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visual art

The greatest living painters in the world

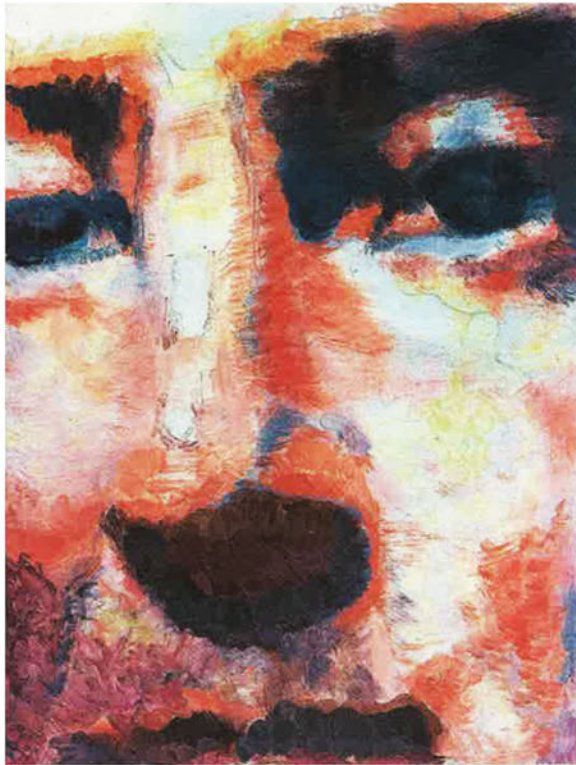
Marlene Dumas, whose work goes on show in London this week, is rated as one of the world's best artists. But who else deserves the accolade?

Rachel Campbell-Johnston decides

Next week, a big show of the South African-born artist, Marlene Dumas, opens at Tate Modern. The painter first came to widespread fame when, seven years ago, newspapers reported that one of her pictures had sold for £3.1 million. Dumas was the most expensive living female artist in the world.

And yet, within the art world, she had long been venerated, admired for the way she could take what might have been the most safely traditional medium and transform it into something so haunting, so unsettling, so thought-provoking.

Who, though, are her rivals? Who are the greatest living painters? It is a much-debated question — and one that the art world has squabbled over since the Italian Renaissance, when Michelangelo pitted his stern Florentine disegno against the atmospheric colorito of the Venetian Titian. In one sense, it is unanswerable. And besides, the accolade may not be particularly coveted by some. It has a gravitas which brings the crushing weight of history — the recipient risks being squashed.



LUC TUYMANS John Playfair: his images are "as reticent as ghosts"

Luc Tuymans

In our world of loud images, all jostling and barging to grab our attention, the paintings of Tuymans are as reticent as ghosts. Why choose so ordinary a subject? Why paint it in so muted a way? The only answer to the question is to take a longer look. Working in thematic series — his works address subjects from Belgian colonialism in the Congo to post-9/11 America — he sifts through visual residue (internet images and newspaper articles, TV programmes and postcards) and examines the ways in which facts filter down to us. The evidence cannot be trusted, he suggests. His bleached-out images — the products of prolonged study, poured out in a single sitting — feel at once vaguely familiar and yet depersonalised and detached. That empty room is a gas chamber, for instance, but you won't necessarily realise it. Tuymans' cryptic images take the tradition of history painting into disturbing psychological territories. As the viewer decodes them, a discomfiting realisation dawns. Tuymans, whose latest exhibition, *The Shore*, opened yesterday at David Zwirner gallery in London, demands that we peer through the filters of our collective desire to explain and compartmentalise and instead to face experiences afresh. It can be unnerving, but this is an artist who has played a major role in making painting again feel relevant.



MARLENE DUMAS
The Widow by "the most unfamous famous living artist"

Marlene Dumas

She was recently described as the world's "most unfamous famous living artist". She does not make the loud public splash of so many contemporaries. Yet her dark, intensely felt images are prized by museum curators and collectors. On one level, it might seem simple enough. Dumas takes the human body as her principal subject. Drawing from diverse sources, from newspaper cuttings, Old Master paintings, personal scrapbooks and Polaroids, she represents the figure. Yet even as she works within a long-established tradition, she transgresses it. Her palette is pale and ghoulish, her forms are distorted, bloated and broken. Sometimes faces are blindfolded. Sometimes limbs are twisted into what feel like graphically sexual poses. They float, without context, against washed-out backdrops. Through the quick, impetuous power of her brush, she transforms the body from an all-too-familiar physical form into an unsettling psychological presence. The portrait becomes less a replica of an actual person than an evocation of their feelings, their attitudes, their state of mind. Dumas uses the body to offer an often politically explicit critique of ideas of race and religion, of social and sexual identity. Rescuing painting from the endless play of post-modern, she lends it a new validity, a philosophical force.