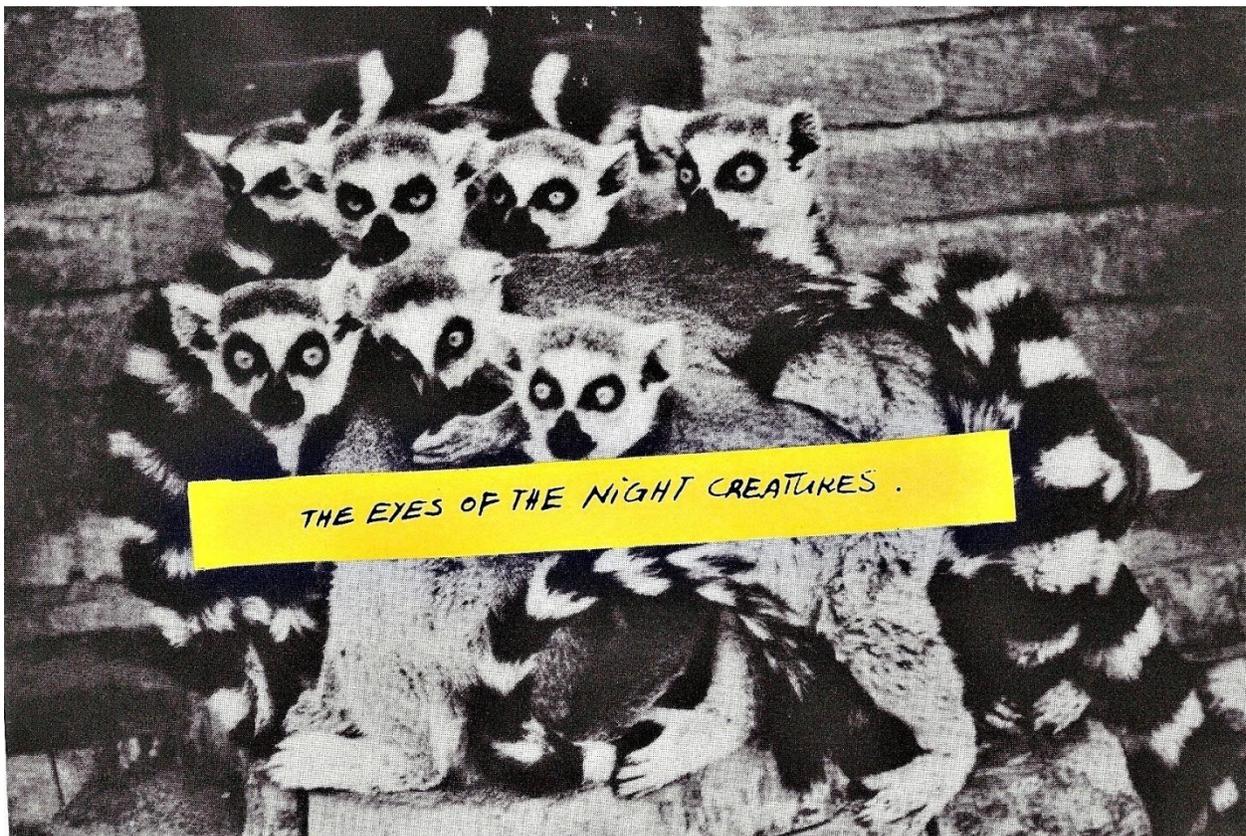


Content, Form, and Medium: Marlene Dumas' Racial Politics



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Research Master Thesis Utrecht University

Title: Content, Form, and Medium: Marlene
Dumas' Racial Politics

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Marlene Dumas

Marlene Dumas exposeert bij galerie Paul Andriessse nieuwe schilderijen onder het motto *The Eyes of The Night Creatures*. De expositie bestaat uit een serie buitengewoon intrigerende portretten. Die portretten zijn geen afbeeldingen van gezichten in de gebruikelijke zin. Je zou ze monumentale voorstellingen kunnen noemen waarin vertrouwde vormen angstaanjagende beelden worden. Dumas schildert ze buitengewoon geraffineerd in verschillende stijlen. Sommige gezichten zijn onthutsend van schoonheid maar die schoonheid is niet pluis. Wat er mee wordt uitgedrukt zou je als dood en verderf kunnen omschrijven, maar die woorden zijn slechts grove benaderingen van een werkelijk onbeschrijflijke sfeer. Het lijkt er op of Marlene Dumas met haar portretten het kwaad zelf in al zijn vreemde schuilhoeken heeft willen ontmaskeren. Alsof ze wil aangeven dat de 'boze geest' werkelijk bestaat.

Wie zich verdiept in de geschiedenis zal Marlene Dumas gelijk moeten geven. De mens is niet pluis. De wijze waarop ze met haar portretten uitdrukking heeft gegeven aan die gevoelens is oorspronkelijk en gewaagd. Haar serie *The Eyes of the Night Creatures* dwingt respect af. Als schilder durft ze werkelijk iets op het spel te zetten.

Tot 4 april. Prijzen vanaf f 1000,-. Galerie Paul Andriessse, Prinsengracht 116, Amsterdam. Dit t/m za van 14 tot 18 uur.

Marlene Dumas

Under the motto *The Eyes of the Night Creatures*, Marlene Dumas is exhibiting new paintings at Galerie Paul Andriessse. The exhibition comprises a series of extraordinarily intriguing portraits. Those portraits are not the customary depictions of faces. They could be called monumental representations; here familiar forms become terrifying images. Using various styles, Dumas paints them in a remarkably refined way. Some faces are staggeringly beautiful, but there is something strange about that beauty. What they express can be described as death and destruction, but those words merely approximate what actually cannot be described in terms of atmosphere. It seems as though Marlene Dumas wishes to unmask evil itself with her portraits, to drive it from all the places where it hides, and thereby show that 'evil spirits' actually do exist. Anyone who looks at history will have to agree with Dumas. There is something strange about mankind. In her portraits she has voiced that feeling in an original and daring manner. Her series *The Eyes of the Night Creatures* commands respect. As a painter she ventures, in fact, to put something on the line.

Betty van Garrel, 22 March 1985, NRC-Handelsblad

Aanslagpleger op paus weer terug in cel

Reuters, AP
ANKARA

Mehmet Ali Agca, de man die in 1981 een aanslag pleegde op paus Johannes Paulus II, is weer terug in de cel. Nadat het Turkse hooggerechtshof vrijdag de beslissing om hem vrij te laten had verworpen, werd Agca door veiligheidstroepen opgepakt in een woning in Istanbul.

De Turkse minister van Justitie Cemil Çiçek was in beroep gegaan tegen de beslissing. De vrijlating van Agca (48) riep enerzijds grote woede op in Turkije, omdat hij zijn straf niet volledig zou hebben uitgezeten. Anderzijds werd hij als held ingehaald door extreemrechts. Hij maakte vroeger deel uit van de fascistische Grijsse Wolven.

Agca werd op 12 januari vrijgelaten na 25 jaar achter de tralies te hebben doorgebracht voor de aanslag op de paus, de moord op *Milliyet*-hoofdredacteur Abi İpekçi en een bankroof in Turkije. Zijn vrijlating was mogelijk door een reeks amnestieverleningen en strafverminderingen.

Volgens deskundigen waren die echter verkeerd berekend. Zo zou de tijd die hij in Italië had gezeten voor de aanslag op de paus, ten onrechte afgetrokken zijn van zijn straf in Turkije.

Pope's attacker back in prison

Mehmet Ali Agca, the man who carried out an attack on Pope John Paul II in 1981, has been sent back to prison. Following the Turkish Supreme Court's dismissal, on Friday, of the decision to release him, security troops arrested Agca at an Istanbul residence.

Turkey's minister of justice Cemil Çiçek lodged an appeal against the decision. The release of Agca (48) gave rise, on one hand, to great anger, due to the incompleteness of his sentence. On the other, right-wing extremists welcomed him as a hero. Agca is a former member of the fascist Grey Wolves.

On January 12 Agca was released after twenty-five years of imprisonment for his attack on the Pope, for the murder of *Milliyet*'s chief editor Abi İpekçi and for a bank robbery in Turkey. His release was made possible by a series of general pardons and sentence reductions.

According to experts, however, these were applied incorrectly. The time that he had spent in an Italian prison, for instance, was not meant to be subtracted from his prison sentence in Turkey.

21 January 2006, de Volkskrant

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Foreword

I first became more thoroughly acquainted with Marlene Dumas' works when I did my initial internship. When working in this institution I performed meticulous research for a new library system intended for an on-going project. During this research, one of Marlene Dumas' monographs drew my attention, and I finally got the chance to investigate her work more comprehensively.

I believe that if the curiosity for an artist's work is still piqued after a thorough reading of a complex monograph, then there exists a connection between the viewer and the artworks. This is what occurred between Marlene Dumas' work and myself. As generally known, she has an impressive body of work dealing with numerous ardent and current subjects, and thus I had a wide and varied palette of works to choose from. What impressed me at a first glance, though, was the complexity of her body of work, in the context of contemporary art.

Conceptual art reached its greatest heights during the preceding few decades, and it has not yet perished. Marlene Dumas' works also have a strong conceptual content, but her paintings go beyond the critical distance of conceptualism. Her pleasure of painting and her devotion to her subjects transforms her art into something more intimate. The fact that every part of her works is carefully considered and depicted seems to recall the continuation of painterly tradition and the touch of the symbolic.

When the time came to choose a topic for my thesis I was quite confused. There were many interesting areas I wished to research, but for my final work I desired a topic that could produce valuable and relevant research. The more I considered it, the more I came to realize that the time was appropriate to research Marlene Dumas' pictorial statements. The remaining question was which angle to scrutinize? Obviously she is an artist of the highest standing in the contemporary art discourse, so it appeared to be a difficult task to find a relevant question and body of work that has not been (exhaustively) studied.

Leafing through countless exhibition catalogues, there were a few paintings that always garnered my attention; when I thought of them as an ensemble, I realized that most of them were part of, or related to, the series *The Eyes of the Night Creatures*. As I mentioned before, most of

these works dealt with Marlene Dumas' past in her homeland, and some of these had a touch of the political. Upon reading interpretations of these works, I found that they dealt with apartheid, otherness, racial discrimination, ethnic identity and intolerance. I, of course, have interest in the political discourse of the past years (as a citizen of a country that faced a political failure in the last two decades), but there was more than a pure historical and critical aspect to these works. All the characters bear in common more than a political and social past. They all pertain to the same category of humane figures. It is a pleasure to penetrate their world, in order to discern more on their uniqueness, but as well of their universality, and how they, together with us, become part of the same world.

Even though I had all the details figured out about what I wanted to do, and how, I was still not certain whether this was the subject that I was meant to research. The final decision came to me one afternoon, when I had a friend over, who was looking through my albums. When she got to one dealing with Marlene Dumas' works, while curiously looking through it, she kept asking what the paintings were representing. Strangely, she could not find a connection between any of the multitudinous works, whereas I found a connection with most of them. After I decided which paintings I would analyze, I did not pay so much attention to the most thorough understanding of all the other ones, but surprisingly enough, I had a bond with all of these other works as well. I found explanation in my own self for each and every work, and all of these made sense in my head on a greater level. This was indeed enough for me to realize that this was the topic I desired to research, for besides scholarly interest, I had an inside connection with all these works.

Last but not least, I would like to give special thanks to Dr. Patrick van Rossem for supervising this thesis, and for offering valuable comments and support these past few months. Also, I would like to show gratitude to my good friends Geoff and Bogdan for the constructive and positive help and remarks throughout this entire period.

Timea Lelik

Introduction

*“Here is to the dead, those killed, for us, by us.
To those who are dying now.
To the “incidents” that happen.
The occupations that continue.
The mindless glorification of military solutions.
The terminology that grows softer,
and attitudes harden and hatred increases.
Inventions not to lighten the load,
but to erase the road.*

*(The Fog of War, Marlene Dumas,
Amsterdam, September 2006)*

Marlene Dumas’ artistic oeuvre was born from a situation embodying cultural division: South African by birth and upbringing; privileged as white, but disempowered as female; Afrikaans speaking, though sounding out against the policy of apartheid that would maintain her white African privilege; living in Amsterdam for almost 25 years, while still thinking of herself as more international than either Dutch or South African.¹ These are the premises from which one of the most unique contemporary artistic creations has emerged.

Assuming for herself the role of visual accountant for contemporary times, Marlene Dumas reveals incidents of daily life, politics and art through the representation of the human being. Her paintings are products of the contemporary world, taken directly from the events of our time, intended to resonate in content, form and medium.

The artist finds inspiration in Polaroid photographs, personal snapshots, torn sheets, notes, drawings and thousands of media images. Her choice to paint from photographs is a

¹ Richard Shiff, “Less Dead”, in *Marlene Dumas: measuring your own grave*, Exhibition Catalogue, Los Angeles, Museum of Contemporary Art, 2008, p. 153.

political one, a way of engaging in the beautiful, disturbing spectacle of contemporary social life. She mines the images that have informed a collective understanding of our era.²

As an artistic medium, Marlene Dumas mostly chose paint. She struggled to find an appropriate method that could help her subjects receive the statements she wanted to confer. During the first years of her stay in Europe she challenged her creativity using collages, and for a period she took a break from painting; eventually, however, she returned to her first passion, that of painting the human figure.

Just as Leon Golub and Francis Bacon (amongst many others), she used the space of her canvas as an arena of psychological tension, and the face and human body as a container for her meaning. Having approached so many different facets of human-interrelations, her work is regarded as informed by psychology, anthropology, and other human sciences. Her artistic critique tackles subjects as diverse as sexuality, motherhood, gender, pornography, et cetera, but in this research I will present, analyze and interpret the nature of her political works from the series *The Eyes of the Night Creatures*. These paintings engage in problems of color and ethnicity, and with the aid of critical theory I will scrutinize the works from the perspective of content, form and medium. As a starting point of my dissertation I will commence with the questions *How and from What perspective should Marlene Dumas' oeuvre be interpreted and analyzed*, and most importantly, *Why in this manner?* By the end of this thesis I intend to demonstrate that in its complex nature, Marlene Dumas' oeuvre can acquire more multifaceted and thorough meaning by analyzing her work equally from the three basic angles: content, form and medium, and if leaving out or disregarding one of these compositional aspects, the artist's messages cannot be fully grasped.

Since Marlene Dumas is one of the preeminent artists of our time, her work has been extensively studied and analyzed. From exhibition catalogues to several artist monographs, her paintings were discussed by scholars, art critics and curators. In this context, it seems difficult to pursue an original study related to her early work. Yet, mostly because of the limited space offered for texts in exhibition catalogues, essays never extensively elaborated on the tackled subjects. Furthermore, the diversity of authors who wrote in these books made the writings differ in style and content. As for the monographs, these are generally rendered as a chronological

² Cornelia H. Butler, "Painter as witness", in *Marlene Dumas: measuring your own grave*, Exhibition Catalogue, Los Angeles, Museum of Contemporary Art, 2008, p. 45.

presentation of the artist's work per ensemble, and given the fact that Marlene Dumas' body of work is very impressive, it is difficult to offer elaborate attention to each and every work of art. Not only hasn't there been any non-artistic analytical framework applied to her art objects, not all her work has been thoroughly analyzed from the perspective of medium and form. Even though it is an obvious observation that an art work is composed of three elementary parts as content, form and medium, few scholars presented or analyzed the close collaboration of these elements. In the time of conceptual art proliferation it is very often that the complete compositional aspect seems to be forgotten, and the work of art remains partially unexplored.

In Marlene Dumas' case, most of the scholars concentrate on what is considered the content (and meaning) of her works. A good example of this is Ilaria Bonacossa's text, *Marlene Dumas*, from the *Supercontemporanea* book series, a writing that focuses on the explanation of the significance and meaning of the selected works, while providing limited but accurate mention alongside the text of the intertwinement of the three elements. Thorough exhibition catalogues, as for instance the one from the Museum of Contemporary Art from Los Angeles in 2008, offers a comprehensive study of some of the artist's works, but mostly thematically. Because it is an important retrospective exhibition catalogue, only a part of the works are presented, and even less of these discussed in the catalogue. In this way, we have an elaborate overview of the topics the artist approaches and the significance she offers to these in the context of her artistic creation, but no further comments on her artistic methods. It is the same occurrence in the exhibition catalogue *Intimate Relations* from South Africa. The curator of the show, Emma Bedford, renders an accurate introductory essay to the catalogue, but discusses each work from the exhibition from the perspective of content, and the manner in which this relates to the topic of the exhibition. Moreover, this is commonplace in exhibition catalogues: the essays that deal with the artist's works are introductions to the topic of the exhibitions and focus mainly on explaining and interpreting the meaning of these works.

Concerning Marlene Dumas' monographs, these clearly cannot exceed their primary purpose, of presenting chronologically and in a general context the works of art. One of the most thorough books of this kind is Dominic van den Boogerd, Barbara Bloom and Mariuccia Casadio's monograph from 1999 over Marlene Dumas' oeuvre, which was revised and expanded ten years later, in 2009. Even so, the book presents a chronological overview of the body of

work, artist interviews, the artist's writings, and a focus that offers a more complex analysis of a specific work, but again mostly content-wise.

The form and the medium have not passed totally unnoticed, but the works that focused on these elements left out the other parts. Ernst van Alphen has explained in his essay from the exhibition catalogue *Models* in 1995 the importance of portraiture and how this has come to life in Marlene Dumas' oeuvre, but never related it to the usage of the artistic medium. Furthermore, he mostly discussed the mask-like portrait and the category of the grotesque, elements that are relevant only for a certain part of the artist's works. The usage of portraiture has been mentioned once again in an essay by Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nutall, but very briefly, and once more, paint has been only tangentially mentioned. The choice of her medium has been studied in a catalogue dedicated to the exhibition *Wet Dreams: Watercolors*, but rather than oil paint, her usage of watercolors was discussed. Once more, the correlation of the three elements was accurately pointed out, but not thoroughly discussed. Regardless, the above mentioned literature (but not only) consistently contributes to the understanding of Marlene Dumas' oeuvre, and most of these essays make accurate and valid observations that concern the artist's body of work. What I considered to be lacking from all of these sources was the equal attention to the analysis and interpretation of the three basic elements, which have the same influence in understanding the complexity of an art work.

