

Collateral Damage

Or, paintings of pictures that show that a painting isn't a picture

by Marlene Dumas

Once upon a time, there was an American girl who came to Europe to further study her art. She worked for a while in a studio in Amsterdam where, before her, a Turkish-German girl had made paintings, in a building where an Irish guy almost made a film on Auschwitz, while a Jewish girl from Israel made a film about the Documenta with her Moroccan friend. The country where she came from is very proud that they saved the Dutch in the Second World War and got there before the Russians did. The USA is also very proud that it hasn't had a real war in its own country for a long time and it has managed that, for many years now, by being at war abroad instead. When your friends in Holland start talking about norms and values, you know the next stop is Afghanistan.



Sylvia was a Poor Shot, 2005, acrylic on canvas, 161 x 230 cm, collection De Ateliers, Amsterdam

Pompe and Circumstance, 2005, acrylic on canvas, 180 x 200 cm, courtesy Galerie Michael Cason

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Melissa Gordon is the kind of artist who takes the bubbles out of the Coca Cola, who brings the White House into the White Cube. Her painting has an attitude. It's flat, but it throws a shadow. She has made a series of paintings that deals with the tradition of collection and re-appropriation of art and pompous images that the White House has collected and with the idealized image of success, with titles like Pomp and Circumstance, Three Treaties (for the end of conflict) and The Winners. (Marcel Duchamp called a title the invisible colour of an artwork).

As a woman of the world, she is not alone when it comes to being interested in image-power and its perversities. Luc Tuymans also targeted the American way of life in 'Proper', a recent show in New York. Melissa's mood is less grim, but no less tense. She gives women their due. One might think of Michael Borremans too, but he is a surrealist and she is not. And although she often uses fragments of pictures alongside each other, she is not a collagist like Neo Rauch. There, however cold the execution of the works, you end up facing a world of fantasy.

With Melissa, you 'enter' the painting.

The painter knows that you are there, but 'they' don't know that you are there. The paintings are self-aware, but we're lured into spaces where others are not aware that we're entering. In a Eric Fischl painting, for example, you watch the boy watching his mother. You look at the woman undressing for the man. You look at Americans interacting, doing their daily business, public or private. You watch.

They do. You judge. They act.

With Melissa it's not like that.

In a Melissa painting, you are inside. Inside someone's head. Inside someone's house and you are not supposed to be there. You wonder if the bookcase is just a cover-up for a secret door. I spy, I spy with my little eye. You could be a detective looking for clues. You pick up the binoculars and see someone with a gun. But this time it's not science fiction. And you are not the good guy trying to solve the crime. You are the killer who polishes your shoes every day and wouldn't hurt a fly. You are the double agent. You are the figure that one does not see in the paintings. You are the real subject of the work. You move your eyes up and down over the walls, the desks, the bulletin boards, across the floor of these frozen spaces. Everyone freeze – don't move! You are the woman who wrote the notes then, and now you are the one who has to decipher the handwriting. Who did it? The nurse, the doctor, the psychiatrist, the senator, or you? You with your split personality...

Still life, 2005, acrylic on canvas, 110 x 150 cm.
courtesy Galerie Michael Cesar





Finding Laura Palmer, 2006, acrylic and oil on canvas, 160 x 180 cm,
courtesy Galerie Juliette Jongma



Covers, 2006, acrylic on canvas, 130 x 140 cm