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Breaking the Rules

Artistic Expressions of Transgression

TO MODEL OR NOT TO MODEL
TRANSGRESSIVE PORTRAITS OF MARY MAGDALENE BY MARLENE DUMAS

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A sinner converted into a saint, Mary Magdalene poses a paradox of representation. Conventionally portrayed as a beautiful and sensual woman with light skin and fair hair, she is most commonly shown in a state of repentance, shying away from the viewer's gaze. Nonetheless, the penitent Magdalene is depicted with a highly sexualized aura. Marlene Dumas' portraits of Mary Magdalene, by contrast, do not engage in the seduction of the onlooker. Her figures stand upright and directly confront the viewer with their gaze. Although sexually appealing, these figures' sexuality is not what is at stake in these works. Starting from this premise, this article's analysis explores the ways in which Dumas' representations of Mary Magdalene transgress stereotypical representations of the saint, questioning and transforming canonical depictions of female subjectivity and at the same time deconstructing conventional notions of Western portraiture.

On the occasion of the 1995 Venice Biennial, Marlene Dumas created a series of eight works entitled *Magdalene* for the Dutch Pavilion. The figures in this series take as a subject the biblical character of Mary Magdalene, who holds a singular position in Western art history as a figure of controversy and opposition. Known to the public as a sinner who became a saint, her depiction typically incorporates elements from her previous life as a sinner, as well as representing her reformed self. In a tradition which attempts to

compromise between these two poles, she has been consistently depicted as a beautiful and seductive woman, with long hair and light skin, seeking repentance. The resulting imagery has portrayed her with a highly erotic aura, and her coyness in the face of the viewers' gaze has encouraged a voyeuristic reading of the subject. In this context, Marlene Dumas chose to present a series of unrecognizable versions of Mary Magdalene. Creating three-metre-high canvases that depict naked female figures in an upright position directly confronting the viewer, Dumas' paintings challenge the conventional understanding of the character of Mary Magdalene. This article will focus on two paintings from this series, namely *Magdalene (Newman's Zip)* (Fig. 1) and *Magdalene (Manet's Queen/Queen of Spades)* (Fig. 2) arguing that the selected portraits transgress art historical canons of representation in order to challenge stereotypical depictions of female subjects and predefined racial identities, at the same time dismantling the concept of the female body as a passive one. Close-reading the paintings and contextualizing these with other works by Marlene Dumas and by other contemporary artists, this article analyses the means by which these portraits transgress conventional readings of female subjectivity and explain how they employ portraiture to deconstruct Western understanding of this genre.

The representation of the human figure is predominant in Dumas' painterly practice, with compositions consisting of enlarged faces or full-sized bodies, which are referred to as portraits. Attempting to deconstruct the portrait by challenging its main characteristic, namely that of catching and depicting the inner essence of its sitter, Dumas fights stereotypical representations of female identity while remodelling the conventional notion of portraiture.

Whereas traditional representations of Mary Magdalene are typically categorized as biblical scenes and therefore included in the broader category of history paintings, Dumas' depictions can best be included in the category of portraiture. History paintings depict a moment in a narrative story, with a

Fig. 1
Marlene Dumas
Magdalena (Manet's Queen/
Queen of Spades)
1995
Oil on canvas, 300 x 100 cm
Collection Stedelijk Museum
Amsterdam, the Netherlands
© Marlene Dumas

Fig 2.
Marlene Dumas
Magdalena (Newman's Zip)
1995
Oil on canvas, 300.5 x 101.5 cm
Collection Stedelijk Museum
Amsterdam, the Netherlands
© Marlene Dumas

well-defined setting and often numerous characters. Representations of Mary Magdalene either depict narrative scenes from her life taken from the Bible, or single out her persona in a portrait-style depiction where she is represented at all times with elements alluding to her identity, such as long hair or an ointment jar. Marlene Dumas' works evade the category of history painting, because these portraits do not focus on scenes from her life. The figures are also stripped of all background and auxiliary elements that could allude to their identity. The close-up and blow-up methods aim to create a present moment of tension with the viewer, rather than seek to represent an unfolding moment from the past. While these depictions of Mary Magdalene can therefore be noted as portraits, they in fact go beyond conventional notions of the genre as they do not set out to create a mimetic representation of the subjects, nor to capture their inner essence.

