

For immediate release

MARLENE DUMAS

Against the Wall

March 18 – April 24, 2010

Opening reception: Thursday, March 18, 6 – 8pm

Press preview with the artist: March 18, 5 – 6pm



The Wall, 2009

Oil on canvas, 70 ⁷/₈ x 118 ¹/₈ inches (180 x 300 cm)

David Zwirner is pleased to announce the first solo exhibition by Marlene Dumas since the artist joined the gallery in 2008. *Against the Wall* features all new works from 2009 and 2010. This marks the first time since 2001 that the artist has presented a new body of work in New York.

Known for her unique approach to canvas and her thought-provoking subject matter, Marlene Dumas is widely considered one of today's most important painters. Her work is characterized by a sensual and gestural technique that is also swift, dry, and minimal, as if under pressure to leave only what is necessary. While she lives and works in The Netherlands, the artist was born and raised in South Africa, and her paintings have often drawn from her own experiences of living with apartheid. For over

thirty years, Dumas has merged political discourse, personal experience, and art historical references in a richly layered body of work. Her paintings integrate complex themes—ranging from segregation, eroticism, or, more generally, the politics of love and war—to explore how image-making is implicitly involved not only in the cultural processes of objectification, but also in the way in which events are documented and collectively understood.

Dumas's practice is often based upon the translation of found imagery and explores the tension between the photographic documentation of reality and the constructed, imaginary space of painting. The works in this exhibition have evolved primarily from media imagery and newspaper clippings documenting Israel and Palestine. However, Dumas's representations acknowledge universal themes of instability, isolation, and the lack of communication, while moreover addressing the medium of painting as such. The titles of these works (among them *Under Construction*; *Mindblocks*; *The Wall*) not only describe the motifs depicted, but also refer to the artist's struggle with the boundaries of her chosen medium: as she herself has noted, "A painting needs a wall to object to."

Dumas's paintings often display a kind of ambiguity of meaning, employing visual "traps" to show how the mind is quick to assume what is being presented in a given image. Her latest works explore the (in)famous walls of this unstable region of the Middle East. The large-scale canvas, *The Wall*, at first appears to present a scene at the Western Wall (also known as the Wailing Wall), an important site of religious pilgrimage located in the Old City of Jerusalem. However, Dumas's painting is in fact based upon a photograph from a newspaper that portrayed a group of Orthodox Jews on their way to pray at Rachel's Tomb. The men are shown against the backdrop of an Israeli security fence outside of Bethlehem.

This ambiguity is further examined in two related paintings, *Wall Weeping* and *Wall Wailing*. While the figures in the former canvas appear to have their arms raised, perhaps, in prayer, the latter painting reveals that they are raised so that armed

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soldiers can search their bodies. In the same manner, the concrete obstacles found at security checkpoints and roadblocks confront the viewer as conceptual *Mindblocks* in a canvas that fluidly merges abstraction and figuration.

Child Waving shows the vulnerability of youth, while presenting a state of tension in which innocent human gestures become suspicious and threatening. *Living on your Knees* depicts a kneeling figure whose pose remains undefined: is the man humbled in the act of prayer or subject to an act of humiliation? A woman mourns for her son in *The Mother*, yet the canvas makes the dead (shown in a framed portrait) seem more alive than the living. *Man Watching* shows a soldier with his back to us; but what is he watching?

In a sense, many of the works in the exhibition could almost be considered landscape, or "territory paintings," as Dumas has described them. She states in the catalogue that accompanies this exhibition, "For once it is not zoomed-in, vertical frontal heads and naked figures that take the main stage, but a man-made architectural structure in a more perspectival narrative space...It leads us not into a holy land, but rather to a barren no-man's land."

While the paintings in *Against the Wall* comprise a critique of what is sometimes referred to by opponents of the West Bank barrier as the "apartheid wall," they ultimately lament the failure of co-existence and the tragic human condition of segregation. The stance taken by Dumas, however, is not one of overt oppositional criticism, but one that acknowledges the artist as an accomplice (among this body of work is a self-portrait titled *The Sleep of Reason*) and which implicates painting in the construction of collective memory.

The exhibition is accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue, which includes a personal and poetic letter by Dumas. Her text also cites a wide range of political voices and writers, including Mahmoud Darwish, Rabbi Menachem Froman, Nelson Mandela, Shlomo Sand, Susan Sontag, and Desmond Tutu. Published by David Zwirner/Radius Books, *Against the Wall* is available in a first edition of 1,000 copies.

Born in Cape Town, South Africa in 1953, **Marlene Dumas** went to The Netherlands in the late 1970s, where she studied painting and psychology, and where she continues to live and work today.

She was recently the subject of a critically acclaimed retrospective, *Measuring Your Own Grave*, which featured over 100 paintings and works on paper and was the largest and most comprehensive examination of the artist ever presented in North America. This survey began at The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, and traveled to The Museum of Modern Art, New York, and The Menil Collection, Houston, Texas (2008-2009). Also in 2008, the Iziko South African National Gallery, Cape Town, and the Standard Bank Gallery, Johannesburg, presented two consecutive shows of the artist's work, marking the first time Dumas had solo exhibitions in her homeland. Haus der Kunst, Munich, will have *Marlene Dumas: Tronies* on view from October 2010 to February 2011.

Dumas has been the subject of many one-person exhibitions at such institutions as the Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo (2007); Marugame Genichiro-Inokuma Museum of Contemporary Art, Marugame, Japan (2007-2008); The Art Institute of Chicago (2003); Fondazione Bevilacqua La Masa, Palazzetto Tito, Venice (2003); De Pont Museum of Contemporary Art, Tilburg, The Netherlands (2002); Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris (2001); The Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston (2001); Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt (1998); and Tate Gallery, London (1996). In 1995 she represented The Netherlands at the 46th Venice Biennale (together with Marijke van Warmerdam and Maria Roosen).

Her work is in the collections of major museums and public institutions, including The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Tate Gallery, London; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris; Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt; Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo; Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven; Haags Gemeentemuseum, The Hague; and Staatsgalerie Moderner Kunst, Munich.