

A splatter of life and death

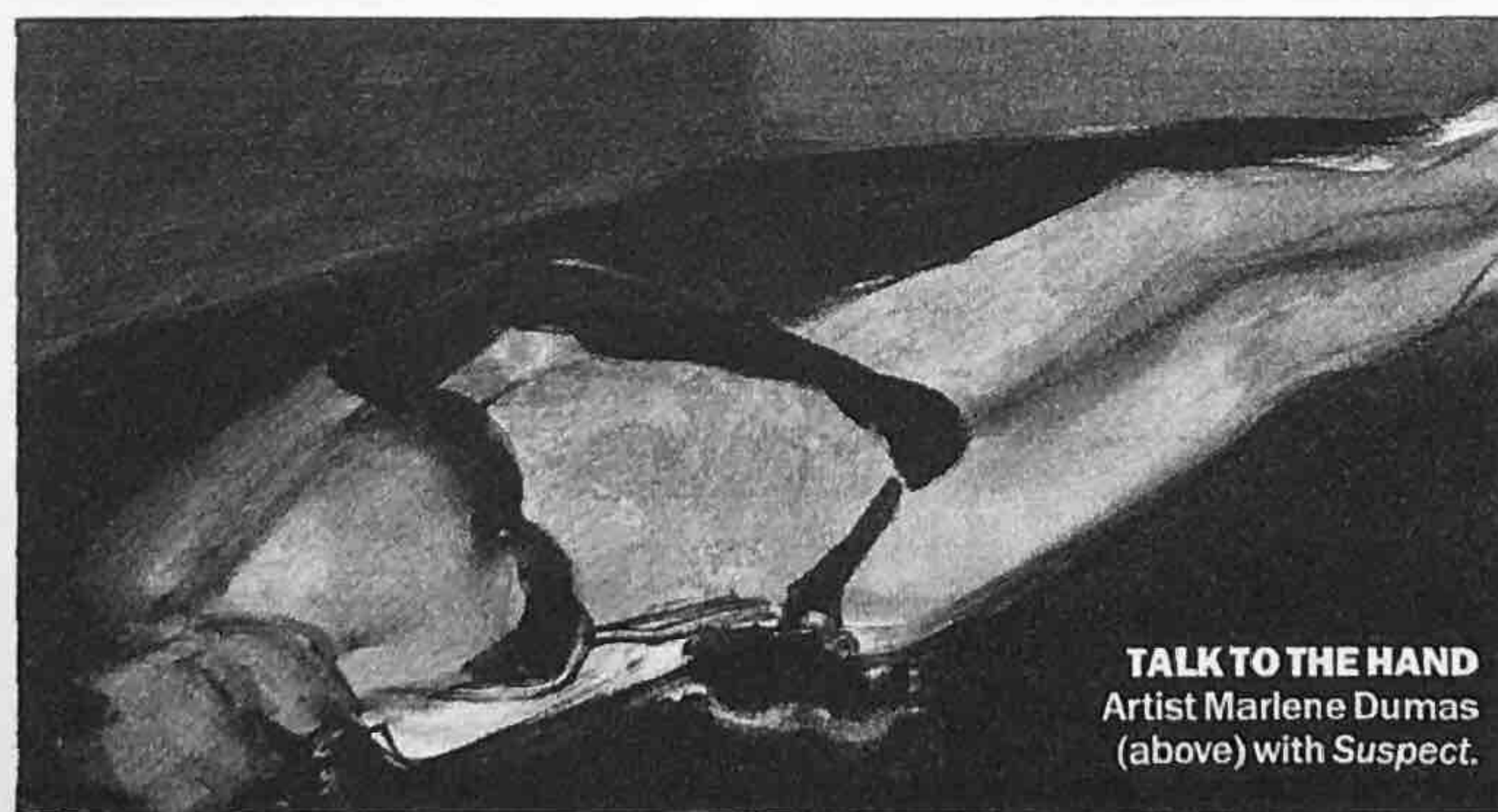
Marlene Dumas's gestural paintings address nothing less than the big issues.

