

Herbert Martin, 'Marlene Dumas, the South African-born painter explains how she came to accept painting for what it is'. ArtReview, nr.61, September 2012, p.87-93.

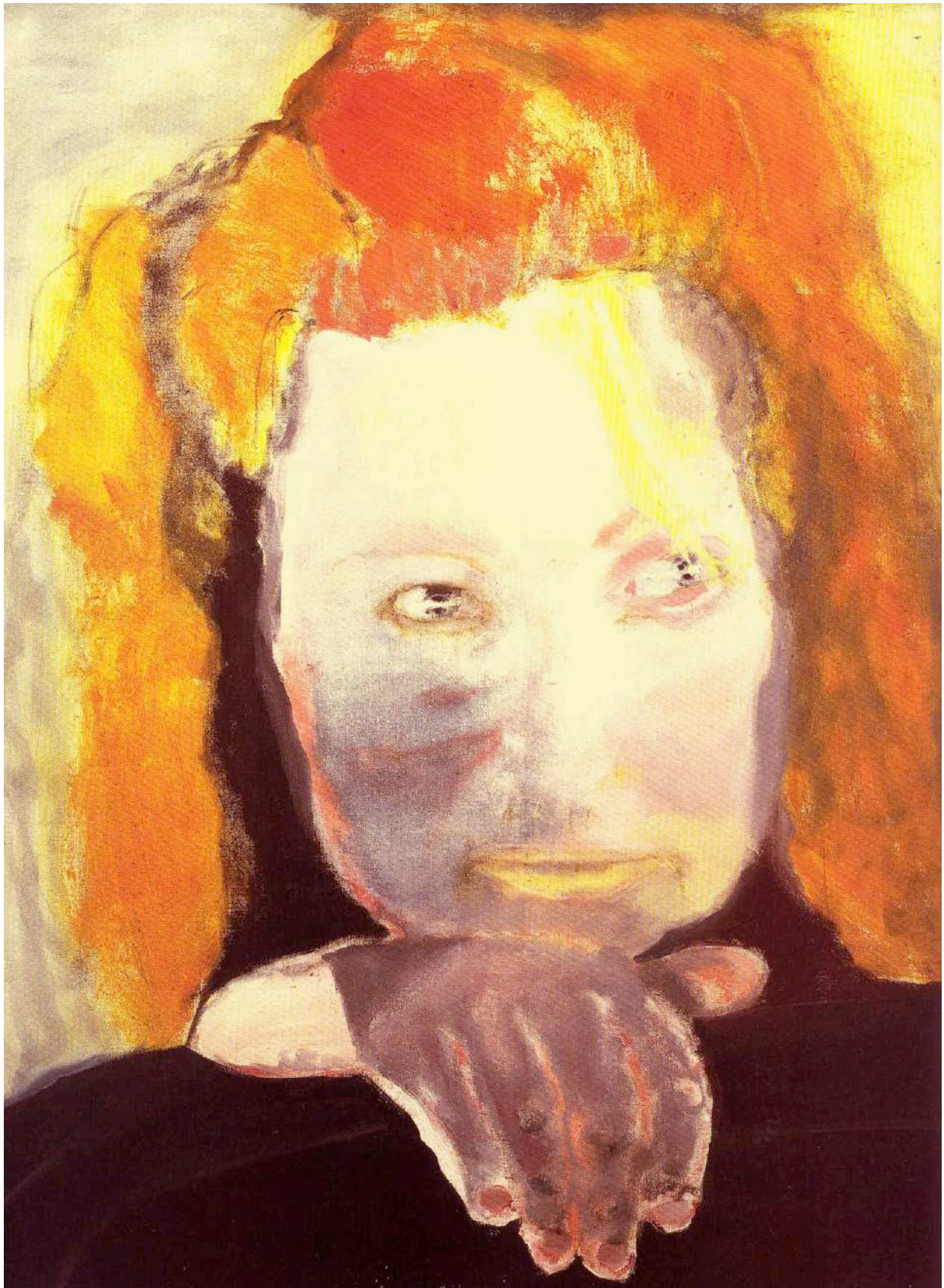
Profile:

A LYRICAL SENSE
THAT'S APT TO SHIFT IN
THE WIND, THE FIGHT
AGAINST
MEANINGLESSNESS,
THE GOD COMPLEX,
THE IMAGE OF
A PERSON

SOUTH AFRICA

Surveys:

FREEDOM OF SPEECH,
AN OBSESSION WITH PEOPLE
FUCKING UP
CIRCUMCISIONS,
RECUPERABLE POLITICAL
FRAMEWORKS, AN
IMPRESSIVE ARRAY OF
EMERGING PAINTERS,
A PERENNIAL EXPOSER
OF YOUNG TALENT



To know, know, know him
Is to love, love, love him
Just to see him smile
Makes my life worthwhile

To know, know, know him
Is to love, love, love him
And I do...

