***Old* (2025)**

***Phantom Age* (2025)**

There is a mature looseness to Marlene Dumas’s painting—an almost alchemical economy of means—that has taken center stage in her artistic repertoire in recent years. In Dumas’s monumentally scaled vertical works *Old* (2025) and *Phantom Age* (2025), for example, which the artist painted specifically for this exhibition, she continues her investigation of the passage of life over time while also furthering her exploration of resistance in the body of painting. Paint is poured as well as moved by her brush along the lengths of these vertical canvases, bringing gravity, chance, and intentionality equally to bear on their outcomes. Based on a sculpture from the second century B.C. called *The Old Market Woman* depicting a woman dressed for a Dionysian feast, both paintings exhibit different perspectives on their shared source image as well as diverse means of production. While the languorous stillness and supple verticality of the body in *Phantom Age* was the result of the artist pouring a controlled flow of paint onto the surface of the canvas, *Old* resisted this technique and called upon Dumas to resort to her hand to summon its spectral countenance with a brush. In these works, the viscous substance of oil paints falls into a kind of geological timelessness while the actively aging “old” bodies that they form are frozen in medias res on their precipitous trajectory to the nothingness of death.

***Glass Tears (for Man Ray)* (2008)**

*A painting is, for me, not only an image. I’m very much aware that it’s a physical object…It is this mixture of the physical and the metaphysical, in a sense, that I want.*

Photography has always played an important role in Marlene Dumas’s painting practice and there is almost no painting in her oeuvre without a photographic source. Dumas came across the source image for this work, the Surrealist artist Man Ray’s 1932 photograph *Glass Tears*, in a book devoted to crying and the cultural history of tears. While this work references the exactitude of photography it is a painting made up of different gestures and styles as its background was made by throwing little drops of water across the canvas. The book on crying that Dumas referenced in the making of this work suggested that Modernism did not generally display emotions (such as women crying) graphically. For Dumas this work became an attempt to rescue expressions of grief from the realm of kitsch.

***Cycladic Blues* (2020)**

***Skull (as a House)* (2007)**

Dumas’s painting *Cycladic Blues* (2020) portrays a close-up of the expressionless and stylized totemic head ~~of~~ inspired by an Early Cycladic figurine. Here three subtle movements of Dumas’s hands across her loosely liquid paint bring into existence the bare suggestion of eyes and a somber, downturned mouth where there were none before, placing this work somewhere on the spectrum oscillating between comedy and tragedy. If the trace of Dumas’s human touch on the canvas can give a mournful voice to the mute, mask-like character of this ancient (possibly funerary) sculpture, it’s her unique take on the depiction of mortality that comes through even more clearly in the painterly, ossified architectonics of her work *Skull (as a House)* (2007). Seen in full profile against a loosely uniform dark background, this “skull as a house” is one part Renaissance memento mori—a reminder that death comes to all—and another part haunted house (although not in the traditional sense of horror films). The haunting that is happening here is related to the inhabitation of the body as a house or structure for the persona that inhabits it. This place of shelter offers a barrier between inside and outside, a tremulous architecture of flesh and bone in which life and death are seen as a cycle rather than a straight line. Paradoxically perhaps, although these paintings are filled with death and melancholy, they are nonetheless lively and broadcast their resistance to the entropic movement of the body toward decay through a radiant embrace of life.

***50+* (2010-2018)**

In *50+* (2010-2018), Dumas offers us both a marker of her shifting stylistic gestures and a meditation on the endless forward movement of time. In this work we see the head of a mature woman thrown back in an indeterminate expression of agony or joy. Completed some thirty years after her work *Helena* (1992), this explosive if small-scale work was inspired by a close-up postcard image of a Roman copy of a notable Hellenistic sculpture depicting a drunken old woman with a wine jug. In Dumas’s hands, the realistic features of the “original” sculpture are transformed into a kind of unstable and flickering double vision that leaves behind a ghostly afterimage. Pulling and scraping paint across the figure’s skin to reveal the material warp and weft of the canvas, Dumas’s homage to this Dionysian figure seems to float joyfully in and out of focus while deploying a purposeful liquidity that speaks to the power of her minimal gestures to create something out of nothing.

