

Maltz-Leca Leora, 'Close-Up: Body of Evidence - Leora Maltz-Leca on Marlene Dumas's Liberty'. Artforum, jg. XLIX, nr. 3, November 2010, p.238-241.



Marlene Dumas,
Liberty, 1993, oil on
canvas, 21 1/4 x 15 3/4".

CLOSE-UP

Body of Evidence

Leora Maltz-Leca on Marlene Dumas's *Liberty*

I paint because I am a dirty woman.
(*Painting is a messy business.*)

* * *

I paint because I like to be bought and sold.
—Marlene Dumas, “Women and Painting” (1993)

MARLENE DUMAS LIKES TO TALK DIRTY. She quips about foreplay with her paintings, muses on the similarities between artists and hookers, and insists: “There are no virgins here.”¹ In this last instance, she is referring to the fact that her subjects are mostly recycled from photographs, but her lineup of sluts and hookers, Magdalenas and Miss Januarys, equally fleshes out her claim. Time and again, Dumas has included herself among her tarty company, warding off tiresome defenses of her fraught subject matter with a spirited offensive: by claiming the role of the gritty, grimy woman.

Dumas doesn't just talk dirty; she paints dirty. Her surfaces—ragged with turpentine, smeared and fingered—betray a painter unafraid to soil her hands when a cloth won't do. Lodged beneath fingernails, veining palms, Dumas's medium becomes, in South African writer Marlene van Niekerk's evocative phrasing, paint as taint.² It stains. It functions as incriminating forensic evidence. Yet if Dumas's hands are sullied, inked up and ready to be fingerprinted, it is because, like all of us, she is part of filthy histories. But unlike most of us, she doesn't try to wash herself clean. And so Dumas's studio has become a crime scene—littered with head shots of her victims, draped in the canvases that have become their shrouds.

Dumas has famously compared the canvas to a grave, her subjects strung within its sepulchral embrace, the stretcher the cross on which they are impaled.³ But here it is less the coffin that interests me than the dirt tossed in after, the soil that covers it. Dumas has exhumed one so-called dirty picture

from the vault of art history—the personification of Liberté as a female nude—dusting it off to produce her own spectral and cryptic oil painting *Liberty*, 1993. This pseudo Liberté is a shifty-eyed column of inscrutability with a face ringed in blue: A bruise? A mask? A trace of painterly capriciousness? Undecidable. What is clear, however, is that the figure's black, naked, prepubescent body tears at the Western tradition of the art-historical nude. And it is one nude in particular that Dumas confronts: Eugène Delacroix's forward-thrusting, tricolor-seizing Liberté in his celebrated *Liberty on the Barricades* of 1830. Dumas's rendition counters with a wooden pose and broken wings. Turpentine-soaked slashes pin Liberty's biceps to her trunk; her forearms splay out from the elbows; blocks for wrists end in sprays of talon-fingers. These hands reach for nothing. Haunted, as we shall see, by the twin specters of colonialism and pornography, Dumas's *Liberty* peers askance at the vexed convention of inscribing political transition on the nude female body.

Rejecting the bared breasts of Delacroix's Liberté—and the metaphors of “naked” or self-evident truths that underpin such depictions—Dumas edges toward the Nietzschean view that truth wears many masks. *Liberty* thus joins a trio of earlier paintings that prod contested political ideals through gossamer plays on veiling and unveiling: *Give the People What They Want*, 1992; *Equality*, 1993; and *Justice*, 1993. The three oils from 1993, identically sized, each depict a prepubescent girl, shown frontally and crouched at the knees. Coverings

of various sorts bandage these bodies together: Justice's eyes are bound in cloth, Equality's face disappears behind an ashen mask, while Liberty's face, traced in blue, bears the memory of Justice's mien. The child in *Give the People What They Want*—who surely allegorizes democracy—is a figure of *uncovering*: She spreads open a cloth to reveal her naked body in a sinister suggestion of child prostitution. Equality clutches tatters of her predecessor's covering, but it has disappeared with *Liberty*. The cloth's traumatic penumbra nonetheless accounts for Liberty's odd pose. Her outstretched forearms reach for the ghost of that cloth, spectral ridges of which remain visible beneath buttery, concealing layers of paint. In rehearsing these valences of hiddenness and revelation, Dumas seems to explore the structural condition of painting as an act of covering, an opaque medium of containment—or burying—that works its self-effacement on the very surface of cloth that is being obsessively passed among the protagonists of these paintings.

Dumas's considerations of paint as the medium of self-concealment are dialectically partnered with her musings on photography's self-exposure. Ultimately, *Liberty* and the string of paintings it emerged from all draw their contradictory logic from the colonial archive: Their source, which is most faithfully emulated in *Give the People What They Want*, is an early-twentieth-century anthropological photograph of a young black girl exposing her naked body to the camera. Shadowed by the pall this image casts, a historical trace of a onetime illicit offering, *Liberty* probes the discrepant meanings thrown up by the notion of exposure—of making something visible by uncovering it. What seem to be illuminated here are the poetic reverberations between the exposures of the photographic process (the source for most of Dumas's work) and the pornographic self-exposure of the female subject.



Eugène Delacroix, *Le 28 Juillet: La Liberté guidant le peuple* (July 28: Liberty on the Barricades), 1830, oil on canvas, 8' 6 3/4" x 10' 7 1/2".

