the photo, because the woman's look, even the color composition of the painting is fairly similar to that in the image, and the only difference is the enlarged close-up of the head. But this similarity doesn't appear as a simple imitation to viewers thanks to the heaviness and vitality outperforming images. The red color of dried blood and blue and white color caused by a lack of oxygen looming in the black background seems to imply that the women may have died, while a whiff of blood color on the nose tip and cheeks, as well as the congested nipples, suggest the trace of life in the woman and a strong sexual implication, giving the viewers an infinite reverie: Is the woman already dead or just in shock and will she wake up some time? Such a work demonstrates Dumas' borrowing and control of images.



(Fig. 1) *Jen*, 2005
Oil on Canvas, 45*51 inches Museum
of Modern Art, New York



(Fig. 2) *Fly*
Directed by Yoko Ono

Regarding Dumas' other works, it is suggested that she is prudent in the choice of images from which she is going to borrow and she consciously selects images that can fully express her emotions, which are more of creation motives. For Dumas, she stores ideas and judgment on a certain incident or a group before she selects an object to depict, which can convey her emotions. Given this idea, she consciously collects and organizes images. Dumas selects images with not only vivid individual features but also the common features of the group before she expresses her

³ Yoko Ono, female, born in Japan on February 18, 1933, is a Japanese-American musician and pioneering artist. Yoko Ono's works include Yoko Ono/Plastic Ono Band, etc.

concern for a particular group by means of an individual or several individuals who meet her requirements. As a result, upon the completion of such a work, not only the depiction of an individual but also a metaphor of the whole group are presented.

Dumas abounds with works portraying groups through individuals. Dumas was born in Cape Town, South Africa, then a colony of the Netherlands, in 1953. Apartheid started in South Africa in 1948. Although the apartheid didn't have a direct impact on her childhood, Dumas has been deeply aware of the grief since then. Her work *Albino* (Fig. 3) created in 1986 depicts a black man with albino, whose chalky skin has a morbid green color. Despite the paleness of his skin, the underlying black color can be seen, implying that he belongs to a colored race. The skin per se is a metaphor of race from which no one can escape, as long as the idea of racial segregation remains. In this work, Dumas illustrates the grief of the entire black race by depicting a black man with albino, trying to provoke reflection of the viewers and society on black people, apartheid, and racial discrimination, demonstrating her care for vulnerable and marginalized groups.



(Fig. 3) *Albino*, 2005
Oil on Canvas, 43*51 inches
Personal Collection



(Fig. 4) *Dorothy D-lite*, 1998
Ink acrylic paper, 49*27 inches
Tilburg Museum of Contemporary Art,
The Netherlands

2. Use of Materials

The use of oil paint and ink on paper is most common in Marlene Dumas' works. In general, strong emotions as intensive as a heavy storm are frequently expressed in her works, which are not only presented in her control of figures and techniques but also the contingency of painting. This contingency makes the painting more vivid and brings the viewers closer to the creative process and emotional fluctuations of the artist. It is very difficult for the painter to capture emotions and reproduce the feelings in the works, with a possibility of repeated failures. The traces of contingency in the painting expresses an unconscious portrayal and specific retention. Moreover, the contingency is beyond the artist's original conception of the work, thus distancing it from the source image and preventing it from being a mere imitation, and forging ahead a step further to the artist's goal of expressing the true feelings.

Such contingency is often present in Dumas' ink paintings. She likes to create a contour in accordance with the shape of the object, or draw a line in a traditional way, lift the paper and let the liquid paint flow rapidly under gravity, then sketch the object with lines of different strength. In terms of the use of contingency, Dumas' iconic ink painting Dorothy D-lite created in 1998 has to be mentioned, which thoroughly reflects Dumas' experiment on ink works and her preference for contingency. The ink shows a unique flow and texture effect when unconsciously guided, while directional guidance is obvious based on the model's appearance and look, as well as the body dynamics. The slightly monotonous face looks unpredictable and rhythmic due to the different treatments of the same material. Dumas boldly scales, alters, and stretches the face structure of the model. Though these painting techniques haven't completely escaped from the scope of figuration, the uncontrollable nature of accidental effect intensifies the richness and variability of the figures' expressions.

Dumas is also adept in painting with oil paints. She is keen on trying various oil-based materials, fabrics, paper, and even fingers to create flowing and hazy texture effects. She has her understanding of painting with paper and fingers, though such techniques were not originally invented by her. Dumas is particularly sensitive to interactive factors in daily life. She reckons that "paintings are the traces of human's touch", which is an experience through time and space. Touch is a vehicle as well as a medium in her paintings. Hands and canvas, in painting, are reciprocal, are the matter of touching and being touched, are confrontation between two subjects. In addition, hands can feel the series of sensations generated by their movements.

