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Marlene Dumas

By CLAIRE MESSUD AUG. 20, 2014

One of the most provocative painters of the human form, the South African–born artist Marlene Dumas doesn't match the stereotype of artist as solitary genius. Her way is chaotic, more responsive and uncertain — and that is her brilliance.

One measure of genius is the life force — what Harold Bloom has dubbed, referring to Samuel Johnson, "Falstaffian vitalism." The South African-born artist Marlene Dumas has such astonishing vitality. On the occasion of our recent meeting in Amsterdam, she gave me her full, intense attention for the better part of nine hours and several bottles of wine between us ("I always think some wine is nice, don't you?") before bundling me into a taxi to my hotel, while she calmly strolled back to her studio in the midsummer twilight for a couple more hours of hard work.

Her airy office and studio are shaded by leafy vines on the ground floor of an apartment block in a residential neighborhood to the south of the city center. On the corner are a Turkish greengrocer — as I passed, the owner impressively halved a watermelon with a machete — and a modest beauty salon obscured by dusty windows. So warm was her welcome that I almost remember her hugging me (she didn't). In her rapid, digressive speech punctuated by laughter and tinged with an Afrikaans accent — she often interjects "nee" or "and so" — she offered me an early aperitif and we sat down to chat for what was supposed to be a few minutes before heading over the road for lunch in a local cafe.

I was interrupting the preparations for her upcoming major retrospective, which opens at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam next month, before going

to Tate Modern in London and the Fondation Beyeler near Basel, and which represents the largest exhibition of the artist's work in her adopted home country to date. Dumas, a rare visual artist who also writes — "a dual talent, like Van Gogh," her partner of nearly 30 years, the painter Jan Andriesse, said — likes to participate in the dialogue about her own work, and wanted to revisit as many critical texts as possible, both her own and others' writing, for the exhibition catalog, which is being produced in three languages. "This was probably the wrong book to do it in," she mused in her office, its large tables covered in papers — proofs, copies of articles and reviews of her work, news clippings as yet unfiled in her room-size source archive. "It has caused an enormous amount of problems, and an enormous amount of work."

Her studio across the courtyard was much darker, like a space asleep, and oddly tidy. A few canvases were stacked facing the wall, but no artist's mess at all, with the exception of three new paintings in the middle of the floor, which she was waiting to have rephotographed for the catalogs' final pages. "No one wants me to change anything any more," she lamented. "They all get so nervous. . . . And all the people are always going on holiday!"

Even without holidays, it might prove difficult to keep up with Dumas. At 61 years old, compact and buxom, she is vigorous, the golden leonine corona of her hair only slightly graying, her Titian cheek still full. She has also been involved in the selection and ordering of the works in the exhibition; their narrative unfolding is, for her, crucial. "With certain things I've done," she said, "I don't regret that I've done them, but you also have the thing as a painting itself, and later, when all other things are gone, you think, 'I wonder, is this really an interesting painting?' " — she appraised a painting in her mind's eye — ". . . and with the different curators, if they all agree that it's okay, you distrust that, because they should see that it isn't; but if you maybe think that something is actually good, and they don't really react . . ." She shrugged. "Some artists, they say, are much more clear about what's good and what's bad in their own work. But I find it difficult."

This admission came as something of a surprise. Perhaps the most celebrated living female painter of the human form, and certainly one of the most provocative contemporary artists, Dumas, in her public persona, doesn't

seem given to doubt. She is known for her unflinching approach to sex and death; for portraits of sex workers, corpses and terrorists, among other subjects; for the washed texture of her often thinned paint; for the unloveliness of her palette. The flesh of her subjects, and not only the dead ones, often has a bruised aspect, and, in the case of white people, a ghastly bluish hue. There's nothing pretty or consoling in her art.

Dumas routinely paints from photographs, although she laments that people "just want to explain everything in relation to that image," whereas, she said, "all the better paintings should be something else." She projects the source photograph onto canvas, but will often then alter its composition to serve a painting's needs so that "it's not really a young girl," she explained, "it's more an allegory."

