

'For Whom the Bell Tolls'

Marlene Dumas and South Africa

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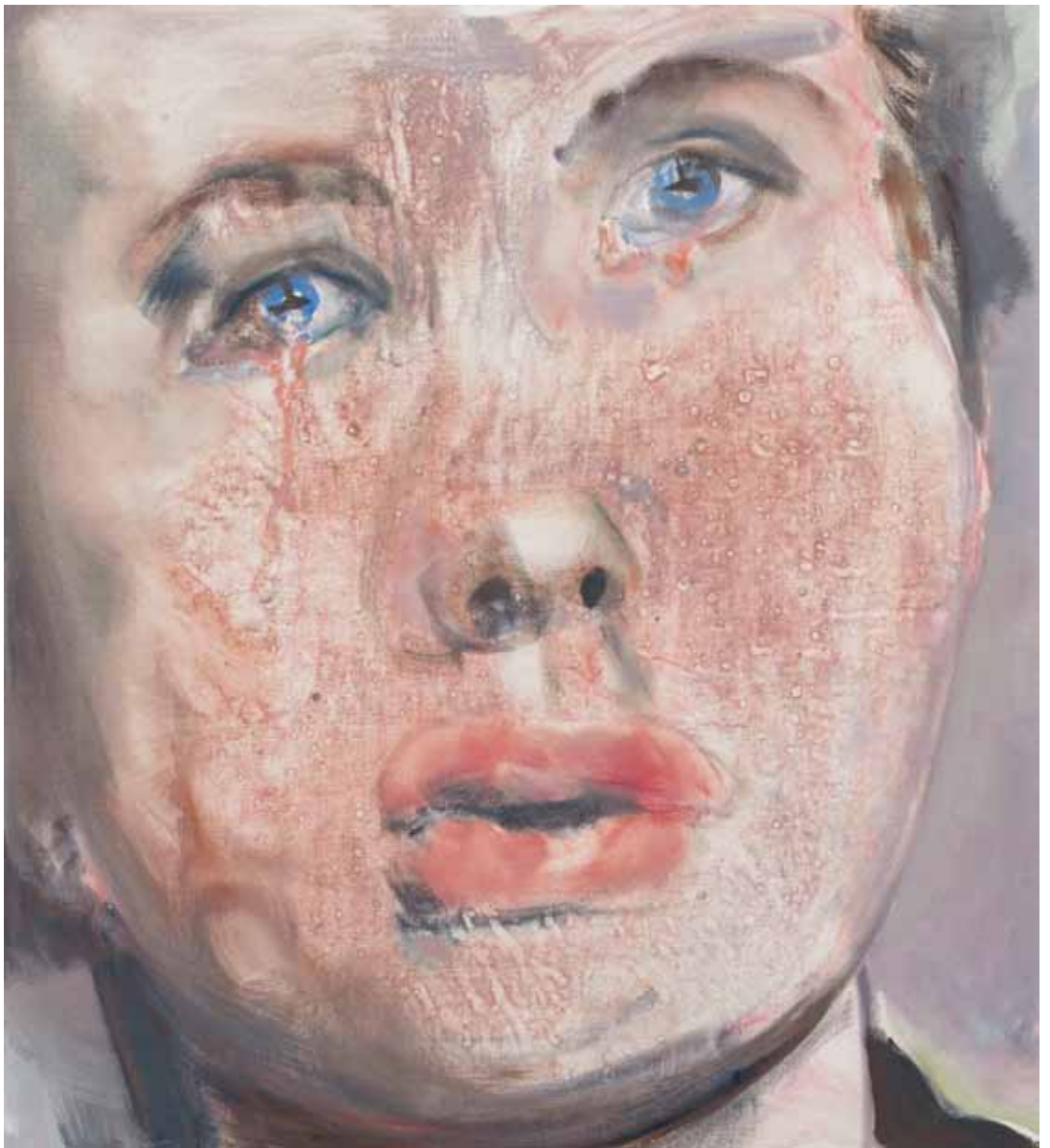
[RUDY HODEL]

