Marlene Dumas and the painting of (the) flesh

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Central to Marlene Dumas's oeuvre is the depiction of human flesh in all its manifestations. By playing on the word "flesh" I will look at how she depicts children and nude adults in her work and to what extent the paintings are underpinned by expressions such as "to make one's flesh crawl" or "the sins of the flesh". Very few commentators have focused on Dumas's representation of the male nude body and that will form a major part of this analysis. My reading is loosely based on Kristeva's theory of abjection (1982).
Keywords: Marlene Dumas, painting, flesh, nude bodies, children's bodies, abjection

Marlene Dumas en die skildering van (die) vlees
Sentraal in Marlene Dumas se oeuvre is die uitbeelding van die menslike vlees in sy vele manifesterings. Deur te fokus op die woord "vlees" word Dumas se voorstellings van kinders en naakte volwassenes in haar skilderye bekyk en aangedui in watter mate hierdie skilderye gerugsteun word deur uitdrukkings soos "die sondes van die vlees" en "om jou vel te laat kriewel". Min kommentaar bestaan op Dumas se voorstelling van die manlike naaktheid en dit vorm die grootste gedeelte van hierdie artikel. My analise is losweg gebaseer op Kristeva se teorie van abjeksie.
Sleutelwoorde: Marlene Dumas, skilder, vlees, naakte liggame, kinderliggame, abjeksie

To make one's flesh crawl - comes to mind when viewing Marlene Dumas's paintings, particularly her paintings of children. In the light of this, Roberta Smith (2008) describes her work in *The New York Times* as follows*:*

> Ms. Dumas's work tends to aim for the solar plexus, as the show's morbid title [Measuring your own grave] suggests. Fusing the political and the painterly, it grapples with the complexities of image making, the human soul, sexuality, the beauty of art, the masculinity of traditional painting, the ugliness of social oppression.

Throughout Dumas's oeuvre one encounters depictions of the body, be it of babies, young girls, pinup models, naked men or dead flesh of cadavers. Flesh, is defined in the dictionary as "the soft substance consisting of muscle and fat that is found between the skin and the bones of a human or an animal" and its related connotations form the basis of this paper. In line with the conference theme of *materiality*, I will comment on the flesh-ness of flesh and its connotations. By looking at Dumas's work from this perspective results in what Kristeva (2002: 125) describes as "transforming flesh into word-presentations", where the latter not only refers to the inscribed word-presentations of the paintings under discussion but also my imposed meanings when interpreting them as a fusion between materiality and corporeality.

Accordingly, Kristeva (2002: 181) remarks that we must not think of flesh "from substances, from body and spirit – for then it would be the union of contradictories." She sees flesh as "an element, a concrete emblem of a general matter of being." In the interaction between analyst and analysand, for instance, transference inscribes flesh into words. Flesh has become words or pictures. Flesh can also be wounded, when one is depressed or melancholic – according to Kristeva. Does Dumas inscribe wounds into her fleshy portrayals so as to comment on reality?

I propose to look at Marlene Dumas's representation of flesh or *the* flesh, or the sins of the flesh in her works and loosely base my reading on Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection (1982) which she explains as something that disgusts you, for example, you see something rotting and

you want to vomit – it is an extremely strong feeling that is at once somatic and symbolic, which is above all a revolt against an external menace from which one wants to distance oneself, but of which one has the impression that it may menace us from the inside.

Relating Kristeva's theory of abjection to art Barrett (2011: 96) points out that the abject is related to perversion and it is characterised by a desire to look even when one is repelled or afraid. Abjection also provides a radical alternative to the repressive regimes. Three major aspects pertaining to the theory of abjection are inside / outside and abjection; disgust and revulsion as well as the revolt against the mother.

When I am confronted by Dumas's paintings of human flesh, I - as the viewer and gazer -am outside the painting looking in at what is often discomfiting and which makes one's own flesh crawl. From the perspective of the painter, she experiences the opposite, for example, when her mother died, she opted to paint "Dead Marilyn", a portrait of the late sex goddess on the morgue slab. Am I disgusted by the dead flesh with its conspicuous colour hues of whites and blues? Am I experiencing revulsion because Marilyn Monroe is known as the archetypal sex goddess with the white hair and the blood red lips?

