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Contours of a lost profile: the human Marlene Dumas' touching brush

*"I paint because I'm a religious woman.
(I believe in eternity)"*

Marlene Dumas

This article¹ focuses on the works of the (South African born) Dutch artist Marlene Dumas. The question it deals with is whether or not her work can be defined as religious art. In one obvious way it is clearly not religious art because it serves no institutional church goal. Are these paintings religious then, because they have Mary Magdalene and Jesus as subjects; or in more recent years, orthodox Muslim and Jewish men? Perhaps the possibilities of the religious lie in other features of her work?² The answer will be sought within the oeuvre of the artist, and within the large-scale reception of her work. As we will see, the answer cannot be a simple yes or no to either of the above-mentioned possibilities.

Forbidden lovers

To my knowledge, no-one has asked these particular questions before about Dumas' art and so this article will be essayistic and heuristic. The best way to start this heuristic search is to quote Marlene Dumas from a book in which she brings together her writings on art, on life, on photography and human relations:

"Why do I so often write in the style of love about art? Because the talk of forbidden lovers and the language of art have a lot in common. Love is the most wonderful

¹ For Hedwig Meyer-Wilmes, in gratitude.

² Due to copyright reason I refer to the Internet for images of Marlene Dumas. My personal favourite is a painting called *The Painter*.

when it has to live in secret, when it isn't really allowed; when it is sanctioned by everyone, and the lovers now officially belong together, its nature changes."³

In other words, the languages of art and of forbidden love have a lot in common. But you can also write in the style of love about religion. I will treat Dumas' art and the (undefined) religious as secret lovers. And it is my intention to change their relation by trying to find and give texture to the secret. Art, religion, and the thrilling ecstasy of a forbidden love, can make us aware that we are alive. It is the longing that keeps us moving, and looking for new horizons. By engaging in Dumas' proposed discourse of the "secret lover", I hope to touch on a kind of revelation, a truth mediated in paint; following Dumas when she talks about (her) art: "The aim is to 'reveal', not to 'display'. It is the discourse of the Lover. I am intimately involved with my subject matter."⁴ I allow myself to be intimately involved with her art, and to see what will be revealed.

It is extremely hard to interpret Dumas' work. Of course, all real art is hard to interpret, but in this case it is even harder. This is because the subjects of her paintings are always so clear on one level: people, bodies, faces, and lately walls. A "Dumas" can be recognized easily. All her work has the human body and being for a subject. Man and women, children (mostly girls), and even dead people are painted and drawn in oil, ink and pencil. The lives (and deaths) of human beings, like you and me but also celebrities, like Marilyn Monroe, are put on canvas and paper; free flowing, in fluid paint and different formats.

Sometimes the humans are life sized and sometimes they are even bigger than life itself. But the ambiguity of their meaning prevents us from any simplistic interpretation. Her paintings and drawings always point to something "beneath" the surface – beneath the linen, paper, and paint, pencil or ink. Clearly, it is Dumas' intention to confuse. She describes her images as having a *Pornographic Tendency*

"at the moment my art is situated between
the pornographic tendency to reveal everything
and the erotic inclination to hide
what it's all about."⁵

³ Marlene Dumas, *Sweet Nothings: notes and texts* (De Balie: Amsterdam 1998), 136.

⁴ Dumas, *Sweet Nothings*, 62.

⁵ Dumas, *Sweet Nothings*, 149.

The curator of the exhibition *One Hundred Models and Endless Rejects* emphasises this specific Dumasian quality in a text called 'Open to Interpretation'⁶:

“The sexualized dynamics of this relationship between painter, image, and spectator is central to Dumas’s work. (...) the viewer is lulled into a (false) sense of intimacy. Dumas achieves this through the manipulation of simple effects – eyes focused directly on the viewer, cropped figures situated in the foremost spaces of the canvas and no background distraction (...). ...it is a specifically painterly emotion in which looking and being looked at are inseparable, and showing one’s own gaze is to make oneself visible.”