That's a secular song. Or it isn't, depending. When, for example, you soundtrack an exhibition with alternating versions of *To Know Him Is to Love Him* by Amy Winehouse (2007) and by Phil

MARLENE DUMAS

The South African-born painter explains how she came to accept painting for what it is

By Martin Herbert

Spector's early group the Teddy Bears (1958), as Marlene Dumas did last year with *Forsaken* at London's Frith Street, and when the assembled paintings include representations of Christ crucified, Osama bin Laden, and Spector and Winehouse themselves, the lyrical sense is apt to shift in the wind. The song was born from doubletalk (when Spector wrote it, he'd been inspired by lines engraved on his own father's tombstone), and it remains a voluminous thing. Listened to while looking at one of Dumas's smoky blue renderings of Jesus, lines like "Everyone says there'll come a day / When I'll walk alongside of him" attain a spiritual gleam. As sung by the late

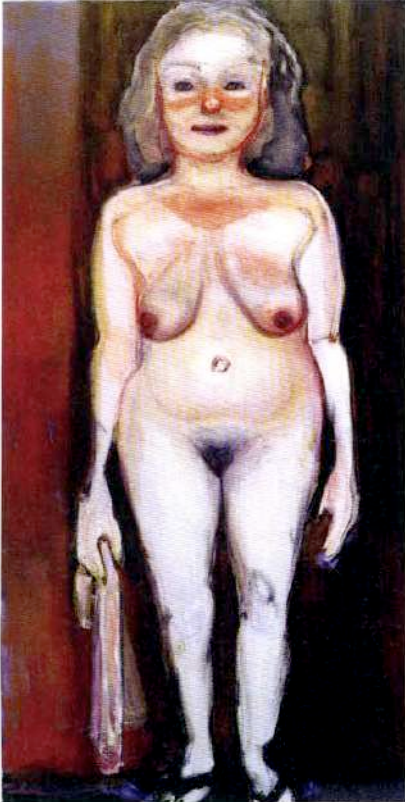
Winehouse, *To Know Him...* becomes a love song from beyond the veil. To know the now-convicted-murderer Spector, you'd think, is probably not to love him much. As for Osama – who's seen half-smiling here – well, it depends who you ask.

Yet if the song is coloured by what's around it, so are each of the paintings themselves, which are not only painted in the South African artist's ambulatory-yet-exact watercolourlike oil technique but, here and in subsequent showings, have been indirectly paired in exhibition, conversing from adjacent walls. Tying the disparate subjects together is a sense of passage from one state, or condition, to another: Winehouse is seen in the (palest) pink and deathly indigo, Spector with and without wig, Christ alive and dead. You can, if you like, interpret this grouping as merely modelling a provocative relativism regarding falls from grace and martyrdom. Or you can listen to what its originator, one of the most fearless and influential painters working today, and a longstanding reviser of what's permissible in her medium (eg, eroticism, sentimentality, the sight of death), thinks about it. Hers is, it's fair to say, a somewhat larger conception.

"Art began with the Fall from Grace," wrote Dumas, via email, while preparing her last exhibition, an augmented version of the Frith Street show, at Fondazione Stelline, Milan, this past spring. "The ability to make choices or, as Jean-Paul Sartre says, to be 'condemned to freedom', for me that is the essence of art – a loss of innocence, an awareness that decisions are leaps of faith in the dark, and also an awareness of destructive forces stronger than yourself. It's not that art is dead, but to make art is to work in spite of feelings of utter meaninglessness. The Christ figure's doubt [the why-hast-thou-forsaken-me moment Dumas refers to with her title] is a visualisation of that aspect of being human. Every period has its figures that become examples of its time. Some attract you more than others."

