

Beauty and Ugliness

London is among the best cities in the world for art exhibitions, and whenever I go there, which is rarely, I try to see as many as time and energy will permit. Recently, for example, I saw two in a single day, the contrast between which seemed to cast a light on the soul of modern humanity, or at least of that part of it that concerns itself with art and aesthetics.

The first, in the Wallace Collection, was called [*Marlene Dumas: The Image as Burden*](#). Reynolds, the most famous British artist of his day, was born in 1723 and died in 1792; Dumas was born in South Africa in 1953 and has worked in the Netherlands since 1976.

The Wallace Collection was once my favorite London gallery. My father had his office, where I worked during my school holidays, around the corner from it; I spent many a lunch hour in the collection, the run of which I often had almost to myself in those days. The courtyard had not yet been made into a restaurant, a transformation that altered the atmosphere of the collection profoundly. Nowadays, it seems almost like a restaurant with Titian, Rubens, Rembrandt, and Velázquez attached.

It was in the Wallace Collection that I first tried (without success, which eludes me to this day) to work out why some art was better than other art, why some pictures moved me while others did not. The picture to which I always returned, and that I never miss a chance to view even today, was [*The Painter*](#). It is of a naked girl, a little older than Miss Bowles, who stands up straight, facing the viewer. Her expression is of a defiant scowl, almost menacing. Her dark, deep-set, intense but indistinct eyes seem to express hatred, not of a particular object but of the world itself (inclusive of the viewer). Most of her torso is covered in light blue

paint; far more disturbing, her hands, which hang by her side, are covered in paint: the right hand the color of dark, venous blood and the left hand the color of bright, arterial blood. One gets the impression that she has just come from the postmortem room or has perhaps murdered her mother. One is never too young to be a psychopath.

It is an extremely disturbing image, painted with talent. You are not likely to pass it by or to forget it. When I showed it to friends, not artistically inclined and unfamiliar with the notion of transgression as the highest good, they shuddered and said that it was sick and that it displayed a diseased imagination. Some will retort that outraged bourgeois have often reacted in this way to new art that subsequent generations took in stride and perhaps considered great. But it does not follow from the fact that a great work once caused outrage that a work that causes outrage is great. For myself, I have no difficulty in both admiring and disliking Dumas's art.

What most interests me is the change in sensibility between Reynolds and Dumas: a change that I recognize even in myself, in that I think that any modern attempt to reproduce Reynolds-like tenderness toward childhood would end up as kitsch, to which the harshness of Dumas (manifest even in her pictures of her daughter) would be artistically preferable.

This profound change in sensibility cannot be a reflection only of a change in the world. It is true that the dress of the eighteenth century, at least of the upper classes, was vastly more elegant and gorgeous (but also more uncomfortable) than anything we wear now; the interiors of houses—again, of the upper classes—were of an elegance now vanished unless specifically preserved; and towns were infinitely more graceful than they are now. But up close, they would have appalled us: the smell, dirt, and destitution would have been greater than anything of which we had the remotest experience. In the London in which Reynolds spent most of his career, 50

percent of children died before the age of five.

So it is not that the world has become “objectively” worse in the interval between Reynolds and Dumas. In many respects, precisely the reverse is true, though many terrible things were done in that interval. Childhood is not less childhood than it was; children are not physically the uglier. Nor is it that we have become more intellectually sophisticated in the meantime, such that we have a better understanding of what human life is about and how it should be lived, or of the true wellsprings of human action. Reynolds painted for a society in which rising men aspired to join the ranks of the aristocracy, whose tastes they imitated wherever possible; but Dumas paints for a clientele just as restricted, economically and culturally.

As it happens, both Reynolds and Dumas are writers as well as painters, and the difference between their literary styles is as great as that between their respective painterly sensibilities. Reynolds’s most famous work is his *Discourses on Art*, a series of lectures delivered to the students of the Royal Academy of Arts, of which he was the founding president. In these lectures, Reynolds attempts to lay down the rules of art, unsuccessfully and often with self-contradiction, in my view, because the task was impossible and also because he often shows errors of judgment. Nevertheless, he expresses himself with elegance and has many still-valuable things to say (which, perhaps, is why the *Discourses* lectures remain in print, two centuries after they first appeared). Indeed, some of his remarks have become more pertinent with the passage of time and the deterioration of our art schools. Reynolds says, in the Sixth Discourse: “Those who have undertaken to write about our art, and have represented it as a kind of *inspiration*, as a *gift* bestowed upon peculiar favourites at their birth, seem to insure a much more favourable disposition from their readers, and have a much more captivating and liberal air, than he who attempts to examine, coldly, whether

there are any means by which this art may be acquired.”

Reynolds adds: “Invention is one of the great marks of genius; but if we consult experience, we shall find, that it is by being conversant with the invention of others, that we learn to invent.” Finally, he observes: “The greatest natural genius cannot subsist on its own stock: he who resolves never to ransack any mind but his own, will soon be reduced, from mere barrenness, to the poorest of all imitations; he will be obliged to imitate himself, and to repeat what has often been repeated.”

In modern art schools, it is as if they have taken the Sixth Discourse as a blueprint of what *not* to do or to teach, so that students come to believe that art, like sex, began in 1963 (at the earliest). Marlene Dumas was indeed fortunate that, having attended art school in Cape Town, she was saved from the kind of provincialism now rampant in London, Paris, and New York. Her writing, collected in a volume titled *Sweet Nothings* (a title intended, one suspects, to ward off serious criticism), has an apodictic, take-it-or-leave-it quality: “Art is a low-risk, high-reward crime.” Or: “Now that we know that images can mean whatever, whoever wants them to mean, we don’t trust anybody anymore, especially ourselves.” This is a world without enchantment. The following words are revealing:

*My generation cherishes loneliness
prizing it even above sex.
They are so sensitive,
they are allergic to each other.*

One cannot help but suspect that there is bad faith in all this, that this is not so much how people feel as how they feel they ought to feel in order not to appear naïve. Dumas quotes a man called Kellendonk (I assume the Dutch writer of that name, who died in 1990): “Kellendonk makes a distinction between aesthetic emotion and ordinary every-day emotions. He

said he could cope with seeing blood in every-day life but not on film or television." I find this obviously insincere and exhibitionistic: the kind of self-promoting flatulence that Reynolds, no stranger to personal ambition, would have disdained as dishonest.

While some would no doubt accuse Reynolds of having avoided the less refined aspects of his society (a charge that could be levied against hundreds or thousands of artists), Dumas is guilty of a much greater evasion, caused by a fear of beauty. In a perceptive note in the catalog of her exhibition, by the critic Wendy Simon, we learn of this fear. Simon draws attention to "the extreme ambivalence we now feel towards beauty both within and outside art," and continues: "We distrust it; we fear its power; we associate it with compulsion and uncontrollable desire of a sexual fetish. Embarrassed by our yearning for beauty, we demean it as something tawdry, self-indulgent, or sentimental."

All that is necessary for ugliness to prosper is for artists to reject beauty.

Lenin abjured music, to which he was sensitive, because it made him feel well-disposed to the people around him, and he thought it would be necessary to kill so many of them. Theodor Adorno said that there could be no more poetry after Auschwitz. Our view of the world has become so politicized that we think that the unembarrassed celebration of beauty is a sign of insensibility to suffering and that exclusively to focus on the world's deformations, its horrors, is in itself a sign of compassion. Reynolds was not tortured by such considerations.

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