I accept Dumas’ invitation to “complete the story”, and not only try to unravel the secret that is hidden in her paintings, but also make myself “visible” in the process: “The audience is part of the meaning-making process. (...) The audience is an accomplice in completing the story. (...) The relationship is between equals.”⁷

Who is Marlene Dumas?

Marlene Dumas was born in South Africa in 1953, from a Dutch-French descent. The year of her birth was the same year in which the Public Safety Act and the Criminal Law Amendment Act were passed, which empowered the government to declare stringent states of emergency and increased penalties for protesting against or supporting the repeal of this law. In 1976 Dumas moved to Holland for further art study at the prestigious Ateliers '63 in Haarlem. After this she studied psychology for a year but returned to art, or to be more specific, to painting. She is a painter, almost despite herself, as she likes to point out time after time. In the beginning she wanted to make art like all the other students did, meaning anything but painting. Her special talent nevertheless kept pushing her to paint, pencil, paper and canvas. This apparently inescapable 'call' brought her worldwide fame. Recently Elsevier Magazine elected her “most important Dutch artist”⁸. Dumas is the subject of numerous

⁶ Jessica Morgan, “Open to Interpretation,” in: Marlene Dumas, *One hundred Models and Endless Rejects* (The Institute of Contemporary Art Boston / Hatje Cantz Publishers: Ostfildern-Ruit and Boston 2001), 11.

⁷ Dumas, *Sweet Nothings*, 104.

⁸ www.elsevier.nl, May 12th 2011. “Marlene Dumas belangrijkste kunstenaars” A leading motive for the election probably was the sky high prices that have to be paid for her works. Her latest pictures are sold for a million euro’s a piece.

solo- and group exhibitions world wide, and of catalogues, books and magazines.⁹ In 2008 she was the highest earning living female artist, selling paintings worth millions.

We must make space for ambiguity¹⁰

Being a painter (and not merely an artist, broadly defined) is, in my opinion, precisely the most intriguing thing about her. The secret lies in the way Dumas uses her material. The hand of the Mistress is recognized in the loose handling of the paint. Because of the fluidity it almost floats on the surface, finding its own way and defining its own borders. But she doesn't paint chaos or infinite colour surfaces. No, she is the Mistress who flirts with her subject but sets her own, pigmented, boundary. She is also the Mistress in the sense that she is always present and not present at the same time. She makes the artwork, but she also lets the 'becoming' artwork control her hand. She is adept at putting herself in a position in which she cannot be grasped in any way. What is so intriguing about her person (as far as we know) is that she has always belonged to the powerful group within society. She was white in South Africa; she is a very successful female artist. But at the same time, she is always (or wants to be) the outsider; the one who is non-dominant. And she always paints people who come from this group but who, at the same time, remain very much in control.

Dumas:

"Firstly I have to be sensually attracted to my subject matter. (...) At the same time, the medium (the colours, textures and the brush strokes and gestures) has to have a lot of freedom too, so it can run into its own paths of chance and surprise. I take pure joy in the making and the material qualities of the work. (...) The balance between control and letting go is very important. Deliberation meets arbitrariness. There is not a set message to decipher, there is ambiguousness to come to terms with, an existential awareness that the interpretation of my works operates like a movie with an open ending. (...) we have to live in a state of tension. And with

⁹ A complete list can be viewed at the website of her art gallery in Amsterdam, Paul Andriessse: www.paulandriessse.nl or at her New York Gallery David Zwirner: www.davidzwirner.com

¹⁰ Antjie Krog, *De kleur van je hart*. (Mets en Schilt: Amsterdam 2000). The South African poet and journalist Antjie Krog has written poetry inspired by Dumas's paintings. And the cover of collected poems in the book *Kleur komt nooit alleen* (Podium: Amsterdam 2002), is the painting of Marlene Dumas named *Schaammeisje (Shy Girl)*, 1991 (oil on canvas, 235/8 x 19 11/16 inches).