In a footnote to her preface *Painter as Witness*, the American art historian Cornelia Butler, who is also the curator of the major mid-career exhibition *Marlene Dumas: Measuring Your Own Grave*, writes: 'It is partly my desire here to re-situate Dumas' oeuvre as a political one for an American audience' (*Measuring Your Own Grave*, exhibition catalogue MOCA, Los Angeles, Los Angeles/New York, 2008). The question is, however, whether this is really possible. Can the work of Marlene Dumas (Kuilsrivier, South Africa, 1953) be seen as a political oeuvre? And can one connect this, as Cornelia Butler does, to her South African origins and her move to Holland in 1976? Her work does, in my opinion, give evidence of a highly developed political consciousness, but I see little reason to define it as 'political'. It also seems to me an exaggeration to describe her emigration to the Netherlands as 'a kind of self-imposed exile', as Butler does. She has never been an exile. And her decision to move to Holland wasn't explicitly to escape from the apartheid in her homeland.

Marlene Dumas came to Holland in the first place to become an artist. In a book chronicling 30 years of Ateliers 63 (ed. Dominic van den Boogerd, *Blue Tuesdays - De Ateliers 1963-2003*, Amsterdam, 2005), the art school she attended from 1976 to 1979, there is an especially relevant comment of hers: 'I came here with the idea of becoming acquainted with the Artauds, the Pasolinis, the Beuyses, with the madness and complexity of European culture and politics, but as it turned out I was surrounded by respectable Dutch people with no traumas at all, who worked from 9 to 5 and liked cooking and design. This was not the Europe I had imagined.'

In a note to Cornelia Butler, Dumas also explained why at that time she didn't want to go to New York but rather to Amsterdam: 'Art-wise, since the 1950s everyone in modern art looked up to New York. As I once wrote, "My mother thought art was French, because of Picasso". I thought art was American, because of Artforum. Yet I did not go to New York to study in 1976 because I was too unsure of myself, but also because it reminded me too much of South Africa. It was not because I had such high principles, it was more intuitive, maybe ... America's racial past (and present) and differences between rich and poor. For me, Amsterdam stood for a freer, more tolerant society'. In short, Dumas wanted freedom, the freedom to develop. And she found it, too, for in spite of the bourgeois dullness

Marlene Dumas,
For Whom the Bell Tolls.
2008. Oil on canvas,
100 x 90 cm.
Photo by Peter Cox.
Courtesy of Zeno X Gallery,
Antwerp.



of her fellow students and the blatantly black-and-white way many Dutch people thought about South Africa and the apartheid there, she stayed. She even became a Dutch citizen.

What she was most interested in was art. In *A Girl For All Seasons* ('n Meisje vir alle geleenthede, published in *Het Moment*, Nr 3, Amsterdam, 1986) Marlene Dumas describes herself, in the third person, as follows: *'She was white of background and skin and brought the smell of wine and sand with her from Cape Town. She came to Holland in 1976. The year of television and Soweto in South Africa. And of dissatisfaction with conventional and unimaginative art in the Netherlands. For her, modern art started in 1950 in America. She was born in 1953. She didn't understand the difference between freedom and therapy in aesthetics.*



Marlene Dumas,
Male Venus. 2006.
Oil on canvas, 140 x 300 cm.
Photo by Peter Cox.
Courtesy of Zeno X Gallery,
Antwerp.

They told her here that creativity didn't have a therapeutic aspect. She vehemently defended the art of the disturbed and of amateurs. But still she discovered secret thoughts and desires of her own – so as not to be defined in advance. But let's not try to use her background as a watertight explanation for her artwork. One can't travel in a straight line through somebody's motives.'

