

## Artist Resources – Marlene Dumas (South African, b. 1953)

[Dumas' website](#)

[Dumas at David Zwirner, New York](#)

[Dumas at Saatchi Gallery](#)

“Yes, I paint portraits and I use the human figure, but actually I want to paint what you cannot see,” she says. “More the spirit of things, or the relationships and the dialogue between them,” Dumas told [W Magazine](#) in a 2008 profile at her studio in Amsterdam.

Dumas' first major survey in the U.S., 2009's [Measuring Your Own Grave](#) included over 100 paintings and drawings, tracing the artist's development from the late 1970s and her interest in exploring themes of race, sexuality, and identity through the human figure. [Listen to Dumas discuss a selection of works](#) in the exhibition at MoMA, in discussion with curator Connie Butler.

In 2014, Dumas participated in [Manifesta 10](#), a contemporary art biennial at the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, Russia. She mounted her series, *Great Men*, 16 portraits of gay men, in an act of protest against the nation's anti-gay legislation. In a poem conceived for the exhibition, Dumas wrote: “Art is there to help us to see more and not less / Laws are there to help us to love more and not less / Laws should protect us from hatred and not from love.” [Watch Dumas talk with the Tate Modern about the series.](#)



Dumas, 2014  
Photograph: Merlijn Doomernik

“I want painting to be part of real life...Every time we look at the news, there are much more horrible things than those I paint – like child soldiers in Africa. Painting is about exploring one's fears, but also I feel that it can be beautiful somehow,” Dumas told [The Gentlewoman](#) in a 2014 profile about practice, inspiration, and convention.

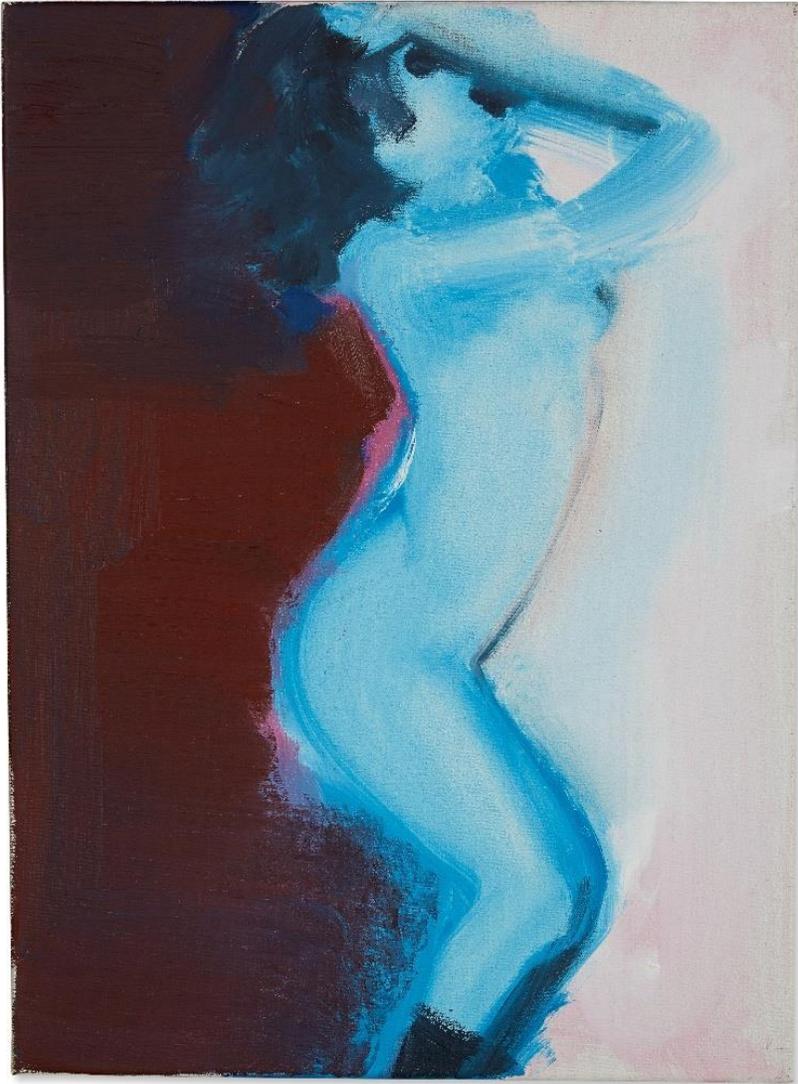
*The Image as Burden*, Dumas' 2015 retrospective at [Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam](#), in collaboration with the [Tate Modern](#), brought together over 200 paintings and drawings in the most comprehensive showing of her work to date in Europe. Watch Dumas' charismatic talk at [Fondation Beyeler](#) in Basel where she discussed her inspiration and the medium of painting. “The intimacy of something, and then the pulling out of it, and then the looking at it. This is something that I find is very important in my work. There is a lot of emotional things, but there is also a lot of distancing...you're the doctor and you're the patient.”