WESTERN PORTRAITURE

The Western notion of the portrait has traditionally revolved first and foremost around likeness. As Roland Kanz mentions in his treatise on painting from 1435, Leon Battista Alberti had connected the need for portrayal to the notion of narcissism, a word whose etymology goes back to the legend of Narcissus, who fell in love with his reflection, and who thus allegedly wished to capture this in the most precise image possible.[1] Commemoration for personal, social, or political reasons was thus one of the chief functions of portraiture. In Western cultures, identity and identification were achieved through likeness as "the portrait canon stresses physiognomic likeness – incorporating the idea that personality may be communicated through idiosyncratic facial features and expression".[2] The identity of the sitter was thus created by the degree of recognizability he or she achieved in the portrait.

In the centuries to come, while a faithful representation of the portrayed was strongly desired and the ability to create such a representation was

1 Roland Kanz, *Portraits* (Cologne: Taschen, 2008), 6.

2 Jean M. Borgatti, "Constructed Identities: Portraiture in World Art," in *World Art Studies: Exploring Concepts and Approaches*, ed. Kitty Zijlmans et al. (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2008), 306.

considered to be a great talent of the artist, the idealization of the sitter gained significance as well. Thus, the scope of portrayal had shifted away from the idea of mere representation and focused rather on the glory of the portrayed. The genre of portraiture had a highly developed tradition of standardized artistic conventions such as rendering of background, costume, posture, and expressions to create a work that would accommodate the patrons' wishes.

Even if significantly influenced by the desires of patrons, it became evident that mindless patronizing did not enrich the art of portraiture. This thought gave birth to the idea of the significant contribution of the painter, who transformed the work into a high piece of art.[3] As Richard Brilliant explains, "the portrait artist's task [was] to make the invisible, yet essential elements of character visible, and so bring together into a single image its corporeal and incorporeal substances".[4] The portrait became more than a passive rendering of the sitter, as it was vital to make visible the essential qualities that otherwise were invisible. According to the standard view, in a successful portrait the viewer is confronted with the original subjectivity of the portrayer, as well as with that of the portrayed, thus encountering the harmonious meeting of two subjectivities.[5] The sitter's subjectivity is defined by their individuality and uniqueness, thus the portrait provides a faithful and unique representation of a subject that is authentic and original. The representation thus became representative of the represented.

Ernst Van Alphen explains that in the traditional portrait there is an illusion of implied unity of the sitter's expression (outer form) and inner essence, a condition that was thought to bestow uniqueness and authority to the genre. This illusionary unity thus dictated the construction of the traditional portrait which relied on a mimetic mode of representation to prove its authenticity.[6] Marlene Dumas' portraits of Mary Magdalene depart from such constructions, as they do not refer to a character's inner essence, nor are they based on mimetic reality. Dumas' characters are not even sitters in the literal sense, as

3 Kanz, *Portraits*, 9.

4 Richard Brilliant, "Portraits: A Recurrent Genre in World Art," in *Likeness and Beyond: Portraits from Africa and the World*, ed. Jean M. Borgatti et al. (New York: The Center for African Art, 1990), 15.

5 Ernst van Alphen, "The Portrait's Dispersal: Concepts of Representation and Subjectivity in Contemporary Portraiture," in *Portraiture. Facing the Subject*, ed. Joanna Woodall (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 239.

6 Ibid., 242.

her paintings are inspired by explicit cultural imagery and not by real subjects. Depicting Mary Magdalene in various non-representative modes, Dumas transgresses art historical canons of representation as well as conventional notions of the genre of portraiture by departing from the notions of individual identity.

MARY MAGDALENE

Although there is no specific biblical reference to Mary Magdalene being a prostitute or of having led a sinful life, she is generally known in Western culture as a sinner who became a saint (Fig. 3). Consequently, it is unsurprising that her representation throughout art history has resulted in numerous paradoxes and ambivalences. Diane Apostolos-Cappadona explains that the reason for this confusion is that the Gospels do not offer a clear and definitive picture of who Mary Magdalene was in the context of Christ's life.[7] The misunderstandings are also a consequence of the common use of the name Mary in Early Christian scripture, making the distinction between characters at times impossible. The earliest identification of Mary Magdalene, and the one on which the Evangelists agree, is that of the first person to see the empty tomb and then eventually the Resurrected Christ. The Gospels also mention her as one of the earliest and most devout followers of Jesus (Luke 8:2-3), from whom he cast seven demons (Mark 16:9; Luke 8:2). While there is no evidence that any of the seven demons had anything to do with being unchaste, Apostolos-Cappadona explains that the confusion might have arisen from her geographic epithet, alluding to the city of Magdala. During the life of the Christ, Magdala was a large and wealthy town on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee, which was destroyed by the Romans as a "result of its citizens' alleged moral depravity".[8] Over time, the confusion between the town inhabitants' sins and the Magdalene herself could have been the source of her image as an adulterous sinner. While scriptural quandary over Mary Magdalene's identity was an on-going debate throughout the first centuries, following Gregory the Great's proclamation (c. 590-604),

7 Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, *In Search of Mary Magdalene: Images and Traditions* (New York: The American Bible Society, 2002), 10.