By **Kate Lowenstein**

One might not expect the painter responsible for such harrowing canvases as *Dead Marilyn* (Monroe, post autopsy) and "The Blindfolded" (a series depicting torture victims) to laugh heartily and often, or to describe herself as "jolly," but that's Marlene Dumas for you. On the phone from her studio in Amsterdam, the 55-year-old South African artist is taking a break from arranging 70 paintings and 35 drawings on a MoMA floor plan in preparation for her retrospective, "Measuring Your Own Grave," scheduled to open Sunday 14. (The exhibition started at the Museum of Contemporary Art in L.A., and will travel to Houston's Menil Collection after its New York run.)

"I'm extremely happy that the show is in the U.S. for the new presidency!" Dumas says. She speaks, disarmingly, in exclamation marks, her Afrikaans-tinted words bumping together in breathless clusters. "It's interesting how the atmosphere of the times can change one's whole spirit." The country's mood may shift with events (and certainly has since 2003, say, when, shortly after the Iraq war started, the artist mounted a show in Chicago replete with images of violence and death), but Dumas's subject matter is unlikely to. "Certain things stay the same," she insists, "whether you've got a good or bad political system, we all have to die anyway."

It is the monumental elements of human life—death, sex, violence, race—that the artist is concerned with. But while her figures often find themselves bruised and battered, in sexually explicit poses or dead, Dumas wishes her work weren't so frequently summed up by a list of grim descriptors. "I would like [viewers] to forget a bit what other people have said or what I've said," she laments. And she insists that the gloomy timbre of her oils is not a reflection of a morbid outlook (the title of the show, she explains, is about fitting a figure into the boundaries of a canvas—and also achieving immortality through painting). "The act of painting is a positive one," she says. "The fact that you want to make an image, want to use paint, want to use your body to express something—there is a pleasure in the making of things."



TALK TO THE HAND
Artist Marlene Dumas
(above) with *Suspect*.

Rather than reduce Dumas's art to a checklist of racy themes, it is perhaps better to say that her work is about looking. "It's hard for us to actually see subjects like death and sexuality and race because we're just too inundated with images," says Connie Butler, chief drawings curator at MoMA, who organized the exhibition. "I think what Marlene does is problematize those

things for us again. It's the handling of the paint, the colors, the choice of the subjects." Indeed, her figures implore us with craven gazes to consider them carefully. While we may glaze over at the sight of yet another pornographic image on our computer screens, we see fraught sex freshly in *Miss Pompadour*, a woman on all fours staring out at us from behind her bared buttocks with a

ghostly, Vermeer-ish gaze. We're similarly awakened by *The Blindfolded Man*, whose rag-bound face recalls dozens of Abu Ghraib images. This visage, crammed into the frame and throbbing with a blackened nose and veiny-blue forehead, makes us cringe anew.

With broad, gestural strokes and referential titles, the work is also clearly about the history of painting. *Magdalena* (Newman's *Zip*) depicts a standing nude whose straight auburn tresses create a vertical divide that recalls Barnett Newman's trademark stripes; the marshmallowy *Ryman's Brides* makes obvious reference to Robert Ryman's all-white works. Dumas is locating herself among "the big guys," as she calls her AbEx forebears. Perhaps that "pleasure in the making of things" she describes—a whiff of hedonism, even—is visible in the rich tones and layered paint that are so often overlooked by those too distracted by her depictions of nudity and death.

"Whether you've got a good or bad political system, we all have to die."

We're about to say our goodbyes when Dumas launches into a meandering story about her newest painting (completed just in time for the MoMA opening), *Magnetic Fields* (for *Margaux Hemingway*), the title for which she came upon during one of her free-associative Google searches. "Somehow I got to the moons around Jupiter," she rambles. "They say it has such a magnetic field around it, and that it is so hot that NASA's equipment melts when they try to make photographs! But the surface is also quite cold. Suddenly I thought, Well this is also a beautiful definition for a good painting: It's got to be hot but it's also got to be cold. It's got to be like a true magnetic field." She heaves a sigh, sounding satisfied—as she should: A trademark Dumas canvas melds frigid existentialism with a heated, painterly passion. We're repelled by its chill, captured by its glow—and end up caught in a Dumasian gravitational pull.

"*Measuring Your Own Grave*" opens Sun 14 at the Museum of Modern Art (see *Museums*).