For a painting in her recent two-person exhibition in Antwerp with her near-contemporary fellow painter Luc Tuymans, for instance, Dumas started with a Man Ray photograph of the Swiss artist Meret Oppenheim. "I really liked the figure," she said. "She was very white with dark pubic hair — that was the first reason. But then the question was, 'What can I make her do?' " She laughed, recalling the dilemma. "I didn't want her just standing with her arm out like so," she demonstrated, "for no reason." She titled the picture "Missing Picasso." "In this case, the title completed the work," she explained. "Her skin is almost raw canvas, almost not painted. He was known for leaving things open, unfinished. And the poor female nude has become so complicated! I thought, 'She's missing Picasso!' "

Dumas frequently paints women, reclaiming the painter's gaze from centuries of men, confronting and re-envisioning the erotic relationship between painter, paint and painted. Children, too: one of her most celebrated images, "The Painter," from 1994, is derived from a photograph of her then-toddler daughter, and portrays, far larger than life, the little naked girl with her hands coated in what might equally be paint or blood, her sweetly plump belly and chest daubed in blue. Her eyes, dark pools of glowering menace, lend her the aspect of a horror-film demon. The title — with its suggestion that this is the spirit that creates art — renders the image shocking, exhilarating and darkly funny at the same time. "All the paintings are about this core violence, deep,

deep in the muscle of our culture," Helen Molesworth, the newly appointed chief curator of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles told me. "I don't think people [in the United States] always get the humor, because she's working out of that dark Northern tradition of bawdy gallows humor. Every punchline is, 'And then you die!' "

If our understanding of male genius is of near-autism — a mind that, rather like Spinoza's God, neither needs nor loves us in return — then it is tempting to see Dumas as an exemplar of a heretofore all-but-unheralded formof genius, one specifically female. She's open, giving, relational, fluid. The example of "Twice," the joint exhibition for which she painted "Missing Picasso," is particularly telling. While Tuymans painted new works for the exhibition, Dumas, in some instances, returned to earlier, unfinished paintings, finding in the show's theme the route to their completion. While Tuymans worked on his own, with an unwavering idea of his plan, Dumas consulted Tuymans for his opinion. When Tuymans suggested that they each show only six works, Dumas concurred, but marveled at his continence. "If I don't work for long periods, then when I do, I go on till the end, and then sometimes I have too many works," she told me. "Mostly I never think like that, I first see what I do, and then in the end I decide. But I thought, O.K., it was more efficient. It's funny, these differences. You could also say he's a man who knows himself well." She emitted a roar of laughter.

Moreover, Dumas responded to the exhibition's brief by painting Tuymans's portrait, a work entitled "The Artist and His Model." This itch for dialogue and interaction strikes me as rare in a painter of Dumas's stature, and not insignificant. Dumas has observed that "art that moves you has something ungainly about it, is in some way bound up with a combination of hesitation and something going wrong." Late in the afternoon, she quoted an influential ethics professor from her undergraduate days in Cape Town, who adapted Descartes's aphorism. "He said to me, 'We think, therefore I am.' " Although she makes her paintings alone, it's an apt expression of how she approaches life.

In the studio, while her assistant Rudolf Evenhuis occasionally looked up from his computer to remind her about lunch, Dumas talked about her youth in South Africa's rural Cape, about her beloved mother and about her brothers,

one of whom now runs the family winery; the other is a minister. “I’m all for the old Socrates dialogue,” she laughed. “We’d have discussions about, say, ‘What is love?’ and we’d get so angry with each other. I really missed it when I came to Holland.”

She was granted a scholarship to study in the Netherlands in 1976. “It wasn’t as romantic as I’d thought,” she told me. “But I’d never been to Europe. I started to really enjoy seeing artworks. I was reading uncensored books.” There are clearly different facets to the story of how she ended up settling permanently in Amsterdam, but one seems to sum it up: “I was always going to go back to my mother, but then I was a mother.” She has always, she said, liked the word “organic.” “But every so often,” she continued, “you have to make a decision. It’s the most terrible thing.” And sometimes the biggest decisions are the ones you make without realizing it.