In the case of "Stern" the viewer is confronted with the representation of a dead woman's head and neck with a piece of black ribbon around it. The title of the painting is problematic and only when one is familiar with the original photo behind the painting, I am able to make "sense" of it. The painting is based on the photo taken of the dead Ulrike Meinhof of the infamous Bader-Meinhof Gang, that appeared in *Stern* and by painting the rope burn around her neck in a particular manner, Dumas gives it the meaning of "a necklace or decorative ribbon (ironically, known in English as a "choker") (Shiff, 2008: 155). Searle (2004: unpaginated) explains the history of the original photo as follows:

> *Stern* is in fact a death portrait, named after the German periodical which first printed the shocking photograph of the corpse of Ulrike Meinhof, the Red Army Faction terrorist who either committed suicide or was murdered in her Stammheim prison cell in May 1976. The artist borrowed the source – a newsmagazine photograph – from the German artist Gerhard Richter (born 1932), who had used the image as the basis for three of the fifteen paintings that make up his suite entitled October 18, 1977 1988 (Museum of Modern Art, New York) commemorating the deaths of all four Red Army Faction members. Ulrike Meinhof was found hanged with a strip of towel, leaving black burn-marks on her neck that Dumas transformed into the suggestion of a black rope above the white shroud.

Dumas reference material is not only limited to the magazine articles on famous people. She also uses Polaroid photographs of her friends and lovers, whilst she also references magazines and pornographic material (which some could associate with the sins of the flesh). Often the painting is based on a photo of her daughter, but once painted and furnished with a title, the narrative of the painted text demands that we subvert its meaning through our knowingness. On the Saatchi Gallery website, when discussing her painting, "The Cover Up", in turn, reference is made to the fact that "the controversy isn't in the images Marlene Dumas paints, but in the way they're subverted by an implied knowingness, a blatant confrontation with a natural reality and its discomforts."

Regarding Dumas's way of conceptualising her paintings, there is an intertextual relationship between the original photo of her young daughter and the represented child on the painting, but it is a representation as part of a narrative thread and not an autobiographical portrayal *per se*. Referring to Dumas's paintings of children, Germaine Greer (2010) – who also had to take the flak for her photo book on young boys - observes: "Dumas's images of children,

including her own, are always unsettling. To a shocked viewer who asked what age the child in one of her pictures was, Dumas snapped, 'It's not a child. It's a painting.'"

Of course, Dumas is not out to simply scare us for scariness' sake; she has a very serious point to make, about the clashing dichotomy between personal and societal expectations of parenthood and the actual, lived experience of it: the child can often be the little monster. Duma transgresses the societal norm that even though parents hate or resent their children, they would never express that in public. By painting adult-faced babies set against a gangrene green background or depicting children as aware of their sexuality or by putting children in settings where their actions could be interpreted as seductive, Dumas wants us to question topics such as innocence and purity.

Discussing the difficulty of painting flesh and finding the correct colour to do so, Lelik (2010: 59) comments on Dumas's characteristic use of colour as follows:

> Though realized in the technique of oil paint, all of these portraits are depicted with water-saturated colours. The translucent appearance of these faces is chosen for a well-established purpose: water-saturated colours 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. The allusive proprieties of water-saturated colours 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.

Paintings of young flesh

Dumas's paintings of children in particular have always elicited a lot of commentary and in particular "The Painter", which according to Deborah Solomon (2008), is "a definite image of ruined innocence." Incidentally this painting inspired Marlene van Niekerk to write a lengthy *Mass for the Painter* (2008: 111). Van Niekerk (2008: 111) reads this painting as "a representation of the archetypal artist as accessory, as accomplice, guiltless / guilty, inspired, vulnerable" and at the same time as "a figure of doom, a player, a prophet." This painting elicits various responses and in my view, for instance, is a manifestation of autoeroticism, especially since the figure in the painting has these large hands and the red and blue paint on the hands and the body itself sustains such a reading. I have also used this painting as the point of departure for a poem, "*Um schlimme Kinder artig zu machen*" (Crous, 2013: 12) and in this poem I refer mostly to the dark blue paint on the hands and hues of dark blue, red and purple on the stomach and on the thighs of the child.