single images (...) we have even less information to help us form our opinions about what it could mean. Or worse – ‘should’ mean.”¹¹

One of the topics in her oeuvre is the particular colour of the human skin. Paintings and drawings bearing titles like: *The White Disease*, *Albino*, *Black Drawings*, etc. As with every other subject in her oeuvre Dumas points to the way we, the viewer, are looking at people; people who are marked by certain irrefutable features, like the colour of their skin, or the bearded young Muslim (an image Dutch people immediately think they recognize and connect to the murderer of the Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh). But she does not directly project an identity onto people by using skin colours. Again, she creates space for ambiguity.

Dumas makes sure we understand her dislike of thinking in terms of “identity”. For her, speaking of identity is a dangerous act. She has seen the outcome of identity-politics in terms of the South African policy of Apartheid. In The Netherlands today the abuses that arise from an obsession with identification are becoming clearer and clearer in the way people (men and women) from Morocco and Turkey, Afghanistan, Iran and Iraq etc. are “identified” (meaning stigmatized) as Muslims. And Muslims are then identified as non-Christians, non-whites, non-civilized, non-emancipated, non-women friendly, non-enlightened.

Dumas: “I only use that word when forced to. This is where that horrible apartheid concept ‘identity’ got us. Now everyone is using and abusing it. And how the art world of the 90’s loved that term! After discovering the body (as if it was ever gone) then they immediately started to look for its ID card.”¹²

Yet the art she produces with such passion and energy cannot be reduced to a series of ethical or political pamphlets. Her works are simply too ambiguous for that. They leave room for the viewer to interpret, and most of all, to experience the latitude she creates by not pinning any interpretation under our prejudiced noses. In a comment on a series titled “*The Blonde, the Brunette and the Black Woman*” Dumas says: “Yet it is not political correctness that inspired these images, but the loss of integrity and shifts of identity that affects everything and most of us, everywhere.”¹³ And: “*Do the Right Thing*. (...) I want to say that the best art there is, is often of an amoral (not immoral)

¹¹ Dumas, *Sweet Nothings: notes and texts*, 104.

¹² Dumas, *Sweet Nothings*, 132.

¹³ Dumas, *Sweet Nothings*, 72.

nature and that what's wrong with South African art in general, is its moralistic attitude. (...)."¹⁴

Dumas puts into question the body identified by gender as, in the words of the curator at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, Emma Lavigne: “[art is] a privileged arena where taboos and stereotypes linked with the representation of women within a patriarchal society are put into question.”¹⁵ I would like to add, not just stereotypes about the representation of women, but of everyone who is ‘different’. One could go further and say that it is a space, for challenging all representations that deviate from the normative.

What Dumas achieves, and I mean exactly this ambiguity to which I've already referred, could also be qualified as work done by a female genius. My fellow editor of this Journal, Alison Jasper, has written a thought-provoking article on female geniuses, particularly Maude Royden, inspired by Julia Kristeva's triptych on Melanie Klein, Hannah Arendt and Colette.¹⁶ A female genius, Jasper says:

“is someone who activates the complex interrelationship of affectivity, embodiment, and representation unlocking their unique potential. They do this not by becoming reified in themselves as one representation of a quasi-divine or transcendent idealization of creativity, but by the exercise of their own extraordinary ambition or curiosity, pursuing the pleasures of sometimes divergent speech, writing, and interpretation in a singular life. (...). Female genius may be about an effective resistance, revealing something new, piece by piece (...).”¹⁷

This means, in my opinion, that Marlene Dumas' genius lies in painting beyond every binary construction, beyond fixed pairs of contrasts, with a more fluid logic.¹⁸ The work of Dumas tries to break with the rigidity of Western thought and representation. She works in line with the philosophy of Luce

¹⁴ Dumas, *Sweet Nothings*, 132.