Over a second glass of wine — and a further gentle reminder from Evenhuis about lunch — she told me about her daughter, who is now 25 and completing a degree in social work while employed in the family courts. As if on cue, Helena dropped by impromptu — a taller, darker, more reserved version of her mother, with glittering deep green eyes. After she had left, Dumas said that her daughter “has to look after me sometimes” — meaning, for example, that when they travel together Helena must drive. Dumas never learned how, just as she never learned to ride a bicycle or to swim. Such practical incompetence has of course handily liberated her to focus on her work.

The progress of Dumas’s artistic career unfolded with apparent ease. She participated in her first group show in Holland in 1978, had her first exhibition of painted portraits in Amsterdam in 1985, and within a decade had garnered considerable international acclaim. In recent years, her paintings have sold at record prices for a living woman artist, the citation of which is a source of continual frustration to her. “I’d like to be remembered for something else,” she told me over another, carefully chosen, bottle of white wine, in the hip but unfussy cafe where she is clearly a regular. It was by then almost four o’clock. “It’s not that I don’t want to be known,” she said, but “I want the other women artists to do well, and then I’ll be pleased to do well.”

In the ebullient flow of her conversation, I noticed that she frequently directed the talk away from herself toward other artists, living and dead — to Picasso, Matisse, Gerhard Richter, Philip Guston, Arnulf Rainer, her good friend Barbara Bloom and also to artists very unlike herself, such as Jeff Koons — but also to Evenhuis and her studio manager Jolie van Leeuwen, to her daughter and her partner and to the discussions about art that she shares with them. "What I like about painting smaller paintings is that you don't have to look at them all the time," she said at one point, peering out of the cafe window at the bustling road beyond. "That's also why I like museums. I don't want to hang 'Fingers' " — she was referring to a painting of a woman on all fours with her buttocks to the viewer and her fingers between her legs — "up here at the bus stop!"

When I asked van Leeuwen and Evenhuis about Dumas's apparently indefatigable energy, Evenhuis nodded. "Yes, she's very strong." Van Leeuwen's eyes narrowed slightly. "It's true," she said, "but then afterwards, she is tired. Exhausted." It's as if Dumas lacks a self-disciplining superego, the internal grown-up who would say, "No, that's enough." So those who love her must say "no" for her, or try to.

After lunch, late in the afternoon, Dumas walked me to the Amstel River, where, in the shadow of the Torontobrug, we visited Andriesse on the former houseboat that is his studio. He, lanky and white-haired, with the elegance of a roué — his long fingers are stained yellow from nicotine, and he sipped discreetly from a flask while we chatted — has a dry humor and strong opinions. They spoke as if taking up a long conversation, alternately supportive of and exasperated by one another, resuming old debates and recounting familiar anecdotes — about the government hassling the houseboat owners; about their first meeting (she didn't like him, but was won over by his having worked in a uranium mine in Canada); and about the importance of keeping the electric lights off as a room darkens.

We spent an hour or two there in the summertime's prolonged gloaming, watching the light change upon the silvery rippling water, discussing the nature of white and unpainted plaster walls; the wide range of the color blue (truest, apparently, in forget-me-nots) and hoping for an experience of the "Purkinje

effect" — so named after the 19th-century Czech scientist: "He was the first to observe that, with twilight, the warm colors — especially red — recede, implode," Dumas said, "and the cool colors, the blues, begin to glow."

Andriesse elaborated: "What also happens with twilight is that you lose color but you gain tonal contrast." There was, in their explanations, such evident delectation in the articulation of visual experience that I could glimpse, briefly, what it might be not just to see like an artist, but to live in the world as one.

"Marlene Dumas: The Image as Burden" opens on Sept. 6, 2014 at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, stedelijk.nl

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