Operating productively within an abyss, finding light within it, is what Dumas has achieved for more than three decades. The artist who painted Marilyn Monroe from an autopsy photograph (*Dead Marilyn*, 2008) and who titled a gimlet-eyed, bloody-handed, blue-chested nude child *The Painter* (1994, based on a snapshot of her daughter) turns images on themselves via choice of subject, title, neighbouring painting and – chiefly – the improbable liquid alchemy of her paint handling. It's a refusenik aesthetic, one begun in the mid-1970s when Dumas, born in 1953 on a vineyard near Cape Town, relocated to Haarlem in the Netherlands for postgraduate study. There she bridled against conceptual and minimal art's resistance to emotional content, to love and desire as subjects, in works like *Don't Talk to Strangers* (1977), a quiescent wash of cream-coloured horizontal brushstrokes at whose edges were taped fragments of her >

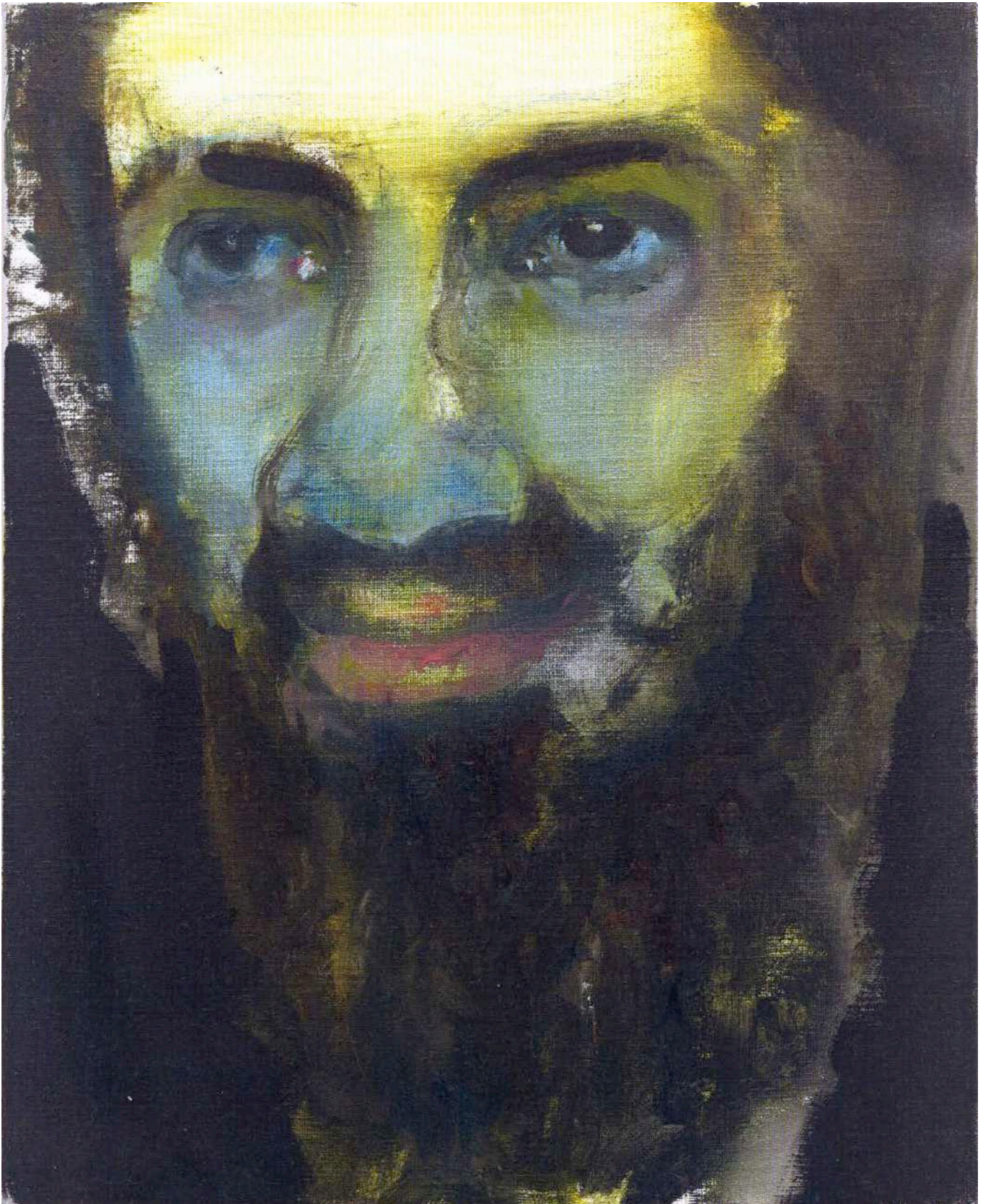


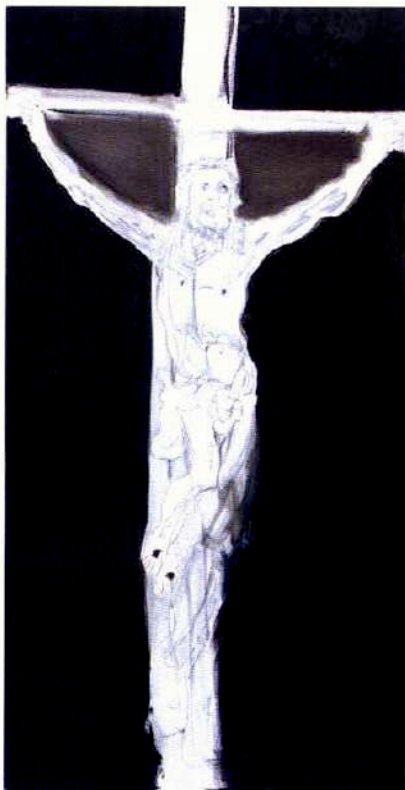


preceding pages, from left:
Evil Is Banal, 1984, oil on canvas,
125 x 105 cm. Courtesy Van
Abbeuseum, Eindhoven.
The Painter, 1994, oil on canvas,
200 x 100 cm. Museum of
Modern Art, New York

this page, from left:
Drunk, 1997, oil on canvas,
200 x 100 cm. Private collection,
© the artist. *Phil Spector - To
Know Him Is to Love Him*, 2011,
oil on canvas, 60 x 50 cm,
Courtesy the artist and Frith
Street Gallery, London. *Deed
Marilyn*, 2008,
oil on canvas, 40 x 50 cm.
© the artist

facing page:
Osama, 2010, oil on canvas,
50 cm x 40 cm. Courtesy the