Dumas's representation of children – and often her daughter Helena serves as model – in my view, is always underpinned by the markings of molestation and incestuous desire. In both "The First People" and "Die Baba" we are presented with almost disease-like deformed bodies bathed in an unnatural colour. "Die Baba" is wearing a constrictive buttoned-up little shirt and his eyes are penetrating and almost revealing a sense of adult scepticism with a slightly lifted eyebrow. The gangrene blue and greenish background does not in any way suggest a joyous sense of motherhood. In "The First People" the eye-catching elements are the strange placement of the heads, the exposed genitals and the rotund bodies. This was done in 1990, but when studying the work in a contemporary context, it makes one's flesh crawl even more, given our

country's high incidence of infant rape. "The First People" consists of four man-sized portraits of babies and in the De Pont Gallery in Tilburg's catalogue (2002), is commented on as follows:

> The work of Marlene Dumas deals with the tension between watching and being watched - and in fact - with the problem of interpretation. She often works after found images that she collects in a personal data-bank. The images reflect the social standards that influence our way of looking. For example in The First People from 1990, that exists of four life-size baby portraits. The dominating reaction on this work is that the babies are immensely ugly. The enlarged representation of their bodies is experienced as very shocking elements. These reactions seem to be influenced by cliché images of the happy babies from the commercial world, that seem to be the present day norm. The paintings of Dumas are very realistic just because of some imaginary elements like the extension of the bodies and the way she handles detail. 'Motherhood is a shock,' says Dumas, 'because you haven't realised how babies look in reality.' Her work, The First People, perhaps represents some of that struggle.

A painting like "Young Boys" also comments on vulnerability and in particular on the vulnerability of young male sexuality. Boys, grouped together tightly, with exposed genitals; with some covering themselves or pulling in their arms to make space for the next, again presented in a spectrum of colours depicting racial difference. One or two of the boys are trying to cover their genitals. This pose by the row of young boys of all shapes and sizes are painted in hues of yellow, stark white and brown. Some of the boys also sport larger genitals than the others. The vulnerability of masculinity associated with a rite of passage such as ritual circumcision is also suggested by the painting.

"The Cover Up", in turn, is ostensibly an innocent painting of a young girl hiding her face but opens up several interpretive possibilities given the context of Dumas's oeuvre. When studied together with a painting such as "The Painter", and in particular, "Girl With Head", we are entering the realm of the sins of the flesh. We know from Freud that children are not innocent babes when it comes to sexual matters and his notion of polymorphous perversity even in young children is well-represented in Dumas's works. Similarly "Girl With Head", is also open to several possible interpretations. The head in the naked girl's lap looks too much like an adult man's and immediately narrates the tale of molestation and even incest. A male figure, probably her own flesh and blood, is playing some sort of ticklish game but the wide open eyes have connotations of ecstatic pleasure whilst playing the monster or bogey man.

Innocent games, innocent and naïve actions of children such as taking off one's underwear or pulling one's dress over one's head invite an almost voyeuristic gaze from the viewer to fill in the open places in the text and try and reconstruct a narrative. Because, we want to understand, want to form a picture and detect meaning in a text.

Paintings of nude flesh

Growing up in the conservative South Africa of the 1970s, Dumas's move to Amsterdam was liberating to the painter. It explains why she writes:

> The only access I had to sexual images was the *Scope* magazine, a *Playboy* that someone brought back from overseas once, and the bare-breasted colonial postcards on stands for the tourists (oh, and the stripper Glenda Kemp with her python, Oupa). Never saw a female European nipple in any movie. Amsterdam in the late 1970s entertained me with the popular soft-porn films of Sylvia Kristel and the harder but funnier *Deep Throat* of Linda Lovelace (Dumas, 2008: 77).

Her portrayal of female pin-ups leaves nothing to be desired and is overtly erotic, drawing the viewer's gaze towards the exposed genitals. "Miss January" is naked from the waist down

and the gaze is directed towards her pubic hair. An interesting facet of the painting is the fact that she is wearing one pink sock, whereas the other foot is left bare. From pin-ups of sexual icons like Marilyn Monroe, for instance, we know that often the minor details encode the text with a different meaning per se such as a shoe slipping off.

