

## Sies + Höke Galerie

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### **Marcel Dzama: *The dove is never free***

Opening: April 8<sup>th</sup>, 2022  
Exhibition: April 9<sup>th</sup> – May 7<sup>th</sup>, 2022

#### **PRESS RELEASE**

Sies + Höke is pleased to present *The dove is never free*, Marcel Dzama's ninth solo exhibition with the gallery, showing new works on paper and sculptures. On its occasion the artist was interviewed by author and journalist Tobias Haberl:

#### **Marcel Dzama, I originally wanted to do this interview with you via Zoom, but you preferred to do it on the phone. Why?**

Talking on the phone is more my thing. I'm not particularly gifted when it comes to digital things, and I haven't had a fun experience using Zoom or any other online communications. Either the microphone doesn't work on my computer, or the connection is bad, and I'm always the one to blame when something goes wrong.

#### **You once said that your works are about an apocalyptic dream of the world on the edge of an abyss. Even if this pandemic and the war in Ukraine have not driven the world to the brink of an abyss, it has certainly been turned upside down. Do you have the feeling that you are being superseded by reality?**

Yes, maybe those early drawings were a premonition of these last two years...cause they have taken a toll — not only on me as a person, but also as an artist. I was exhausted, depressed at times, and often had bad dreams. The first few months of the pandemic were particularly bleak. There were the restrictions, buildings boarded up, so many closed down stores, riots, a curfew, so much death, and an idiot president Donald Trump, so it was twice as bleak. Everything felt unstable, like it was the apocalypse or everything was about to fall apart.

#### **How has this enduring crisis affected your work?**

My drawings have become more positive. I hadn't planned it at all; I work too intuitively for that. Things just developed that way. My paintings used to be negative, violent, macabre. The older drawings have war and battle scenes, savage slaughter, decapitated people, bound men with knives jabbed into their guts, masked dancing women with machine guns.

But when reality itself became brutal, I no longer felt the need to show violence in my work cause it was everywhere, I mean after I did some political drawings to get it out of my system I wanted the new work to offer hope. I know it sounds cheesy, but I think that's the truth. My paintings have become more colorful. It must also have to do with the fact that I spent some time in Mexico and Morocco before the pandemic. Morocco, in particular, was incredibly good for me. I spent four weeks with my wife and son traveling all over the country — Tangier, Marrakesh, Fes, Casablanca. We even went to the Atlas Mountains. During lockdown, all these impressions came back to me — Morocco's vibrant colors, Mexico's tropical setting, even the huge moon that I saw with my son in Essaouira. We walked half the night through the alleys and stared at the sky because we couldn't believe how gigantic it was.

#### **Your new works seem more politically engaged, as if referring to the political events of the day. There is one titled *\*No war no more\**. Another, titled *\*The dove is never free\**, depicts a white dove in the colors of the Ukrainian flag.**

Yes, some were created just before, others just after the Russian invasion. I draw at night, listening to the radio in the background. The things I hear feed into my pictures, but again — rather unconsciously. You're right. The four years of Donald Trump have made me very politicized. Suddenly this con-man with an authoritarian obsession and the walking definition of white male privilege, but framing himself as the victim of everything was on the world stage — very aggressive, the embarrassing power gestures, and it emboldened such toxic

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masculinity. Almost every day you would read about some sexist or racist attacks, Trump parades would be driving out side of town, men on motorcycles with huge Trump flags, like some ridiculous cult.

So my work functioned as a kind of exorcism. I was so angry that I had to get rid of my negative feelings when I was drawing. I have basically two approaches to drawing: either I take refuge in beauty or confront cruelty. And then Vladimir Putin invaded Ukraine so the horror continues.

### **Is it true that you have Ukrainian roots?**

Yes, my mother's father and my father's mother are from Ukraine, but they grew up in Canada after their parents escaped from the Stalin regime. I still feel a connection to this country and its people regardless. My grandfather taught me to play Ukrainian songs on the mandolin, and my grandmother cooked Ukrainian dishes, cabbage rolls, borscht soup, and pierogi, which are basically dumplings with a mashed potato filling. I distinctly remember molding pregnant pierogi creatures as a young boy, using the potato filling as their pregnant bellies. When I see the refugees on TV today, I think: They look exactly like my cousins. I still have relatives in Ukraine today, but they are very distant, there's no one that I am in direct contact with.

### **Donald Trump has not been in the White House for more than a year. Were the four years of his presidency worse than you feared, or less so?**

They were just as bad as I feared, but they definitely could've been much worse. And we shouldn't feel safe just because Joe Biden is now president. Another problematic far right wing nut could rise to the presidency at any time, but maybe this war will make many people realize that guys like Trump and Putin are destroying everything that constitutes a free society.

### **The pandemic altered many people's routines. Hardly anyone was out and about, and most people were sitting in their home offices. What did you miss most during the months of the pandemic?**

Travelling. My parents in Canada, art museums and seeing friends.

### **What did a typical day during lockdown look like for you?**

I started working as soon as my son was in bed, which was 8.30 pm. Then I drew until 4 or 5 in the morning, got up at 7 to make breakfast for my wife and son, and went to bed again. As my son had online school, me and my wife supervised. Then cooked, cleaned up, and answered a few emails. I never went to the studio, I just worked at home. I spent a lot of time with my son. He is nine, so he's at an age where he isn't embarrassed of his parents. We drew a lot together and worked on plaster sculptures. He inspires me, makes me feel more in the moment.

