

Painting Creation in the Context of Contemporary Art: A Brief Discussion on the Painting Art of Marlene Dumas

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Abstract: Easel painting shined in modern art, however, its influence faded in contemporary art. Marlene Dumas, a contemporary artist in the field of easel painting, displays a form differentiated from modern art in her paintings. Her creations break the inherent traditional image mode; her thoughts on artistic concepts are based on the study of artistic language. She holds a strong concern for the issues of social life, and demonstrates true feelings and emotions in the paintings.

Key words: Marlene Dumas; modern art; easel painting

1. Introduction

Art, both in the East and the West, is a part of social life. Western art originated on the Mediterranean coast. After the Renaissance, art intersected with science, and painting had been exerting the function of visual recording in the era without cameras. Till the 19th century, art showed signs of change and developed into the mainstream in the 20th century, forming modern art. Modern art was the art for breaking through traditional painting forms as well as pursuing pure forms of artistic expression. Gradually, easel painting became marginalized, and new art forms including installation, performance, photography and multimedia art were embraced by more and more artists, who draw nutrients from real life to create new mass art, that is, contemporary art. Contemporary art is conceptual, which allows artists to return to the content of artworks and express their concepts in an intelligent way. Contemporary art is also impersonal and aims to achieve the publicity and openness of art. Artists are close to the public life and concerned about social issues like environmental pollution, racial discrimination and gender discrimination. “Pluralism” is the core concept of contemporary art, which means that diversified standards are adopted to make judgement.

According to Julian Stallabrass (Julian Stallabrass), in contemporary art, the linearity, unidirectionality, whiteness and masculine principles of modernism have been completely dismantled, and it has been complicated by fragmented practices and language. Replaced by the landscape, these languages and practices are diverse, multi-directional and rich in ethnic characteristics. In this context, female artists and artists of color have always been the focus of discussion. For female artists in particular, although they have been long living under the “identity” given by society and gain peace in such narrow space, they do not limit their artistic expression to the small world of female. Instead, they demonstrate a stronger expression desire for the broader social reality, such as Marlene Dumas.

2. Contradictions and Metaphors in Marlene Dumas's Paintings

Dumas was born in South Africa. In her paintings, the images she depicts are mostly women, children and people of color, who are prone to be vulnerable and ignored. Instead of simply depicting reality, Dumas creates on the basis of collecting and selecting images and materials that are in accordance with her deep understanding and imagination of reality, so as to express the spiritual truth of reality. Dumas displays the sufferings and struggles of the low-social-status-persons explicitly, and reveals the instincts and flaws of human nature without a bit exaggeration, which makes her art very touching for admirers.

2.1 Male and female---the gender

In the 1960s and 1970s, the feminist movement broke out in the society where the patriarchal ideology had been ingrained, and women started to advocate sovereignty, which had a great impact on Dumas. Thus, the female images are souled living bodies whose desires, fears and confusion are exposed in a direct way.

In the painting of Magdalena (Newman's Zip), the long and fluffy curly hair of the image and her body curve form the contrast of line to plane, brightness to darkness, revealing feminine charming of calmness. In spite of the nudity, there is no erotic temptation, but full of confrontations against the audience, confrontations against society's discrimination against women, demonstrating her dignity and strong self-spirit. Dumas chose this classical female image who has been misunderstood in history to subvert the traditional understanding of female aesthetics, to reshape the female image, and to re-establish the status of women.

2.2 Black and white---the race

The life experience in South Africa exerted the most profound impact on Dumas. As a white artist in a country where the majority were blacks, she lived with this contradiction with an objective and neutral attitude, and created a series of works to accuse the injustices in society as well as to express her wish for solving the contradictions caused by apartheid.

Black Drawings, created between 1991 and 1992, consists of a quantity of ink paintings of black portraits that are based on a set of postcards used in Europe to show Africa. In this series, Dumas focus on the faces of these people to present their alienation and resistance, misery and depression. She regards black the same as other colors, and expresses it regardless of political stance. The equal treatment of colors is a reflection of her attitude towards race relations. The collision of water and ink pigment in the paintings is not random, but the result of deliberately seeking for sensory stimulation; the seemingly light watercolors and oil paints are used to balance the contradictions. These subjective expression forms mirror female painters' sensitivity to social problems, as well as their soberness and bold resistance in contradictory positions. Dumas grasped the zeitgeist of the society at that time, injecting real emotions into this series of works and adding more contemporary characteristics.

3. Conclusions

The paintings of Dumas are innovative in contemporary art. As a contemporary feminist artist, Dumas expresses the most contemporary ideas by use of traditional painting language and creating dialogues between photographic images and the reality in a tangible or intangible way. Dumas takes painting as a means of studying reality, and constructs a spiritual realm full of tension through the reconstruction of images in painting creation. It is precisely owing to artists like Dumas that easel painting has more new possibilities in the context of contemporary art.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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