In "Fingers" the V-shaped fingers of the painted subject immediately directs the viewer's eyes towards the exposed vagina. "Snow White, Purple Pose and Dorothy D-Lite" depicts three females with porn star names and they are presented in the different poses associated with female bodily exploitation.

In "Feather Stola" the female subject wears high heels and a feather boa, the accoutrements of a stripper or erotic dancer. Her provocative pose and the veiling of the body behind the feathers makes her an excellent example of what Barthes (1975: 19) described as the most erotic zone of the body, namely there where the "garment gapes".

But an interesting aspect of Dumas's work which I think has not received sufficient attention is her portrayal of nude male flesh. The representation of male nudity is one of the ways in which Dumas (Emma Bedford: 2008:40) is "dedicated to tackling taboos in the interests of exposing dehumanising ideologies and practices`". According to Bedford (2008: 42) Dumas's representation of nude males is an illustration of "charging" the painting with "an erotics achieved through the content and the interplay of the suggestion of touch and the fluid use of the wet medium."

Dumas confronts the binary opposition between erotica and pornography, which Gloria Steinem (in Loftus, 2002: 194) defined in her classic essay on the topic as the difference between people making love with "a sensuality and touch and warmth, an acceptance of bodies and nerve endings", and on the other hand, the depiction of sex "in which there is clear force, or an unequal power that spells coercion." By presenting women with legs spread open or a nude man with an erection in "X-plicit", Dumas wants us to consider this binary and question it. Is it art? Is it erotic art or is it pornography presented as art? Or is it eroticised art making fun of pornographic representations of the lower body region?

Speaking to Kröger (2008) Marlene Dumas's examines her position on pornography and points out that pornography is more than the depiction of the sex act:

> Er zeigt zwei oder mehr Leute, die mit einem Betrachter agieren. Ich stelle mir vor, den Betrachter wie einen Liebhaber in meine Bilder mit einzubeziehen. Es ist wie guter Sex: Alles geschieht im Kopf." Einen intimeren Ort gibt es wohl tatsächlich nicht. Das aber macht die Darstellung von Sex in der Malerei so schwierig: „Es hat immer mit persönlichen Vorlieben und Geschmack zu tun, außerdem geht es darum, was gerade als ‚normal' und ‚gesund' empfunden wird. Die Leute lehnen das auch heftiger ab als, sagen wir, ein Blumenstillleben."

In "Male Beauty" based on a postcard from *Physique Pictorial*, we see a male figure on his stomach but with his genitals visible. He has his hands on both thighs and the suggestion is that he wants to pull his overtly visible white buttocks apart, as is often the case in pornographic photos. The viewer's gaze is directly influenced by the placement of the hands.

What is represented here is male beauty (as the title suggests) but it is also a deconstruction of the prevalent assumptions about masculinity and the way in which men are usually presented. For a straight male viewer the painting suggests submission and subservience and from a queer point of view, it could be interpreted as a gay pin up inviting anal intercourse. Bedford (2008: 43) contrasts this painting with "Immaculate" a painting by Dumas based on Courbet's "Origin

of the World". Robert Enright (2004) compare the two representations as follows: " In these erotic works she is giving the guys with the gaze a run for their money, she contests Courbet's claim that the origins of the world is a male domain and wrestles the phallic paintbrush from Degas and Picasso, turning an implement of penetration into a whisk of intimacy."

The framing of the male body in a suggestive albeit submissive position subverts heteronormative assumptions about desire and the body. From a queer theoretical perspective the body is framed as an object of erotic admiration. To be penetrated is to abdicate power. By painting men in a submissive position and reverting to a position usually allocated to women in the gaze of heteronormativity, Dumas turns men into objects of sexual desire to be viewed by a female or queer gaze.

The female equivalent of this painting is **"**Invitation**"**, where the female genitalia are exposed and opened for the gaze of the viewer by two different figures' hands (look at the difference in hand colour), suggesting something of a *ménage a trois*. The question arises: who is invited? Who desires the exposed female genitalia? But also, what is the subtext? Is it an excessive commentary on the male gaze?

