

## **Marlene Dumas interview - Art - Time Out london**

### **Why the fascination with Crucifixions?**

'Although we've increasingly become a secular society, everyone knows the image of Christ on the cross - it's so much a part of Western culture. I didn't want to pastiche a picture I admired, such as the Isenheim Altarpiece, so I came to feel that you can't paint that figure as it has become a cliché.'

### **How did you overcome that block?**

'The first one, "Forsaken", was based on an ivory figure, so it was already like a ghost or a floating spirit, not flesh. Then, I took Him off the cross and in another picture put Him on a split tree where the figure and the cross almost become one. I have always been interested in how you can depict suffering without being heavy-handed.'

### **And that first picture was where the show's title came from, too?**

'Yes, but although it takes those words as a starting point, it's not only about Christianity. That moment of feeling utterly alone is also one of existential doubt, of whether what you believe in is true, of whether heaven is empty or not. The story is also of a son doubting his father, so I started building up these relationships between pictures.'

### **The first picture you see is actually of Phil Spector. Why?**

'Some people don't know who he is, but he produced all this beautiful music that was important to me when I was younger, songs like "You've Lost That Lovin' Feeling". Here was a guy with all this talent who goes and murders a girl and - whether or not you think it was an accident - he tragically ends up in prison. In one quote I saw he said: "In the old days, if the phone went it would be John Lennon and now it's Charles Manson calling to tell me he likes my music." In fact, it was his father [Ben Spector] who inspired his very first song, "To Know Him is to Love Him".'

### **What is the link to Amy Winehouse?**

'I was already thinking about tragic lives and falls from grace and then I found out that she did a cover of that same song. It was so sad - such a beautiful and heart-breaking version - but I wouldn't have done it if I wasn't also moved by her death.'

### **Is that why you've made two 'versions' of everyone in the show?**

'There are these painterly things that happen while I'm working. These jumps of association are not deliberate - it's more about an atmosphere. So I'd already painted

Osama bin Laden a long time ago, but I did a different version and changed the colour. Then I found this book by Omar, the fourth son of Osama, who lives in London. He wrote about how he didn't agree with his father's deeds, but also that he didn't agree with how he was killed, without a funeral.'

**Why is there such a dark undercurrent to your work?**

'You say that, but if I paint a person with a sack on his head it might suggest Abu Ghraib or you might think an image of a black person has something to do with apartheid, but that is not necessarily what I'm painting. I do think that I'm not good at making pretty things. It doesn't come so naturally for me.'

**Marlene Dumas: 'Forsaken'** is at Frith Street Gallery until Nov 26