Therefore, neither artists nor viewers can see things completely objectively. But what the eyes can see is linked to what the minds think during the processing of the brain. Appropriate materials and media can reproduce not only the objective world in artists' eyes but also the reality of their subject feelings, thus arousing viewers' emotional resonance.

3. Personal Emotions and Humanistic Care

Dumas once said when reviewing her creative process, "I think there is a whole set of different sensory and perceptual processes. A rather popular aspect of works is built on people's sensations, unlike many forms of modern art, they can immediately understand and recognize what it is, from which they feel that they know what is happening in the works. Works should be inspiring, which enlighten all types of narratives but don't tell you directly what happened. I think works will invite you to talk with them."⁴[Li Jia, 2018.]

The creation of paintings is an expression of emotions, which is difficult to be defined in one word or one sentence. This sensual way of communication conveys thinking to the viewers. Figures created by Dumas have something in common. Their vacant eyes stare at us from different angles. Figures in the paintings look down upon the viewers from above, suggesting that the survival of

⁴ Li Jia. *Exploring the Feminine Consciousness in the Works of Marlene Dumas*[D]. Shanxi University, Shanxi, 2018.

them or the groups they represent is threatened as if they were questioning the world and they could awake the underlying vulnerability and depression in humanity. Therefore, Dumas is not depicting temporary and superficial beauty which can be directly observed by eyes, but her subjective understanding of society with her unique perspective. She is a narrator, who describes the world vividly and delicately. In such a time of diverse and complicated information sources, Dumas tries to maintain her pure artistic philosophy and explore the origin of spirituality in the process of art creation. She utilizes the figures in the photos as a metaphor for what is happening in reality, trying to establish a moral scale among illness, marginalized groups, and society. She gives the viewers a unique sensory stimulation, a strong strike of painting language, and a spiritual shock.

Dumas curated an art exhibition named *Against the Wall* in 2010, focusing on the theme of the Middle East War. Her work *Mother* (Fig. 5) painted in 2009 illustrates a mother in dark-colored middle eastern clothes crying while looking at her kid lying in the grave. In her work *Wall Wailing* (Fig. 6) created in 2001, a group of Palestinians, facing the wall, with their hands up, wait for the soldiers to inspect them. And in *The Wall* (Fig. 7) created in the same period of time, a crowd of Jews are standing at the “security wall” officially built by Israel, about to pray. The source images of the series of works come primarily from a collective protest book on the Middle East Issues. Under the disguise of protecting the personal safety of Israeli people, the so-called “security wall” is actually discrimination and oppression against other people. Dumas paints through facts, trying to reflect her discontent at wars and discrimination. It is suggested from this series of works that Dumas doesn’t avoid sensitive topics. Contrarily, she hopes to express her concern for wars, society, and even the living space for human beings through her paintings. In this series of war-related creation, Dumas have portrayed her concern and fear for wars and incorporated her unique humanistic and moral care into his paintings.



(Fig. 5) *Mother*, 2009
Oil on Canvas, 70*118 inches



(Fig. 6) *Wall Wailing*, 2009
Oil on Canvas, 70*118 inches



(Fig. 7) *The Wall*, 2010
Oil on Canvas, 70*118 inches

“Works will invite you to talk with them.”⁵Just as he said, [Liu Yuanyuan, 2016.]Dumas always define herself as an artist good at empathy. In her point of view, empathy is a consistency of temperament, an emotional identification with a person, while empathy does not necessarily require contemplation of the work. When the work interacts with the viewer’s empathy, it gives a physical intuition that is similar to what the artist wants to express. In other words, empathy is a more sensitive and vigorous relation that is established through experiential sensory ties, not as stable or abstract as one's sympathetic identification with a personality type or a culture. On the contrary, Dumas believes she is depicting emotions that everyone can feel, “I always recognize this tension. On the one hand, you know you are making a material object, on the other hand, you realize the emotions of the depicted objects are indescribable. However, if the painting is successful, this emotional tension is embedded in it.”⁶[Lisa Gabrielle Mark.2008, p256.]

Conclusion

In such an era of diversity, Dumas’ works look like figurative paintings prevailing in the 1960s and 1970s at the first glance. However, if attention is only paid to the shape of her pictures, the image she creates in her paintings becomes a burden in itself. Dumas hopes that the viewers can focus more on the past and future of objects in the paintings, which is the abstract connotation hidden under the figurative form and is also the tension of the painting. Like a puppeteer, Marlene Dumas has become one of the manipulators of the public’s emotions. She hopes that she can pull the viewers’ emotional strings and thus inspire them to reflect on the dark side of society.

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