

# Exhibitions

## Marlene Dumas

Amsterdam, London and Basel

by JAMES CAHILL

'SOMETIMES I THINK I'm not a real artist: because I'm too half-hearted'. This is one of a sequence of confessional statements prefacing each stage of Marlene Dumas's retrospective, *The Image as Burden*, previously at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, and now at **Tate Modern, London** (to 10th May).<sup>1</sup> To skew her words – and Dumas's art is nothing if not a subtle skewing of the recognisable – it might be said that she has made an art of half-heartedness, if a powerful one. From her earliest works, made in her native South Africa before she emigrated to Holland in 1976, a tentativeness of touch and a wilful inexactness of meaning have defined her approach to 'found images'. The burden of the image, if a burden is truly felt, is expressed with an almost faltering lightness.

Dumas's paintings and works on paper, surveyed at Tate in a loosely chronological format that suits their meandering development, repeatedly convey the air of an opening gambit – the beginning of the formulation of a thought. In one early collage, *Don't talk to strangers* (1977; p.24), the opening and closing lines of letters received by the artist have been cut out and collaged in irregular columns on either side of a bleached, streakily stained expanse of paper. The emphasis falls, literally, on the blank in the middle – the unsaid and the unknowable.

*Losing (her meaning)* (1988; p.46) extends this preoccupation. A nude female body is depicted face-down in a nonchalantly daubed pool, like Ophelia desultorily flipped over. Whether she is diving or drowning is pointedly unclear. Poised between agency and passivity, the anonymous woman can be read as an allegory of Dumas's art, in which we encounter, again and again throughout Tate's stylish hang, a deliberate suspension of meaning and ambiguity of intention. As Ulrich Loock observes in the catalogue, 'Meaning, finally, is conceived as an object of desire, not of fulfilment'.<sup>2</sup> In *Waiting (for meaning)* (p.48), painted the same year, a limp body is stretched out across a white cloth, in what might be a visual analogue to Eliot's 'patient etherized upon a table'. Significantly, it is an image of indefinite waiting – a denial of the closure that interpretation brings.

In this regard, Dumas's art is unavoidably 'painting about painting'. Art criticism has routinely categorised her in the same post-modern bracket as Gerhard Richter and Luc



48. *Great Britain*, by Marlene Dumas. 1995–97. Canvas, two panels, 200 by 100 cm. and 200 by 143 cm. (Vicki and Kent Logan collection; exh. Tate Modern, London).

Tuymans, dispassionate translators of found images from high and low echelons of culture. But in contrast to these contemporaries, Dumas's sources seem largely irrelevant – mere prompts rather than ends in themselves. *Death of the author* (2003; p.119; Fig.49), portraying a lifeless face tucked up in bed, is accompanied by a wall text earnestly name-checking Roland Barthes and questioning whether meaning resides in origin or destination. In Dumas's work, meaning is (at best) suspended unreachably between the two: that very gap between them is the enduring subject of her art. The triangle of white bedsheet which occludes the man's face is at once a barrier and an empty space or site of potential (Dumas has compared it to a 'Malevich rectangle').

Tate's wall texts offer a wealth of historical contexts to Dumas's works, particularly those with politically charged points of origin – Apartheid South Africa, for example, or the 1961 funeral of Congo's ex-premier Patrice Lumumba, a photograph of which served as the basis for *The widow* (2013; p.164). But



49. *Death of the author*, by Marlene Dumas. 2003. Canvas, 40 by 50 cm. (Jolie van Leeuwen collection; exh. Tate Modern, London).

one wonders if such background is useful or relevant. Indeterminacy, after all, is the emotional and psychological catalyst within Dumas's art. *The trophy* (2013; p.168) shows a naked girl – her breasts and crotch blacked out – being offered up like a sacrificial victim by two soldiers; but we are not looking (merely) at a particular crisis or injustice. Rather, it is a painting of the 'look' a crisis acquires in the mind's eye, and also of what we choose not to see – the black oblongs again act (as did the triangular sheet) as abstract barriers, breaches in the image.

Dumas's subjects are in this way both vague and instantly recognisable – newborn babies, pornographic glimpses of buttocks and breasts, 'ethnographic' snapshots of black people. 'I could say', she stated in 1994, 'South Africa is my content and Holland is my form, but then, the images I deal with are familiar to almost everyone' – words which seem to acknowledge this tendency to gravitate towards universalised spectres. Readily available and endlessly varied, Dumas's 'found images' facilitate an investigation into ways of seeing, or modes of picturing, even if these are ways we might prefer to ignore or deny. A rumour circulating in the run-up to the show claimed that Tate had censored *D-rection* (1999; p.100), a painting of a youth with a giant erection (Dumas has since clarified that she chose to omit it from the hang). Her ink drawing *Young boy* (1996–98; p.95) meanwhile succeeds in uncomfortably merging attitudes of childish vulnerability and classical ephebic allure.