8 Ibid., 11.

the Western Christian tradition acknowledged Mary Magdalene as being both a sinner and penitent.[9]

While this image of Mary Magdalene is not based on historical sources, it is encouraged by the Church, as through her example they could show believers that no matter how much they had sinned, there would always be a place for redemption in the eyes of God. Esther de Boer argues that there might have been a more complex relationship between Jesus and Mary Magdalene than that of disciple and teacher, which may have triggered the jealousy of the other disciples and thus led to a subversion of her image.[10]

The notion of Mary Magdalene as an adulteress spread in Christianity from its early stages, and can be traced back at least to Ephraim the Syrian in the fourth century.[11] As a result, art historical imagery depicted her as a beautiful, sensual woman. Her beauty and long hair, as well as subtle scriptural symbols such as the ointment jar, make her easily recognizable in depictions throughout the centuries.

Mary Magdalene's ointment jar is in itself a symbol of metamorphoses. Depending on its depiction, it can take various shapes, including an alabaster container, a liturgical vessel, or a perfume bottle. Alluding either to the previous sinful life of pleasure or her redeemed persona, the anointing oils represent

Fig. 3
Carlo Crivelli
Mary Magdalene
c. 1480-87
Tempera on panel, 152 x 49 cm
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam,
the Netherlands

9 Ibid., 14-15.

10 Esther de Boer, *The Mary Magdalene Cover-Up* (London: T&T Clark, 2009), 14-20.

11 Richard J. Hooper, *The Crucifixion of Mary Magdalene* (Sedona, AZ: Sanctuary Publications, 2008), 81.

her cleansing and her break-away from evil and sin. While her long flowing hair has been used to anoint Jesus' feet, it also represents the iconography of a sinful woman. As Apostolos-Cappadona explains, hairstyle had significance in the Classical world where only young unmarried women allowed their hair to flow freely down their shoulders. Married women covered their hair as a symbol of their social status, but also to preserve their beauty for their husbands alone. Courtesans braided their hair, decorating it with "bejewelled or floral ornaments alluding to the female personification of profane love."[12] Furthermore, light hair was typical of the personification of the Goddess of Love, Venus, and thus symbolized sexuality.

Daniel Arrase argues that hair is Mary Magdalene's feminine attribute (if only one could be named), just as the phallus is the male attribute.[13] Analysing imagery that depicts Mary Magdalene with loose, unarranged hair, he notes that hair becomes a metaphor for another specific symbol. While her extravagantly styled hair is a symbol of her previous life as a seductress, her long hair loosely flowing over her body must therefore represent the opposite. We have already noted that loosely flowing hair was reserved only for young unmarried girls – innocent, but most importantly virgins – who were in a different category than that of Mary Magdalene. As the Magdalene was no longer a virgin, her loose hair could only represent the manner in which she would be most likely wear it in intimate circumstances. Yet in the time of Mary Magdalene, women were not allowed to present themselves in public with dishevelled hair, as this was indicative of an untidy lifestyle, one that Mary Magdalene had already left behind. Mary Magdalene's untidy hair is nevertheless fully accepted in traditional depictions of her character, as according to Arasse's argument, this had actually metamorphosed into her pubic hair. Calling it 'considerations of representability' – when one could not represent something because it is taboo, and therefore replaces it with something that resembles it in one way or another – Mary Magdalene's highly sexualized aura is maintained and entertained by her long and unarranged

12 Apostolos-Cappadona, *In Search of Mary Magdalene*, 20.

13 Daniel Arasse, *Take a Closer Look* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2013), 75.

hair. Left to loosely curve around her body, her long hair becomes a metaphor for her pubic hair, which is reminiscent of the savage, man-eating habits of her earlier sinful life.[14]

Newman's Zip and *Manet's Queen* have almost none of the characteristics discussed above. Neither figure is light-haired or fair-skinned, and *Manet's Queen* does not even have long hair. Cutting off Mary Magdalene's hair would be, according to Daniel Arasse's argument, taking away her preeminent sexually inviting attribute, at the same time denying her background as a sinner. Furthermore, neither of the two figures is depicted in repentance or shying away from the viewers' gaze: both stand upright and look the viewer in the eye. While Marlene Dumas' Magdalenes are inspired by supermodels such as Naomi Campbell and Claudia Schiffer, it is not only their seductive bodies that are at stake in these paintings. Going beyond the stereotypical image of the fashion model, Dumas attempts to alter submissive female identity by transforming the anonymous body into a present and active body. It is almost as if, without knowing the titles of the works, viewers would not be able to identify the subjects of the paintings. Nevertheless, titles are important guides for Dumas' work as she uses these to direct and intensify the impact of the paintings.