From content to form

For a long time Marlene Dumas felt like a stranger in her new country. And this feeling has never really left her. Cornelia Butler also writes extensively about hybridism and her identity as an *'allochtoon'*, an alien, and tries to connect this with the presumed political content of her work. An *'allochtoon'* in Holland is someone who's not 'from here'. An immigrant, who despite all his efforts to become an *'autochtoon'*, a native, will always remain a foreigner, an outsider. It is a very stigmatising concept, which expresses above all the fear of the majority of the population that they will lose certain privileges, jobs and income.

It is through the relative *'outsider'* which Marlene Dumas has always remained, that the theme of South Africa again comes into focus. Although by far the largest part of her painted oeuvre is based on photographic images she found or shot herself, it is certainly not 'reality' she is after. The reality of the photographs is not denied, but used for her own subjective purposes. There are a number of realities existing alongside one another, and consequently there are also a number of meanings. Her reality is ambiguous and quite often



contradictory. Beauty is always associated with ugliness, good is tied up with bad and there is no life without death. Her handling of reality, which is infinitely more complicated than it seems and therefore needs constant adjustment, was already part of her baggage when she came to Holland. It was one of the legacies of the apartheid regime. As a white person in South Africa you were automatically, whether you liked it or not, one of the oppressors. Even if you were an innocent child. Once in Holland, in suburbia, with its taste for safe and innocuous academic art, her situation as a Afrikaans-speaking South African certainly didn't become any easier. See her dissatisfaction with her training at Ateliers '63.

South Africa therefore has a number of meanings in Marlene Dumas' work. It can refer to a motif like the Table Mountain in the drawing '*Homesick*' from 1976 or be about the content and background of her whole oeuvre: how to deal with reality? How, for example, to deal with the imaginary yet true reality that reaches us day after day through television and the newspapers? How to deal with this profusion of two-dimensional images that have made us insensitive to what is really going on? Her work is political to the extent that she tries to undermine the flatness of this media-made reality. In her passionate oeuvre the world is often literally shown in relief and the viewer made aware that ultimately it is he or she who reads and interprets the work.

Without making any drastic change, over the last few years Marlene Dumas has slowly but surely changed the accent in her work from multi-interpretable content to form. It's no longer the conflict of meanings that comes first, but the painting as an object. She continues to be an exceptional painter of the

Marlene Dumas,
Einder (Horizon). 2007-2008.
Oil on canvas, 140 x 300 cm.
Photo by Peter Cox.
Courtesy of Zeno X Gallery,
Antwerp.

Marlene Dumas,
Crying in Public. 2008.
Oil on canvas, 130 x 110 cm.
Photo by Peter Cox. Courtesy
of Zeno X Gallery,
Antwerp.



human form, of sensual nudes and penetrating portraits. What has been added, emphatically so, is that the form now emerges from action, a treatment that makes use of all possible means, including chance. The result is a steady stream of paintings that are more open and abstract than her past work and therefore leave even more room for speculation and the imagination.

This new development was clearly visible at *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, her most recent solo show in the Benelux which ran from September 6 to October 11 2008, at the Zeno X Gallery and Zeno X Storage, both in Antwerp. As a whole, this exhibition was extremely exciting and I personally thought it better than her prestigious show *Measuring Your Own Grave* earlier that year at the MOCA in Los Angeles. What made it so exciting? I had never seen an exhibition that had been announced beforehand in a text on art history. After visiting Dumas' studio, Cornelia Butler wrote in her article *Painter as Witness: 'More recent research for a future body of work on crying women begins with notes on and images of Pablo Picasso's Guernica (1937), the album cover from the original soundtrack of For Whom the Bell Tolls (1943), which features a close-up of a crying Ingrid Bergman.'*

The exhibition *For Whom the Bell Tolls* was indeed about crying women, Picasso and Ingrid Bergman. In that order. In fact, my first thought in Antwerp was that this exhibition was only about extremely emotional film stars. For next to the crying Ingrid Bergman hung Romy Schneider ('*Sad Romy*'), Emanuella Riva ('*Hiroshima mon Amour*'), Renee Falconetti ('*Sleeping with the Enemy*') and especially Marilyn Monroe ('*Crying in Public*', '*Inverted Marilyn*', '*Blue Marilyn*', and '*Blue Movie*'). Only when I came to the painting '*Einder*' (Horizon) did the meaning of all these tragic heroines become clear. The whole exhibition was a tribute to Dumas' mother, one of the most important people in her life, who had died in South Africa in September 2007.