In my research I deal with the thorough analysis of the series of paintings *The Eyes of the Night Creatures* from which I chose to emphasize four paintings. Even though this series holds an important role in the artist's portfolio, these paintings have never been extensively or exhaustively studied. The exhibition catalogue for this show from 1985 has only one brief essay written by Paul Andriess, which presents a largely personal opinion about the body of work. Furthermore, these paintings have attracted a whole lot of attention, and have been well-established as possessing strong political elements, but it has been rare that they have obtained an elaborate study. Also, the materials written on *The Eyes of the Night Creatures* series are done simply content-wise, attributing to the chosen paintings a strong political resonance, without profoundly questioning the manner by which they have come to their expressiveness. The reason I have chosen these four specific paintings, *Het Kwaad is Banaal*, *The White Disease*, *Albino*, and *Genetiese Heimwee*, is due to their crucial role in the understanding of the complex nature of Marlene Dumas' oeuvre. First of all, these paintings are representative of one of the artist's

major themes of artistic creation: racial and ethnic intolerance. Secondly, they make accurate usage of the artist's main form, the human body. Thirdly, they are depicted in the artist's main medium – paint – and moreover, they are excellent examples of how Marlene Dumas has worked with this medium.

In order to conduct this research I have chosen to apply the methodological framework of critical theory. As an artist, Marlene Dumas has been known to be a social critic of contemporary society, and critical theory, as the examination and critique of society and culture, applies very well to the artist's chosen body of work. Postmodern critical theory concerns itself with the politicization of social problems *by situating them in historical and cultural contexts, to implicate themselves in the process of collecting and analyzing data, and to put their findings in perspective*³. This observation indicates that in contrast to modernist critical theory that concerned itself with the criticism of stable forms of authority that accompanied the industrial and corporate evolution of capitalism, in postmodern assertion critical theory does not relate to a stable "other". A generally held contemporary view is that societies' meaning has lost a stable and universal significance, resulting in a change of focus of the studied material, which shifts from broad generalizations to local manifestations. In my dissertation, I will analyze and interpret the paintings in their local historical and political context, approaching alternative methods that rather than attribute specific meanings, open up a space that encourages reflections about "politics and poetics". Through these alternative methods I seek to embody in my work comparative, dialogic and improvisational aspects, which do not relate to one fixed significance, but rather elaborate on the chosen topic. By employing this method I intend to present the manner by which Marlene Dumas' art can elaborate a limitless number of hypotheses, dialogues and cultural complicities, suggesting altogether a series of possibilities for coexistence.

Since one of the core concepts of critical theory is improving the understanding of society by integrating all the major social sciences, fields such as history, political science, anthropology, geography, economics and psychology became part of the analytical framework of critical theory. Furthermore, in the last four decades of the 20th century critical theory interplayed with methods such as semiotics, iconology, iconography, psychoanalysis, feminist and postcolonial theory, and so on, therefore, many of these methods are indispensable when

³ Thomas R. Lindlof, Brian C. Taylor, *Qualitative Communication Research Methods*, CA: Sage, Thousand Oaks (2nd Edition), 2002, p. 52.

investigating Marlene Dumas' oeuvre. Because critical theory has abandoned the idea of an objective and fixed meaning, it has discarded the more traditional view of interpreting and analyzing art works with the aid of one (or maybe a few more) well-defined methods. Instead, it employs an interplay of all these methods, that in this context, instead of excluding each other, they help define a better grasp of the work of art. As a result, psychology, semiotics, hermeneutics, iconography and iconology play a significant role in the analysis and interpretation of the artist's work, expanding its meanings by its multilateral approach. Also, for analyzing and understanding the chosen works in their context by means of content, form and medium, a complex methodology is needed, that frequently involves cooperation between various traditional art history methods. Moreover, my intention is not to exhaust the meanings of the portraits, but rather to develop these meanings from angles that have not yet been tackled. In this context, contemporary art should be understood as a site where larger networks of cultural, political, and social discourse intersect, thus creating new possibilities of creation and analysis.⁴

This paper shall be structured in three major chapters, in which the chosen works are discussed by means of understanding and interpreting the elements of content, form and medium. The chapters will present and analyze information about Marlene Dumas' chosen series of paintings, but also expand on knowledge by means of personal assertions and interpretations.

When dealing with the problem of **content**, I will reference a famous work of the philosopher and social critic, Jean Baudrillard, *The Transparency of Evil*. Analyzing and interpreting Marlene Dumas' work through Baudrillard's concept of evil and perception of the "Other", I intend to bring forth my interpretation of her pictorial statements that deal with racial intolerance during the last decades of the 20th century. Jean Baudrillard is known to be one of the major critical theorists of present days. He is an unconventional and critical sociologist, criticizing society within sociological terms. In the chosen book, the author makes a thorough analysis of the perception and position of the "other", developing a social and philosophical postcolonial discourse. Both Marlene Dumas and Baudrillard render a discourse that consists of the analysis and reaction to the cultural legacy of colonialism. Relating their works, the postcolonial theory of destabilizing Western thinking is elaborated, thus enabling new directions of development in the field. Marlene Dumas and Jean Baudrillard both use a similar normative

⁴ Maria Hlavajova, "Introduction Citizens and Subjects" in Rossi Braidotti, Charles Esche, Maria Hlavajova (eds.), *Citizens and Subjects: The Netherlands for example*, Utrecht, BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, 2007, p. 10.

dimension to criticize society from the perspective of the theory of value. In my view, Baudrillard's concept of evil is essential for the understanding and contextualizing the artist's work, for through this optic the discussed portraits acquire new meanings, and thus further develop the artist's criticism of apartheid. The bibliographical reference for this chapter shall most importantly consist of the analysis of the book *The Transparency of Evil*, but shall make reference to essays and exhibition catalogues that discuss Marlene Dumas' oeuvre in a larger context.

The **form** through which the artist's work came to life was the human body, acting as a container of deep meaning. The second chapter will deal with the presentation and analysis of the artist's usage of the human body, in these paintings represented by the human figure. I intend to elaborate on the choice of the portrait as a strong psychological resonant, and how this made the artist's ideas come to life. Also, I will explain why it is essential to relate to the usage of portraiture in the artist's works. The use of semiotics, iconology, and iconography are indispensable for the better deciphering of the artistic language. I shall develop and present the defining characteristics of traditional and modern portraiture, and will apply this to the portraits under discussion, in order to understand why this genre of art history was most suitable for the artist's subjects. For bibliographical resources I shall employ books and exhibition catalogues that discuss and present the portrait and its developments in recent art. Good examples of this kind are to be found in Ernst van Alphen's essays, in Melissa Feldman's *Face-Off: The Portrait in Recent Art*, but also in Jean Borgatti's and Richard Brilliant *Likeness And Beyond. Portraits from Africa and the World* publication. Bibliography on portraiture in general also needs to be consulted, and here I will use books as R. Brilliant's overview of portraiture in general, Joanna Woodall's *Portraiture. Facing the Subject*, but also Shearer West's *Portraiture*. Bibliography touching upon Marlene Dumas' pictorial representations in general will also be utilized. It is essential to note that the usage of portraiture in Marlene Dumas' oeuvre has been discussed previously –tangentially– in several exhibition catalogues, but was also further developed in Van Alphen's essays. What is interesting to observe though is that the usage of portraiture was rarely linked to the usage of paint. It is of crucial importance to understand that the artist's portraits would not have obtained the expressiveness desired by the artist if depicted in another medium.

By means of the artistic **medium** Marlene Dumas chose paint, to assist her figures in the task of transmitting her messages. In this chapter I shall investigate the communicative powers of

her medium, ‘how’ and ‘why’ these helped the artist obtain the subjects she wanted, and I will note the importance of understanding of the usage of (oil) paint. Since the discussed paintings are portraits representing people, human flesh becomes a key element of her depiction. In this context, I shall present and analyze her subjects’ appearance with the aid of iconological, iconographical and semiotic investigation. For bibliographical reference I shall use several articles that present and analyze the depiction of skin throughout art history, especially Ann-Sophie Lehmann’s research. Since there is little investigation done in this field in general, and even less for the field of contemporary art, I will transpose this information to the discussed portraits through personal assertions. I will use as well other additional artist statements or bibliography on the general body of work.

Marlene Dumas’ oeuvre is interesting to analyze, firstly, because of her unique artistic approach. Though contemporary with the current of neo-expressionism, Dumas has more of a personal style of painting, and furthermore, a rather unique standpoint. Historically, it is interesting to note that her work is a token of her personal experience, making her work a carrier of an ardent message. Socially, it is a compelling study to observe the means by which a white person presents a discriminatory system, while she is part of the privileged half. Furthermore, at the time, she was one of the few artists to engage in such radical discursive practices. Her fearlessness in her political views and in her approach to art became evident; she is dedicated to exposing dehumanizing ideologies and practices.⁵

Her series of paintings that articulate racial statements are interesting to analyze because of the antagonistic positions she found herself in while living in her native country. Confronting apartheid as a white citizen, she gave her art a fresh and loud approach. Her work has made a valuable contribution in defining the discourse of postcolonialism, for this discipline concerns itself with the destabilizing of Western thinking. Her paintings are open to a myriad of interpretations, offering a wide space for scholars to further question and analyze postcolonial theory in an artistic context. From this perspective, her art aids critical thinking on the topic, and helps remodel normative values.

Her political statements and beliefs are spread over the entirety of her oeuvre, but *The Eyes of the Night Creatures* series is imbued with intricate and subtle connotations. From the

⁵ Emma Bedford, “Questions of Intimacy and Relations”, in Marlene Dumas, Emma Bedford (eds.), *Intimate Relations*, Amsterdam, Roma Publications, Jacana Media, Johannesburg 2007, p. 40.

moment the series was conceived, constructed, and rendered, it carried a profound and personal significance. In her artistic approach, content, form and medium are interlinked terms. With strong content epitomizing the biggest problem of the 20th century – ethnic intolerance – she chooses a form – the human face – to transmit her message, with the help of an expressive medium, painting.

For the better understanding of this paper, it is necessary to consider Marlene Dumas' oeuvre as a whole, composed of three basic elements. Though it may seem obvious at a first glance that content, form, and medium are interlinked terms, it is not very often that this relationship is adequately studied. The artist's work is a result of long-term research and a cognitive process of the depicted with a careful choice of artistic tools. Consequently, it is important to observe how these factors constantly redefine each other, in the most unforeseeable ways. Marlene Dumas' work cannot be simply read; her subjects require attention and understanding. When reading this paper, it is essential to remember that not everything is obvious, and some elements deserve a more elaborate study.

I. Content

*The devil is back, as two-faced
and as polarizing as ever.
Whose side you are on
depends where you're from.*

*(Man Kind or here's to those who
inspired me, Marlene Dumas,
Amsterdam, September 2006)*

This first chapter of my research will commence with a brief introduction of the artist's racial experiences in her native country, South Africa, and will discuss her motivation to explore this topic in her artistic creation. Furthermore, I will introduce the philosopher Jean Baudrillard and his book *The Transparency of Evil. Essays on Extreme Phenomena*. In the second part of the chapter I will present the four works chosen for this discussion and I will analyze these through Baudrillard's concept of evil and perception of the "other". The third part shall deal with further developing the artist's idea of racial discrimination in other works, again with the aid of the philosopher's perception of otherness. The last part concludes the topics discussed so far in this chapter.

I.a. Introduction

In the first years of her stay in Holland, Marlene Dumas renounced painting and applied her artistic creativity to collages and other forms of construction, with materials gathered from common culture. In 1985 though, she returned with a remarkable body of art – *The Eyes of the Night Creatures*. Reminiscent of her life in South Africa, this series of paintings represent a token of great nostalgia and sweltering political memory. This body of work testified to her presence as an emerging artist in the international discourse of painting during the 1980s.⁶

⁶ C. Butler, *Op.cit.*, p. 55.

In the context of social and political developments that occurred in South Africa and the continent in the 1980s, Marlene Dumas' oeuvre was greatly influenced by her personal experience at home, more precisely by South Africa's racial politics. As a white person in a black country, she was movingly influenced in her philosophy of life. She focused her attention mainly on some conditions that perhaps best epitomize the evil in the 20th century, namely ethnic intolerance towards the "others".

Racism has had a long-standing history, passing through myriads of stages, and it remains a widespread force. Today many make claims of having an open minded-society, with tolerant and liberal attitudes towards everyone, but the values that we propagate may be false and precarious. While ethnic intolerance manifests itself through nationalism and xenophobia on the continent, in a colonial territory it becomes more draconian. South Africa is, unfortunately, one of the countries that only recently achieved a democratic system that had citizens of all races and ethnicities sharing the same rights.

Marlene Dumas' memories of these times are very much alive; these have greatly influenced the artist's life as a person and a painter. Asked to talk about her past, the artist has characterized apartheid at its worst: *It was a strange, unhappy and terrible situation. You were in contact with other races all the time, but at the same time the discrimination was very clear – for example, there were public signs reading "For Whites Only" or "For Non-Whites Only". People of different races were always working together, but if you were friends you were not allowed to go to the same restaurant or to sleep together. This meant that interracial friendships felt quite strange, because the white person had all the privilege.*⁷

Jean Baudrillard, one of the prominent philosophers of our time, has written extensively about the principles of evil in contemporary society. Most of his works from the 1990s are reminiscent of the major problems of the 1980s, dealing as well with ethnic intolerance towards the "other". The problem of racism was at its heights in South Africa in the 1980s, and Baudrillard described the climax of intolerance of the period, on the continent, but as well outside of its boundaries. Moreover, the society Baudrillard finds culpable for the guilt of prejudice is the same that created the system of apartheid in South Africa.

⁷ Yuko Hasegawa, "Interview with Marlene Dumas", in *Marlene Dumas: Broken White*, Tokyo, Tankosha, Metropolitan Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo, 2008, p. 151.

In his book *The Transparency of Evil. Essays on Extreme Phenomena*, Baudrillard describes the principle of evil as a *principle of instability and vertigo, a principle of complexity and foreignness, a principle of seduction, a principle of incompatibility, antagonism and irreducibility* [...]⁸ Most of these characteristics describe Marlene Dumas political views about the system of apartheid. She had seen this as a strongly unjust structure, which made life a labyrinth of sorrow and unjustness. In an email to Cornelia Butler,⁹ Marlene Dumas explained her reasons for desiring to leave her native home, in the hope of finding a place that was more forbearing. Desiring to leave behind the damning complicity that binds every white person in South Africa to the legacy of apartheid, she avoided the US because she thought it resembled too closely her homeland. America's racial past (and present), and as well the differences between the rich and the poor, made her choose Amsterdam, a place that seemed to her to be the home of a more tolerant society.

A couple of years after she moved to Holland, she found the power to artistically relate her experience in South Africa. Bringing forth the discourse of the "other", perceived as the "untolerated", she depicted this 'face' under diverse aspects. The condition of a serial painter offered her the possibility to make use of many versions and approaches to a subject, in order to explore its many facets and complexities.¹⁰ In the works I chose to analyze from the series *Eyes of the Night Creatures – Het Kwaad is Banaal, The White Disease, Albino, Genetiese Heimwee* – the discourse on the other is put to question. Furthermore, these pieces seem to anticipate Jean Baudrillard's concept of "transparency of evil", both in its spirit and in its warning of late 20th century global outbreak of racial hatred.¹¹

1.b. Jean Baudrillard and The Eyes of the Night Creatures

First of all, it is important to look at the subjects' formal, iconological and iconographical interpretation, for in Marlene Dumas work this is done in a personalized manner. Even though elements of continuity with former works are to be found, the artist confers her subjects a touch of the symbolic. Nevertheless, for a better understanding of these works and their positioning in

⁸ Jean Baudrillard, *The Transparency of Evil. Essays on Extreme Phenomena*, London, Verso, 2003, p. 107.

⁹ C. Butler, *Op. cit.*, p. 75.

¹⁰ E. Bedford, *Op. cit.*, p. 42.

¹¹ C. Butler, *Op. cit.*, p. 62.

the discourse of art and theory, it is essential to start with elements that are visible and develop these into further assertions.

Het Kwaad is Banaal (Evil is Banal) is one of the most representative portraits of the series. The title is inspired from Hannah Arendt's reports on Nazi bureaucracy, raising discomforting questions about the alarming ordinariness of evil.¹² The artist wishes to draw attention to the strong resemblance of the Nazi and apartheid policies and practices, which judge human beings based on color and ethnic differences. The artist's self-portrait is depicted with translucent paints and watercolors, attaining a particular transparency and consistency of the skin, a metaphor for the covering and exposure of evil.¹³ Her white skin and hair color present her as one of the "whites", the privileged class in the system of apartheid. Her gaze, staring backwards, seems to allude to the white burden in her home country, and the sneering complicity that ties every white person to this discriminatory system. The apparently random application of color on the surface of the painting, as well as the loss of contours attempts an allusion to the arbitrariness of skin color as means for differentiating, and thereby discriminating against groups of people.¹⁴ Also, her white skin is partially stained by darker bluish and grayish paint, another note to the incriminatory deeds of her compatriots.

Another one of her paintings that deals with the problems of whiteness is *The White Disease*. While consciously alluding to a medical problem, the artist essentially suggests the understanding and acknowledging of racism as a serious and lethal illness. The portrait seems to represent a woman whose age is rather uncertain because of the distortions her face is experiencing. Painted with translucent and transparent paint, her white skin is stained by slight spots of darker color. Her mask-like portrait seems to lose contour, but also her facial expression is fading away, as a sign of loss. Her forehead has almost disappeared through her hair, her eyebrows are barely noticeable, and the shape of her nose has been replaced by a reddish spot of color. This loss could be interpreted as a loss of humanity, and absorption into oneself. Her gaze is fixed on a far-away point, and her eyes seem to become smaller, as the eyes of a resigned or condemned person.

Thematically, *The White Disease* relates to another painting of the series, entitled *Albino*. This work represents an African albino man who suffers from the white skin disease. Even

¹² E. Bedford, *Op. cit.*, p. 36.

¹³ C. Butler, *Op. cit.*, p. 62.