THE NAKED

Manet's Queen references Edouard Manet's famous painting *Olympia* (Fig. 4), first exhibited at the 1863 Paris Salon. The canvas instantaneously attracted much criticism from the public as it included several indicators that the character depicted was a naked prostitute. While the female nude has been a common subject in painting over centuries, the way it was depicted up to the moment when *Olympia* was shown in public was in the most idealized manner. The female nude was used for expressing allegories, virtues, and goddesses, thus romanticizing the idea of the female figure. *Olympia* managed

14 Ibid., 87.

to scandalize the French public in the first place simply because it depicted a real woman, in her probable real-life surroundings. She was not depicted as a nude, which would have been indicative of a studio model, but rather appeared as naked. Her nakedness meant that the viewer was actually confronted with the unclothed and unmasked body of a courtesan, which, placed in the public sphere, embarrassed its viewers. *Olympia* altered and played with identities contemporary culture wished to keep still, namely those of the nude and the prostitute, and that is primarily why it was so harshly mocked and criticized.[15] Art of that time was not supposed to confront its viewers with realities, but rather with ideals. Therefore, stripping the nude of the idealized forms of the female body, the nude became the naked.

Fig. 4
Edouard Manet
Olympia
1863
Oil on canvas, 130 x 190 cm
Musée d'Orsay, Paris, France

15 Timothy James Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and his Followers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 100.

Kenneth Clark begins his survey of the history of the nude in art by explaining the difference between the nude and naked. While being naked is being deprived of clothes and accompanied by a feeling of embarrassment, the nude, on the contrary, implies no discomfort. "The vague image it projects into the

mind is not of a huddled and defenceless body, but of a balanced, prosperous, and confident body: the body re-formed".[16] In the eyes of Clark, the nude departs from the naked in the sense that it represents an ideal, rather than an imitation of reality. He therefore argues that the nude becomes a perfected version of reality, created by the artist from his imagination combined with the study of mathematical proportions. While Manet's *Olympia* clearly draws inspiration from Titian's *Venus of Urbino* (1538), it adds one element which in fact changes the entire history of the female nude representation. As Clark mentions, ultimately the most shocking aspect of the work was placing on a naked body a head with so much individual character, that it in fact jeopardized the whole premise of the female nude.[17] Aware of her nakedness, *Olympia* confronted the gaze of the onlooker, looking directly back at the viewer and eventually dismissing his presence. She confronted the spectators that intruded in her private quarters and punished them by making them aware of their role as voyeurs. In fact, gazing back at the spectator, *Olympia* challenged male control over the female body, denouncing the idea of the contained and passive, non-interactive female nude.

Van Alphen explains in his book on *Francis Bacon and the Loss of Self* the consequences of unconventional renderings of the female nude: direct confrontation precludes the traditional objectification of the female body in male desire and visual pleasure, as the gaze becomes self-endangering. Without being able to enjoy what it sees, its mere function is reduced to unmasking the onlookers' voyeuristic position. Pursuing a different attitude from Manet's *Olympia* that dismissed the viewer, these female figures engage the viewer in a provocative, confrontational way to make them aware of the difficulty of their position.[18]

In her book *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality*, Lynda Nead argues that one of the principal goals of the female nude has been the containment and regulation of the female sexual body.[19] Through the procedure of art

16 Kenneth Clark, *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form*, 8th ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 1.

17 Ibid., 165.

18 Ernst van Alphen, *Francis Bacon and the Loss of Self* (London: Reaktion Books LTD, 1998), 174.

19 Lynda Nead, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 6.

and Western culture, the female body has been framed so that it becomes contained and controlled; "The transformation of the female body into a female nude is thus an act of regulation: of the female body and of the potentially wayward viewer whose wandering eye is disciplined by the contentions and protocols of art".[20] Embracing Manet, Dumas explained:

> I don't want the nude, I want the naked. But I do know with the description of things, as with the *Magdalene* paintings, that I was deliberately not looking for seduction, but rather for confrontation, and for a long time that was the case with my other depictions of figures. Maybe I thought that confrontation was closer to nakedness than seduction.[21]

Both *Manet's Queen* and *Newman's Zip* are naked, aware of and accepting their own sexuality. They overtly show this to their viewer, whom they also confront with a direct gaze. Dumas in fact transforms the shocking naked body into what had previously been attributed to the nude, namely the reformed-body. Dumas' portraits of Mary Magdalene show the naked body as a confident, balanced body, therefore entirely transforming the category of the female nude.

