

## Interview

*Marlene Dumas is one of the most influential and controversial painters working today. Born in South Africa but long based in Holland, she brings a dark intensity to her work, favoring subjects with profound sociopolitical subtexts and addressing explosive issues of gender, race, religion, and explicit sexuality through the prism of her striking, graphic, heavily worked portraiture. A major mid-career survey, *Measuring Your Own Grave*, opened on June 22nd at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. Artkrush contributing editor Shana Nys Dambrot asked Dumas for her thoughts on the occasion.*

**AK:** For *Measuring Your Own Grave*, how involved were you in the decision to organize the show thematically, rather than chronologically?

**MD:** Absolutely involved — I know the difficulties of my works. I did it in dialogue with the curator, [Connie Butler](#), and we worked with the architecture of the museum and the characteristics of the pieces. The works start to *talk* to each other when they get together in the rooms, and some don't like each other and seem to do each other no good, while others form new and better relationships when they (sometimes accidentally) meet. In Amsterdam, my friend and studio manager Jolie van Leeuwen and I had already tried out some combinations, working with a two-dimensional floor plan, but in three dimensions, things always change again. I always ask the members of the hanging team for suggestions too, when I'm in doubt. I'm not a linear thinker or maker — I embrace chance.

**AK:** You've written extensively about the search for meaning in your work and in art generally; whose responsibility is that — the artist's or the audience's?

**MD:** I don't "search" for meaning. Meaning comes with the consciousness of the viewing process; it's an interrelational process, not a static identity. I understand the notion of existentialism that refuses an essentialism of meaning. We all are responsible for what we say we see.

**AK:** Are you comfortable with your work being read as overtly political?

**MD:** It depends on what's meant by "political." If you define it as only relating to South Africa's apartheid politics, then I find it a hypocritical and stupid interpretation — what about American, European, and other racist and imperialist politics? If "political" includes the fact that all aesthetic judgments are culturally biased and context-

sensitive, then you're getting closer.

**AK:** Do you consider yourself a feminist?

**MD:** In the year 2008, when the rape and abuse of women is worse than ever, and with all the official and unofficial wars that surround us, we should all be feminists as human beings. But as a painter, I don't work with any "-isms" as a primary subject matter.

**AK:** What about painting men is different for you than painting women, if anything?

**MD:** It depends on the specific individual or image thereof I'm dealing with. If the man is my lover, I'll treat him differently than if I make a more detached painting of a certain type of male, e.g., a gay macho pinup, whom I may be fascinated by, but not attracted to. Just as the cliché *Playboy* woman types aren't exciting to me anymore — I often find the androgynes much more erotic. I could go on, but the short answer is that for a painter, every good painting should be different from another, whatever the sex of the subject.

**AK:** How do you choose your subjects?

**MD:** They choose me.

**AK:** Have you found that either male or female collectors, critics, and curators have more supported your career?

**MD:** Both sexes have supported me — not always for the same reasons, but that's the nature of my work. Different people recognize and appreciate different aspects of it.

**AK:** Though you nearly always work from photographic sources, your paintings flirt with abstraction and don't attempt likenesses, per se, as portraits typically do. Do you think your works function as conceptual portraits of your subjects, or do they have more to do with broader social histories and quasi-archetypes? Or do more purely formal considerations interest you, such as the differences between photographs and paintings?

**MD:** All of those considerations are important to me and, for me, define all the best portraits of our time. In my case, my form being painting, in the end, after all is said and done, the painterly and formal aspects are crucial. The way painting moves be-

tween illusionism and flatness determines the tone and dynamics of the visual impact.

**AK:** How integral is your own written work to your overall process? Is it concurrent, preparatory, retrospective, etc., vis-à-vis the visual art?

**MD:** My writing is more reflection afterwards, but there's some foreplay too.

**AK:** Do you primarily think of yourself as a Dutch artist? If so, when did that start?

**MD:** I don't think in those terms really, but when I realized that [Vermeer](#) had at last left the stage of kitsch reproduction/admiration for me and had become so alive to me, and when [Mondrian](#) finally transcended the art book and began to move me, I had to admit Dutch art was so much more than I ever thought it was when I first came to study in Europe.

**AK:** How do you view the situation of the art world in your adopted homeland, generally speaking?

**MD:** Contemporary Holland is not a place for art stars and glamour, and so its artistic self-esteem isn't that high. Americans don't even know the art of the last few generations here. But there are some very good artists in Holland, and the country only needs some strong Dutch critics and writers to defend its worth and show its specific depths more in relation to international art. Museum directors should write more essays on the artists that live here. If I was a better writer and had more time...