¹⁴ E. Bedford, *Op. cit.*, p. 36.

though most of his face and head are emphasized by a strong white color pigment, his racial characteristics are clearly visible: his strongly curly hair, his wide nose base and nostrils, and his thick lips. The painting alludes again to the skin metaphor of race, underlining that real skin color reveals itself independent from the surface appearance. In the context of a damning society, no one escapes his or her own skin color.¹⁵ Again, we are confronted with a mask-like portrait, which takes the shape of a close-up on the character's face. The significance of this action could be read as an endeavor to emphasize the character's unfortunate position, by inspecting his gaze, aimed with one eye at the viewer, and with the other one lost towards an uncertain point in space.

Another representative portrait of the series is *Genetiese Heimwee*. The title can be translated from Afrikaans as "genetic longing", suggesting a clear connection to the artist's homeland. This can be interpreted as a "genetic homesickness", the need for home contact, but as well as revealing the fallaciousness of the conception of genetic purity.¹⁶ The painting represents a woman that is looking to her right, as if she were gazing at a clear and fixed point. Her skin is depicted within many layers of color, with a wide-ranging palette. Her forehead is red, her chin is white, and most of her face is covered in the aforementioned dark bluish/grayish color. Her hands are partly red, partly yellow and orange, while her hair is black. This strong combination of colors can be seen to represent a mixture of races, maybe a mixture of genetics, symbolizing a disdained or belittled race. South Africa had three race categories: the whites, the blacks, and the colored, out of which only white people were entitled to most of the privileges. While black people were mostly oppressed, colored ones – mixed race - were also discriminated against, in comparison to the whites. Therefore, the portrait seems to take the form of an existential melancholia. Also, her black cloth might represent the character's grief at this funeral of morality. But, as the artist has put it herself, *a painting can't really be explained in words, anyway; it's a representation of the existential state of the human being.*¹⁷

All of these characters seem to be aware of what Baudrillard describes as a (Western) society that has gradually lost its criteria of judgment, taste, and most importantly its values, as a result of the continuous desire to acquire more. *The glorious march of modernity has not led to the transformation of all values, as we once dreamed it would, but instead to a dispersal and*

¹⁵ C. Butler, *Op. cit.*, p. 62.

¹⁶ E. Bedford, *Op. cit.*, p. 37.

¹⁷ Yuko Hasegawa, "Interview with Marlene Dumas", in *Marlene Dumas: Broken White*, Tokyo, Tankosha, Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo, 2008, p. 154.

*involution of value whose upshot for us is total confusion – the impossibility of apprehending any determining principle [...].*¹⁸ This morass leads undoubtedly to an increased negative feeling towards society and its surroundings, a boost of disgust over lack of disgust. *An allergic temptation to reject everything en bloc: [...], the tolerance, the pressure to embrace synergy and consensus.*¹⁹

Within the context of severe intolerance, Baudrillard views this chapter of civilization as a “dehumanization” of the human being, which results in a direct attack on each other. At first, it occurs as the rejection of material values, but soon it turns into the repudiation of moral values, which inevitably leads to the rebuttal of human kind itself. First targets, in this matter, are the “Others”, the ones different from those who have control and power. Marlene Dumas’ portraits are images of this brutalization; they epitomize apartheid’s most dehumanizing effects. They present the sorrow of injustice experienced by colored people, but also explore the negative effects it had on those people who were subjugated by an order they did not create or agree with. *“I was not the victim of the bad system. I was part of the bad system. So I don’t make work about being victimized (also apartheid was very bad for the spirit of its people). I rather find everyone capable of terrible things and I fear my own weakness and blindness first.”*²⁰ Whilst the *Albino* man is the image of the undermined, *The White Disease’s* exterior sickness penetrates the character’s inside as well, transforming her into a condemner and condemned who is subjected to two different types of hurt at the same time.

Marlene Dumas’ artistic discourse of the “other” brings forth ardent and unresolved issues, but also focuses on the question of how to relate to one another. Personally involved in the subject matter of her paintings, she questions the authority of a system that was imposed on people based on their color. When apartheid was at height, the artist found the power to criticize a faulty system she was unwillingly a part of.

Her criticism is largely addressed at what Baudrillard considered a standard of a differentiated system. He explained that even though the biological claims of racism were without real foundations, by making a clear racial difference, society set the basics of a structured system. *But differential systems can never achieve equilibrium: differences oscillate constantly between absolute highs and absolute lows. When it comes to the management of*

¹⁸ J. Baudrillard, *Op. cit.*, p. 10.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

²⁰ Gianni Romano (ed.), *Marlene Dumas: Suspect*, Milan, Skira, 2003, p. 18.

otherness and difference, the idea of a well-tempered balance is strictly utopian."²¹ Marlene Dumas observed this closely, and in her works hinted at the stained and guilty conscience of those that were part of the system and to the misery and suffering of the "others". The stained hand from *Het Kwaad is Banaal* and the self-explicit *White Disease* portrait are illustrious examples of this discrimination, while *Albino*, with his resigned look, represents the position of the oppressed "other". *Genetiese Heimwee*, while looking away in an empty point to her side, is also subjected to this unfortunate set of circumstances.

Just as Baudrillard announced that in contemporary society everything became political²², Marlene Dumas explained that her paintings consciously allude to the politics of color and the color of paintings. *I don't want to seem like Michael Jackson saying "it doesn't matter if you're black or white", because that is, like the issue concerning male and female, still painfully burning bright. This is a sensitive area for almost everybody. Yet it is not political correctness that inspired these images, but the loss of integrity that affects everything and most of us, everywhere.*²³ In this statement the artist agrees with this massive loss of values that Baudrillard discusses in his book, and acknowledges the chaos it attracts.

While discussing "the transparency of evil", the author explains that the "other", who under the given conditions becomes a target of hatred, is impossible to annihilate; annihilation in the sense of obliteration of other races seems impossible, even practically, without considering moral consequence. However, a solution is needed to somehow subjugate the radical "other", that cannot come to good terms with the West: *"The radical Other is intolerable: he cannot be exterminated, but he cannot be accepted either, so the negotiable other, the other of difference, has to be promoted. This is where a subtler form of extermination begins – a form involving all the humanist virtues of modernity."*²⁴ What Baudrillard seems to indicate here is the differentiated system racism is based on, where the "other" is subjected to a different type of treatment and judgment. The system of apartheid is a perfect match for this description, since it represented the promotion of human-value based system. This structure of difference is in Baudrillard's opinion the beginning of the moral extermination of the other, a fact that Dumas' colored characters seem to have acknowledged. The look in the *Albino* man's eyes is the look of

²¹ Ibid., p. 129.

²² J. Baudrillard, *Op. cit.*, p. 9.

²³ Marlene Dumas, *Sweet Nothings: notes and texts*, Amsterdam, De Balie, 1998. p. 72.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 133.

the resigned and condemned; a lucid and sad gaze at the same time. This character is the face of the differentiated other, and his expression could represent the general attitude towards the given situation “*For if racism in its viral, immanent, current and definitive form proves anything, is that there is no such thing as the proper use of difference.*”²⁵

The face of the “other”, in its rejection and disapproval, can be attributed to the category of grotesque. As Ernst van Alphen has put it in his essay *Facing Defacement. “Models” and Marlene Dumas’ intervention in Western Art*²⁶, the grotesque body implies the idea of the freak, for they both represent problems of the boundary between self and other. This alienated character, the so-called “freak”, is always a freak of culture, since the abhorrence against his presence is a metaphor of society’s impotence to accept the body of the cultural other. Van Alphen quotes Susan Stewart on the body of the cultural other, and the way this has to be naturalized and domesticated, in a process that might be considered to be characteristic of colonialization in general: *For all colonialization involves the taming of the beast by bestial methods and hence both the conversion and projection of the animal and the human, difference and identity. On display, the freak represents the naming of the frontier and the assurance that the wilderness, the outside, is now territory.*²⁷

What is nominated as a freak in this essay corresponds to what Baudrillard sees as the marginals, and how these categories became “tamed” in/for Western society: *Over recent centuries all forms of violent otherness have been incorporated, willingly or under threat of force, into a discourse of difference which simultaneously implies inclusion and exclusion, recognition and discrimination. Childhood, lunacy, death, primitive societies – all have been categorized, integrated and absorbed as parts of a universal harmony. Madness, once its exclusionary status had been revoked, was caught up in the far subtler toils of psychology. The dead, as soon as they were recognized in their identity as such, were banished to outlying cemeteries and kept at such a distance that the face of death itself was lost. As for Indians, their right to exist was no sooner accorded them than they were confined to reservations.*²⁸ The group

²⁵ Ibid., p. 130.

²⁶ Ernst van Alphen, “Facing Defacement. “Models” and Marlene Dumas’ intervention in Western Art”, in Marlene Dumas, Silvia Eiblmayr, (eds.), *Marlene Dumas: Models*, Exhibition Catalogue, Salzburg, Salzburger Kunstverein, 1995, pp. 67-75.

²⁷ Susan Stewart, *On Longing. Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 1984, p. 109.

²⁸ Ibid., pp.128-129.

of people that go by “others” are part of these marginals, these freaks, and their representation has been frequently explored by Marlene Dumas. Examples of such are her *Rejects*, a category of characters, but as well as a distinct body of works. The freak of *The Eyes of the Night Creatures* series is the *Albino* man, an object of abuse and terror. This image has been further cultivated though, and can be seen in works that follow *The Eyes of the Night Creature* series: *The First People*, *Pregnant Image*, *Warhol’s Child*, *The Human Tripod*, and so on. What is important to remember from Baudrillard’s essay is that the category of others is also going to become part of the Western grand scheme of harmony, but in order to become so, a few compulsory steps must be followed. Consequently, after otherness becomes an element under control, it shall acquire its more stable position. But because the other has such a complex nature and a varied socio-cultural background, the process becomes longer and more painful. The system of apartheid is part of this long-term process, and therefore with the aid of these characters Marlene Dumas struggled to represent its inadequacy.

The only way to understand this political and representational mechanism of domesticating and colonizing the other is doing it by the difference of self-reflexivity.²⁹ Marlene Dumas has done this with the aid of her other subjects of the series. *Het Kwaad is Banaal* and *Genetiesse Heimwee* can be both seen as alter egos of the artist, and with the aid of these portraits she undergoes a process of self-scrutiny. By the universal character her subjects attain, this process of reflection becomes collective, thus enabling a shared recognition of the genuine situation. This side of Marlene Dumas’ work should be seen as a destabilization of a representational practice that has cultivated its fine image by depicting the cultural other in chaos and disaster.³⁰ These works should not be regarded though as mere critiques of society, but more akin to images that celebrate diversity and the humane in a time of identity crisis. Marlene Dumas’ subjects resemble the old-age desire of the *peintre maudit*: to be accepted in being rejected by society, to be respected just for being marginal.

I.c. Otherness and other works

In addition to this hectic rush for uniformity, humanity has lost its spontaneous element. Western society walks towards a readymade and prepared identity, while categorizing the

²⁹ E. van Alphen, *Facing Defacement...*, p. 71.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, p.72.

outliers as “others”. What they fail to recognize and what Marlene Dumas poignantly represented in her oeuvre is the diversity that lies within the group of people called “black”. In her series of one hundred and eleven portraits of black people in ink and watercolor, called *Black Drawings*, she challenged the stereotypical view these people had been framed with for such a long time. The black ink on paper formally and metaphorically transformed into the skin color of this group of people, but left a great deal of individuality and personal characteristics to each face. This fact accentuates the variety of individuals rather than their uniformity, highlighting the irrationality of distinctions based on race.³¹ When the artist conceived this body of work she had in mind certain questions and issues: [...] *an attempt to exhibit my own unease, fear and admiration for the individuals grouped together under the term called “Black”. In artistic terms (the suddenly very popular) area of “the other” comes to mind. We (?) have to come to terms with them (?)*.³²

Marlene Dumas’ inspiration and desire to represent the category called “black” has grown from a myriad of reasons. She has acknowledged – as Jean Fisher claims in her essay *The Syncretic Turn. Cross Cultural Practices in the Age of Multiculturalism*³³ – the “blindspots” of the relationship between art from the black or non-European community and the Western art system. To sum this up, it is a report where *the greater the work’s visibility in terms of racial and ethnic context becomes, the less it is able to speak as an individual utterance*³⁴. This translates to the acknowledgement of Western criteria that have been set for all the non-European art and artists: to always employ a repetitional and stereotypical art, which always deals with racial and ethnic problems. When she realized *Black Drawings*, Marlene Dumas noted that all the Europeans and Americans said *she comes from South Africa, that’s her background, that’s her story*.³⁵ But Marlene Dumas, in her endeavor to represent individuality, and the outcome of what it means to be a part of a group as well, has noted that this history is in fact, everyone’s history. *All these works are all separate, and hopefully each has its own integrity, but when they are assembled in a group, both our relationship toward them and our way of seeing them changes. In that sense, Black Drawings is not only about South Africa. The oppression and discrimination of*

³¹ Ilaria Bonacossa, “Marlene Dumas” in Francesco Bonami (ed.), *Marlene Dumas*, Milan, Electa, 2006, p. 9.

³² M. Dumas, *Sweet...*, p. 70.

³³ Jean Fischer, “The Syncretic Turn. Cross Cultural Practices in the Age of Multiculturalism”, in Zoya Kocur, Simon Leung (eds.), *Theory in Contemporary Art since 1985*, Oxford, Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2005, pp. 233-241. The version rendered in this book is a slightly revised version of an essay that appeared in Lia Gangitano and Steven Nelson (eds.), *New Histories: The Institute of Contemporary Art*, Boston, The Institute, 1996, pp. 32-39.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 234.

³⁵ Y. Hasegawa, *Interview with Marlene Dumas...*, p. 151.

*apartheid in South Africa created an awareness of the cruelty people inflict on each other, and the injustice, stupidity, and horror of some social and political systems. But people who have actually live under such a system are actually more aware of these issues than people here who think that they don't have any prejudice.*³⁶

Marlene Dumas represented blackness in many other works from the 80s, most of these being made in Holland, a place where, through distant, she gained the perspective she needed to deal with apartheid. Her work is difficult to analyze chronologically, largely due to recurrent motifs, which reappear throughout her career. A few preeminent examples of these works include *Selfportrait as a Black Girl (1989)*, a painting in which all the apartheid laws were transgressed; *An African Mickey Mouse (1991)* and *Mask for a White Man entering a Black Area (1980-1988)* that were wittily invented and modified, but also *Die Hotnotsgod (1985)* – signifying The Praying Mantis – which depicts an insect that is about to devour the African continent after coupling with it, alluding to the Western exploitation of the third world.³⁷ Even if Marlene Dumas' voice has had a political resonance, her works where she employs the usage of black paint or ink should not be seen as exclusively dealing with the problems of apartheid. She is an artist that praises blackness as a positive state and honors black as a beautiful color.³⁸

The guilt of the privileged was developed in a series of paintings depicting Snow White. The choice of this character has often been interpreted by scholars and art critics as an autobiographical representation of the artist's ethnicity, and her specific privileges as a white in South Africa. Even though these paintings are open to a wide range of readings, the artists mostly depicts herself as being dead, and ready to awaken in another setting. The name Snow White evokes the fairy tale in which the princess is poisoned, falling into a deadly sleep, but is brought back to life by a magical kiss, suggesting the violence of death compared with the sentimental vision of life offered by fairy tales.³⁹ These works mostly aim at the compromised contemporary society that destroyed everything surrounding it, waiting for a miraculous awakening from the current nightmare.

³⁶ Ibidem, pp. 151-152.

³⁷ Jonas Storsve., *Marlene Dumas: Nom de Personne / Name no Names*, Exhibition Catalogue, Paris, Centre Georges Pompidou (11 October-31 December), 2001, pp. 21-22.

³⁸ Y. Hasegawa, *Interview with Marlene Dumas*, p. 152. In her explanation given over her works emphasizing black people Marlene Dumas has stated: *It was also the first work [Black Drawings] in which I used a large amount of black ink, so I wasn't pleased when people wrote about it as if it was only about apartheid. It was not only about political problems but about blackness as a positive state and honoring black as a beautiful color.*

³⁹ I. Bonacossa, *Op. cit.*, p. 31.

Baudrillard considers that *in its irreconcilability, this force [of hatred and foreignness] is present in every culture. It is still at work today in the relationship between the Third World and the West, between Japan and the West, or between Europe and America, and also within each culture, in the shape of those deviant forms which eventually come to predominate. [...] There is no solution to Foreignness.*⁴⁰ This consequently leads to a continual hatred that Marlene Dumas has very well summed up in her latter series of works. Gathering experience and artistic influence from her previous years, she realized a series called *Man Kind* that made powerful statements about a culture experiencing radical transition.⁴¹ In the Netherlands, for instance, Marlene Dumas' paintings have been perceived as strong contributors to the local but also global political discussions. Just as Aernout Mik, she is considered to be an artist that addresses the discourse on race, specifically the relationship between Islamic and Dutch culture.

Baudrillard had noted and observed this phenomenon of intolerance towards Islam, and justified it with a continuation of affronts towards Western society: *the Indians, with their implacable religiousness, made Western culture ashamed of its profanation of its own values. Their fanaticism was intolerable because it was an implicit condemnation and demystification of Western culture in its own eyes (the same role is being played today by Islam)*⁴².

Just as in the case of *Black Drawings*, *Man Kind* presents a long series of portraits that from a certain distance can be perceived as a crowd of people. At closer inspection – Marlene Dumas likes her works to be examined with the so-called “close up” technique – one may notice that these paintings and drawings are composed of images of Mediterranean-looking men, generally with dark hair and a beard. In times of general anxiety and fear, these images are perceived as faces of the “untamed other”, well-known from the media. In the *Young Men* part of the series, one can see the faces of twelve very different young Muslim men. As we look closer at the portraits, we are compelled to distinguish the differences between these portraits, which in the age of terror, take the shape of a stereotype.⁴³ It is these types of images that are presented in everyday life to emphasize terrorist threats. Marlene Dumas uses her works to neutralize the faulty images inspired by media. Here, as well as in previous works, the artist invites the viewers to see the individuality of each character, which is unique in its being. As Marlene Dumas has

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 40.

⁴¹ C. Butler, *Op. cit.*, p. 43.

⁴² J. Baudrillard, *Op. cit.*, p. 134.