It is particularly worthwhile to analyse another painting by Dumas, *The Particularity of Nakedness* (Fig. 5), in this context, because of its exploration of the tradition of the male nude. Depicting a male nude horizontally, the work attracted much criticism as it was unthinkable for a male figure to be shown in such a position, deprived of a traditionally masculine vertical, authoritarian position. Furthermore, the public associated this figure with the image of gayness. Silvia Eiblmayr has pointed out that the most significant conclusion is not about sexual orientation, "but rather the traditional identification of the passive, erotically displayed and readily available body with what is female and its concomitant depreciation".[22]

20 Ibid., 6.

21 Marlene Dumas, Andrea Buttner and Jeniffer Higgie, "To Show or Not to Show," *Tate Etc.* 33 (2015), 52-53.

22 Silvia Eiblmayr, "The Eyes of the Night Creatures. On the Non-Domesticated Gaze in the Pictures by Marlene Dumas," in *Marlene Dumas: Models*, exhibition catalogue, 9 December 1995-28 January 1996, Portikus, Frankfurt, Germany, 12.

The Mary Magdalene figures, on the contrary, denote authority. Having Mary Magdalene stand upright, directly gazing at the viewers, transforms the passive body into an active body, thus challenging not only the stereotypical representation of the female nude, but also of the female figure itself. By deliberately playing with the size and format of her works, the artist actively transforms the roles given to her characters. As both paintings are three metres tall, the observer's view of the painting is first at crotch level, inviting a sexualization of the image. The imposing size of the Magdalenes propels them to gaze down at their spectator, who then becomes little in their presence. Regardless of the onlookers' standpoint, they always have to gaze up to these figures, hereby making the Magdalenes superior to the onlooker. The *Magdalene* series combines verticality with authority, challenging the historical notion of Mary Magdalene as a repenting sinner who conventionally shies away from the gaze of the onlooker in shame. Accepting their sexuality but obstructing the voyeuristic gaze, Dumas' figures are no longer passive and become active subjects.

DUMAS' PAINTERLY METHODS

Besides their compositional elements, Marlene Dumas' Mary Magdalenes also transgress stereotypical representations through the artist's painterly methods. Purposefully distorting aspects of natural appearance in order to obtain the visual effects she desires, Dumas explained that nature can be better understood when it is turned and twisted, resulting in a work that is not a mere reproduction of real life.[23] To her, "Art is not a mirror. Art is a translation of that which you do not know, but of what you want to convince others or rather, that which no one knows…".[24] Therefore, art itself is not a mere reproduction of nature, but instead a distorted image of what one perceives as his or her own reality.

23 Statement made during the conference P*aintings/Problems/ Possibilities: A Symposium Dedicated to Svetlana Alpers*, held in Amsterdam on 7 May 2010.

24 Maria Hlavajova, "*Ik is een allochtoon*. A Conversation with Marlene Dumas," in *Citizens and Subjects: The Netherlands, for Example*, ed. Rosi Braidotti et al. (Utrecht: BAK and JRP|Ringier, 2007), 114.

Fig 5
Marlene Dumas
The Particularity of Nakedness
1987
Oil on canvas, 140 x 300 cm
Collection Van Abbemuseum
Eindhoven, the Netherlands
© Marlene Dumas

Dumas' method of painting applies wet on wet materials, such as ink with plenty of water or diluted oil paint, which give the works the possibility of abrupt change at any moment. The artist continuously intervenes in the creation process with fast gestures, explaining: "I like my medium slow and my gesture fast",[25] thereby accentuating the importance of spontaneity in her painting process. While these paintings carry the impetuosity of their development, they are in fact the products of intense study and laborious time in the studio. Consequently, their raw, at times unfinished and sketchy look, is part of the artistic process.

Like sketches, these works seem to be studies of the same character, developing ideas for a final work. Closely related to the term *modello*, a sketch can also imply a smaller precursory version of the final work. Dumas does not create a final, referential work around the subject, but each of these representations of Mary Magdalene represents an individual work. These works are not models for others, but are rather models for themselves, constructing a different identity for each of the Magdalenes they represent. Their sketchiness also evades stereotypical representation, by not confining to pre-set rules. Through these transformed Magdalenes, Dumas evades pre-defined, stereotypical cultural images of the character, therefore undoing stereotypical representation.