Individuals, too, take on an aura of vagueness that seems a far cry from celebrity worship. The strongest room in the show contains a sequence of narrow rectangular portraits of *Magdalenas* (pp.91–92), long-haired and siren-like, all of them anonymous except for a portrait of Naomi Campbell that has been juxtaposed



50. *Magdalena (Venus)*, by Marlene Dumas. 1995. Canvas, 200 by 100 cm. (Private collection; exh. Tate Modern, London).

with a winsome picture of Princess Diana (together these canvases form the diptych *Great Britain*; 1995; p.93; Fig.48). The painting of Campbell is rendered in a flattened, naive, near 'primitive' style; it is amazing that this piece has not proved to be more controversial. It turns the fashion icon into a tribal totem, in a schematising process which – whatever its other implications – allows us to subsume Campbell into the plangent, nameless, allegorical chorus that surrounds her. The portrait of Diana, by contrast, is a striking example of what Dumas's art typically is not. Here, historical specificity and verisimilitude encroach with a deadening effect: the likeness is too precise, the overtone too edgily satirical. Diana smiles demurely, decked out in sugary pink, and manages to seem like the work of another artist entirely (a cross, perhaps, between a Will Cotton candyscape and Tuymans's portrait of Queen Beatrix in Amsterdam).

For all that portrait painting has virtually dropped out of the contemporary canon, Dumas's ultimate talent is as a painter of faces, or more precisely, of looks – looks which impel us, in turn, to interrogate how we look at the world. The visages need not be recognisable as individuals. *Rejects* (1994–ongoing; pp.84–85), a grid of heads on paper (originally discarded from a larger project) with which the show begins, is a testament to the failure to achieve

a likeness. The impact of the *Magdalenas*, moreover, lies in the obliqueness of their gazes, sometimes sidelong and introspective, and sometimes directed at the viewer as in *Magdalena (Venus)* (1995; p.91; Fig.50). Phil Spector's furtive glance in *Phil Spector – to know him is to love him* (2011; p.156) – betokening pained interiority as much as an outward glance – derives none of its potency, ironically, from Dumas's (or our) knowing the subject. It is the fugitive aspect that is resonant.

The 'look' is what Dumas dwells on, but often that look is vague – in the literal sense of wandering or straying – like so much else in her art. At its best, her work stands out not merely for its ethereality of touch, but for the evanescence of what that touch conveys – gesturing elliptically towards what I.A. Richards, in his poem 'To dumb forgetfulness', called 'The hidden face, the word too gently said / That spelled maybe a formula of fate'.

<sup>1</sup> The exhibition will be seen at the **Fondation Beyeler, Basel**, from 31st May to 6th September.

<sup>2</sup> Catalogue: *Marlene Dumas: The Image as Burden*. Edited by Leontine Colelew. 196 pp. incl. 200 col. ills. (Tate Publishing, London, 2014), £19.99. ISBN 978-1-8497-6256-4.

## Adventures of the 'Black square'

London

by JONATHAN VERNON

IT MIGHT SEEM slightly odd that a show dedicated to Kazimir Malevich's *Black square* (1915) should so quickly follow an exhibition, held at Tate Modern, London, last year, which placed the Suprematist idiom at the very centre of its display and concerns.<sup>1</sup> It is perhaps a good thing, then, that *Adventures of the Black Square: Art and Society 1915–2015* at the **Whitechapel Gallery, London** (to 6th April), does no such thing.<sup>2</sup> Neither is it about Malevich's *Black quadrilateral* (undated; cat. no. 1), which opens this survey and marks our point of entry into what feels like a very short century of geometric abstract design. Indeed, the exhibition negates a great many of the claims that heralded its opening and adorn the gallery walls, fostering the inclination to view it through the eyes of a psychologist sent to diagnose its split and contending personalities.

It may be tempting to call such an approach uncharitable, or even symptomatic of a failed imagination: *Adventures of the Black Square* is an ambitious project for the Whitechapel, and a forgiving length of rope might well have been tossed in its direction were the scope and content of this ambition not so obviously bound up with its flaws. The exhibition's subject – the making of art re-envisioned through abstraction as a form of social engineering through the twentieth

and into the twenty-first century – comprises a dense web of concepts with profound internal tensions: the development of forms emptied of traditional notions of content, and thus divested of failed perceptual regimes; the redefinition of pictorial elements as units in a structure that could be applied universally, encompassing architectural, print and product design; and its Janus face in conceptualising social life as aesthetic, and thus material, manipulable, and potentially subject to the same systemic and absolute order of the *Black square* itself. The task of unpicking these notions, and mapping them convincingly to individual works, demands a proper account of the social worlds in which the artists in question sought to intervene, as well as those that incorporated and co-opted them.

The co-curator, Iwona Blazwick (joined by Magnus af Petersens), demonstrates an understanding of the stakes necessitated by abstraction's 'protean nature' in her catalogue texts, and begins by asking the right questions of her subject: 'how it can be at once universal and local, timeless and temporal, autonomous and fallible or object'?<sup>3</sup> However, the challenge would always be to unfold and examine these apparent contradictions through the exhibition format, and this is where the historical sensitivity required to navigate them is most tellingly absent. The



51. *Painterly relief, synthetic composition*, by Vladimir Tatlin. 1914–15 (reconstruction by Martin Chalk 2001). Wood, steel, aluminium, paint and wallpaper, 84.5 by 39.5 by 17 cm. (Greek State Museum of Contemporary Art – Costakis Collection, Thessaloniki; exh. Whitechapel Gallery, London).