Subsequently in other paintings of the male nude, Dumas uses the codes associated with gay pornography to expose her viewers to another form of masculinity. The male figures sport erections, they are in sexually provocative positions and just like the female pin-ups painted by Dumas, are revered as sex objects. They live up to the gay pornographic fantasies of the muscular well-endowed sex object. They possess both the penis and the phallus, the master signifier of power and potency.

Writing about homoeroticism and viewing, Mercer (1991: 182), points out that, "the gendered hierarchy of seeing / being seen is not so rigidly coded in homoerotic representations, since sexual sameness liquidates the associative opposition between active subject and passive object."

Power dynamics do not disappear, of course; but gay porn suggests that the question of who lacks, or who is (relatively) object and who subject, gets a set of parameters other than gender.

In Dumas's painting called **"**Male Stripper**"** the phallus is veiled behind the white underpants, which is also a regular feature in male pornography, whereas **"**Pretty White Male**"** is from a pornographic magazine or catalogue advertising some exotic sexual object. Since the 1980s white underpants, particularly brand name briefs such as Calvin Kleins, associated with certain male muscular models like Mark Wahlberg, whose posters were all over Times Square and have become essential accoutrements in gay pornography. Harrity (in Titterington, 2010: 48) is of the opinion that:

> Calvin Klein's influence marks the beginning of a new consciousness about the male body, and in turn raised the expectations of a generation to muscular, youthful male perfection. And the rapture over white briefs spread to porn as well. '70s porn was virtually underwear-fee. There was the novelty of a filthy jock strap here and there, but still riding the wave of the sexual revolution, gay porn performers free-balled their way through that decade.

White (2011) implies that along with the pressure to be "well endowed" is more policing of Western male beauty in general. The Calvin Klein ad staring down on men on the bus conveys the message that "desirable men are hairless with perfectly formed abs, a great haircut, and a bulge in the pants. Not to mention he has to spend $40 on underwear". Similarly Luciano (2001:

153) is of the opinion that "body image" really matters for the modern man and there is an increased interest in bodybuilding since the 1970s:

> It was impossible to categorise cultivating of muscularity as a gay activity because it so clearly articulated classic masculine physical attributes, and the hard torsos of gay men evoked as much admiration among heterosexuals as among gays. Not only bodybuilding but clothing designed to show off those carefully crafted hard bodies crossed over into the heterosexual marketplace.

The phallus-obsessed culture of gay pornography (Waugh, 1995: 323) is subverted and satirised by Dumas. This culture is characterised by "corporeal fragmentation and alienation" and by "the patriarchal privilege of male sexual expression and occupancy by public space".

By painting a nude male with a 10 inch penis Dumas employs the codes of gay pornography to comment on the overt fetishism of the phallus associated with masculinity and puts the erect phallus as symbol of potency, virility and power in a fleshy pink hue. The figure in the painting has shoved the fingers of his other hand up his rectum, which is also in line with gay pornography with the anus serving as the object of the fulfilment of desire.

Bersani (2010: 70) points out that the penis is central in gay male desire, and can easily be "elevated or degraded into the phallus, the emblem of mastery". Similarly, White (2011) comments that in the porn-world every man's penis is over 8 inches long: "There's the phenomenon of monster-cock porn, in which guys (wearing realistic sheaths) give the illusion that a penis can rest on your heart."

According to Mark Simpson, a UK journalist and author who coined the term "metrosexual," this pressure begins with porn: "Young men grow up watching almost infinite amounts of online porn in which the 'star' of the show is a large penis. And porn is really just the hard core version of the increasingly visual culture that we're now immersed in" (in White, 2011).

In male-male exchanges in film for instance, power differences are usually an overt thematic issue. This maintains even in homoerotic representations, where the difference that impels the narrative is often one of power — in myriad, unstable relationships such as hustler/ john, black/ white, master / protégé. For a female viewer to enter such an erotic scene means entering a power relation as well.