⁴³ Achille Mbembe, Sarah Nuttall, “The Human Face”, in Marlene Dumas, Emma Bedford (eds.), *Intimate Relations*, Amsterdam, Roma Publications, Jacana Media, Johannesburg, p. 128.

admitted, some of the actual subjects for depiction are a Belgian politician, a Dutch comedian, and even a friend of her daughter's (a Dutch boy of Moroccan ancestry), emphasizing the beauty of these characters that deserve a regular existence. *Encouraged by the media we almost "wish" to see these images as images of terrorists. The painting series thus speaks about us rather than about "them"*.⁴⁴

With the aid of this series, Marlene Dumas continues the pursuit of social and political criticism, this time alluding to her adoptive country, The Netherlands. Many academics, artists and art theorists made forceful statements against racism and xenophobia and the extent to which both have intoxicated the public debate in Holland. *Terms that circulate and get reiterated in the public debate in the Netherlands today such as klein (small), Nederland is vol (The Netherlands is full), angst (fear), kwetsbaarheid (vulnerability), poldermodel (polder model), intolerantie (intolerance) and allochtoon (foreign-born) need to be scrutinized and reinvented in a way that might infuse hope and emancipation into the discourse.*⁴⁵

Marlene Dumas has brought this issue further, as a result of the special attention she bestowed to the usage of political language, consequent to her past experiences with the rules of apartheid. *I have never suffered from physical violence, but coming from South Africa made me more sensitive to how changes in language affect relationship between people. The political use of language during apartheid framed individuals as groups.*⁴⁶ The term "allochtoon" was introduced in 1971 in order to replace the word "immigrant". With the passing of years the term started to shift from one meaning to another, and soon became a pejorative. Nowadays, it is mostly considered to be a non-western person who is black or Muslim. In her strong disapproval of this state of fact, the artist has proclaimed a T-shirt that enounced *Ik is een allochtoon*, embracing her own outsider status. This way she made allegiance with these citizens that are what Baurillard calls the "others", accepted in Western society in the idea that this way they can be kept under control. Even though the artist is not part of this category "allochtoon", her noble desire to identify with them imbues her art with honesty and understanding. Marlene Dumas has seen and lived the horror resultant from the wish of a certain ethnic group to preserve a static

⁴⁴ "Ik is een allochtoon". A conversation with Marlene Dumas, in Rossi Braidotti, Charles Esche, Maria Hlavajova (eds.), *Citizens and Subjects: The Netherlands for example*, Utrecht, BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, 2007, p. 107.

⁴⁵ Rossi Braidotti, Charles Esche, Maria Hlavajova, "The Netherlands, for example", in Rossi Braidotti, Charles Esche, Maria Hlavajova (eds.), *Citizens and Subjects: The Netherlands for example*, Utrecht, BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, 2007, pp. 22-23.

⁴⁶ "Ik is een allochtoon". A conversation with Marlene Dumas..., pp. 108-109.

identity. This is why she prefers to liberate herself from categorization, considering, likewise Baudrillard, that this quest of finding an ideal identity is fatal. *Identity – I can't stand that word.*⁴⁷

Completing Baudrillard's theory concerning the undying desire of the westerner to change the world and implicitly the face of the other – who is seen as an imminent danger to the rest of the society – Marlene Dumas points out that the “other” is a mirror image of us, which is not better or worse. *Look at the United States. Contrary to their rhetoric on peace and liberty, they have been at war – although not on their own territory – for many decades. This casts a whole new light on the event of 9/11 in my view.*⁴⁸

Once more, Baudrillard sees this desperate endeavor of reducing everything to a single standard as a Western attempt to tame the unpredictable: *for us everything is predictable [...] we have abolished “elsewhere”.*⁴⁹ As a direct consequence, cloning⁵⁰ becomes of high interest for westerners, and can provide one with an antibody of himself that leads to the destruction of “otherness”.⁵¹ What fails to be addressed is that everything becomes doomed to self-metastasis and pure repetition; otherness returns in the form of a self-destructive process, and this is where we acknowledge the transparency of evil.

Marlene Dumas' *Genetiese Heimwee* seems to fit this description. The existential melancholy that the character is experiencing seems to be the most absolute misfortune society faces. The disharmony of colors comprising her skin may symbolize this mass hatred between nations, and the impossibility of reconciliation. As suggested in *Het Kwaad is Banaal*, evil is not an extravagant phenomenon, but rather something that works between us – and human relations in general – on a daily basis.

I.d. Conclusion

One might not enjoy Baudrillard's merciless honesty about the modern age, but it is a voice which needs to be heard. Marlene Dumas' works seem to have spoken of the same dangers, though in a different manner. While Baudrillard describes the horrors of contemporary

⁴⁷ Ibidem, p. 109.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 109.

⁴⁹ J. Baudrillard, *Op. cit.*, p. 145.

⁵⁰ I use the term cloning here to refer to a metaphor of trying to standardize all societies. In his work Baudrillard starts with the genetic explanation of the term, but exemplifies it as a metaphor for contemporary society.

⁵¹ J. Baudrillard, *Op. cit.*, p. 121.

issues, Marlene Dumas display understanding and empathy, despite the pitiless representation of human inadequacy. Her work conveys an optimistic vision, capable of expressing people's universal dignity⁵² notwithstanding the litany of injustices they may have been subject to.

As I have discussed so far, the relevance of Jean Baudrillard's view for Marlene Dumas' oeuvre is remarkable. The artist's work can be seen in this context as an exploration of the condition of the other in current contemporary society. Baudrillard makes a lucid analysis of society's instability and insanity, and how all of this is the result of an eternal quest to change and manipulate people and situations for one's personal interest. Marlene Dumas' subjects bring to life universal examples of these victims' fate. Considering these characters through the lens of transparency of evil, they acquire new meaning. While on one hand they become bearers of society's evil face, on the other hand they present a human being's dignity. This way, they do not resume only to the criticism of society, but present the humane aspects of this.

In order to express this powerful content, Marlene Dumas made use of a compelling form and medium. In order to better understand the way these figures have come to life and the message they convey, it is essential to scrutinize the form they take – the portrait – and the medium they employ – paint. By viewing the works as a whole, they acquire the complexity the artist instilled in them in her artistic creation.

⁵² I. Bonacossa, *Op. cit.*, p. 8.

II. Form

*Here's to portraiture, more or less,
used by politicians, martyrs, murderers,
the military...be my guest.*

*(Man Kind or here's to those who
inspired me, Marlene Dumas,
Amsterdam, September 2006).*

This second chapter commences with a brief and general introduction to the notion of portraiture and the general perception the genre has acquired in the last century. In the second part of the chapter I will discuss the artist's employment of the portrait, and analyze the reasons why this form was chosen, how this relates to the paintings of the series, and which elements were most persuasive. Third, I will make an iconographical and iconological analysis of the portraits, and show the relevance of this information for the better understanding of the paintings. Last, I will render a small conclusion of the chapter that distills the main ideas discussed so far and explain once more the relevance of the genre for the chosen works.

II.a. Introduction

Traditionally, the portrait has been a commended genre in art history. In contrast to other genres that have become "old fashioned" and outdated, with the passing of the centuries the portrait has become increasingly recognized as a cultural practice and as effigy. Even though recent art tends to manipulate and transform this concept, portraiture still holds an authoritarian position. It is highly esteemed, according to the standard view, because in a successful portrait the viewer is not only confronted with the "original" subjectivity of the portrayer, but also with that of the portrayed, thus encountering the harmonious meeting between two subjectivities.⁵³

As an institution that has had (and still has) extended authority in the domain, the National Portrait Gallery has set some of the guiding values and theories of the genre. The

⁵³ E. van Alphen, "The portrait's dispersal: concepts of representation and subjectivity in contemporary portraiture", in Joanna Woodall (ed.), *Portraiture. Facing the Subject*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1997, p. 239.

original thinking behind the institution was that in an increasingly complex and impersonal society, portraiture identified the human source of thought and action, offering the prospect of a direct and intimate relationship between one individual and another. It linked one to the value of humanity itself while affirming the irreducible complexity of individuality.⁵⁴

At a popular level, portraiture was used to bridge the gap between the complexity of society and the experience of individual identity. The apparition of portraits in journals – one of the many inspirational sources the artist uses – was a part of sociological and journalistic commentary on contemporary issues and events. Portraiture has appeared in the emerging forms of public communication, thus enabling subjects to be reborn, and viewers to get in contact with an individual on a more subjective level. In this context, portraiture was employed as a method of creating more communication between people, and thus bringing the portrayed closer to its audience.

The passing of years has caused the basic conception about the portrait, the portrayer, and the portrayed to drastically change, though as Benjamin Buchloh has put it, portraiture seems to have renewed itself as the Hydra, after each decapitation. Nowadays, rather than as a traditional follow-up, portraiture should be seen as an amalgam of ethno-cultural and socio-political factors. New works employ fictional or allegorical modes of representation that open themselves to multiple meanings and new art forms.⁵⁵

The last century has experienced a large debated on the end of the genre, but as Buchloh explained, it should not be a surprise, that unlike landscape, still life and the nude, the portrait has resurrected incessantly, becoming in fact the site where the myth of a natural motivation of the sign, and of the mimetic model of representation would be most avidly reaffirmed within every generation of the twentieth-century modernity.⁵⁶ The hurriedly changing concepts of subject and subjectivity combined with the rapid disintegration of the traditional pictorial categories can be noticed in the seeds of modernity, as a reflection of external conditions that affected the dismantling of traditional concepts. The avant-garde artists from the beginning of the

⁵⁴ Paul Barlow, “Facing the past and present: the National Portrait Gallery and the search for the “authentic” portrait”, in Joanna Woodall (ed.), *Portraiture. Facing the Subject*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1997, p. 226.

⁵⁵ Melissa Feldman, “The Portrait: From Somebody to No Body”, in Melissa Feldman (ed.), *Face-Off: The Portrait in Recent Art*, Philadelphia, Institute for Contemporary Art, 1994, p. 10.

⁵⁶ Benjamin H. Buchloh, “Residual Resemblance: Three notes On The Ends Of Portraiture”, in Melissa Feldman (ed.), *Face-Off: The Portrait in Recent Art*, Philadelphia, Institute for Contemporary Art, 1994, p. 54.

century commenced these alterations with changes of perspective, but in recent art many transformations have been due to the interference of the media.

Portraits of the past that were confined to aesthetic conventions of representation now became standardized by those promoted by the media. The meeting of two subjectivities – that of the portrayed and the portrayer – and the notion of uniqueness has been challenged by photography's hegemony over representation.⁵⁷ The guaranteed critique of photography was acquired exactly by the factor that made it so popular and indispensable to the modern concept of identity: the recording of empirical facts, stripped by useless "subjectivity".

Several artists have tackled the genre of portraiture with various and diverse approaches: the media stereotypes employed by Andy Warhol, and later on by Roy Lichtenstein, the denial of the portraiture as an actual reproduction of real life, for the idea of a mere recorder of absence in Christian Boltanski's work, the attention and the empathy toward the conventionally unappealing and socially marginalized in Nan Goldin and Alice Neel's work, the exploration of the social aspect of portraiture depicted in Ilya Kabakov's work, and so on. However portraiture has been perceived through these incongruent decades, finally most of the artists have realized that the total modification of the image of the subject could be done as well within the representation of the subject itself. More clearly, this meant that they renounced their endeavors to empty the genre with the death or exclusion of "figure". Artists who have mediated for the death of the genre by using stereotypical or mechanical images have finally renounced their undertakings, accepting some of the initial features of portraiture. The artists that have worked with the portrait using its basic and traditional concepts have not dismantled the subjectivity this was thought to have, but artists that were certain of the genre's lack of substance, operated with this in a way that – in their hands – portraits appeared emptied of all individuality. However, Marlene Dumas is one of the artists who equally employed a myriad of facets of the genre to offer her subjects the expressivity she desired, attributing these characters the role of social accountants. She has definitely dismantled some of the traditional features of the genre, but used modern views and assertions to emphasize her ideas. In her series *The Eyes of the Night Creatures* she employed the portrait more in its traditional assertions, but also made inquiries about the loss of subjectivity.

⁵⁷ M. Feldman, "A Double Death", in Melissa Feldman (ed.), *Face-Off: The Portrait in Recent Art*, Philadelphia, Institute for Contemporary Art, 1994, p. 23.

II.b. The portrait and the Eyes of the Night Creatures

Marlene Dumas used in her paintings the human body as a container for all her meanings. Even though emphasis shifted from certain parts of the body to the representation of the entire ensemble, the portrait has always held an important position in the artist's creation. The figurative representation of one's face was thought to be crucial for the understanding of the human being itself. Nowadays, even if this concept has been fashioned by new criteria of judgment, it is still widely accepted that the human face is a carrier of gist, capable of reverberation in sense. The body reveals itself to us only in parts; therefore what remains unseen to oneself becomes a primary subject of figurative art: the head and the shoulders of a portrait and the bust. Because in the case of such a representation the body remains unrevealed, the face turns into a gigantic presence, acquiring profound meaning and significance. In this context, the visage is able to become a text or a space that can be read and interpreted, and therefore gain an existence for itself.⁵⁸ Of course the interpreting of a face is dependent on a series of other external factors, but in Marlene Dumas' case the subjects are isolated in neutral contexts, a fact that makes their facial elements the most expressive features they possess.

The face reveals a depth and profundity unique and different in comparison to the rest of the body. Because the eyes and to some degree the mouth are openings onto fathomlessness, behind their appearance lies the interior stripped of appearances. It is a common thought that through the openings and cuts of the human body one can see the inside of another human being. In the case of the visage, these open points are represented by the eyes, and moreover by the mouth, seen as two major expressive elements of the face, but as well of the human body itself. Consequently, one "reads" the expression of the face with trepidation, for this reading is never apparent from the surface alone. The face is a type of "deep" text that has its meaning complicated by change and by a constant series of alterations between subjective and objective factors. This convention of interpretations has led Western literature in attributing the notion of a book to the face, examples of this kind being found in writings pertaining to Dante Alighieri or Shakespeare.⁵⁹ Even though the reading of a portrait as a "text" is more of a traditional view, this idea is still used in some contemporary portraits, as in the discussed series for example.

⁵⁸ S. Stewart, *Op. cit.*, p. 125.

⁵⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 127.

Marlene Dumas' portraits investigate the complex subjectivity in relation to the discursive practices of psychoanalytic theory, race, and gender.⁶⁰ Individual subjects are brought forth to express their existential troubles at a time when apartheid was at its peak, and no one had eyes to see, or ears to hear. These characters are represented with the aid of portraiture – and close-ups of the human face – to a relevant and intimidating means of expression. The artist brought to life these portraits in the context of radical social and political events in South Africa, using these to comprehend and fashion her own sense of self through a process of self-scrutiny.⁶¹ *The aim of my work, I have come to believe, has always been to arouse in my audience (as well as myself) an experience of empathy with my subject matter (be it a scribble, a sentence or a face) more so than sympathy. Sympathy suggests an agreement of temperament and an emotional identification with a person. Empathy doesn't necessarily demand that. The contemplation of a work (when it "works") gives a physical sensation similar to that suggested by the work.*⁶²

In her paintings the figures become antiheroes capable of questioning one's political and moral certainties, and exploring our prejudices. To achieve this, the artist isolates the figures in neutral contexts that make their emotions and experiences universal.⁶³ In this context 'universal' refers to an emblematic existence, each of these characters representing a collective model, a model that could universally apply to anyone. A good example of this can be seen, for instance, in the representation of posh females that, taken out of their context – glamorous magazines – become icons stripped of their glamour, in this case the faces of Naomi Campbell and Josephine Baker.⁶⁴ The pictures never offer precise notes on origins, status or nationality. The individual lives of the figures are thus redirected and transformed into emblematic experiences. A large number of her portraits are in fact famous or familiar people –politicians, actors, (TV) stars, friends or neighbors – but stripped of their personalized medium, they become simply the face of the "other".

The close-up method Marlene Dumas employed in her series *The Eyes of the Night Creatures* consists of isolating the face on a neutral background deprived of any context: *for me the close-up was a way of getting rid of irrelevant background information and, by making the*

⁶⁰ E. Bedford, *Op. cit.*, p. 35.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² M. Dumas, *Sweet...*, p. 25.

⁶³ I. Bonacossa, *Op. cit.*, p. 9.

⁶⁴ Ibidem., pp. 9-10.

facial elements so big, it increased the sense of abstraction concerning the picture plane.⁶⁵ This seclusion was necessary in the eyes of the artist, as the isolation of a recognizable figure increased and the narrative character decreased, and the interpretive effects were inflamed. [...] My "Night Creatures" are alone, but if you compare them to the metaphysical loneliness and alienation that Giacometti conveys, they strike a warm pop(ular) note [...].⁶⁶

Marlene Dumas' portraits represent neither a single portrait nor a group portrait, but rather a group of single portraits, challenging the disciplined approach to reading faces. They lack composition in the second case, which means they lack hierarchy.⁶⁷ Even if, through the lens of apartheid, a white person, as depicted in *Het Kwaad is Banaal* or *The White Disease* would be worthy of portrayal, and consequently hierarchically represented prouder than any depiction of a colored person, in Dumas' oeuvre all the faces share the same dignity or condemnation. While in the *Albino* man's eyes we see the resignation of sufferance, in *The White Disease* we notice the guilt that lays beyond every white person in South Africa. The characters are all depicted with the same devotion, with no intention of discriminating between them. They all carry their own burdens, becoming majestic through significance rather than through appearance.

At first glance one gets the impression that these portraits form one family in the sense that they belong to each other, though at closer inspection it becomes difficult to recognize a group identity. Each portrait is different from the other, testing the superficiality with which the human eye treats what it sees. For example, *Black Drawings* seems to exclusively represent typical African natives, while in reality some paintings embody individuals that might be white, Asian, or even faceless. Marlene Dumas has even introduced a portrait of herself amongst the 111 black drawings. It is by this manner that the artist tries to attract attention to one's biased judgment, which initially operates on surface perception alone. Marlene Dumas' single (but also group) portraits explore the relationship between representation and identity, and they provide insight into each other.

The interest in the portrait is confronted with personal attitudes of expectation. The artistic detransfiguration of any ambiguity or factuality becomes a "trap" for established,

⁶⁵ M. Dumas, "Artist's Writings. Larger than Life", in Dominic van den Boogerd, Marlene Dumas, Barbara Bloom, Mariuccia Casadio, *Marlene Dumas*, London, Phaidon, 1999, p. 116

⁶⁶ M. Dumas, "Artist's Writings. Isolation", in D. van den Boogerd, M. Dumas, B. Bloom, M. Casadio, *Marlene Dumas*, London, Phaidon, 1999, pp. 116-120.