¹⁵ Emma Lavigne. “The Body Slogan,” in: Camille Morineau and Annalisa Rimmaudo, *Elles@centrepompidou: Women artists in the collection of the musée national d'art moderne centre de création industrielle* (Centre Pompidou: Paris 2009), 90.

¹⁶ Alison Jasper, “In Defence of Female Genius: Maude Royden / Passionate Celibacy,” in: Pamela Sue Anderson (ed), *New Topics in Feminist Philosophy of Religion. Contestations and Transcendence Incarnate* (Springer: Dordrecht Heidelberg London New York 2010).

¹⁷ Jasper, “In Defence of Female Genius,” 185.

¹⁸ As Pamela Sue Anderson so inescapably has made clear that these binary constructions hold every discourse in its place. Pamela Sue Anderson, *A Feminist Philosophy of Religion: the Rationality and Myths of Religious Belief* (Blackwell: Oxford 1998).

Irigaray, (and in her footsteps, women like Anne-Claire Mulder¹⁹, Grace Jantzen²⁰ and Hanneke Canters²¹) who all plead for a fluid logic. So instead of painting the One Subject, she paints, to quote Canters, multiple subjects and fluid boundaries. And it is exactly this that gives Dumas' works of art the convincing force they have.

Religious iconography in the heart of the oeuvre

It is important to give some context to Dumas' work in order to be able to make the next step in the interpretation of her work in the light of the overall question: can the work of Marlene Dumas be interpreted as being religious art?

A lot can be said about the way Dumas relates art to religion. From a biographical perspective we should say that she was raised in a white Christian milieu in South Africa. One of her brothers is, in Dumas' own words, "a very good unconventional preacher. He won a lawsuit against [his 'own' SG] Dutch Reformed Church in the apartheid days."²² But her statements on religion are as ambiguous as everything else she says.

To start with, according to Dumas, the relationship that is often drawn between art and religion is not as obvious as it might appear to be: "We're often extremely sloppy in our use of analogies. (...) But what I find questionable is the appropriation of terms from outside art which are primarily intended to elevate the status of art: war and religious terminologies, for example. We want to make use of the exotic in religion (of real religion) without being willing to pay the price." And: "On the subject of art Duchamp rightly said: 'as a religion it's not as good as God'"²³ So, for Dumas, art and religion differ and thus, this analogy should not be used lightly. In other writings and interviews she describes herself as being a religious woman. Although, again, she makes sure that we don't immediately, or perhaps are never able to, completely catch her meaning on the subject.

¹⁹ Anne-Claire Mulder, *Divine Flesh, Embodied Word: 'Incarnation' as a Hermeneutical Key to a Feminist Theologian's Reading of Luce Irigaray's work* (Vossiuspers UvA: Amsterdam 2006).

²⁰ Grace Jantzen, *Becoming Divine. Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion* (Manchester University Press: Manchester 1998).

²¹ Hanneke Canters / Grace Jantzen, *Forever Fluid. A Reading of Luce Irigaray's 'Elemental Passions'* (Manchester University Press: Manchester and New York 2005).

²² Marlene Dumas in an interview with Odili Donald Odita: <http://www.arudemag.com/marlene-dumas-interview-by-odili-donald-odita/>

²³ Dumas, *Sweet Nothings*, 128.