artist and Frith Street Gallery,
London





from top:
Forsaken, 2011, oil and crayon
 on canvas, 200 x 100 cm. *Ecce
 Homo*, 2011, oil on canvas, 200
 x 100 cm. *Tree of Life*, oil on
 canvas, 200 x 100 cm. All three
 images courtesy the artist and
 Frith Street Gallery, London

personal letters, opening lines on the left and closing lines on the right: the brushstrokes, like luscious redactions, seemingly stand for what can't be read but might be guessed at. Ever since, patrolling the interstice of painterly and theoretical approaches, Dumas has found myriad ways to unseat, question and refresh the silent orthodoxies of contemporary art.

So if in the mid-1980s the painted portrait seemed moribund, Dumas reanimated it in a series where each subject, worked up from a Polaroid or a magazine clipping, was painted in a different style, chosen to semaphore a notional subjectivity, a representation-resisting inwardness. (To a depiction of herself as flame-haired, ashen-faced and pensive, she gave the Hannah Arendt-referencing title *Evil Is Banal*, 1984.) If race is perhaps an unavoidable subject for a white South African, Dumas has carefully wrested complication and irresolution from beautiful black women like Josephine Baker and Naomi Campbell: in *Naomi* (1995), the pugnacious model appears heavy-lidded and sphinxlike, at once intimidating and exhausted. If the female nude seemed a played-out male redoubt, Dumas revived it in lambent watercolours of strippers and porn models: paintings that are both sexually confrontational and startlingly denuded of a moral position.