Full frontal male nudity remains one of the major taboos in society and especially in Hollywood and as David Titterington (2010) explains, the controlling gaze in Hollywood cinema is almost always male and this "male gaze" is objectifying, voyeuristic, eroticizing, and is considered a straight-male privilege. Bookadian (2008:18) asserts that veiling the penis from "the gaze" is directly connected to power relations in contemporary culture. In order to keep their privileged position, the heterosexual man must keep his own body out of the "perific ring" of the female and homosexual male gaze. Dumas's painting, "D-rection" (1999) serves as a visual metaphor for the homosexual gaze. As the title suggests, it refers to the erection of the model in the painting but also the direction of the eye towards the erection of the young man in the picture.

One does, however, detect sensitivity to the changing nature of masculinity in contemporary consumer culture and its appearance-orientated economy. Straight men gaze still gaze at women voyeuristically but there is a shift towards turning men into objects of gaze to mostly gay men. Since the late 1980s has also witnessed the growth of journalistic expositions on the growth of male consumerism and according to Galilee (2002: 34) led to "the invention of journalistic labels such as the "new" man and the "new" lad to describe these new male consumers".

Marlene Dumas is familiar with this size-obsession in masculinist culture – both straight and gay. She takes a satirical look at it and overemphasise aspects of that culture in order to poke fun at it. Her depiction of male nudity also comments on the gay obsession with muscles and muscularity, which is an imitation of heterosexual masculinity. No longer are gay men depicted as the aesthete or the dandy, but are associated with a body obsessed culture with posturings of masculinity and overtly butch behaviour. This culture, however, is characterised by a derision of drag queens and femininity. Or as the adverts usually read: No femmes or fats or queens. Straight looking gays only.

The painting "Pretty White Male" falls in this category and comments on the racialised nature of gay culture, where black men are mostly seen as an exotic other. The exoticising tendency in gay culture is in stark contrast to the exoticised and eroticised view that white women had of black men during the colonial times, whereas it created panic among white men (Fanon, 1967: 170).

The nude bodies are usually presented as the objects of a desire that can never be fulfilled. *Jouissance*, that strange fusion of pleasure and pain, is experienced when gazing at the representations. But perhaps as some consolation, we also experience what Kristeva (1982: 204) calls, "the literal laughter of the carnavalesque." We laugh at our desires, our repressed needs and desires and the unattainable fulfilment of our desire. Emblematic of this, perhaps, is the painting "Honey", with its endearing title, its ostensibly normal looking male figure in all its flaccid splendour.

Conclusion

In her work Dumas definitely creates a liminality or a border between the representation and the viewer. Even if her work is based on a familiar figure or a photo, we see that she transgresses by encoding the painting to such an extent that the viewer is either abhorred or amazed by what he or she "reads" into the text. Her deconstruction of binary oppositions is noteworthy, especially the way in which she undermines the traditional binary oppositions such as male physique / female beauty or even the codes of pornography. In the end the confused gazer does not know whether it is art or pornography, or both? Or how is the eroticised body being painted into the textual spatiality. Following Kristeva, one could attest that in Dumas's work she is creating a boundary between the "I" and "the other", especially if one is familiar with the intertextual reference at work in the painting. Dumas's work does not try to please the viewer and as result is unable to "succeed in protecting against the abject as non-differentiated otherness" (Barrett, 2011: 106). As a result the viewer projects his or her own fear and loathing onto the represented other and does not produce a "preferred reading" of the text but rather a transgressive one. To return to an earlier quote: "It is not a child. It's a painting." Through her representation of her naked daughter with alien-like features and by calling it "The Painter", Dumas invites us to attempt a transgressive reading of the work, detached from the intertextual reference to her daughter. The following quote by Oliver (in Kristeva, 2002: xxvi) captures the essence of such an approach:

> The connection between flesh and words conjured and refigured in analytic transference opens up the space for idealisation that Kristeva associates with love and psychic space. And this space for idealisation gives the analysand a renewed image of self.

Viewing becomes a self-reflexive activity with the corporeality of the presented flesh eliciting questions about the self, the self's relation to its own flesh. Do I love my own body (flesh

and blood) more (or less) having been confronted with Dumas's enigmatic depiction of nudes, young children in provocative poses and the bodies of the dead? Or does it result in a conflict between *Eros* and *Thanatos*? Dumas's deconstruction of idealised body images may result in acceptance and love for the self.

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