But Dumas has made religion – unambiguously – a visible core theme in her work, using elements of recognizable religious iconography and some key subjects like images of Jesus with the crown of thorns. Almost in every case, too, these are recognizable as being religious because of the titles she gives the work. She paints: a series of Jesus pictures, titled “Jesus Serene”: 24 parts of ink wash, watercolour and pencil paintings from 1994; “(In search) of the perfect lover”: 60 drawings in ink wash and pencil on paper from 1994; a Maria Magdalene-series; a vulva titled “Immaculate” (after Gustave Courbet’s “L’origin du monde” from 1866). Recently she has started to paint pictures with reference to Muslims, with titles like “The Prophet”, “The Second Coming”, “The Neighbour”, “The Believer”, “The Semite”, “The Pilgrim” etc. “Against the Wall”²⁴ is her most recent exhibition. It focuses on the so called “security” wall that splits Palestine and Israel. In these artworks she shows the oppression and the forces of disruption at work in this particular context. You can sense the human tragedy caused by these political decisions; a woman (a mother?) visits a grave, people pray facing the wall and people are executed facing the wall.

But is it religious art?

Some of the art of Marlene Dumas can be called religious art because she paints from a Christian iconographic tradition. She also paints Islamic and Jewish people, from the past and present. But, more importantly, in my opinion, her whole oeuvre can be labelled as religious art because it evokes compassion and challenges our opinions or preconceptions about people. The last third of this article will concentrate on further tracing and sketching this intuition.

The art historian James Elkin has developed a theory about the relationship between visual arts and religion in a secular context.²⁵ He thinks that,²⁶ since the end of international modernism, art and religion have become almost impossible to combine.²⁷ In search of new liaisons, he determines five possible positions in the contemporary debate. Art can be: 1) conventional religious

²⁴ Marlene Dumas, *Contra o muro* (Serralves: Porto 2010). According to the foreword in the book, Marlene Dumas is choosing a new direction with this exhibition by showing the influence of the environment on people.

²⁵ James Elkin, *On the strange place of religion in contemporary art* (Routledge: New York and London 2004).

²⁶ And of course there are many more scholars who have written on the subject, but I choose this example for its clarity.

²⁷ Elkin, *On the strange place of religion in contemporary art*, 37.

art, 2) art that is critical of religion, 3) art that sets out to create a new faith, 4) art that burns away what is false in religion, or, 5) art that creates a new faith, but unconsciously. He concludes, “perhaps the most interesting religious art is critical, but open-minded, or deeply undecided. That is what I mean by ‘art that is critical of religion’: not only art that criticizes religion, but art that ponders religion from a few steps outside it.”²⁸ I would like to place Dumas’ works in this category; at least the ones with a more or less clear Christian iconography, like the Magdalene-series and the paintings that “play” with the body and image of Jesus. This is all the more because Dumas’ art is always ambiguous, but, at the same time, gives evidence of strong convictions. Emma Bedford also recognizes this particular Dumasian hallmark:

“What is so apparent is Dumas’s fearlessness in her political views and in her approach to art; she is dedicated to tackling taboos in the interests of exposing dehumanising ideologies and practices, or conversely in developing ideas and art that address the rifts in society.”²⁹

That is what she does with her Magdalene, Jesus, and Muslim paintings as well. She tackles power structures within both societies and religious discourse.

We now take a last step. The religious in the art of Marlene Dumas is not only determined by the iconography, or by the ‘spiritual’ sense it might arouse. It is, in my opinion, the *act of painting* itself that makes Dumas’ art religious. “Painting is about the trace of the human touch. It’s about the skin of a surface. A painting is not a postcard.”³⁰ Dumas caresses the faces and bodies of the people she paints with her brush. Her brush is the hand of Michelangelo’s God touching Adam. She touches individuals personally, even in their death. The Word made Flesh by paint, colour, gesture, brush, linen and paper; intentionally represented compassion.

Furthermore, Dumas’ work conveys a religious/aesthetic experience characterized by the strongly ambivalent emotion of estrangement and belonging, felt at the same time.³¹ Let me explain this specific emotion drawing on a

²⁸ Elkin, *On the strange place of religion in contemporary art*, 65.

²⁹ Emma Bedford in: Dumas, M. et al. (2008). *Marlene Dumas / Intimate Relations*. Johannesburg, Jacana Media and Roma Publications.

³⁰ Dumas, *Sweet Nothings*, 72.