***Alfa* (2004)**

***Persona* (2020)**

Death haunts painting in general and Dumas’s works in particular, and it is the human face that stands at the formal forefront of this nagging, stalking, and persistent movement of bodily time toward its inevitable endpoint. Faces of all kinds populate Dumas’s canvases. In *Alfa* (2004), the artist’s gauzy, atmospheric handling of her oil paints gives an emptied out, mask-like character to the face of a dead woman seen in profile and lying in final repose. The source material for this painting was a newspaper clipping of a young dead Chechnyan woman who was part of the Moscow theater hostage tragedy in 2002 while its title is derived from the first letter of the Greek alphabet. In the bible, Jesus refers to himself as the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end. The much later work, *Persona* (2020), is a pathos-filled portrait of a face taken from a photograph of one of Auguste Rodin’s plaster casts created for his monumental *Gates of Hell* (1880-1917). As Dumas has pointed out, the word *persona* derives from the Latin word for mask and was used to describe the devices donned by actors in ancient theater in order to embody their characters. The face as mask becomes the façade through which an actor performs either on stage or in life. At the end of that life, in the eyes of those who are gazing upon it, the face becomes a death mask, or rather, a stand-in for the presence that once inhabited a body.

***Immaculate* (2003)**

A number of Dumas’s works take human genitals as their topic, and she has frequently commented on the beauty of the human form. The intimate painting *Immaculate* frames the corporeal geometry of the lower female torso with a forthright formal frontality. Firmly rejecting any classical moralistic dichotomy between pure and sullied states of being, *Immaculate* almost cinematically projects an image of the beginning and the end of both painting and life. This work vibrates at a frequency almost imperceptible to the human eye, its muted palette of blues, pinks, blacks, and grays resonating with a paradoxically frenetic stillness. As with all of Dumas’s paintings it is hard to separate the materiality of the paint from the body, or rather, bodies, being depicted.

***Two Gods* (2021)**

If *Immaculate* (2003) took an intimate and humanly scaled look at the form of female human genitals, we see a very different approach in Dumas’s painting *Two Gods* (2021). In this work the figures of two towering phalluses emerged from a chance pour of paint that was initiated by the artist without any intention of what might be rendered. As the artist has described the process of the making of this painting, the forms of two monumental male organs slowly emerged as the paint moved vertically across her canvas as she lifted it off of the floor. Chance and intention can sometimes be equal partners in the genesis of the figures in Dumas’s paintings. While the phallus was used as a talisman ~~form of magical protection~~ in ancient Greece and Rome, this work is open to many possible interpretations. The two figures could refer to a couple—lovers, rivals, or enemies.

***Helena and Eden* (2020)**

***Shèrkènt and Eden* (2020)**

***Helena Michel* (2020)**

While many of Dumas’s bodies seem to create a constellation of mourning and melancholia triggered by our inevitable collective march to the end, other works seem equally resistant to that reading in their proactive embrace of life. Whether it is in the intimate and lovingly rendered portraits of her pregnant daughter in *Helena Michel* (2020) (on view in the first floor rotunda gallery), her son-in-law and grandson in *Shèrkènt and Eden* (2020), or her daughter and grandson in *Helena and Eden* (2020), Dumas often takes life (and particularly her own life) into a heartfelt embrace as she creates her work.