Any man's death diminishes me

Because of this autobiographical background, *For Whom the Bell Tolls* immediately became a moving and probing exhibition about life, death, personal grief and powerlessness. It was also a typical Dumas exhibition. There is a near-universal title, this time referring to a well-known author (Hemingway) and an even more famous film. And not the film itself but the image on an album cover proves to be the catalyst for the exhibition. And it turns out that it's not Hemingway who is the real author of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, but the English poet John Donne (1573 -1631). He once wrote the almost godlike words: '*Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in Mankind. And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls. It tolls for thee.*'

The most enigmatic painting at this exhibition, because it was different from the others, was '*Einder*' (Horizon) 2007 – 2008. I remember looking at it for a very long time because I couldn't tell whether it had been painted from a photograph. '*Einder*' shows us a warm night-blue sea. Darkness has fallen. In that sea we see the floating outline of what is possibly a coffin. And on the edge of the coffin, which almost merges with the high horizon, an exuberant floral tribute blooms at this hour of parting. They are the flowers her mother had asked for.

Incidentally, I learned this last important detail from one of the five filmed interviews that Hans Theys conducted at the gallery on August 31 2008, and which he posted on Youtube. These films too are extremely valuable.

In these interviews Marlene Dumas also explains that the title '*Einder*' is taken from the volume of poetry with that title by the South African poet Elisabeth Eybers (1915 – 2007) who had lived in Holland since her divorce in 1961 and who died in Amsterdam in 2007, three months after Dumas' mother.

She had come across a reference to this book by Elisabeth Eybers in a letter to her mother. Otherwise, the interviews with Hans Theys mainly concerned the surface and texture of the works on display, focusing in particular on the way in which certain details have been executed and how the illusionist sections are contrasted with vaguer, more abstract surfaces. Theys asks about the big watery portion in *'Crying in Public'* and is told that she never really cleans her brushes but just puts them in a jar of water and every once in a while uses this



Marlene Dumas,
Homesick I. 1976. Mixed
media on paper, 42 x 59 cm.
Courtesy of Galerie Paul
Andriess, Amsterdam.

water to paint with. *Marlene Dumas also says: 'I try to make paintings that are elegant, playful and light, like my drawings and earlier watercolours. I try to be guided by what happens when you do certain things'*. She also likes working with kitchen-roll paper and tries – as in her earlier work on paper – to let chance enter her work again. Here too her adage is:

'My best paintings are like drawings

and my best drawings are like paintings'.

The abstract passages in her current paintings reminded me very much of the *'atmospheric bands'* that gave her large drawings a particular charm in the late seventies. They were a kind of playground for the imagination which sometimes looked like skin, though most of them were abstract splashes with only scraps of graphite or charcoal or stains, scratches and random lines on them. This shift to deliberate painterly experimentation also reminded me of *'The Eyes of the Night Creatures'*, the group of paintings with which Dumas made

her breakthrough in 1985. At the time they were simply portraits of herself and some people close to her, but in these works too she paid a lot of attention to the painted surface and here too the paint seemed to have been stroked rather than brushed on. But the most striking and moving aspect of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* is her imagined return to the autobiographical; to Table Mountain (in 'Male Venus') and the restless sea, from which she had once emerged like a mermaid, who first captured Holland, a bit at a time, and then at an ever-increasing pace the whole world, from Los Angeles to Tokyo. South Africa is still part of this work, as it is still about death and love, the love of life and love of art. ■

Translated by Pleuke Boyce