³¹ For more deepening thoughts about the relationship between the religious and esthetical experience I refer to the article by Monika Leisch-Kiesel in this Journal. On the topic of aesthetics, theology and bodilyness I refer to the splendid article by Stefanie Knauss.

personal experience that I had once, in the Sacré-Coeur in Paris. After the Eucharist I was overwhelmed by a “transcendent” love. Later, when things fell more into place, I came to see that the experience was about the people in the pews during Mass. The church – representing traditional Roman Catholic masculinity – was filled to the last seat with people from all over the world. All ethnicities, skin colours, ages and social strata were gathered in the name of g*d. And every single person in that church was meant to be who she/he is. And that is exactly what Dumas does, over and over again. She paints every single person, whoever she/he is, into being – without fear or favour, but with her compassionate brushstroke. As she writes in one of her own “poems”:

*The Question of Human Pink
Colour*

I don't know much about colour really
I use it intuitively.

I don't know much about racism really
My knowledge is skin deep.

What do you mean, he said.
Oh, she said, didn't you know
All scars have a pink that shows.³²

For me, then, her art is first and foremost about human vulnerability and fear – of death, of the other/our neighbour, of ourselves. Secondly it is directly linked with the roles we all (consciously and unconsciously) play, or at least wrestle with. And there is no escape from being human. In very few of the paintings, do the subjects (or are they objects? The answer depends on the relationship between painting and viewer) have ground under their feet. Neither do they have a heaven/sky above their heads. In fact, very few of them even have a context, or reality in which they are situated. They are terrifyingly free from everything – except our gaze. It is in catching our gaze that the subjects on the canvas, play. They do not want to please us in any way. They seem to be doing the contrary. They gaze back at us, intrepidly, without the use of spoken language. Some even turn their naked backs towards us bending over.

Something also happens to me when I contemplate her art, that resembles an experience she herself described as having had when looking at Goya's

³² Marlene Dumas, *Sweet Nothings*, 48.

“The Fate’s”³³. At first, she regrets the fact that paintings don’t make the viewer cry – a position, or experience I don’t share with her, by the way. But then she returns to this opinion after having visited the Museo del Prado in Madrid.

“I walked into the room with Goya’s black paintings³⁴. They put their spell on me. I covered my mouth as if to prevent the devil from entering. The Fates³⁵ does away with the abstraction versus figuration discussion. Everything is flat and deep simultaneously. The four sexually ill-defined figures are unsympathetic. They are forces, not human beings. It is as if he painted not the screams of humanity but, rather, the silence of God.

I felt so alone and yet so at home. I bathed in this sensuous, ominous brew of ritualism and exorcism. I felt the Gypsies, Islam, Christianity and Africa, all at the same time.

And then I cried.”³⁶

Based on her own words, then, this is another reason why I would want to label her art as religious art. As we have seen in this article, Marlene Dumas lets herself be touched in order to be astonished and hurt by people, goddesses and the devil.

In conclusion, Marlene Dumas’ *act of painting* is that which allows us to define her art as being religious art. She touches the human skin with a stroke of her brush and paints them into existence; in the dialectics of the Word being painted into Flesh and the Flesh becoming Word. She paints the human being into existence, but without covering up the vulnerability or sometimes even the loss of meaning. Her paintings, for me, hold a very special quality; they give me consolation for the inevitable recognition that: ‘we are alone and yet so at home’, and as Dumas recognizes in the Goya painting, in her work, we

³³ Dumas, *Sweet Nothings*, 129.

³⁴ Dumas has painted a series titled Black Drawings herself.

³⁵ A description of this painting is given on the website: <http://chef-doeuvre.blogspot.com/2006/12/goyas-black-paintings-fates.html>. “In classical mythology, the fates are three goddesses that control the thread of life. They are the personifications of destiny (or fate). The first, Clotho, spins the thread of life, the second, Lachesis, controls its length, and the third, Atropos, cuts it. They symbolize birth, the passage through life, and death, respectively. (...) The fates are goddesses, but there is nothing godlike or divine in these women. They have the same distorted, brutal faces we have seen in several of the black paintings. The dreary, moonlit landscape serves to create a spooky atmosphere.”