25 Dumas, Buttner, and Higgie, "To Show or Not to Show," 50.

The transgression of representation can also be noted in the Magdalenes' race and skin colour. In Dumas' oeuvre, the characters' skin becomes a bearer of meaning. In these portraits, Dumas plays with the double meanings of colour, attributing new meanings to the multiple skin tones. In relation to the colour of the *Magdalene* series, it is worthwhile to mention two other paintings: *Cupid* (1994) and *Reinhardt's Daughter* (1994), made approximately a year prior to the *Magdalene* series. Both works are based on the same image of the artist's sleeping child, the only difference between the two being the colour or race of the infant. While *Cupid* alludes to a baroque figure from a church decoration, *Reinhardt's Daughter* alludes to a dark-skinned child, positioned on a sombre background. Concerning these works, Dumas has written: "You change the color of something and everything changes (especially if you are a painter)".[26] These works represent an investigation of the meaning of the colour black, and its consequences for the reception of the work. As titles are never incidental in Dumas' works, the artist also references the American abstract expressionist painter Ad Reinhardt, most famous for his monochrome paintings from the 1950s and 1960s of entirely black canvases, created using a multitude of shades of black. Interested in Reinhardt's distinction between black as a symbol denoting the negative (e.g. of race or evil) and black as a colour devoid of any of these negative associations, Dumas in fact continues her investigation into what it means to be black and how this affects perceptions of the self and the Other.

Dumas' Mary Magdalenes are inspired by African tribal women, as well as by the bodies of supermodels such as Naomi Campbell, thus transgressing the stereotypical representation of white women. In her own writings about *Newman's Zip*, Dumas questions the notion of the white model: "Where does the white model come from? From a cool, transparent place called Western Art?"[27] Noting the dominant depiction of white women in Western art history, Dumas proposes a novel interpretation of the female model. By doing so, she

26 Marlene van Niekerk, "Reinhardt's Daughter," in *Marlene Dumas: The Image as a Burden*, ed. Leontine Coelewij et al. (London and Amsterdam: TATE Publishing and Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, 2014), 72.

27 Marlene Dumas, "Magdalena or the Megamodel meets the Holy Whore," in *Marlene Dumas: Models*, 28.

continues what Paul Gauguin started with his painting *Ia Orana Maria* (*Hail Mary*, 1891) where he depicted the Virgin Mary and Jesus as Tahitians. Non-homogenous skin colour combined with the transgression in representation of biblical figures is in fact Dumas' search for a 'bastard race' which would encapsulate the entirety of human races, indicating that there is no such thing as a superior race or skin colour.

Marlene Dumas is known for using the blow-up and close-up methods and isolating her figures on a neutral background: "For me the close-up was a way of getting rid of irrelevant background information and, by making the facial elements so big, it increased the sense of abstraction concerning the picture plane".[28] Through this seclusion, the narrative character of the paintings is decreased, and the images are freed from the burden of straightforward deciphering. Dumas' enlarged and focused compositions depicting Mary Magdalene create a direct contact with the viewer, relying on their intimidating effect. She explains: "I have used the close-up only for the human face. This method achieves an intimidating and confrontational effect, which was what I intended. Images combining intimacy (or the illusion of that) with discomfort".[29] Stripped of her religious connotation, Mary Magdalene appears as a threatening woman, ready to overturn the spectators' voyeuristic gaze in an overt act of upheaval.

DUMAS' MODELS

Marlene Dumas describes Mary Magdalene as the meeting point of two types of models: the fashion model, or 'Megamodel', and the religious model, or the 'Holy Whore': thus the notion of the model is a key concept in the artist's investigation of the cultural image of female subjectivity. As the artist paints from existing photos, her characters are not models in the traditional art historical sense, since they have never modelled for the artist; rather, the artist used an already existing representation of them to create a new

28 Marlene Dumas, "Artist's Writings. Larger than Life," in *Marlene Dumas*, ed. Dominic van den Boogerd et al. (London: Phaidon, 1999), 116.

29 Ibid., 120.

representation. Furthermore, being a model does not imply one's subjectivity, as one with subjectivity is called a sitter; therefore, a model alludes to anonymity. Remaining anonymous, the model is emptied of its individuality. Given that conventional art historical depictions of Mary Magdalene are based on a pre-defined identity, portraits of her are emptied of individuality, as each representation becomes a social construct. By deconstructing these cultural stereotypes and transgressing the culturally accepted image of Mary Magdalene, Dumas exposes constructions of female identity in cultural images.

Mary Magdalene is not fundamentally different from the fashion model, as her image in art history became a cultural model. In works such as *Models*, Dumas exposes the cultural image of fashion models, whom people model themselves on. Mary Magdalene functions in the same way as the fashion model, as onlookers have to model themselves after her, and not only after her holy persona, but also after her culturally constructed image. For Dumas, the fashion model is a new version of an already existing construction of the religious model, foregrounding the similarities between cultural images and art images. By transgressing stereotypical representations of existing characters, Dumas deconstructs cultural images through transformation, battling the power of already existing stereotypes. She understands and unmasks the fact that cultural images do not represent identity, but are instead representations of culturally created identities programmed to represent ideals instead of reality.