Renown culture critic Hilton Als spoke with Dumas for [Interview Magazine](#) in 2019 in conjunction with the publication of her monograph for the exhibition, *Myth & Mortals*, at David Zwirner. The friends and [previous collaborators](#) discussed the liberation of Europe after growing up in South Africa, family, and storytelling through images.

[Zeno X Gallery](#) in Belgium re-opened in May 2020 with a presentation of Dumas' recent work, including portraits and works inspired by Charles Baudelaire's final collection of poems, *Le Spleen de Paris*.



Dumas in her studio office, Amsterdam  
Photograph: Jackie Nickerson



Marlene Dumas (South African, b. 1953)  
**Dancer**, 1999  
Oil on canvas

Private Collection; L2025:112.1

Marlene Dumas was born and raised in South Africa before relocating to the Netherlands in 1976. Her paintings often originate from photographs, resulting in intimate portraits that explore emotion and identity. **Dancer** was based on Polaroids the artist took when documenting Amsterdam's strip culture. The neon blue color evokes the light of the entertainment district, which also abstracts the figure beyond distinctive recognition. The artist once said: "My art is situated between the pornographic tendency to reveal everything and the erotic inclination to hide what it's all about."

*On view February 18 – May 24, 2026*

Marlene Dumas (South African, b. 1953)

**Amazon**, 2016

Oil on canvas

Private Collection; L2023:1.9

Born and raised in South Africa during Apartheid, Marlene Dumas moved to the Netherlands in 1976 to pursue her artistic career. The painter is interested in depicting emotion, identity, and representation in portraits that often originate from photographs of friends or family. **Amazon** is a depiction of Dumas's daughter, Helena (b. 1989), who has been a recurring subject in the artist's work for her entire life. When this painting was completed, Helena was preparing to give birth to her first child. As Dumas once said: "Painting doesn't freeze time. It circulates and recycles time like a wheel that turns."

*On view September 20 – December 31, 2023*





Marlene Dumas (South African, b. 1953)

**Like Don Quixote**, 2002

Oil on canvas

Private Collection; L2020:38.1

Marlene Dumas has lived and worked in the Netherlands since leaving her birthplace of Cape Town, South Africa in 1976. Dumas is best known for portraits, although the term only narrowly describes her creations. She never works from life, preferring the distance of art historical reproductions and photographs of herself and her family, as well as celebrities, literary icons, artists, and political figures. Seeking out the ambiguity of intense emotions and complex experiences, Dumas renders intangible subjects (death, sex, and shame are favorites) in figurative form. **Like Don Quixote** takes its pale profile from German Renaissance painter Hans Holbein's life-size *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* (1521). Removed from its original context and given the suggestive simile of a title, the anonymous face glows with a ghostly hue created by thinned layers of paint: a mask of insubstantial flesh that provides no reassurance of identity, time, or place.



*The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb*, 1521 (detail)

Oil on limewood

*On view July 1 – October 4, 2020*