⁶⁷ E. van Alphen, *Facing Defacement...*, p. 62.

adapted, conformed patterns of behavior and taste: *My best works are erotic displays of mental confusions*".⁶⁸ As noted before, the artists consistently works with the interlinking of content, medium and form, and therefore, when creating a work, she equally uses and manipulates all these three elements. Regardless of the outcome of her endeavors, she allows the viewer a personal interpretation of the work. Her images are freed from the burden of any straightforward deciphering. However, in the series *The Eyes of the Night Creatures* – especially in the chose paintings – she demonstrates the biased judgment of viewers, and that the way one perceives a work is often based on prior prejudice. For instance, when considering Marlene Dumas' *Albino*, but also her other numerous images of black people, viewers inevitably think of the culture of apartheid and the representation of the "exoticized" other. But this aspect does not offer a complex and thorough reading of the artist's works. She has indeed raised discussion on a failed political system she was a part of, but this was not entirety of her message. She chose to honor the people who were grouped under the denomination "black", but as well to praise the color black as a beautiful and expressive artistic tool. These substantial, personally charged portraits correspond to an extremely differentiated, committed written language, which Marlene Dumas ties into her thinking as an artist.⁶⁹

All the attention in these portraits goes to the expression of the features, especially to the gaze of the eyes. Even though Marlene Dumas' paintings seem spontaneous, they are the product of intense study and devotion to the depicted subject. The way she employs the paint on canvas reminds of expressionistic procedures, and the pictorial technique acquires an exploratory character. In her desire to express the feeling of "being alive" she distorts and modifies some aspects of natural appearance to obtain the visual effects that she desires. All her characters have vibrant eyes, regardless of their gaze or posture. As the artist has stated herself, *eyes, no matter where the gaze is, have strong impact. It is self-evident that the quick cheap thrills of immediate psychological impact can also turn out to be very tedious*.⁷⁰ Many of these paintings are confrontational, like a blow in the face.⁷¹ They are aimed to penetrate to the inside of their

⁶⁸ Tilman Osterwold, "Water-colors as physiognomies", in Thomas Knubben, Tilman Osterwold (eds.), *Marlene Dumas wet dreams. watercolors*, Ravensburg, Hatje Cantz, 2003, p. 20.

⁶⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 20.

⁷⁰ M. Dumas, "Artist's Writings. Close-ups", in D. van den Boogerd, M. Dumas, B. Bloom, M. Casadio, *Marlene Dumas*, London, Phaidon, 1999, p. 120.

⁷¹ Dominic van den Boogerd, "Survey. Hang-ups and Hangovers in the Work of Marlene Dumas", in Dominic van den Boogerd, Marlene Dumas, Barbara Bloom, Mariuccia Casadio, *Marlene Dumas*, London, Phaidon, 1999, p. 38.

viewer; to make a connection with the audience. It is to that extent that the artist tries to give enough character to her subjects to involve in an intimate dialog with the onlooker. The artist explained that in her portraits the eyes are really the main features of the faces she paints, since in these portraits that are stripped of a compromising background, the gaze of the eyes becomes the major expressive feature. *You look at the painting but the painting also looks at you.*⁷² Also, the fact that the eyes of the characters are represented in different manners – some gazing directly at the viewer, others gazing to the right or backwards, or even into an empty point – shows the desire of the artists to present of cycle of human feelings and attitudes felt towards their given situation.

While *Albino*'s gaze shifts between showing a posture of dignity in spite of his fate and a sad but resigned gaze, the woman's look in *The White Disease* seems to dissolve into itself. Her last gaze expresses emptiness, guilt and pain. This sting comes from the disintegration of her humane self caused by her disease – moral and physical – a fact that she conscientiously witnesses. This state of mind reminds us of Baudrillard's words about the loss of oneself that *is threatened with irradiation in the void.*⁷³ When saying this, the philosopher referred to this phenomenon as a consequence of the endeavor to annihilate the other, which results in the loss of oneself. *The White Disease*, in her endeavor to subjugate the others, has finally come to self-annihilation. Even though her eyes might shout for a last call of help, her lips are sealed, signaling the moral death of the subject.

These portraits are confrontational, and with their direct stare they unswervingly involve the viewer in their lives. Frontal projection of a character is employed when a face-to-face interaction is desired. The 'magical' proprieties of frontality are well-known and have been employed by artists to impress the numinous power and authority of the image on the viewer. A frontal gaze also heightens the communicative force of the portrait image in less threatening ways, enhancing the intimacy of reception.⁷⁴ Therefore, these portraits are directly confronting and speaking to their audience about the burdens they are carrying.

The size of her works is also deliberately speaking about the importance a subject acquires in the artist's perception. Dumas consistently manipulates scale to highlight the power

⁷² A. Mbembe, S. Nuttall, *Op. cit.*, p.128.

⁷³ J. Baudrillard, *Op. cit.*, pp. 121-122.

⁷⁴ Richard Brilliant, "Portraits", in Jean M. Borgatti, Richard Brilliant, *Likeness And Beyond. Portraits from Africa and the World*, New York, The Centre for African Art, 1990, p. 20.

of her works; if a work is large, it represents a serious problem that requires one's full attention and awareness. *I don't have any conception of how big an average head us...I've never been interested in anatomy. In that respect I relate as children do. What is experienced as most important is seen as the highest, irrespective of actual or factual size.*⁷⁵ In her pictures reality is distorted by chromatic and tactile variations, which together with the distortions of the dimensions and proportions of the subjects, completely transform our vision of reality.⁷⁶ The artist stated⁷⁷ that nature can be understood better when it is turned and twisted, resulting in a work that is not a mere reproduction of real life. Therefore, art itself is not a mere reproduction of nature, but mostly a distorted image of what one perceives as his or her own reality. *Art is not a mirror. Art is a translation of that which you do not know, but of what you want to convince others or rather, that which no one knows...*⁷⁸

Since there is no better metaphor for fear than the expressiveness of the face, the representation of this forces a connection with the viewer. The viewer is required to confront the death experienced by the face of the other.⁷⁹ The artist suggests that by our indifference one becomes an accomplice to the human face's death, and hence the resulting stains on one's conscience. This awakening from obliviousness can only be achieved by a portrait, a close-up of a face that presents all the suffering of the other: *I have used the close-up only for the human face. This method achieves an intimidating and confrontational effect, which was what I intended. Images combining intimacy (or the illusion of that) with discomfort.*⁸⁰ Apprehending the face's image becomes a mode of possession. The portrait allows possession of the face of the other. By visualizing a portrait, firstly the viewers append the image of the face to his or her own body, and second the face becomes an object of contemplation⁸¹, thus acting upon the artist's wish for empathy and reflection.

The size of these faces is a call for attention; they invade ones visual field in order to acquire understanding. Their close appearance can be seen as an attempt to intimately connect

⁷⁵ M. Dumas, "Artist's Writings. Larger than Life", in D. van den Boogerd, M. Dumas, B. Bloom, M. Casadio, *Marlene Dumas*, London, Phaidon, 1999, p. 116.

⁷⁶ I. Bonacossa, *Op. cit.*, p. 8.

⁷⁷ Statement made in a conference dedicated to Svetlana Alpers in Amsterdam, on the 7th of May, 2010.

⁷⁸ "Ik is een allochtoon". A conversation with Marlene Dumas..., p. 114.

⁷⁹ A. Mbembe, S. Nuttall, *Op.cit.*, p. 129..

⁸⁰ Marlene Dumas, "Artist's Writings. Close-ups", in D. van den Boogerd, M. Dumas, B. Bloom, M. Casadio, *Marlene Dumas*, London, Phaidon, 1999, p. 120.

⁸¹ S. Stewart, *Op. cit.*, p. 126.

with the onlookers, but as well it is speaking of the intimacy between the artist and her subjects. While some of the portraits have a fixed expression, timidly alluding to a mask-like portrait, the expression on their face represents an eternal feeling, which will accompany them in perpetuity. The portraits are an undying token of the experiences they wish to transmit through this eternalized posture. Even if racial discrimination shall become an issue for history, the *Albino* man shall always have the sorrowful memory of his resigned past; even if the *White Disease* shall be cured, traces of the skin destructive illness shall still be seen; even if one looks back with regret and disdain at the appalling circumstances described, these shall never be forgotten (*Het Kwaad is Banaal*); even if the a new cultural climate shall be created, one will still look with searing nostalgia to the acts of the past (*Genetiese Heimwee*).

The mask-like appearance of both the *Albino* man and *White Disease* can be linked to other works of the artist, but as well to the message she wanted to associate with these characters. On one hand, the mask-like guise of the *White Disease* calls attention to the concept of the “mask”, an element that can be closely related to uniformity. Everyone who accepted the ideology of the damning system of apartheid shared some of the same ideas, and thus created a sort of uniformity in thinking. The uniformity of the *Albino* man’s appearance can be associated with the manner by which the category of black and colored people was abstractly categorized and divided, on the basis of such frivolous criteria as skin color, thus creating a uniform lower social category.

It is common for portraits to exhibit a formal stillness in the sense of a motionless picture, a heightened degree of self-composure that responds to the portrait-making setting. The portraitist does this in order to indicate the timelessness of the image as a general summing up of a “life”.⁸² The stillness attributes the portrait dignifying traits, which elevates the subject from the personalized appearance to one that resembles a more universal example, be this a hero or an idea. Rather than the other two (self-) portraits that were presumably meant to communicate personal thoughts and emotions, these two faces were meant to become carriers of a meaning that exceeds the strictly personal level. The subjects were meant to illustrate tokens of general experiences, common not only to certain individuals, but to an entire group of people. They both represent the face of the other, perceived from different angles.

⁸² R. Brilliant, *Portraiture*, London, Reaktion Books Limited, 1991, p. 10

Benjamin Buchloh has pointed out that a mask conceives of a person's physiognomy as fixed rather than a fluid field; in singling out particular traits it reduces the infinity of differentiated facial expressions to a metonymic set. Moreover, in singling out particular traits the mask reveals a rigid mechanical display of the subject's features, a characteristic which attributes this to the category of the grotesque.⁸³ The image of the grotesque has always been attributed to the marginalized members of society, such as the lunatics, the sick, the homosexuals, or the colored. Even though these two characters share the same disease, they don't share the same fate. The albino man appears in front of the prejudiced viewers as the "other" representing the grotesque face of otherness that needs to be subordinated in order to avoid its more violent annihilation, whilst the albino woman is the face of the ill (physically and mentally) oppressor, the expression of the condemned condemner.

Marlene Dumas' group portraits such as *The Teacher* and *The Schoolboys* account for such mask-like representations, but these portraits approached a different path of criticism. All the children in these works are depicted in school uniforms, which create uniformity and abolish distinctions. Yet in the context of South Africa this portrayal highlights the way apartheid attributed fixed identities on the basis of the most superficial exteriority.⁸⁴ Also, all the faces of the painting share the same features, an indicator of obedience and ignorance. This general trait can be linked with the death of "subjectivity", which, when viewed in a political context, can be regarded as a lack of opinion and interest towards the general situation, or leniency towards the system. In a larger contemporary context the death of subjectivity can be linked with the death of the subject.

This concept has been widely employed by artists in the last decades in their endeavor to demonstrate the death of portraiture as a genre. A good example of this venture can be seen in a great part of Warhol's and Lichtenstein's work, where they modeled the genre into presenting individuals emptied of any interiority and privacy. Another artist that explored the same concept with a different approach was Christian Boltanski. He used the "holocaust-effect" (in a non-historical sense) to demonstrate the absence that a portrait is actually implying. Part of his work was to set up installations of school-children pictures that he had once known. The moment the project was developing, these children had already become adults, thus strangers for the artist.

⁸³ B.H. Buchloh, *Op. cit.*, p. 54.

⁸⁴ E. van Alphen, *Facing Defacement*. p. 68.

By installing these photos in a shrine of remembrance, Boltansky actually pointed out that now, since these characters exist no more, the photos are only tokens of emptiness and absence, instead of subjectivity and warmth. Even if *Albino* and *The White Disease* share some features with the mask-like portraits of these artists, they were destined to pursue another path. These portraits are not part of a group, but they are individual examples, so here we cannot speak of their uniformity with other concrete faces. These characters represent *the* face of a certain group, and more like African tribal masks, they attempt to represent the roles of specific individuals in society and how they have fulfilled the roles their community assigned to them.

The stillness encountered in Marlene Dumas' works can be seen from other angles as well. *In most cases the drama is psychological rather than pictorial (especially in the portraits) [...] In the "Black Drawings", however, we are back where we started with the "Night Creatures", in some essential way. The narrative has dissolved into "presence". The viewers are back in the court room.*⁸⁵ Even though the characters are isolated from their natural environment and deprived of anything that could subject them to preconception, we still see the drama that the characters are a part of. From existential melancholy (*Genetiese Heimwee*) to personal sorrow (*Het Kwad is Banaal*) and resignation (*Albino*), or damnation (*White Disease*), the characters express these feelings with their mere presence. And the fact that this is possible – or made possible – is because of the great emphasis their face acquire.

These faces appear naked in a way; there is an element of vulnerability in them that denotes a lack of resistance, a visceral unclothing.⁸⁶ Although the portrait refers to an original self who is already present, the self needs its portrayal in order to secure its own being.⁸⁷ When looking at these faces, the question that comes up is whether one has anything in common with them, and what are the duties one has towards them. But the answer is not self-contained, since these portraits represent the face of the other, which still has an element of impenetrability to itself.⁸⁸ Therefore, the face of the other still remains a mystery for the most part, a fact that can inspire fear. What Maria Hlavajova called the condition of fear in the so-called West – the image of the other as a terrorist, suicide bomber, or so on – takes shape in Marlene Dumas oeuvre through the portrayal of certain individuals. If *Black Drawings* and *Man Kind* generate

⁸⁵ Marlene Dumas, "Artist's Writings. Larger than Life", in D. van den Boogerd, M. Dumas, B. Bloom, M. Casadio, *Marlene Dumas*, London, Phaidon, 1999, p.125.

⁸⁶ A. Mbembe, S. Nuttall, *Op. cit.*, p. 129.

⁸⁷ E. van Alphen, *The portrait's dispersal...*, p. 239.

⁸⁸ A. Mbembe, S. Nuttall, *Op. cit.*, p. 129.

this fear through the form of a group, in the *Eyes of the Night Creature* series these individuals emerge alone. The *Albino* man we see is alone in his condemnation, and even if defenseless, he still inspires alienation. *I call into question this notion of identity in the Man Kind project. But this is not at all new in my work. I have always been especially interested in how different cultures deal with portraiture. For me a good portrait conveys a point where attraction and alienation meet.*⁸⁹

As noted so far, Marlene Dumas' works discussed here are, as Ernst van Alphen has put it, a part of an overall endeavor to explore and challenge systematically the characteristics of the traditional portrait as a politically invested genre⁹⁰. She successfully does this, and with the aid of portraiture she offers new faces to the understanding of the system of apartheid. But these portraits, as a total, should not be seen only as politically charged images. The artist equally explores portraiture's traditional and non-conventional features to achieve powerful pictorial statements.

II.c. Tradition and The Eyes of the Night Creatures

Marlene Dumas' subjects have a deep and vibrant iconographical impact. She equally used the effects of color, texture and appearance to create a personal iconography of her subjects. Commencing with size and depiction, every detail is clearly metaphorical. In constructing the identity of the portrayal, a cluster of elements becomes necessary. Obviously, only physical appearance is naturally visible, and the rest is conceptual and must be expressed symbolically. However, all these elements can be represented by the artists, who must meet the complex demands of portraiture as a particular challenge of their artistic ingenuity and empathetic insight.⁹¹

Throughout centuries, the more majestic and imposing a character was thought to be, the bigger in dimension his portrait would become. For obtaining this illusion of grandeur, the sitter was often depicted at full-length. The portraits of *The Eyes of the Night Creature* series, with their size, receive some of the grandeur of the antique portraits, mostly used to illustrate

⁸⁹ Ik is een allochtoon". A conversation with Marlene Dumas, p. 108.

⁹⁰ E. van Alphen, *The portrait's dispersal...*, p. 252

⁹¹ R. Brilliant, *Portraiture*, p. 9.

universal examples – figures whose transcendent qualities or achievements merited emulation.⁹² Even though they are not full-size depictions of the human body, the grandeur these faces receive conjures an air of the authoritarian. The faces become the size of a full-length portrait, making their expressions and eyes larger than natural, transforming their cause into something larger than their own individual life. When these portraits are viewed, one remains caught up in the stare of the portrayed, making eye contact and therefore, communicating.

Historically, the portrait of the individual was often accompanied by subordinating elements that would serve to elevate the status of the portrayed and elucidate his identity, but in Marlene Dumas' works the viewer confronts only bare faces. This decontextualization of the individual is essential, because the artist does not wish for her viewers to encounter a pre-made stereotypical image, but rather create a picture for themselves. The artist's creative process dealt from the beginning with edited information; she has taken what she considered the essential parts of her subjects and transformed this information to obtain her final pictorial representations. When depicting her characters, Marlene Dumas was aware of the fact that each and every individual is prone to analyze her paintings based on previous prejudice. It is a basic feature of human nature to egotize every piece of information to oneself. The artists considered that part of the public that shall come into contact with these portraits will have had previous prejudice that dealt with abstract categorization which divided up people on the basis of skin color, gender, or ethnicity. It is for this reason she has stripped her portraits of familiar backgrounds that could lead one into judgment based on the predetermined, but as well for ensuring the most subjective, but as well objective reading of the painting. It is most subjective in the sense that each individual molds a possible meaning after his or her own interpretation, but objective in the sense that it is not a manipulated image, but rather a self-standing work, able to speak for itself.

The portrayed used to be depicted in a recognizable iconographic way, with visual reference to precedents. This was done in order to observe the conventional expectations of their role, and thus position the sitters in the category they pertained to. Marlene Dumas also makes use of recognizable features for her subjects, such as the negroid features of the albino man that come to light under his translucent whitish skin. The characteristics of the fair woman are almost excessively represented, in order to understand her origins. Even so, her allusion to precedents

⁹² Joanna Woodall, "Introduction: facing the subject", in Joanna Woodall (ed.), *Portraiture. Facing the Subject*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1997, p. 2.

are not strongly imbued in her paintings, rather, they are slight suggestive threads. The artist tries to avoid manipulation; her work is engaged with the transmitting of a more universal idea, intrinsic to each individual.

