



ART REVIEW: Carnality and Culture, Part I: Marlene Dumas at David Zwirner

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by Sally Grant

Two of the most important painters of the human figure working today are currently exhibiting new works at two of New York City's powerhouse galleries. Both shows engage with the carnal body and with cultural memory and myth. This review, of Marlene Dumas's "Myths & Mortals" at David Zwirner, is followed by a tandem review of [Jenny Saville's "Ancestors" at Gagosian.](#)

In interviews, [Marlene Dumas](#) comes across as open and gregarious, with a curiosity about all the facets of life, from love and sex to terror and death. This expansiveness translates to her emotionally charged paintings, which frequently deal with the grimmer sides of human existence. The artist's latest works, though—currently on view in "Myths & Mortals" at [David Zwirner's](#) West 20th Street location—focus instead on the life-giving, life-enhancing powers of the body, and of paint.

The exhibition consists of several large oil paintings of the human figure, mainly nudes, and smaller works depicting facial details and body parts. Dumas completed these paintings within the last couple of years and most date to 2018. Accompanying these is a series of ink drawings made to illustrate Hafid Bouazza's 2016 Dutch translation of Shakespeare's narrative poem (based on Ovid's *Metamorphoses*), "Venus & Adonis."

Upon entering the large, light-filled first gallery, the visitor is immediately struck by the bold colors and incredible sensuality of the towering canvases displayed on its walls. All six of these larger than life-size paintings are nudes, except for one, a playfully bawdy image wryly titled *Spring* (2017). A worthy postmodern descendant of [Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec's](#) 19th-century paintings of Parisian prostitutes and performers, *Spring* depicts a woman with her dress up and underwear down, pouring the contents of what appears to be a bottle of vodka into her crotch.



"Spring" by Marlene Dumas, 2017. © Marlene Dumas. Courtesy David Zwirner, New York/Hong Kong.

Offset by the dark background and her midnight blue dress, the woman's ruddy skin tone, and particularly her bright red legs, emphasize her carnality, while the garish acid green of the implied stage and appealing messiness of the brushstrokes aid the overall sense of ribaldry. With *Drop*

(2018)—a small, haunting close-up of a woman’s face—hung nearby, the effect of both paintings is intensified.

Ms. Dumas was deeply involved in the show’s curation, and intriguing connections between the included works, and with paintings of the art historical canon, are frequently found in “Myth & Mortals.” On the opposite wall from *Spring*, for example, the vivid red and green foregrounded in that work becomes a backdrop in the image *Birth* (2018), where it frames, halo-like, the pale, nude body of a pregnant woman, a figure partly inspired by the artist’s daughter.



“Birth” by Marlene Dumas, 2018. © Marlene Dumas. Courtesy David Zwirner, New York/Hong Kong.

Presented frontally, extremely close to the picture plane, with arms raised (in resignation? Acceptance? Defeat?), her body recalls both Renaissance images of the crucified Christ and, by implication, the Virgin Mary. Considered in dialogue, these two paintings raise the myth of woman as whore or as the Madonna, but through her ballsy pictorial idiom, Dumas reclaims the stereotype, ridiculing its preposterousness.

The positioning of two male nudes between *Spring* and *Birth* supports the notion that Dumas is confronting the conventional history of the gaze. Both *Alien* (2017) and *Amends* (2018) depict a lone man, presented to the viewer as though he is a specimen for public display. Set against a deep blue background, the warm orange and red flesh tones of *Alien* emphasize the subject’s bodily presence, but his rigid frontal stance, downcast look, and the blue wash of paint across his face suggest his objecthood.

This feeling of performance is only amplified by the adjacent image, *Amends*, in which the pale, naked man is watched by an audience of dark female forms. His outstretched arms seem to imply: “Look, here I am; is this what you came to see?” What is so skillfully provocative is that while Dumas inverts the male gaze by this kind of objectifying, her paintings do not provide easy acceptance of this act; by emphasizing the men’s vulnerability, the two paintings raise the question whether this is the “amends” that women seek.



“Amends” by Marlene Dumas, 2018. © Marlene Dumas. Courtesy David Zwirner, New York/Hong Kong.

The titles that Dumas ascribes to her works frequently clarify their subject matter, often in a humorously blunt way. Examples include *Protruding* (2018), a close-up of a breast with a very erect nipple, and *Teeth* (2018), another fabulously bawdy work that revels in the Rabelaisian, with its extreme close-up of a gaping mouth framed by lipstick-red lips, its sweep of green over the subject's eyelids recalling the heavy makeup of transvestites.



"Teeth" by Marlene Dumas, 2018. © Marlene Dumas.
Courtesy David Zwirner, New York/Hong Kong.

Awkward (2018), on the other hand, sublimely captures the nervous trepidation of two young lovers. Though their facial features are blurred, the tenderness between them is revealed by the placement of the girl's foot upon his, and the mass of briskly-painted electric blue lines that articulates their lower arms denote a sexual charge, as though the act of holding hands has made this charge erupt with energy.



"Awkward" by Marlene Dumas, 2018. © Marlene Dumas. Courtesy David Zwirner,
New York/Hong Kong.

Dumas's painterly, multifaceted approach to the canvas—a mix of long, sweeping brushstrokes; thin washes of color; some sections quite detailed, others sketched summarily; forms painted boldly, while certain parts appear to dissolve—re-creates pictorially the tremor of sensual experience. The frequently close-up nature of the subject matter and its lack of discernible setting only heighten the sensation. This is particularly manifest in works such as *Lips* (2018), in which purple and black pigment and soft, feathery brushstrokes create an intensely intimate image of a kind that Dumas terms "erotic landscapes."



"Lips" by Marlene Dumas, 2018. © Marlene Dumas.
Courtesy David Zwirner, New York/Hong Kong.

A similar erotic intimacy characterizes the works on paper that the artist created for Bouazza's

translation of “Venus & Adonis,” 33 of which are on view at the gallery. Drawn in ink wash, the illustrations of the story of Venus’s desperate love for Adonis, Adonis’s preference for the hunt, and his killing by a wild boar, are handled sensitively, with the medium’s suggestive capabilities mirroring the passion and tragedy of the tale.

One drawing in particular, *She Speaks* (2015-2016), thrums with emotive and poetic associations. The work is a close-up of a woman’s mouth and the ink wash is handled so tenderly it is as though the artist’s touch gives visual form to the subject’s unseen breath. What is more remarkable—and a reward of peering closely at the artwork—is that the ink stains of her lips appear to form a landscape. Perhaps alluding to the mythological *poesie* of Titian (who painted the theme of Venus and Adonis a number of times), the landscape resembles the watery environs of the Venetian countryside.



“She speaks” by Marlene Dumas, 2015-2016. © Marlene Dumas. Courtesy David Zwirner, New York/Hong Kong.

Thus, in this highly sensual pictorial poem, and throughout this stirring exhibition, Dumas highlights the binding chain of history and myth as she imparts pictorial life, intimately and expansively.

BASIC FACTS: “Marlene Dumas: Myths & Mortals” is on view April 28 to June 30, 2018 at David Zwirner, 537 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011. www.davidzwirner.com.

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