

Marlene Dumas:  
Measuring Your Own Grave



THE MENIL COLLECTION

March 27–June 21, 2009



Marlene Dumas  
*Dead Marilyn*, 2008  
Oil on canvas  
15<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 19<sup>11</sup>/<sub>16</sub> inches.  
Private collection, New York

**T**hrough figures and portraiture, Marlene Dumas explores many fundamental themes of human existence. She traces the cycle of life from birth to death to probe a complex array of human emotions: love, sexual desire, despair, and confusion. She engages with difficult social and political issues of her time while transcending the limits of racial and cultural identity politics. *Marlene Dumas: Measuring Your Own Grave*, the first major survey of Dumas' oeuvre in the United States, presents a body of work created over the last thirty years that reflects her ongoing interest in specific subjects, including children, the male and female nude, and mortality.

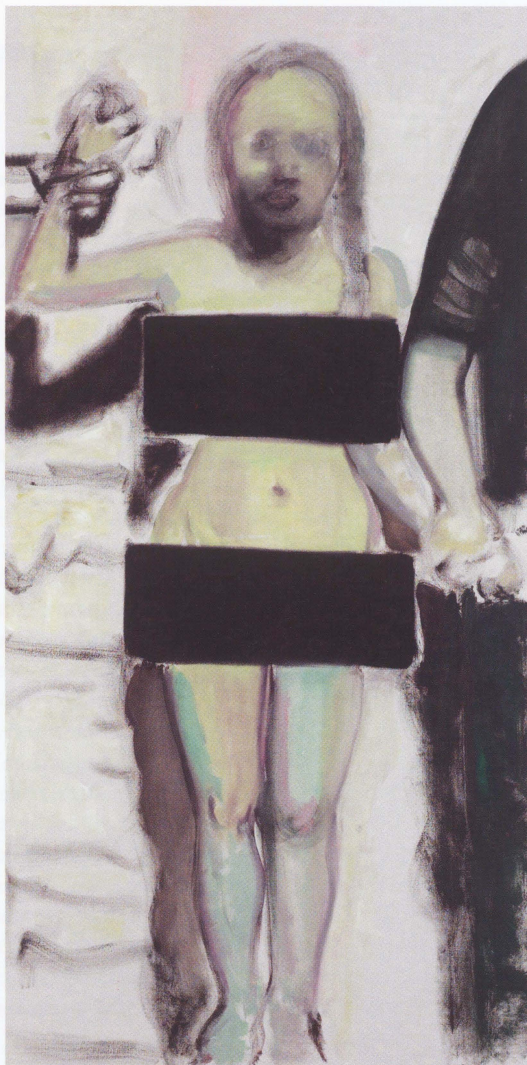
Born in Cape Town, South Africa, in 1953, Dumas earned her bachelor's degree in visual arts at the University of Cape Town in 1975, moving to Amsterdam the following year in order to pursue further studies. She attended the art school Ateliers '63 in Haarlem (now de Ateliers in Amsterdam) through 1978 and has lived and worked in Amsterdam ever since. Dumas' graphic, sometimes disturbing, imagery has colored the general reception of her oeuvre, but her work ultimately has as much to do with the acts of looking, seeing, and responding as with her particular rendering of art. The artist almost exclusively uses photographic source material, including Polaroid photographs, personal snapshots, and thousands of media images, which she has collected in her ever-evolving image bank. For Dumas, these images are merely starting points; as she has stated, "You can't TAKE a painting—you MAKE a painting." A Dumas painting is never a literal rendition of a photographic source. Rather, as part of her practice, the artist focuses on the inherent differences between photography and painting—what she has described as "the essential immorality or indifference" of a photographic image when it is removed from its original context or stripped of its identifying information. To this end, while Dumas clearly renders her subjects, she often abstracts their contexts or situations so that a work's meaning is waiting, suspended, or even lost, depending on the viewer, who must bring his or her own assumptions to its interpretation. The ambiguity of representation in her paintings and drawings is ultimately a political act, enticing the



viewer into an awareness of his or her role in the assignation of meaning to faces, bodies, groups, and figures.