For centuries the portrayed characters were the honorific elite, be they aristocracy, or later on distinct personalities, acclaimed individuals or even political bodies. It has taken some time until the interest shifted towards involving the rest of society. Marlene Dumas is one of the artists that took the authority to portray whomever she wanted, acquiring a sort of intimacy with her subjects. Though it is not new for contemporary painting to depict characters of all ranges, Dumas does it in a special manner. Her portraits have the dignity and authority of the former time's paintings, transforming these characters into universal models.

Joshua Reynolds, as the first president of the Academy of Art, has always mediated for the supremacy of historical painting over portraiture for one strong reason. He held that a Portrait-Painter painted a particular man, and consequently a defective model.⁹³ Assuming that individuality is a defect, portraiture can only elevate sitters by omitting some of the peculiarities of their appearance. Marlene Dumas though has proceeded in the opposite way, demonstrating that portraiture can as well aspire to an ideal. The artist has neither depicted a certain individual, nor has she omitted any idiosyncrasies of her subjects, thus the result was not a defect, but rather a result of individual and collective (re)creation of a story which is capable of bearing a general idea.

The most innocent readings of the portraits would be that the sitters were portrayed because they had authority in the first place, in whatever field of society. One presumes the portrayed person was important and the portrayed becomes the embodiment of authority in some manner. Thus, authority is not so much the object of portrayal, but its effect. It is the portrait that bestows authority on an individual self. Positioned in a renowned place, the portrait makes the viewer stand in awe, in front of the portrayed.⁹⁴ And this is what happens to Dumas' subjects: presented in the biggest galleries and museum in Europe, but also across the world, these paintings become famous, and the message they pass along become statements well-known in the art world.

⁹³ P. Barlow, *Op. cit.*, p. 224.

⁹⁴ E. van Alphen, *The portrait's dispersal...* p. 240.

Moreover, the artist explores the relationship between format and authority in her forthcoming works, turning and twisting the regular representations of different sitters. While in *The Eyes of the Night Creatures* series, verticality is traditionally combined with authority and grandeur, in other works she employs verticality from a different view. In her endeavor to ‘play’ with format, she depicts the usual unusual, and twists the depiction of verticals and horizontals. Whilst babies, seen as defenseless and vulnerable are generally depicted horizontally, the artist gives a new challenge to the viewer. In her series *The First People* she depicted infants in a vertical way on enlarged panels, transforming these babies into imposing (and maybe even fearsome) creatures. The vertical lines are replaced by horizontals and vice versa, thus remodeling the essence of classic portraiture.

II.d. Conclusion

The German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer is well-known for his magnum opus *Truth and Method* where he elaborated on the method by which human understanding and perception functioned. The notion of the portrait and thus the representation of a sitter was essential to his writings, and therefore he discussed the importance of the portrait and the portrayed. He claimed that in the portrait an individual is not represented idealized, not in an incidental moment, but in the essential quality of his true appearance. Moreover, in a portrait, more than in any other kind of picture, an “increase of being” emerges, symbolizing the fundamental value of the sitter.⁹⁵ This is a statement to remember, as Marlene Dumas’ portraits perfectly fit the description. Not only does the artist portray her subjects in their true essence, but she does it in such a way that this fundamental nature is imparted, so that it is closely related to the artistic process of creation. *The portrayer makes visible the inner essence of the sitter and this visualizing act is creative and productive. It is more than a passive rendering of what was presumed to be already there, although interior and hence invisible. The portrayer gives this supposed interiority an outer form so that the viewers can see it. This outer form is then the signifier (expression) of the signified (the sitter’s inner essence).*⁹⁶

The realization of portraits is a response to the natural human tendency to think about oneself, of oneself in relation to others, and of others in apparent relation to themselves and to

⁹⁵ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, London, 1975, p. 131.

⁹⁶ E. van Alphen, *The portrait’s dispersal...*, p. 241.

others.⁹⁷ Portraiture catches the essence of human relationships, and the simple existence of a portrait constitutes the admission that there is “someone” out there worthy of identification and preservation. Portraits make value judgments not just about the specific individuals portrayed, but also about the general worth of individuals as a category.⁹⁸ Portraiture challenges the transiency and irrelevancy of human existence, forcing a re-examination of value in life.

Marlene Dumas’ usage of the human body as a container of all her meanings can be seen as a continuation of the general tradition of the body as a “microcosm”, a tradition that projects the body upon the universe. The artist has chosen this form for her art -an art that was sought to be both a criticism, but as well an appraisal of society- because of her belief in the power of expression of the human being in general. The idea of the universal that characterizes so well Marlene Dumas’ oeuvre springs out of her desire to dignify the individual. In the end, her art is only aspiring towards a general situation that is characterized by acceptance towards each other.

Even though Marlene Dumas’ portraits represent the face of evil and death, they are images of a better essence; they are the images of hope. They are entrusted with the hope that they will awaken the viewers’ ability to comprehend these images, but as well faith in their capacity to communicate the artist’s sentiments. These portraits may also be related to an oxymoron, as the one in Baudellaire’s *Les fleurs du mal*, suggesting that something beautiful can grow out of horror and pain.

It is of high significance to acknowledge the importance of the form employed by the artist, for this clearly speaks of her creational intentions. Dumas has spoken on several occasions about the impact of the human body as a container of deep significance, and her usage of this in her works verifies this. *The Eyes of the Night Creature Series* employs the human face as its most powerful element of communication, because the portrait is powerful enough, historically and ichnographically, to pass along such moving statements. Furthermore, the artist considered that the human body is the best persuasive element for directly communicating with the onlookers. With the aid of the human face the relationship between the painting and the viewer becomes more intimate, thus enabling the subject to directly relate to its spectator. It is essential to study the usage of portraiture in Marlene Dumas’ oeuvre because this is the manner in which one can understand the works of art in their complexity, and better grasp the artist’s intentions

⁹⁷ R. Brilliant, *Portraiture*, p. 14

⁹⁸ *Ibidem*.

behind the creational act. The content that the artist has reflected on so deeply needs to be presented in its most expressive form, while this form must also be further developed. For this reason the artist chose paint, a medium with which she could attribute her subjects as much pictorial metaphor as she desired.

To conclude, portraiture remains a very active genre of the 20th century. Conceptions of subjectivity and identity have been challenged, making way for new outcomes in the concept of representation. However, artists have generally acknowledged that portraiture resembles a spider web that has an undying creator, and thus further explored in the process of artistic creation. Marlene Dumas has employed several aspects of the genre, thus achieving the complexity she desired for her subjects.

III. Medium

Everything everyone holds against painting is true. It is an anachronism. It is outdated. It is obscene the way it turns any kind of horror into a type of beauty. It's decadent. It's arrogant. The way it insists is unique. And then it's stupid because it can't answer any questions. Why do we still care to look at images? That's why I continue to create them.

(Marlene Dumas)

This final chapter begins with a brief introduction on the status of figurative painting in the last century, with an emphasis on the past decades. In this context, I will present and analyze Marlene Dumas' choice of medium. In the second part of the chapter I will shortly discuss skin depiction from an art historical perspective, and in the third part I interpret and examine the artist's oeuvre with the aid of iconography, iconology and semiotics. The last part of the chapter comprises a brief conclusion of the discussion thus far.

III.a. Marlene Dumas and her choice of painting

Unlike portraiture, which has had its limits and potential ardently tested and debated over the last century – and especially during the last decades – figurative painting has been pushed aside as a bearer of old meanings. In the post-war period figuration, implicitly figurative painting was seen as strongly connected to the ideologies of the past, always burdened by predetermined judgments. It was in this period that abstraction began to bloom, and in this specific era when modernity emerged. This is when Andy Warhol became known as a convention-breaking artist, and what was perceived to be a traditional pictorial representation ceased to be of interest.

As discussed in the previous chapter, portraiture has actually regained its status, commencing with the last two decades of the past century. A similar trend has occurred with figurative painting, though mostly by the end of the 1990s. Across Europe and the US, group painting exhibits began to materialize, connecting previously isolated protagonists. A few

preeminent examples of such shows were held in 1997, at MOMA in New York featuring Elizabeth Peyton, John Currin and Luc Tuymans, in 1998, in London profiling the works of the British newcomers Cecily Brown, Chantal Joffe, and Martin Maloney, and in 1999, “Examining Pictures” at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago that featured works by fifty-six artists.⁹⁹

The answer to this phenomenon of “rebirth” of painting can be found in artists’ ideas and works. One detail that seems obvious is that more artists chose to concentrate on painting, for this offers an antidote to the *rat-tat-tat of images that are shot at us from every corner of our daily life*.¹⁰⁰ Life is not a rush of snapshots, but rather of fine pauses, where one comes to acknowledge the present moments. The world does not appear in front of us through a series of out of context and frozen moments, but rather as a building process towards what we shall at one point concede as one’s “entire existence”. These factors can be seen as reflectors of the power and charm of painting, which is capable of offering a more complex picture of one’s “essence”. This might be regarded as one of the major factors which caused the artists return to painting.

As a socially committed artist, Marlene Dumas chose such an expressive medium as paint for a myriad of reasons. First of all, she loves painting, and a painting takes a long time both in its creation and viewing, thus opening a broad space for reflection and the structuring of her highly complex and articulated poetics. Furthermore, painting offers the artist the freedom to create her own images, capable of revealing more about the world around us than maybe photography or documentaries.¹⁰¹ Nonetheless, paint is almost exclusively *the* artistic medium that, throughout centuries, carried the burden of reality and our surroundings, becoming the perfect medium for the representation of human brutality. When painting, Marlene Dumas is interested in a (visual) complexity which cannot be taken in at one viewing, but which unravels or reveals itself over time, as one looks again, or gets to know a painting.¹⁰²

The specific formal choices in her work (size, the pictorial technique, colors) acquire an exploratory characteristic, and therefore the artist alters her pictorial technique in relation to the subjects represented. Her paintings are simultaneously mental, political, and intimate, and they develop by achieving a continuous compromise between what is revealed and what is concealed,

⁹⁹ More details about the emerge of figurative painting in the last decade of the twentieth century can be found in Charlotte Mullins, *Painting People figure painting today*, New York, D.A.P., 2006, pp. 8-17.

¹⁰⁰ Charlotte Mullins, *Painting People figure painting today*, New York, D.A.P., 2006, p. 17.

¹⁰¹ I. Bonacossa, *Op. cit.*, pp. 12-13.

¹⁰² A. Mbembe, S. Nuttall, *Op. cit.*, p. 127.

between the tactile quality of the painting, the intensity of the emotions, and theories of representation.¹⁰³

The artist chose painting in order to speak of the horrors that surround us, starting from her personal experience, in order to deal with universal issues. She has deeply considered the chosen medium, in order to represent the dreadfulness of humanity. Due to her representation of the horrors of the world, neither harmony nor aesthetic pleasure lie at the heart of her work, but a perpetual conflict that springs out of the complex unresolved issues of contemporary society, represented with subtle humor.¹⁰⁴ This detail should not be interpreted as disinterest of the artist in her subjects' appearance, but on the contrary, she is deeply involved with their depiction. Though we may be arrested by a startling image or an exquisite body, it is the formal qualities of their rendering that hold our attention. A seductive body is matched by the seductive handling of her means, although surprisingly not in an obvious way.¹⁰⁵

In the era of lived art, the artist chose to depict her subjects with the aid of a medium that has been acknowledged as "outdated". Artists that chose to represent horrors of the world have often done so with the aid of technology, whether utilizing developed photographic methods or simple Polaroids. For this reason figurative painting was in decline; it was considered wasteful to expend efforts on a method that was incapable of naturally capturing the spontaneity of the moment. This criticism, however, was not entirely merited. In the century of mass-media explosion, there have been several fellow artists such as Luc Tuymans, Lucien Freud and Elizabeth Peyton who have seen figurative painting as a worthwhile pursuit, and for good reasons.

Marlene Dumas willingly chose painting because of the great space it offers for creation. She has explicitly motivated her reason of choosing painting over photography for her works. First, unlike photography – which is an objective part of the world, existing outside one's will – painting gives life to a certain sentiment or situation. Additionally, a painting is a live testimony to the presence of a creator, whilst a photograph may merely record an event. *The aim is to reveal, not display. It is the discourse of the lover. I am intimately involved with my subject matter...I am not disengaged from the subject of my gaze. With photographic activities it is possible that they who take the picture leave no traces of their presence, and are absent from the*

¹⁰³ I. Bonacossa, *Op. cit.*, p. 8.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 9.

¹⁰⁵ E. Bedford, *Op. cit.*, p. 42.

*pictures. Paintings exist as the traces of their makers and by the grace of these traces. You can't take a painting – you make a painting.*¹⁰⁶

Photography can be manipulated; nature can be photographed in the posture which the photographer wishes it to appear. Painting unlocks a totally new world; it is represented through the creative subjectivity of the artist, but recreated through the subjective reading of the viewer. It does not engage a sense; it offers space for interpretation. *Most people still assume that photography displays the “truth”. My paintings cannot prove that something actually happened and do not pretend to do. Even though everyone who understands the nature of images knows you can manipulate photography, one still uses photographs as some sort of authentication of experience or identification of persons. It is absurd –just think about it- that we believe photography still equates to truth.*¹⁰⁷ Because the traditional notion of the portrait implied that the strength of a portrait should be judged in relation to the supposed essence of the sitter, negative opinion was seeded on photographic portraits. However, with the passing of years this view has been remodeled, and the concept of “authenticity” and “uniqueness” was attributed to the mode of representation rather than to the portrait, portrayed or portrayer.¹⁰⁸ It is by this judgment that Marlene Dumas chose paint as an artistic medium, for she found this the best artistic method to reconcile her message and her subject.

As a result of technological evolution, current image products are created on the basis of photographic and reproductive material. If one is accustomed to perceiving pre-formulated reality – based in art and cultural history – through the “glasses” of the media, then a tradition is being continued of perception dependent on or led astray by the media. Throughout centuries, feelings, thoughts, and patterns of behavior and taste have been manipulated by a belief in “images”.¹⁰⁹ What the artists proposed to do, by means of paint (a medium traditionally invested with more than one subjectivity), was to offer the chance of viewing her subjects stripped of a certain “incriminating” context. Even though painting is known for its power of allowing the mind to wander over untraveled paths, Marlene Dumas saw this alternative as working for the better cause: *“Acknowledging and embracing ambiguity does not place one above suspicion”*,

¹⁰⁶ M. Dumas, *Miss Interpreted*, Eindhoven, Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, 1992, p. 43.

¹⁰⁷ *Ik is een allochtoon”. A conversation with Marlene Dumas...*, p. 108.

¹⁰⁸ E. van Alphen, *The portrait's dispersal*...p. 240.

¹⁰⁹ T. Osterwold, *Op. cit.*, p. 22.

Dumas explained. “*But painting is worth doing for the sake of extending the possibilities of moral choice*”.¹¹⁰

III.b. Flesh color and the Eyes of the Night Creatures

In the quest for ideal representation, Marlene Dumas has used countless expressive elements, acquiring a strong and telling character through painting. As previously discussed, the portrait and specifically the facial expressions of a subject are excellent means of expressing the sitters’ essence. However, the gaze of the eyes and the general mimic are completed by the colors of a portrait that consists mostly of a depiction of human flesh. Not only is human skin difficult to paint accurately, but it also becomes a strong element of communication for a painting. In Dumas’ oeuvre the characters’ skin becomes a bearer of meaning, and the color becomes a metaphor for the artist’s message. Marlene Dumas is a modern painter that seeks to transpose her personal image into the abstract character of her paintings, and therefore her portraits are definitive expressions of this endeavor. However, as an artist that seeks inspiration from the old masters, her attention to detail, and moreover to flesh, has been extensive in her work.

The lifelike nature of human portraits was considerably intensified by the introduction of oil paint. Already in the 14th century it was documented that for the depiction of thin, translucent glazes oil painting techniques were associated.¹¹¹ Since the artist alters her pictorial technique in relation to the subject represented, Marlene Dumas specifically chose for her *The Eyes of the Night Creature* series the procedure of oil paint. This way, her subjects could receive the depiction that was traditionally seen as the closest to reality. Nonetheless, besides the continuation of a highly-praised representation, it shows the artist’s strong attention to detail and significance. By appropriating a long-established artistic medium, the artist succeeds to personalize her paintings in a modern and creative way.

In his *Schilderboek*, Karel van Mander described a detailed step-by-step instruction on how to paint bodies and implicitly flesh color: after carefully observing the body (variation and condition of skin color), follows the choice of relevant pigments (material proprieties, discoloration), and finally the application of paint (number of hues, shadings, heightening,

¹¹⁰ C Butler, *Op. cit.*, p. 155.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 100-101.

application and manipulation of the paint)¹¹². Observing Marlene Dumas' oeuvre, we can see that her creational process perfectly fits the scheme: from carefully observing her photographed subjects, she renders the character in a matter that is speaking from her thoughts, and thus employs multiple paint layers in a clever and metaphorical way. Viewing it from this angle, the artist's creational process follows the traditional technique of pictorial representation, emphasizing the artist's interest in the history of painting. However, some details bear the sign of modernity, thus aiding Marlene Dumas' art in defining the contemporary discourse of figurative painting.

Through art history the representation of the human skin has been approached from different angles and studied by the greatest masters of all time. With the passing of centuries it has gained more prestige and become the signature of highly distinguished painters. Though it is of main importance in the art history of Western painting, the crucial role of flesh color has only recently been subject to art historical research, and has been scrutinized only in art of the past centuries (in works pertaining to artists such as Titian, Rubens, Van Eyck). Marlene Dumas is a painter whose works are imbued with art historical allusions; her works allude to Theodore Gericault, Hans Holbein, Egon Schiele, and Leon Golub; therefore the element of skin color acquires great significance.

Painting human flesh has always proved difficult, and for various reasons. Firstly, it has always been highly analyzed by viewers, because as in real life, one uses the appearance of skin to help determine the main characteristics of the sitter, be these details about sex, age, gender, health or even emotional feelings. Second, skin is a very complex substance composed of many subtle nuances which require considerable ability to render in all its density. Also, skin is extremely different from individual to individual, and in order to have an accurate rendition, the artist needs to create fluent transitions between colors and textures, natural and unnatural, and coloring of the figures and their environment.¹¹³ Because flesh color is not a regular color but tied to the object it denotes, it achieves high importance in the matter of representation.