***Leather Boots* (2000),**

***High Heeled Shoes* (2000)**

*My art is situated between the pornographic tendency to reveal everything and the erotic inclination to hide what it’s all about.*

The entire complexity of life—sex, birth, aging and death—plays an equally important role in Marlene Dumas’s unique form of painterly practice. For example, the various erotic bodies that populate many of her paintings, such as the luminous, back-lit crouching figure of *Leather Boots* (2000), the kneeling chiaroscuro protagonist of *High Heeled Shoes* (2000), or the contorted and dream-like phantom of her watercolor *Dorothy D-Lite* (1998) (on view in the first floor rotunda gallery), were based on Polaroid photographs that that the artist took of erotic dancers in Amsterdam whose bodies appealed to her in some way. While admiring the formal aspects of the bodies of her subjects—the curve of the line of a crouching back, the symmetry of the arches formed by buttocks seen from behind—Dumas’s erotic paintings also foreground the circulation of gazes back and forth between the viewer and the viewed. While the artist might be painting strippers, her practice of painting portraits (whether her subjects are famous or anonymous) itself enacts a kind of stripping. As she’s said in relation to this topic, “it’s not so much about exposing roles, or making the rich look dirty or the famous ordinary — it’s a stripping down to that melancholy sex appeal that makes surnames disappear and first names fictional.”

***Back* (1994)**

***Torso* (c. 1998)**

***Long Neck (fragment)* (c. 1998)**

***Anguish* (2000)**

***Jesus looking for his cross* (1994)**

***Trapped* (2001)**

***The Conversation in the Garden of Eden* (c. 1998)**

***Head* (2019)**

*I never had a desire for a camera. I loved to play and draw in the sand.*

Drawing has always played a central role in Dumas’s life and career. As a medium, it has held its own unique place in her artistic practice and has never been about preparing for the production of a painting. Working in ink, pencil and crayon, Dumas’s drawings on paper exhibit an almost ethereal looseness and liquidity that speaks to their having an almost living quality. As her longtime partner Jan Andriesse once said: “When Dumas draws a line, the line says, “I am aware and conscious.” This group of work spans two decades and features simple gestures in which Dumas’s fluid ink lines seem to have minds of their own as they consciously congeal into the fragmented features of bodies (a back, a torso, a neck and a head) that move from the tragic to the comic, evoke troubled states of being, or allude to dramatic biblical scenes.

***Give me the Head of John the Baptist* (1992)**

*Salome’s erotic dance drove the king to give her whatever she asked for. When the seventh veil fell, after all was said and done, she asked for the head of John the Baptist. A Bible story showing the power of desire. Not love, but desire.*

Dumas’s *Give me the Head of John the Baptist* is a seventeen-part installation of drawings loosely based on the biblical story of Salome and John the Baptist. The story involves a dance, a promise, and a tragic request. Rendered in ink, crayon and pencil, Dumas’s drawings depict this story of desire and resentment in a dreamlike and almost cinematic fashion. Moving from scenes depicting Salome holding the Baptist’s bloodied head to her dancing with the head on a platter before then cutting to a close up of John’s disembodied head with the words “NO BODY” etched into the bottom of the frame, Dumas’s playfully rendered drawings capture the tragic moment of the shattering of child-like innocence by violence and desire.

***Helena* (1992)**

A particularly powerful and somewhat early example of Marlene Dumas’s painterly practice can be seen in her work *Helena* (1992). This intimately scaled portrait of the artist’s daughter as a child vibrates with an intense frequency as the determined look of its subject willfully confronts the viewer. Working in a consciously unorthodox and slightly unnatural palette of greens, ochres, blacks, and blues, Dumas creates an apparition of Helena with an economy of means and a few simple gestures. A flick of her wrist here and there evokes two eyebrows, a tightly pursed pair of lips, and two extremely focused eyes that together convey a forceful skepticism. Rendered with an almost watery distorted focus on a field of burnt umber, Helena is almost completely present in our world while keeping one foot in the painting itself. Her visage offers up a starkly determined rebelliousness, which, when combined with Dumas’s almost ethereal handling of her palette, triggers an oscillation back and forth across the threshold between the world that we inhabit and the netherworld of oils and pigments.