

TO UNDERSTAND Marlene Dumas, you must first understand her hair. Dirty blonde in colour, it spreads from her skull in heaps that twist and drift like a herd of demented seahorses. When she speaks, the whole matted mound heaves forward under the energy of her expression, then, when she gets stuck on a point mid-sentence — as she often does — she pushes the massed pile back from her face with both hands. Doing this, it seems, helps her to find the word she's looking for among the manic jumble of complexities that swim inside her thoughts.

Like her hair, Dumas' creative reasoning and the rationale for her thinking first appear completely untended. It's as if her brain sprouts millions of ideas, but they are too numerous to be individually noticed, so some turn into forgotten fluffs that get in the way of her eyes. Examine Dumas' skull a bit more thoroughly though — during an hour-long conversation, say — and you find that all those unconnected, staccato strands are solidly rooted to a frantic intellect.

Dumas' art — the largest fragment from her thoughts — displays itself like a smeared mirror focused on all her obscurities. When you view it in the flesh, within the sterile ambience of an art gallery, you feel as though you've trespassed into a dimly-lit room where you know something intimate has just happened, but you are not sure — as you move among the smell of body-fluids and damp skin — whether beauty or violation was witness to the act.

This unsettling ambiguity, so flip-pantly presented on a flat canvas, is the lubricious lipstick mark left behind on every one of Dumas' works. Viewing them fills you with a sense of devious enjoyment — there's a momentary surfacing of a suppressed propensity for debauchery then the uneasy revelation that your very own thoughts are turning the images into a sexual peepshow for your soul.

And it's a peepshow that some are prepared to pay a fortune for, just so they can hang the salacious suggestion above their marriage bed. Dumas is the most expensive female artist alive, a distinction she was given in 2005 when Christie's in London sold a 1987 painting, *The Teacher*, for \$3.34 million (R25.6 million). In 2004, she sold paintings for \$1.24 million (R9.5 million) and \$993 600 (R7.6 million).

Yet, strangely, she remains relatively unknown in the country of her birth, South Africa. And, no, it isn't one of those stories where the person was merely born here and hasn't come back since — Dumas spent the first 23 years of her life here, only leaving in 1976 when UCT offered her a bursary to attend Ateliers '63 in the Netherlands. She now lives in Amsterdam, but returns to SA almost every year to visit her family. Now 53, Dumas is displaying her first solo exhibition here, entitled *Intimate Relations*.

"I am mixed up when it comes to what I call myself, but I don't find Holland beautiful like I find South Africa beautiful," says Dumas. She has a deep Dutch accent, so throaty that when she laughs or becomes gregarious, she sounds like a rowdy pirate getting drunk in a bar after being at sea for a year. She even has rows of gold fillings on her bottom teeth.

Our meeting place is the cosy garden of a Rosebank guesthouse. It's late on Sunday afternoon, and the low sun is fingering through the



ALL AT SEA: Dumas' inner life is as complex and frequently sensual as the subjects in her paintings

DIRTY BLONDE

South African-born Marlene Dumas is the world's most expensive living female artist. **Oliver Roberts** speaks to her about her ambiguous ability to create works that are altogether harsh, beautiful and misunderstood

foliage, lighting up her hair, making it blonder.

"My better works have a complexity where you don't only think 'this is horrible' or 'this is pretty', because, for me, the essence of life is complex," she says. "Images are ambiguous — we think we know what they mean, because of the information that comes with them. I give titles to show in which direction I was thinking, or what prompted me to paint it. But sometimes the picture cannot handle that — there can be friction between the image and the title."

Dumas is not an easy person to interview. She seems evasive, but not disinterested; talkative, but sometimes nonsensical. I realise, after half an hour of trying to get her to answer one of my questions directly, that she is the ambiguous, living example of her work.

"I am sometimes worried when I start a work," she says, "I think to myself, 'What am I doing now?' I'm

a bit scared of voodoo-like things, scared of my subject matter. But I want painting to be a bit more dangerous as an activity. I work with things that trouble me, and there are therapeutic qualities to painting those things, and letting people look at it."

Dumas never elaborates on the voodoo remark — it was something said with such frivolous speed that it didn't stand a chance of catching up with the remainder of her dialogue. I feel strangely troubled by the mention of the word, and so I presume she is joking.

But she isn't. She's serious. When Dumas jokes, she flashes her gold-tipped laughter, just to make sure. The truth of her voodoo worry lies in her eyes and, most disturbingly, in the eyes of her subjects.

In all her paintings, the thing that is most haunting is the eyes. Dumas depicts them with such disturbing deftness that they become the only

reason for the entire piece, the only thing needed. They all have looks of shame and emptiness, and a yearning for innocence, only intensified by the lack of attention paid to the nose. Stare long enough, and you can see someone's unredeemed soul trapped inside them. Maybe yours.

Another reason Dumas finds it difficult to open up about her craft is, I think, modesty. She is vague and embarrassed when asked about the millions of dollars people have paid for her pieces. She is also one of the few artists I have encountered who doesn't go off on a haughty harangue when discussing the meaning of her work. Instead of tedious intellectual essays, Dumas' pieces

'I don't make my art for other people, I make it for myself; but I am grateful that I can show them'

are accompanied by poems written by herself or others.

"Although I am interested in the viewer, I don't make my art for other people, I make it for myself; but I am grateful that I can show them," she says. "That is why I am a bit sad when people make so much of the auction prices. All you really want is to find a gallery that is willing to give you a show and put on an exhibition that speaks about the issues that affect other people. That is all that matters."

Just then, it begins to rain, and we grab our glasses and walk inside. I instinctively want to run, but Dumas is still talking to me, moving slowly, not noticing the rain, so I stick with her, and we start to get wet.

Once inside, the mood changes and, sensing this new intimacy, she begins to talk more softly, sometimes whispering. Without effort, the conversation drifts into the erotic. It's while sitting in this tiny room, with the thunder bursting outside, that I want Dumas to tell me about naked figures, sex and those sad, sad eyes.

"I have always been interested in eroticism, because I feel that if you are dealing with a nude figure, it shouldn't be so much about gender, but human condition," she says. "I still have some of the first nude paintings I ever did, and even then I didn't give the bodies sexual organs."

Dumas herself is not asexual in the least. Today she is dressed in pants and a black shirt with just two of the buttons done up. Her bare, voluptuous belly flesh bulges out, and she has a relentless cleavage whose shuffled, conversational bounce correlates with that of her hair. She is her own erotic masterpiece.

"Some eroticism is much too sweet for me," she says. "It can be very light-hearted and lovely, but that's not my experience of sexuality, my own body and other people's. The essence of sex is very complex. Some of my works have a naked figure, but they are not erotic. That also interests me, because when people see a naked image, they think it's all about the same thing, but one naked image is not like another."

Intimate Relations includes some of Dumas' notebooks from her studies in the '70s. The pages are filled with confused sketches and notes written by Dumas about herself. They are the sentences of someone who has always understood that they'll never grasp their own thoughts, and so they write down how they feel then, hoping to return to those words years later, and feel a rewarding anguish that they still don't understand what they're trying to say.

One reads: "I think that I would like to show you how I feel/have felt/can feel, but I succeed seldom."

Her art is exactly that — a restless attempt to unravel the uncomfortable urges that we all share and recognise within each other, but never speak of. Dumas has succeeded because she fails to present feelings that can be unfelt.

● **Marlene Dumas** — *Intimate Relations* is at the Standard Bank Gallery until March 29. (011) 631-1889; www.standardbankgallery.co.za