In this sense, Dumas' practice comes close to Cindy Sherman's endeavours for her early *Film Stills* where she unmasks the notion of authentic identity as an illusion. A Sherman film still is not based on an original image, as the scene depicted has not been previously seen, neither in a movie nor a different type of media. It has no original. "The condition of Sherman's work in *Film Stills* – and part of their point, we could say – is the simulacral nature of what they contain, the condition of being a copy *without* an original".[30] Portraying an

30 Rosalind Krauss, *Cindy Sherman: 1975-1993* (New York: Rizzoli, 1993), 17.

array of stereotypical Hollywood or New Wave heroines in an atmosphere revealing of their situation and reminiscent of 1950s *film noir*, Cindy Sherman produces what Rosalind Krauss refers to as 'generalized memories' and 'remembered fantasy' of fictional characters, a stereotypical view of certain female personae. Drawing attention to the proliferation of images and how these become idealizations of the character depicted, Krauss explains that Cindy Sherman aims to unmask the process behind the creation of what we commonly refer to as a stereotype.

As a major discursive strategy, the stereotype is a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always 'in place', already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated.[31] Homi Bhabha argues that this process of ambivalence is central to the stereotype as it produces the effect of probabilistic truth and predictability which, for the stereotype, must always exceed what can be empirically proved or logically construed.[32] He exemplifies this thought through "the essential duplicity of the Asiatic or the bestial sexual license of the African that needs no proof, can never really, in discourse, be proved".[33]

The stereotype is thus an amalgam of shared thoughts and opinions that coagulate into an idealized version of the subject, which by repetition create a moment of the timeless eternal. The moment captured becomes universal truth: the stereotype operates with universal truth. As Krauss argues:

> [The] myth is an act of draining history out of signs and reconstructing these signs as "instances"; in particular, instances of universal truth or of natural law, of things that have no history, no specific embeddedness, no territory of contestation. Myth steals into the heart of the sign to convert the historical into the "natural" – something that is uncontested, that is simply the way things are.[34]

31 Homi Bhabha, "The Other Question… The Stereotype and the Colonial Discourse," *Screen* 24 (November 1983), 18.

32 Ibid., 18.

33 Ibid., 18.

34 Krauss, *Cindy Sherman*, 25.

In her *Magdalene* series (and not only), Marlene Dumas similarly unmasks the consumption of the myth of Mary Magdalene. By transgressing stereotypical ways of representation she demystifies the myth of Mary Magdalene as the repentant sinner, which in fact historically cannot be proven. Taking the process a step further, in addition to unmasking the stereotype she also breaks the underlying codes of the construction of her cultural image. Krauss explains that none of the roles and characters depicted in Sherman's film stills are independent or free-standing, but produced through the unification of separate codes referencing gender, age, position, and more. Therefore, when the viewer comes to recognize the character, it is a process of decoding the given codes:

> What is being masked is that the name [of the character of the *Film Stills*], rather than pointing to a primary entity in the "real", is an effect of the vast already-written, already-heard, already-read of the codes; it, the denotation, is merely the last of these codes to be slipped into place. The consumer of realist fiction, however, buys the pitch and believes in the "character", believes in the substance of the person from whom all the rest seems to follow as a set of necessary attributes – believes, that is, in the myth.[35]

Mary Magdalene's 'codes' are her long hair, the ointment jar, and her pious attitude, features which mostly lack from Dumas' depictions of the character. Even when recognizable attributes, such as long hair, are still in place, they turn into different signs, as previously noted. While Sherman's *Film Stills* are an extreme case of masquerading aimed at exposing the social construction and power of stereotypes, Dumas goes beyond unmasking cultural stereotypes by replacing them with alternative constructions that analyse and criticize notions of gender, race, and sexuality, encouraging the viewers towards a different understanding of female subjectivity.

35 Ibid., 32.

Norman Bryson argues that a constructivist view of the body makes it a social construction rather than an anatomical constant.[36] "Entirely subsumed into the sphere of the cultural work, indeed apparently becoming the principal arena of cultural activity, it sheds at last its primitive character and is fully assimilated and civilized".[37] He further explains that since the Enlightenment the body has been made to disappear, as it is said to solely consist in its representation: "It is by virtue of being built by culture that the body comes to be an object of historical inquiry, that it comes to exist at all".[38] In the case of Mary Magdalene, it is not her individuality that was sought to be represented but rather her historically created persona, which metamorphoses into the body of a beautiful woman.