Liberty ponders the role of one grubby enterprise (painting) in the affairs of another, even dirtier business (politics).



This page: Marlene Dumas, *Give the People What They Want*, 1992, oil on canvas, 15 1/4 x 11 1/4". Opposite page, from left: Marlene Dumas, *Justice*, 1993, oil on canvas, 21 3/4 x 15 1/4". Marlene Dumas, *Equality*, 1993, oil on canvas, 21 3/4 x 15 1/4".

Liberty's unveiling, moreover, provocatively collapses democracy and porn together by suggesting that both enact the titular directive of "giving the people what they want," which in this instance amounts to consuming the raced, prepubescent body. Pornography here bristles between the terms of art and politics as Dumas compares the esteemed ideal of democracy to what she archly intimates may be its visual equivalent: the cheap thrills of porn.

Liberty thus ponders the role of one grubby enterprise (painting) in the affairs of another, even dirtier business (politics). Painted during the longed-for but violent transition of the artist's "fatherland" from apartheid to democracy, this work nods toward the democratic ideals of postapartheid South Africa, even as it quibbles with *Liberty's* mythologized status in the African postcolonies.⁴ For Dumas's painting joined a motley troupe of

other *Libertys* sauntering around the tip of Africa circa 1993, as local artists grappled with the problem of how to reimagine the new body politic. Reshada Crouse painted a monumental version of Delacroix's *Liberté* for the Nelson Mandela Theatre, William Kentridge conceived *Liberty Eckstein*, and Robin Rhode tugged a stone flag across the cracked sidewalks of Johannesburg. Dumas's *Liberty* would ultimately join them all in downtown Johannesburg, transformed into a monumental tapestry installed in South Africa's new Constitutional Court and renamed *The Benefit of the Doubt*, 1998. That title, a relatively sanguine counter to *Liberty's* somber image, nonetheless evinces suspicions as to the dubious ideal of nation, not to mention the capacity of a capitalist democracy to deliver on its promises of equality and justice. Widespread fears about the derailing of the democratic process, coupled with

ambivalence about the media-packaged rhetoric of the "rainbow nation," weighed down the flags these *Libertys* were flapping around. In Rhode's vision, a bag of rocks does the job. In Dumas's, the flag is vanquished, while the hands that would seize it have frayed into mere stumps. Form has been completely deformed under the weight of this charge.

In this way, Dumas's heavy-handed painting colludes with the image of *Liberty's* heavy hands, laden with unknown burdens or unnamed guilt. As *Liberty's* unfurled fingers graze the perimeters of the canvas, we again witness the body squirming against its tomb or, restated, the artist brushing against the edges of her medium. Straining against her facility, Dumas has renounced the brush's caress for an attack on the hands—on painting itself. Yet her willfully maladroit ("dirty") painting does not simply rehearse a trendy de-skilling. Rather, the formal

bleeds into the political, for if Dumas's hands seem freighted, her brush loaded, it is partly because she rejects the myth that color can be shorn of its social context, disavows that prelapsarian, precolonial dream of "pure" color—color cleansed of its dirty histories—that still circulates among artists and critics alike. Her paintbrush drags around the leaden heft of its own whiteness.

Yet as much as Dumas's hands are tied to history, ballasted by it, her painting takes flight through her projective imagination—through a fluid traffic between bodies that insinuates the canvas as a porous "skin," a surface of touch through which intersubjective empathies might flow.⁵ Venturing contentious identifications, Dumas posits an illicit trade in bodies: between her own and the refracted subjects of her paintings; between the objectified female body and the painting as object; between the

artist who sells her name and images of sex and the hooker who sells sex itself. Likewise, when Dumas sardonically declares that she paints because she is a "dirty woman," she allies herself not only with the socially unclean body of the hooker and with "the people" (the unwashed masses) but also with their historical "smutty" representative—with Delacroix's *Liberté*, "hairy-armed," "ignoble," and "filthy," as contemporary French critics protested.⁶ *Liberté*, like Dumas, had grime beneath her fingernails. But more chillingly, the former's dirtiness was projected onto her skin. She is "dirty-skinned," Delacroix's critics pronounced. In so doing, they vocalized the unarticulated connection between dirt and race that has stalked this essay: The dirty woman is only part of a longer lineup of historical "criminal" types that includes the dirty Jew and, in Frantz Fanon's famous opening salvo, the "Dirty nigger!"

In identifying herself time and again with those whom history has cast as dirty, Dumas potentially counters the fetishization of the epidermis with a radical poetics of projection—one that almost echoes the utopian ethics of intersubjective empathy, *ubuntu*, being advanced in South Africa in 1993.⁷ Yet like any flight beyond one's own boundaries, such voyages of empathetic transport are not without their hazards. Which may explain why—if we follow Derrida in metaphorically thinking of the "touching hand" as the medium of empathy—*Liberty's* hands are mangled: Her wings are clipped.⁸ She is built of dirt and ashes. Such wings will never loft high enough to melt. □

LEORA MALTZ-LECA TEACHES IN THE DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY OF ART AND VISUAL CULTURE AT THE RHODE ISLAND SCHOOL OF DESIGN IN PROVIDENCE.

For notes, see page 282.