³⁶ Dumas, *Sweet Nothings*, 129.

are hearing 'not the scream of humanity but the silence of God'. And within this silence of God she, in her paintings, asks only questions, of herself and of the viewer. She does not give answers or ethical directions. In this, for me, she makes not only religious art, but makes art that evokes religion.

Dieser Artikel geht der Frage nach, warum die Kunst von Marlene Dumas als religiöse Kunst bezeichnet werden kann. Beim Verständnis von Kunst und Religion als einer Begegnung sich heimlich Liebender vermittelt sich hier ein neuer Sinn. Obwohl die Ambivalenz im Werk von Dumas dessen Interpretation erschwert, macht sie zugleich das Geheimnis ihrer Arbeit aus. Mit fließendem Material und Farbe malt sie eine fluide Logik. – Es gibt inhaltliche Gründe ihre Arbeit als religiöse Kunst zu bezeichnen, denn einige ihrer Arbeiten weisen klar eine religiöse Ikonographie auf. Aber viel entscheidender für das Verständnis von Dumas' Kunst als religiöser Kunst ist der Akt des Malens selbst. Dabei ist es so als ob sie die menschliche Haut mit einem Strich ihres Pinsels berührt und in die Existenz hineinmalt, ganz im Sinne der Dialektik wonach das Wort zu Fleisch gemalt wird und das Fleisch zum Wort wird. Sie malt Menschen in ihre Existenz, ohne allerdings deren Verletzbarkeit und manchmal sogar Sinnlosigkeit zu kaschieren. Ihre Gemälde weisen eine sehr spezielle Qualität auf; sie spenden Trost für Ambivalenz und Verlust: „Wir sind alleine und zugleich zuhause“, und – wie sie in einem Gemälde von Goya erkennt – „... nicht der Schrei der Menschheit, sondern das Schweigen Gottes.“ Inmitten dieses Schweigens Gottes, stellt sie in ihren Bildern bloß Fragen über sich selbst und den/ die Betrachter/in. Sie gibt keine Antworten oder ethische Richtungen vor. Damit macht sie nicht nur religiöse Kunst, sondern Kunst die Religion hervorruft.

Este artículo analiza por qué el arte de Marlene Dumas puede definirse como arte religioso. Considerando la relación entre el arte y la religión, como si éste fuese un diálogo de amantes secretos, surgirá un nuevo significado. Aunque la ambigüedad hace difícil interpretar la obra de Dumas, es precisamente esta misma ambigüedad el secreto de su obra. Con materia fluida y color pinta una lógica fluida. Hay razón para interpretar su obra como arte religioso, partiendo del tema de que algunos de sus cuadros tienen una clara iconografía religiosa. No obstante, lo decisivo en definir el arte de Dumas como arte religioso, es la propia *acción de pintar*. Con un toque de su pincel toca la piel humana y la hace vivir, en la dialéctica del Verbo, siendo pintado en Carne y la Carne haciéndose Verbo. Pintando, Dumas da existencia al ser humano, pero sin cubrir la vulnerabilidad e incluso a veces, la pérdida del significado. Sus cuadros son de una calidad muy especial: ofrecen consuelo a la ambigüedad y la pérdida. Como ella misma experimenta: “estamos solos, y a la vez tan en nuestro hogar.” En un cuadro de Goya “no reconoce el grito de la humanidad, sino el silencio de Dios.” Y dentro de este silencio de Dios, ella en sus cuadros sólo se plantea preguntas a sí misma y al espectador. No da respuestas ni direcciones éticas. De modo que no sólo hace arte religioso, sino que también hace arte que evoca la religión.

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