> The sense of identity – of each image as bodying forth a different presence – becomes manifestly a product of manipulation of the complex social codes of appearance, a pure surface. Which is to say that identity – the interior depths supposed to stand behind or within the surface of appearance – is only an identity-effect, the semi-hallucinatory transformation of material surface into imaginary profundity.[39]

Thus taking away the sexualized aura of the saint, Dumas exposes the predefined social constructions of her body. By deconstructing this stereotype through transformation, she creates a new image for female subjectivity that further questions the cultural representation the female body on its own.

Taking as a starting point stereotypical, pre-defined cultural images that she deconstructs and replaces with unusual and unexpected constructions is an on-going pursuit in the artist's practice. In her series of portraits depicting the infamous producer Phil Spector (Fig. 6; Fig. 7), she paints using already existing photographs. Her works, however, depart from the socially constructed understandings of images of the convicted criminal, as she explains:

36 Norman Bryson, "House of Wax," in *Cindy Sherman: Untitled*, ed. Rosalind Krauss (New York: Rizzoli, 1993), 218.

37 Ibid., 218.

38 Ibid., 219.

39 Ibid., 218.

Fig. 7
Marlene Dumas
The Producer (For Phil Spector)
2010
Oil on canvas, 50,8 x 40,6 cm
Private Collection, The Netherlands
Courtesy Paul van Esch & Partners, Amsterdam
© Marlene Dumas

Fig. 6
Marlene Dumas
Phil Spector — To Know Him is to Love Him
2011
Oil on canvas, 60 x 50 cm
Private Collection
© Marlene Dumas

Some people don't know who he is, but he produced all this beautiful music that was important to me when I was younger, songs like "You've Lost That Lovin' Feeling". Here was a guy with all this talent who goes and murders a girl and – whether or not you think it was an accident – he tragically ends up in prison.[40]

40 Ossian Ward, "Marlene Dumas: Forsaken," *Time Out London*, 21 December 2011, accessed 13 December 2016, http://www.marlenedumas.nl/wp-content/uploads/D-2011-Forsaken-Time-Out-london.pdf/ .

Naming one of the works *To Know Him Is to Love Him* (Fig. 6), Dumas references Spector's first pop music hit, which was inspired by his father. Relating his persona to the relationship with his father, she brings attention to a different side of Phil Spector, one that is unknown to the public and contrasts with stereotypical descriptions of him as a convicted criminal.

CONCLUSION

By creating several versions of the same subject with distinctive representational codes, Dumas deconstructs the notion of fixed identity inherent in traditional portraiture. She deconstructs the idea of the implied unity of the sitter's appearance and inner essence: a condition that was thought to bestow uniqueness and authority to the genre. She demonstrates that Mary Magdalene is a socially fabricated cultural image, as viewers could not recognize her without her original trademarks: her long hair or ointment jar. Dumas also exposes the impossibility of mimetically representing Mary Magdalene, as a lack of historical information makes her persona uncertain. Refusing to depict Mary Magdalene's culturally informed inner essence represented by her repentant nature, as well as her outer characteristics such as long hair, Marlene Dumas destabilizes the genre of portraiture in order to give new meanings to female subjectivity.

While the *Magdalene* series seemingly engages with a religious subject, Marlene Dumas avoids religious controversy. Her innovative interpretation of the biblical figure of Mary Magdalene only acts to confirm her endeavours to challenge stereotypes of representation of gender, race, and sexuality. According to Matthias Winzen:

> The naked female body often appears in Dumas' work, but never as a passive body, either erotically presented to the male gaze or – equally passively – as feminist evidence of the abused body. Instead, Dumas'

images confront us with self-aware, complex presentations of the female, in which there is a totally new configuration of depicted figure, viewer and author.[41]

Consequently, Marlene Dumas' Mary Magdalenes challenge the traditional representation of the passive objectified female nude and propose a re-evaluation of female subjectivity through the traditional genre of portraiture. In Dumas' oeuvre, portraiture thus becomes a tool to expose pre-defined, stereotypical female identities, and is also employed to create alternative images of female subjectivity. Transgressing conventional modes of representation through elements of composition, format, size, colour, and painterly methods, she actively fights the notion of the submissive female body. Dumas' portraits of Mary Magdalene therefore defy existing stereotypes, unmasking and exchanging the emptiness of idealizing cultural images with self-referential constructions.

41 Matthias Winzen, "A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman," in *Marlene Dumas: Female*, ed. Matthias Winzen (Cologne: Snoeck, 2005), 35.

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Freedom Flowers Project
Manuel Salvisberg and Ai Weiwei
2014/15
Bomb and urn
Photo: Annette Dubois – CC BY-NC 2.0

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