Ann-Sophie Lehmann presents a brief history throughout the centuries of the importance of flesh painting in her article *Fleshing out the body*¹¹⁴. She emphasizes that antique sources and

¹¹² Ann-Sophie Lehmann, "Fleshing out the body", in *Body and Embodiment in Netherlandish art*, Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek, Zwolle, Waanders, 2008, p. 99.

¹¹³ Ibidem, p. 88.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., p. 93.

recipes included Byzantine and early medieval compilations, devoting a considerable amount of attention to the painting of the human skin. Compilations including elaborate chapters on the subject were found in various European locations, and by the beginning of the 15th century varied terminology for the depiction of skin was acknowledged. These terms constantly developed in the coming centuries; nowadays many of these terms have been forgotten or simply ignored. However, in all this process of mixing, the judgment of the painter was undoubtedly addressed, with the recommendation to vary body tints in order to avoid repetition and to ensure that the flesh achieved the desired color. The conclusion of this fact is the high importance this particular feature of a painting has had throughout the centuries and how this developed and changed with the passing of years. Marlene Dumas is an artist deeply involved with this aspect of her works, and her choice of paint was not accidental. Furthermore, her subjects' flesh is depicted with great care, for several reasons.

These constant endeavors for high quality skin depiction represent a confirmation of the effect of the myth of the living art work inspired from Pygmalion and his famous sculpture. In order to achieve a lively animation in painting, thorough attention was needed to be given to skin representation. In some of Marlene Dumas' oeuvre the effect of life is accomplished with the aid of the eyes and gaze, as discussed in the previous chapter, but as well with the aid of skin. The very colorful skin that both women in *Het Kwaad is Banaal* and *Genetiesse Heimwee* possess make them appear genuinely alive before us. The multilayered colored flesh conveys their inner feelings upon their faces, thus making their experiences and thoughts visible to the public, and as a result making them present in an aspect of real life. Even though her palette often bears no realistic relation to the subjects depicted, it is this abstractness that brings the characters to life. The artist desired to talk about the abstract aspects of human life, and these came to the surface on the skin of the characters. Even if *Albino* and the woman from *The White Disease* do not appear in front of our eyes as strikingly 'alive' characters, but more like ghostly apparitions and holograms, these characters are actually living, because of their existence as a token of a real life. Though artists of the previous centuries tried to attain the most faithful representation of the human skin with elaborate theories and pictorial formulas, the characters frequently lacked life-like aspects. Trying to attain impeccable replicas of the sitters, they somewhat neglected life-giving details. Marlene Dumas did not try to give life to her subjects by means of photographic elements, but succeeded to breathe life into her characters via other means. Even if her

characters' skin is imbued with non-realistic elements, the manner by which these subjects bear their features allow them to come to life.

In former years it was held that flesh color needed to be properly mixed and made, implying that it derives its quality not only from the price and purity of pigments but also from the skill of the person who mixed it. Despite working with pigments that might not represent the human flesh in a veridical sense, Marlene Dumas works with technique and pigments in several ways. First of all, the basic colors used to mix skin were red, ochre and lead white¹¹⁵, colors that are used in most of these portraits. Furthermore, the way these colors appear and mix on the surface of the canvas denotes a thorough attention to the skin detail and to the message it bears. The artist made sure the colors she used for rendering the flesh of these subjects speaks of their origin and essence. *Genetiese Heimwee*'s skin is a mixture of colors that represent a factual blend of human race colors, *Het Kwaad is Banaal* uses a powerful white to allude to her actual white origins, *The White Disease* uses a ghostly shade of white that alludes to her illness, and even if the *Albino*'s color is not clearly definable, a faded shade of brown comes to light under his dirty-white (apparent) skin color.

In another of her essays discussing the importance of flesh depiction, Ann-Sophie Lehmann¹¹⁶ has called attention to the evolution of skin painting in the era of modernity. Since numerous changes in pictorial representation began with Picasso, it is interesting to observe and analyze details of his works. His subjects and pictorial techniques have undergone notable changes, but flesh and flesh color remained important in the artist's oeuvre. One of his most famous works, *Les Femmes d'Alger*, provides a strong example of this, where he employed up to five or six flesh tones. In this image it is easily observable that within the contours of the figures, the brushstrokes follow regular strokes that smoothly pursue the movements of the body. Rubens had utilized the same triad of colors (yellow, red and blue) in depicting the skin of his characters, therefore highlighting that the usage of red and blue is not really a modern invention at all.

Though contemporaries were shocked by the brutality this new way of painting implied, the manner with which the skin reflected the correct sensibility attested to the progress of an

¹¹⁵ Ibid., p. 93.

¹¹⁶ A. S. Lehmann, *Vlees kleur*, in *Kunstschrift*, 42ste Jaargang, no. 5, September/October 1998, p. 20-21. The article is dedicated to the evolution of flesh depiction mostly in the art of the past centuries, but makes a valid point of this continuation in the twentieth century.

artistic quest. The same can be observed in Marlene Dumas' oeuvre; the way she renders flesh merits plenty of attention. This fact serves as evidence that skin has continued to be a prominent aspect of figurative painting, although with the modernist transitions it has fallen out of mainstream attention. Despite diminished interest in continuing tradition after the Second World War, painters still became enamored with flesh color. As Willem de Kooning put it, *at one time it was very daring to make a figure red or blue - I think now it is just as daring to make it flesh-colored*. In De Kooning's case, not only did his art go one step further, overcoming the painting of flesh, but it also acquired an agreement between subject matter and skin color. The same harmony has emerged in Marlene Dumas' *Eyes of the Night Creatures* series.

III.c. The choice of color and the Eyes of the Night Creatures

As previously discussed, skin holds a leading role in defining the portraits in *The Eyes of the Night Creatures*. In these portraits Marlene Dumas plays with the double meanings of the color repertoire, attributing numerous meanings to the multiple skin layers. Though the faces are not depicted with the traditional mixes used for attaining the most truthful appearance, the artist still employs the basic colors and makes use of these in a psychological and metaphorical way. As a witness of modern life, she returns the touch of the painter's hand to the symbolic.

It is of high importance to discuss these portraits again with the aid of iconography and iconology, for the works are imbued with significance from a myriad of angles. Most interpretations given to Marlene Dumas' works are personal assertions resultant from a thorough contextualization of the works in their time of creation, but I see it of high significance to analyze these as well from an art historical context. Though the artist comes from a different historical background, she has proven herself to be a painter interested in tradition and continuity. While she offers her subjects to the public for intimate interpretations, she still confers to them her personal touch, through the usage of certain elements that are speaking of her intentions.

The image of the woman in *White Disease* has been acknowledged as the face of guilt and shame, and the presence of a disease that comes from the inside and reflects on the outside. The ghostly appearance of her face and presence is rendered with the help of a white spot of color. White is generally accepted as the color that purifies thoughts and actions, offering mental aid, and here enabling fresh beginnings. The translucent paints that help attain the specter-like

quality speak of the character's life experience, and the chosen colors provide insight on her moral and mental state.

Genetiesse Heimwee is a portrait that employs multiple colors and layers for depicting the character's body. All of these tints bear a symbolic meaning, as well as their juxtaposition in the sitter's portrait. For the depiction of the woman's face, a dark grayish mask of color is utilized. It is generally considered that gray is the color of knowledge, wisdom and intellect; hence the composition of the brain as "grey matter". By depicting this color on the face of the character, the artist might be suggestive of her acknowledgement of the general political climate, and facts that provoke this "genetic longing". Furthermore, a "grey mood" is attributed to melancholy or unhappiness. The portrayed has long black hair and is also clothed in black. The color black is seen as authoritative and powerful, and depicted on a large area it becomes overwhelming. By means of this color the portrait attracts attention to itself; furthermore its subject becomes authoritarian, involving the viewer in its existence. Black clothing is generally worn as well by priests and judges, summoning judgmental and forgiving qualities for the sitter at the same time. This color is also a sign of mourning in numerous cultures, therefore the woman may be wearing a coat of grief. The forehead, as well as part of the neck and hands of the woman, is depicted in red, a color that has more personal associations than any other color. Depicting this on the essential parts of the body, the artist might be alluding to herself, and thus she appears to the viewers as a person that shares the same feelings as her subject. The hands are illustrated with the aid of a mixture of the colors red, orange and yellow, possibly alluding to a mixture of races and population. Yellow though, is seen as a symbol of hope and faith, speaking perhaps about the trust the artist still has in general reconciliation.

Het Kwaad is Banaal represents the artist's self-portrait with very fair colors, alluding to her origins. Her hair is a powerful mixture of orange and yellow, colors that appear stronger in contrast to the hand, which is mostly stained by a dark grayish tinge. As discussed before, dark gray tones often service negative connotations; in this instance, they are seen as an allusion to the sins of her white fellow citizens. The black figure, on which the character seems to be leaning, is in direct opposition to the portrait's exceedingly white skin. On one hand, this could allude to racial contrast, the white face being above the stained hand that leans on the black object, but as well as to hope and forgiveness.

The *Albino* man – similar to *The White Disease* – has a phantom-like appearance, again caused by the disease which has infected the man’s body. Translucent paints are applied to represent his face, and on his forehead a whitish substance is conspicuous; his chin acquires a brownish aspect. This is primarily a reference to his racial origins, but also the color brown can be seen as the color of self-discipline, thus speaking to the endurance of the colored populace.

These subjects are created in a two-dimensional space, invading their medium with sometimes violent and unreal colors. Marlene Dumas’ paintings are stratified in the sense that her canvases, even those on which the handling is most liquid or graphic, develop out of a slow layering of the pigment.¹¹⁷ As a consequence, the paint is spread with slender impasto effects, reminiscent of neo-expressionism. Dumas’ art cannot strictly be categorized as pertaining to a certain style, but her brush strokes become visible at times, denoting a strong passionate impulse when realizing the paintings. The painterly style makes use of visual effects such as contrasting colors, broad brush strokes, sketchiness and impasto, thus enabling more dynamism to the works. Marlene Dumas’ portraits completely pertain to what is called the category of painterly, for all the effects used in depicting these lead to the realization of an expressive painted figure.

Though realized in the technique of oil paint, all of these portraits are depicted with water-saturated colors. The translucent appearance of these faces is chosen for a well-established purpose: water-saturated colors lend the portraits and their physical and physiognomic plasticity an unreal, immaterial transparency. Skin and faces become lucid. In cautious detail, the fluid coloration and outlining depict an indifferent psychosomatic state. Powerful body language is delicately painted; soft and severe facial features are woven into one another. The human appearance has the effect of being a transparent “body”, where a symbiosis of form and content is easily noticeable.¹¹⁸ The allusive proprieties of water-saturated colors suggest the fugitive nature of life and the bleak circumstances of death. We are reminded that the crimes perpetrated against humanity – discrimination, violence, brutality, murder – are registered in and on our flesh.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁷ I. Bonacossa, *Op. cit.*, p. 8.

¹¹⁸ T. Osterwold, *Op. cit.*, p. 16.

¹¹⁹ E. Bedford, *Op. cit.*, p. 44.

III.d. Watercolors

Marlene Dumas is a complex artist: she renders her subjects with diverse approaches. In contrast to her oil paintings, which try to evade mass-media stereotypical manipulation, her watercolors offer an easier and more frivolous manner of expression. *Being married to oil painting, it's a relief to have a much more irresponsible affair with watercolors.*¹²⁰ With the aid of watercolors she further develops her “firsthand experience” created on the basis of “secondhand material” (the transference of the personal image into the abstract character of the painting by employing images, which for their part use other images),¹²¹ but this time, with a different attitude. In these “drawings” she develops the media-specific characteristics of photographic reproduction in order to carry out her conceptual strategy: the pretense of the characteristics attacks the viewers, making them insecure about themselves and about the interpretations of facial expressions.¹²² While her oil paints present themselves with a graver attitude, the watercolors denote a more playful approach. However, the end result upon scrutinizing Marlene Dumas’ work is unanimous: art bears hidden meanings, which are juggled between terms as appearance and reality, disguise and credibility, then left, for the viewers to decide their fate.

The artist’s water-colors not only imply water as a vehicle, but rather as an elementary, forming substance. Her paintings also share part of this facet; her portraits sustainably make use of water in defining their expression. In his essay *Tender, loathsome, shrewd and ecstatic*¹²³, Jean-Christophe Amman attributed Marlene Dumas to the water cultures, and her thorough employment of water as a sign of her desire to penetrate even the smallest cracks. He considered that one could go so far as to assign the color of the water a temperature, a structure *that guides the brush and is in a position to turn the notion of a smile upside down*¹²⁴. The central point of this essay attributes to the artist’s water-paints the quality of transporting a message, a mood, and an essence. The moment the contact occurs between the brush, the water, the paint, and the

¹²⁰ M. Dumas, “Wet dreams”, in Thomas Knubben, Tilman Osterwold (eds.), *Marlene Dumas wet dreams. watercolors*, Ravensburg, Hatje Cantz, 2003, p. 46.

¹²¹ T. Osterwold, *Op. cit.*, p. 24.

¹²² *Ibidem*, p. 40.

¹²³ Jean-Christophe Amman, “Tender, loathsome, shrewd and ecstatic”, in in Thomas Knubben, Tilman Osterwold (eds.), *Marlene Dumas wet dreams. watercolors*, Ravensburg, Hatje Cantz, 2003, p. 112.

¹²⁴ *Ibidem*, 110.

paper, a fusion occurs, which transforms the work's central idea, guiding it through its countless uncertain outcomes.

III.e. Conclusion

The artist tackled pictorial representation in the century of lived art because painting, throughout the centuries, has been seen as the foundation stone of visual arts. The discursive nature of painting is persuasively useful, due to its characteristics of possessing a never-ending web of representations. It does often share the irony implicit in any conscious endeavor these days, but can transcend it, to represent it.¹²⁵ Painting thus offers its viewers a complete picture of life, but not as a mimetic representation, but rather as a reconstruction of a personal experience. It is with the aid of painting that artists throughout the centuries have left to posterity their enchanting or miserable assertions of the world, making it possible for us to comprehend a tiny part of our shared past.

Figurative art has always held a leading role in communication between the artists and their subjects and viewers, and the way this was done is of major importance for artists and art history simultaneously. The study of flesh depiction has been more or less ignored throughout art historical research mostly because it was seen as such an evident feature. It seems so naturally understood that human flesh needs to be depicted carefully and thoroughly, but few have actually investigated the means by which this was made possible. Naturally, the old masters hold a leading role in dealing with skin, and thus received priority in investigation. Because of the controversies experienced in the art of the last decades, painting has been pushed aside, and furthermore, flesh depiction might have appeared as an inexistent subject to research. But this is not entirely true. In an era when the proliferation of mass-media has been at its height, artists such as Marlene Dumas have taken for themselves the role of figurative painters, according as much attention to skin details as the old masters. Even though the artist's palette is not a realistic one, it truly speaks about reality.

Marlene Dumas' flesh color is important to study in these four portraits because they are imbued with the artist's metaphor. Moreover, it is only with this form of analysis that the portraits achieve their meaning at full potential; in Dumas' oeuvre, content, form and medium are interlinked terms. Without either of these it would be impossible for these subjects to carry

¹²⁵ Thomas Lawson, *Last Exit: Painting*, Artforum, no. 20, October 1981, p. 45.

their ultimate message, and impossible for the observer to fully grasp them in their complex nature. The importance of understanding the artist's choice of oil paint is essential for these works since in this manner the viewers are one step closer to understanding the intentions behind the artistic creation, and can penetrate deeper the work's essence.

Conclusion

As seen so far, Marlene Dumas' oeuvre has an exceptionally complex nature. It is art that does not come into existence by any sort of chance; it is the result of long contemplation and devotion to the subject matter. The chosen series and the portraits under discussion bear a significant role in the artist's body of work. Furthermore, they are invested with a noteworthy power both in defining Marlene Dumas' artistic style and her contribution to the discourse of contemporary art.

The Eyes of the Night Creatures, but also many other series, have been discussed on several occasions. Most of these were done in the context of group and solo exhibitions, and as a result they have received a myriad of interpretations and contextualization. Marlene Dumas' paintings are known for their openness, and consequently juxtaposing her work with that of such figures like the famous painter Francis Bacon, the photographer Anton Corbijn, the fashion designer Martin Margiela or the video artist Marijke Warmerdam have been of great success.

But in this context of great popularity and achievement, was Marlene Dumas' oeuvre thoroughly understood and studied? It has been the main question of this research to reveal the best method of investigating and analyzing Marlene Dumas' oeuvre, and furthermore, why is this method justified? This question arose after an elaborate research of the written materials about the artist's work, which in my opinion, lacked an equal meticulous analysis of all the compositional elements of a work of art. That is why in this research I equally scrutinized the series *The Eyes of the Night Creatures* by means of content, form, and medium.

The way Marlene Dumas has created her paintings deserves deeper study. It is not sufficient to grasp her meanings and content, but not the means by which this has come to life. Hans-Georg Gadamer talked about beauty as the congruency and transparency of form and content. In Marlene Dumas' case, medium is just as powerful as content or form, thus remodeling the philosopher's idea. The entailment of these three terms is therefore essential to the artist's body of work, subtly molding the final outcome of these paintings. Colors are all activated in their union and form a body that takes the shape of a portrait, and which put together give meaning to the subject. *The eternal triangle of form-content-medium has middle, and this*

*center is the reflection of self in the other – the personal and metaphorical alter-ego which is echoed in artistic expression.*¹²⁶

I find it essential for the better understanding of these portraits to have them studied from the three proposed angles. It is important to give extended attention to their content since these paintings are metaphorically alive, simultaneously carrying a message and reality in a concrete form. These subjects are always ready for an unpredictable confrontation, thus enabling comprehension of a factual situation through artistic creativity. It is of high significance to extend the interpretation of Marlene Dumas' message to other non-artistic theoretical frameworks, since a piece of art can be fully understood only when seen in its larger context. Baudrillard's *Transparency of Evil* offers the opportunity of a deeper contextualization, and the optic that the philosopher proposes consequently gives a more accurate understanding of the concept of other, otherness, and thus racial discrimination. Seeing Marlene Dumas' oeuvre through Baudrillard's concept of evil brings the viewer one interpretation closer to the understanding of such a complex phenomenon as apartheid, and its fatal consequences on *man kind*.