The multiple readings that are suggested but never confirmed by Dumas' compositions are perhaps the aspect most common to her work. Her earliest mature group of paintings—a series of portraits, many of family and friends, made during the 1980s—includes *The White Disease* (1985) and *Albino* (1986), which, as their titles suggest, are word-puns that reference skin. *Miss Pompadour* (1999) and *Leather Boots* (2000) show women in provocative poses and address complex emotions inherent in sexual desire, looking, being looked at, and representation. The portrait series *Man Kind* (2002–06) depicts men of Middle Eastern descent who are drawn after images of friends, terrorists, and ordinary citizens. In part, a number of Dumas' works comment on the ways in which the proliferation of mass-media images—photographs broadcast on television or reproduced in newspapers—can obliterate one's sense of another's individual identity. As exhibition curator Connie Butler observed of Dumas' most recent painting *Dead Marilyn* (2008), made especially for this exhibition and based on a post-mortem photograph of Marilyn Monroe, "Certainly part of why this image of Monroe dead is so incomprehensible is precisely because in death one is permitted to see what was denied during her lifetime; her face assumes a peaceful expression, hair straight and flat, flaws unconcealed by makeup—a break from the carefully crafted image of beauty and desirability."

In the prose poem, "Framing and Naming," a companion piece to *Dead Marilyn*, Dumas writes: "I never wanted to paint symbols. / I also never wanted a painting to be a symbol.... I paint because I am afraid / to be dead while still alive." Dumas regularly comments on her own work in short texts and prose poems, writing extensively about her experience as an artist as it relates to her own upbringing, politics, gender, and creative milieu. In this, her first American retrospective, Dumas reflects on her choice of title, *Marlene Dumas: Measuring Your Own Grave*, drawn from her 2003 painting, in a poem of the same name: "It is the best definition I can find / for what an artist does when making art / and how a figure in a painting makes its mark."



Marlene Dumas  
*The Woman of Algiers*, 2001  
Oil on canvas  
78<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 39<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> inches  
The Museum of Contemporary Art,  
Los Angeles, and The Nasher Museum  
of Art at Duke University, Durham,  
partial and promised gift of Blake Byrne

Curated by Connie Butler, The Robert Lehman Foundation Chief Curator of Drawings at The Museum of Modern Art, and organized in Houston by Franklin Sirmans, Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art, The Menil Collection.

*Marlene Dumas: Measuring Your Own Grave* is organized by The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (MOCA) in association with The Museum of Modern Art, New York (MoMA).

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In Houston, this exhibition is generously supported by Frances Dittmer, Barbara and Charles Wright, and the City of Houston.

The exhibition is accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue which includes texts by Connie Butler, Lisa Gabrielle Mark, Richard Schiff, and Matthew Monahan, as well as writings by the artist.

## **PUBLIC PROGRAM**

Monday, April 13, 2009

7:00 p.m.

### **Bodies of Paint, Bodies of Text:**

#### **A Poetic Response to Marlene Dumas**

In collaboration with

*Gulf Coast: A Journal of Literature and Fine Arts*

Pursuing *Gulf Coast's* mission to explore the intersection between the visual and verbal arts, poet and former editor Sasha West invites a group of writers to read poems that resonate with the Marlene Dumas exhibition. Through discovering what writers have had to say about similar themes—violence and death, sexuality and childhood, the body, racial, and cultural identity—the evening offers a poetic dialogue with the exhibition, giving viewers a new way of approaching Dumas' work.

Cover: Marlene Dumas

*The Kiss*, 2003

Oil on canvas

15¾ x 19 11/16 inches

Courtesy of the artist and Frith Street Gallery, London

All works © 2009 Marlene Dumas

## **THE MENIL COLLECTION**

1515 Sul Ross Street

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713-525-9400

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