In *Drunk* (1997) she presented a bleary-eyed, middle-aged and sagging, semisunburnt nude woman, at once an embodied challenge to conventions of decorum and female beauty and an affectionate figuring of an individual that's been compared, aptly, to Alice Neel's laser-guided portraiture. It's not a realist portrait – the head is oversize, the brushwork ornery – and yet it has an improbable convincingness. The road to this is, perhaps, counterintuitive. "I don't think I'm God, Dr Frankenstein, or a realist," says Dumas when quizzed about her subjects' vivid presentness. "I can't, and am not trying to, bring a dead person to life. But I do try to make an image come alive, by not trying to pretend it's a real person." Viewing is translation and projection within guidelines, and for Dumas to tangle together both an image and a bevy of apparent responses to it necessitates an intuitive, improvisatory journey away from photographic sources, and a respect for the animism of painting.

"The photograph or projection... forms the skeleton for the work to begin," she clarifies. "After that, the painting proceeds like a performance of direct interactions. Whether it stays close to the composition of the source or leaves it eventually, depends on what the painting wants." To paint, particularly in Dumas's virtuosically slackened, *jolie laide* manner, is to abandon the photograph's indexical assumptions; this is the artist, after all, who entitled a 1988 exhibition *Waiting (for Meaning)*. Yet such is not to say that the wait never ends, and it feels fair to argue that her work's content flows primarily from her engagement with the sidelong way in which painting itself comes to signify, how a voice rises from the haze.

body to show me." A newer work, *Gravità* (2012), travels even further into nonfiguration, a faceless Christ's outstretched arms serving as a divisor for pale and black portions of the canvas.

This, of course, is pointedly the inverse of seeing an image of Jesus and, in a leap of faith, making him 'real' in one's mind. 'In terms of subject matter, it is mostly to do with portraiture,' Dumas said of her work in a 2006 interview, 'or maybe one should say the image of a person and how one tries to read identity. People believe they can get information from looking at a picture, and in a sense the appearance takes on its own life.' If she reverses that process, undoes it, for figures such as Christ and Osama, who make explicitly dangerous the process of identification, then perhaps her own chosen pathway on the spiritual life won't come as a surprise. "I'm not a new-born Christian, puritanist or fundamentalist," she says now. "I'm an old existentialistic Kierkegaardian. Doubt rules." It's hard to imagine verities unravelling any further; neither fearful nor trembling, however, Dumas has a go. "Maybe art is a mistake," she says. ■

Work by Marlene Dumas is included in the group exhibition Art & Press, at the Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie, Karlsruhe, 15 September – 10 February, and in This Will Have Been: Art, Love & Politics in the 1980s, at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, 16 November – 3 March

"When I started to embrace the ambiguity of the image, and accepted the realisation that the image can only come to life through the viewer looking at it, and that it takes on meaning through the process of looking, I began to accept painting for what it was," Dumas told an interviewer in 1998. This touches on how her art's emotional pulse coexists with a questioning of the medium and its contours. Just as she partly began working on female nudes in the 1980s because men appeared to own the subject (Dumas's loosely limned eight-drawing series *Defining the Negative*, 1988, contains notations such as 'I won't pose for Mr Salle' and 'I won't sleep in Mr Fischl's bed'), her engagement with the perplex of Christian iconography is both latently politicised and concerned with the power and intransigence of imagery: the downsides, in this case, of freewheeling signification. Form and content are here inextricable.

"Poor Jesus (like Mohammed), used to justify the most terrible crimes, when he's supposed to stand for self-sacrifice, not the sacrifice of others," says Dumas. "Once one of the most painted male figures of Western art, although no original model or actual description of him exists." In 1994 she'd painted *Jesus Serene*, 21 wildly divergent watercolours of Christ, disquietingly like a police artist's impressions of a wanted man, which bore down on a face whose shape nobody knows for sure. (The characteristic beard, for example, is supposedly a symbol of authority borrowed from representations of Zeus.) Such a work implicitly laments the violent certainties that spring out of interpreting scripture, and when Dumas now paints Christ *in extremis* she constructs a system of revisions and second thoughts: in *Ecce Homo* (2011), a white wraithlike figure hangs from a cruciform, while in *Tree of Life* (2011) a yellow-skinned redeemer is strung from a V-shaped structure, seeming to merge with it. "I wanted a very minimal painting, almost no figure," she says. "As simple and naked as a tree in winter, the cross splitting the canvas formally and metaphorically. I'm looking for abstraction but need a figure or a

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Gravità, 2012, oil on canvas,
87 x 175 cm. Courtesy Galerio
Paul Andriessse, Amsterdam