The form used to express these somber conditions has been carefully chosen by the artist, who deliberately opted for the usage of the human body as a container for her messages. It is widely acknowledged that the artist used the human figure as a form for her art, but this argument has never been extensively scrutinized. It is vital for an art work to be understood from all sides, and thus a more thorough study of the employment of portraiture should be performed. As mentioned before, Ernst van Alphen has conducted research on portraiture in contemporary art, and has investigated the usage of the genre in some of the artist's works, but the topic is yet far from exhaustion. As seen in the previous chapters, portraiture as a genre has been largely employed, and even though it was at times on the verge of rejection, it has always survived and revived. In expressing Marlene Dumas' ideas, a portrait is absolutely essential because the artist seeks to create a humane art. It is not solely the discourse of terror, but also the discourse of trust. It needs the human face to emphasize the horror, but it also needs the human face to bring forth dignity and hope.

Generally, content and form have been acknowledged to be of prominent relevance for a work of art, but in Marlene Dumas' case all three elements share the same value. Her portraits

¹²⁶ T. Osterwold, *Op. cit.*, p. 20.

would have not been capable to acquire the moving statements they bear of without the support of painting. The artist has chosen this medium to speak of the horrors of the world in a warmer, more familiar way. With the aid of paint the artist intimately related to her subjects. This artistic medium offered her the space of representing a complete picture of her personal experience, but not as a mimetic representation, but rather as a subjective reconstruction. She has explained on several occasions why she chose this medium and not one that has gained ground in the era of technological evolution. With the aid of paint she received the liberty to imbue her subject's skin with subtle metaphors, thus attaining the pictorial poems she has wished for.

One of the reasons for which Dumas' oeuvre acquired a preeminent content-based interpretation is because, currently, art is largely seen as being conceptual. This is though not entirely the case of Marlene Dumas. In her body of work content, form, and medium are in continuous communication. Even though it is evident that the content needs to bear a form, and the form gets shape with the aid of a medium, few have actually elaborated on the artist's oeuvre in this manner. The intertwinement of these elements has been accurately mentioned in some of the presented literature, but never sufficiently examined. Another aspect that has been somewhat diminished in Marlene Dumas' paintings due to the politicization of her content was the loss of the humane aspect of her works. These last few decades have become extremely political, and as Jean Baudrillard has stated, specificity and boundaries have disappeared, thus resulting in a state that is dominated by political views. In her works from the '80s, Marlene Dumas has been highly influenced by her racially dominated past, originating from a country that experienced the system of apartheid. But this fact does not convert her work into an exclusively political and conceptual body of work. On the contrary, with the aid of wonderful pictorial statements, the artist has tried to generate attention for the humane aspects of life.

With the aid of this research I have demonstrated that Marlene Dumas' series *The Eyes of the Night Creatures* has not yet been exhaustively studied, and that by paying equal attention to all the compositional aspect of a contemporary painting, one can attain more fruitful meanings and results. Since Marlene Dumas herself desired that her paintings never exhaust their meanings, it is with the aid of critical theory that the study of her work remains open. Postmodern critical theory, as an emerging method in the field of contemporary art, literature, and cultural studies offers the optimal methodological framework to pursue a comparative, dialogic and improvisational study of an art work. This research has contributed to the better

understanding of Marlene Dumas' body of work, both in its historic and artistic context. As well, it has added new assertions in the debate of postcolonial theory concerning the international positioning of art coming from outside Europe. To clearly answer the research question of this dissertation, Marlene Dumas' works should always be equally studied from the perspective of content, form, and medium, because it is only in this manner that one can thoroughly explore the intentions behind the artistic creation. If when analyzing the artist's oeuvre one of these aspects is disregarded, the interpretation of the works tends to a more radical reading, losing part of their artistic charm.

To conclude, it has been my goal to demonstrate that it is impossible to grasp Marlene Dumas' whole artistic intention and message without continuously linking and connecting the three basic elements of a work. By seeing these portraits from the proposed angles, I sought to give a new meaning to the whole body of work. Regardless, I think Marlene Dumas' appeal lies in the fact that she offers so much ingenious material, that it becomes a pleasure to continuously investigate and link her subjects to our surrounding world.

Artist Biography

Marlene Dumas was born in 1953 at Kuils River, on the outskirts of Cape Town in South Africa. She earned her bachelor's degree at Michaelis School of Fine art at the University of Cape Town from 1972 to 1975. For her forming as an artist, this was a highly crucial period since it was now when she came in contact with diverse people and ideas and cultural beliefs. When she was only twenty-three years old she decided to move to Europe, and she chose Holland to study and view Western art. In Amsterdam she joined Ateliers '63 in Harlem, a place where she came to observe and respond to the culture, politics and ideas of apartheid. Being an artist interested in more sides of the artistic creation, she decided to enroll to the Psychology Institute at the University of Amsterdam, and obtained a degree in 1980.

Her first solo exhibition took place at Galerie Annemarie de Kruyff in Paris, a period when she occupied herself mostly with works on paper. These represent a combination of collages, drawings in either ink or pencil, cut-outs from diverse media sources, and sporadically even objects. All these objects from her first solo exhibition were presented in another exhibition, this time at Galerie Paul Andriessse in Amsterdam, under the title *Unsatisfied Desire*. Most of these works have dealt with her past and personal life, and shortly after this Marlene Dumas returned to painting and clearly defined some of the topics she would research in her future endeavors.

Some of the notable solo exhibitions of the 1980s and 1990s number *The Eyes of the Night Creatures* at Galerie Paul Andriessse, Amsterdam in 1985, *Waiting for Meaning* at the Kunsthall Kiel, Kiel in 1988, *Miss Interpreted* at the Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, in 1992, *Give the People What They Want* at Zeno X Gallery, Antwerp, 1993, *Not From Here* at Jack Tilton Gallery, New York, in 1994, *The Particularity of Being Human: Francis Bacon/Marlene Dumas* at Malmo Konsthall, Sweden and Castello di Rivoli, Turin in 1995, *Models* at Salzburger Kunstverein, Portikus, Frankfurt am Main in the same year, *Miss World* at Galerie Paul Andriessse, Amsterdam in 1999, and so on.

In the early eighties she produced some of her most significant works portraying numerous faces, which she grouped in certain categories: the models, the rejects, the black,

the troubled. All her subjects received the same attention and care, transforming Marlene Dumas in one of the most successful artists of her time. To prove this fact since 1982 she has been invited in the most preeminent art shows around the world, starting with Documenta 7 in Kasel, where she was a guest again in 1992. In 1984 she participated in the sixth Sidney Biennial and in 1995 at the Johannesburg Biennial. Her artistic creation has only grown and developed in the last decade, displaying a witty and optimistic vision of all her protagonists. Amongst the last solo shows she has participated in we can mention *Nom de Personne* at the Musee National D'art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou in 2001, *Marlene Dumas: Wet Dreams* at Stadtische Gallerie Ragensburg, Germany in 2003, *Man Kind* at Galerie Paul Andriessse, Amsterdam in 2006, *Broken White* at the Metropolitan Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, *Marlene Dumas: measuring your own grave* at the Museum for Contemporary Art, Los Angeles in 2008.

Today, we can find Marlene Dumas' works in the most important and renowned collections, such as: the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, the MOMA in New York, the MOCA in Los Angeles, the Stedelijk in Amsterdam and Tate Modern in London. Clearly, the artist is still actively involved in defining the discourse of contemporary art, and her contribution to today's cultural dialog shall appear on several other occasions.

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Figure 11: Young Man, 2002-2005, series of 12 watercolors on paper, each 45x35 cm, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam

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Figure 1. Binders containing Marlene Dumas' image bank in her studio 2008



Figure 2. Genetiese Heimwee 1984



Figure 3. Het Kwaad is Banaal 1984



Figure 4. The White Disease 1985

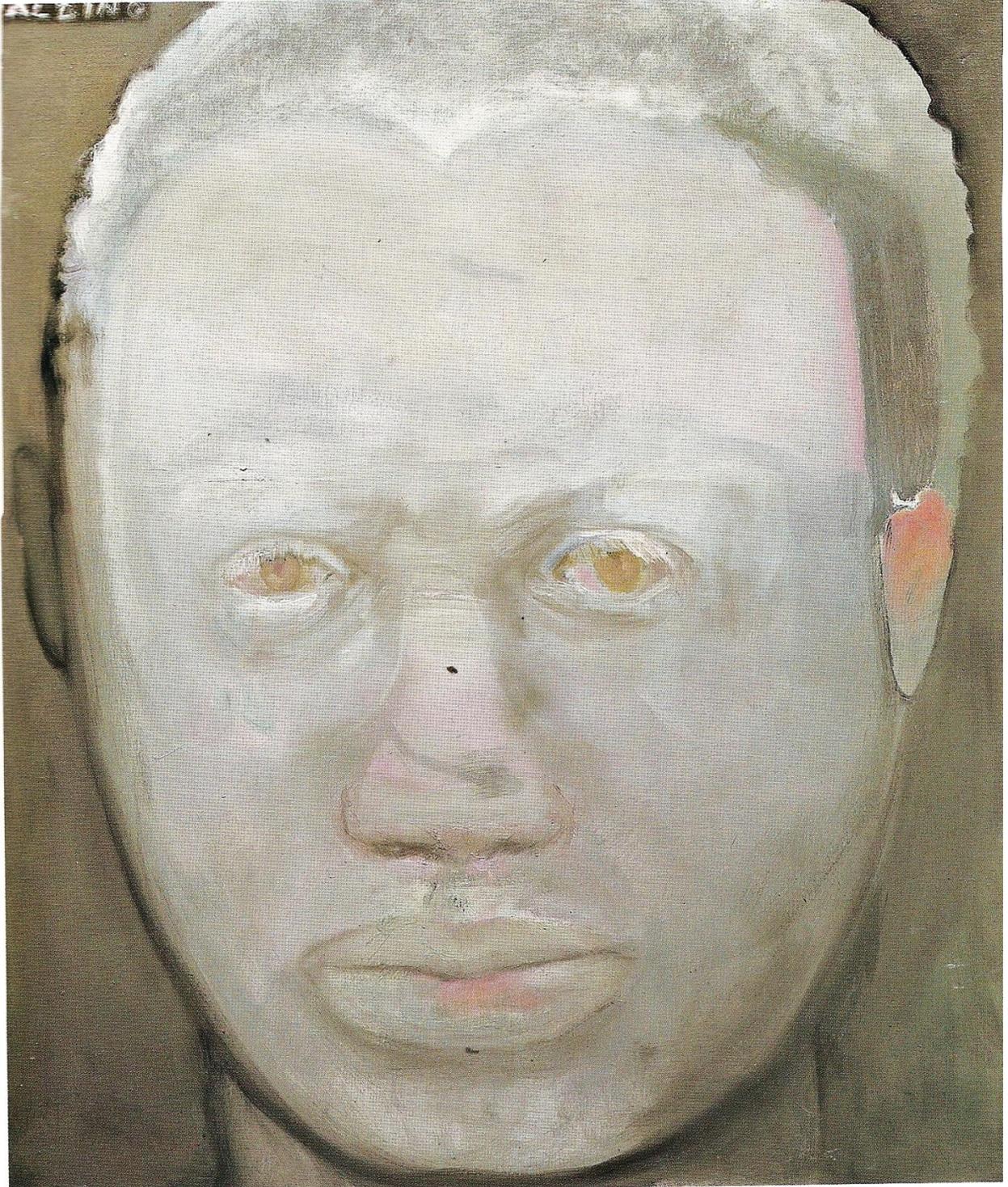


Figure 5. Albino 1986



Figure 6. An African Mickey Mouse 1991



Figure 7. Die Hotnottsgod 1985

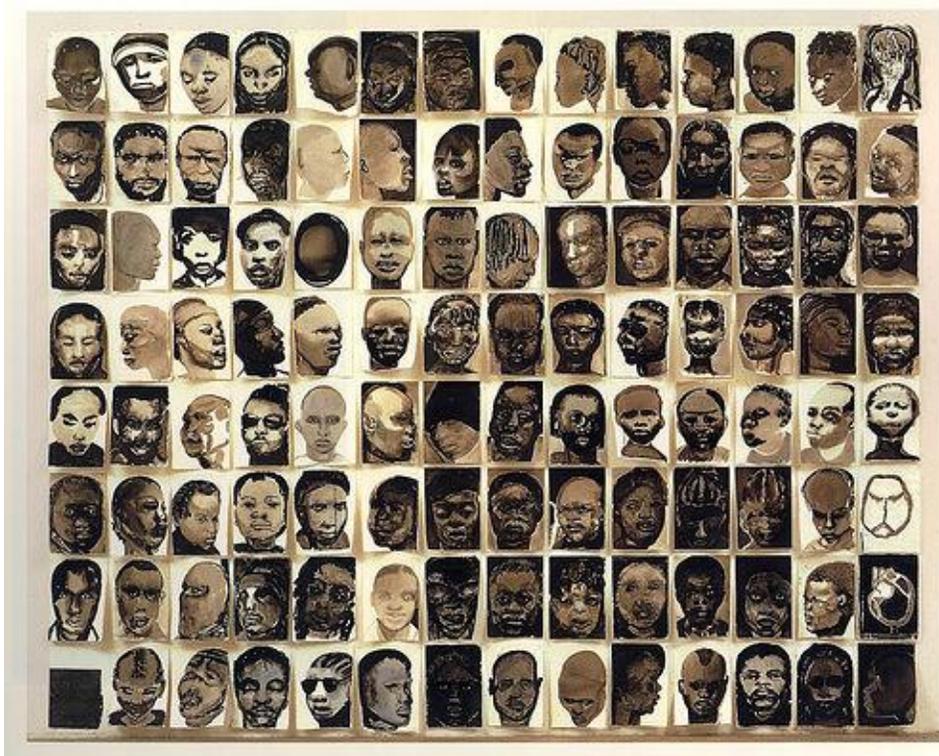


Figure 8. Black Drawings 1991-1992



Figure 9. The Teacher (sub a) 1987

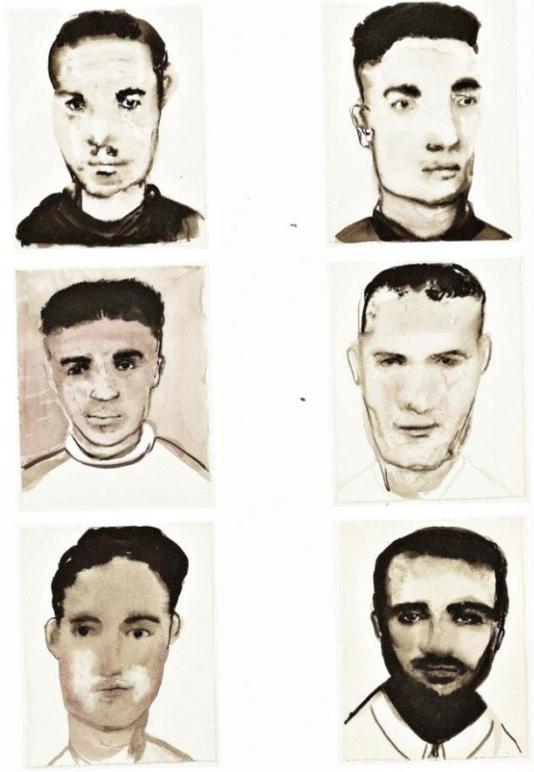


Figure 10. Young Man 2002-2005

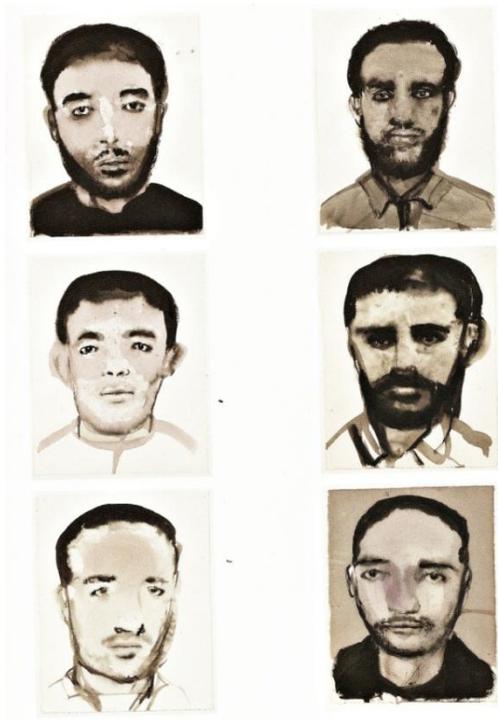


Figure 11. Young Man 2002-2005

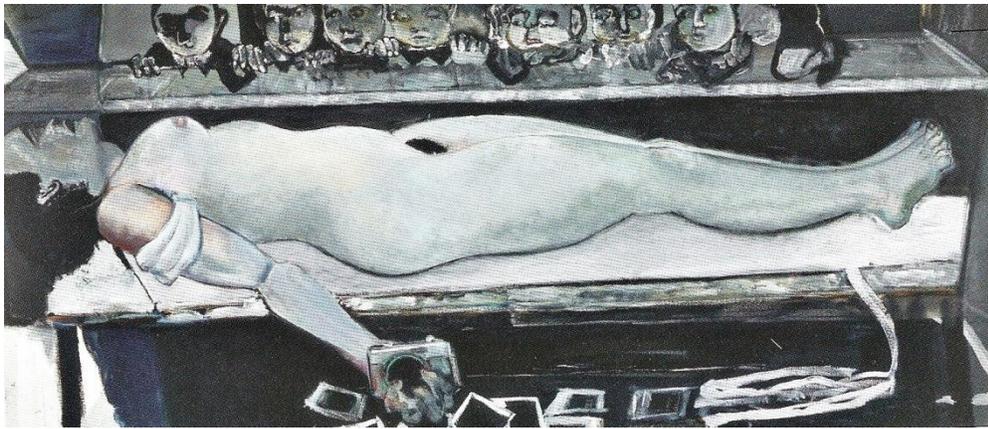


Figure 12. Snow White and the Broken Arm 1988



Figure 13. Snow White in the Wrong Story 1988



Figure 14. The First People 1991

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