### **You once said, "In my drawings, I accept chaos and free myself from demons. Then I can go back to my normal life. It's like therapy for me."**

Yes, with the political work but mainly this quote applies to my older work.

### **Maybe your son is delivering you from your demons now?**

Yes, this is true. I've become a different person since his birth. I was much more negative before, gloomy, cynical. Today I can better recognize the beautiful aspects of life. I was glad that he was with me in Morocco. He discovered so much that I didn't even notice: a street cat here, a pretty window mosaic there. I have benefited every day from seeing the world through his eyes.

### **Your new drawings look more generous, more open, bolder, less driven by perfectionism than before.**

That is some of my son's influence, but mainly from collaborating with the artist and dear friend Raymond Pettibon. We met at a collectors' dinner; we were both so uncomfortable that we started drawing on napkins. Raymond is just insanely relaxed about everything. If paint drips down on a work, he just lets it happen. He even walks on top of his drawings. Since I've met him, I can paint not only with my hand, but with my whole

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arm; my paintings have become larger. He doesn't talk much. And neither do I. We understand each other without words. And when he does say something, it's poetic or just really funny. Sometimes we go to horse races. I watch, he bets. Our kids are close friends too. Sometimes we bring them to watch the horses.

### **There are two kinds of artists: dreamers and intellectuals. To which group do you belong?**

Yes, I'm a dreamer. I'll draw intuitively, let myself drift. As soon as I sit at the drawing table, I have one foot in reality and the other in my subconscious.

### **The Italian writer Dario Fo once said, "While drawing I discover what I really want to say."**

Yes, I would agree with that. Sometimes you have a plan for a drawing, but it radically changes and expresses what you are really feeling and didn't realize.

### **What goes on inside your soul when you draw?**

When work is going well, time disappears and your soul is fully engaged. And it shows in the work, it turns out better than you could have ever imagined it.

### **Does drawing make you feel lonely?**

No. It feels like I'm hanging out with an old friend.

### **Are you happy when you draw?**

Yes. When it goes well, it feels good. I'm in my element.

### **Is it taxing?**

Not at all. It's more like playing around. I used to draw all day long when I was a kid. I was a dreamy child. Winters in Winnipeg were hard, minus forty degrees. You don't feel like going outside. You're trapped at home and you have to try not to go crazy. Luckily, that was always easy for me. It probably fueled my imagination more because I was forced to find ways out of the dreariness. I would just draw the stream of images in my head.

### **Listening to you, the impression is that you are working a lot, perhaps too much.**

I work a lot, but it doesn't feel like it because I enjoy it so much. That being said, I had a burnout a few years ago. When I was designing costumes for the \*New York City Ballet\*, I was working on a film and three exhibitions at the same time. I basically didn't sleep and eventually I collapsed after I finished.

### **What was the problem exactly? All the work or the different contexts?**

Everything combined. I was curious about how far I could push myself and see what I could accomplish, but I overestimated myself. At that time, I had at least two press interviews a day, and I felt so weird talking about myself so much. At some point, I didn't feel like myself and I was completely empty. It wasn't until the trip to Morocco that I got back on track. Looking back, it was probably some kind of midlife crisis. I'm happy it's over.

### **How important were the years in Winnipeg for your artistic development? You have always talked about the city's unique atmosphere, which still seems to have an impact on your paintings.**

I think my work would be very different had I grown up somewhere else. At the beginning of the 20th century, Winnipeg was the "Chicago of the North". The city was booming. It was a major hub for commodities. People flocked here from all parts of the country to try their luck. After the economic crisis and a general strike, which was brutally suppressed in 1919, everything collapsed. Winnipeg never returned to its former glory after that. Today, the city is stuck in the past, a nostalgic ghost town. You can see vestiges of the old days everywhere — vaudeville theaters, old advertising signs. Winnipeg is a very impoverished city, people are constantly breaking into cars. But I also spent a lot of time with my grandparents, who lived on a farm in rural Saskatchewan.

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### **Is that where all the animals in your paintings come from?**

Yes, probably. I remember that a black bear rummaged through our compost pile every day. It was full of animals everywhere — bats, coyotes, owls, skunks. I carry these impressions with me to this day.

### **Do you like horror movies?**

Not at all. I'm too sensitive. The images get stuck in my head and I don't need that.

### **The story goes that you watched Stephen King's *The Shining* when you were 7 years old.**

That is true. My parents were sitting in front of the television, and I was watching it in the cabinet's reflection. It was a striking experience that triggered dark fantasies that probably led to my drawings, which in turn gave my teachers a headache. Have you seen the film? In the end, this woman runs through the deserted hotel in complete panic and sees a guy in a rabbit costume going down on someone in a room for a few seconds. This scene is so surreal, I still can't get it out of my head. That haunted hotel is stuck in the 1920s, just like my hometown.

### **Do you have a bigger imagination than the average person?**

I don't know. Maybe I just don't restrain my imagination as much as most people do.

### **Your paintings, sculptures, and films are strongly informed by mythology. It's hard to tell whether they are set deep in the past or in a future that we can't even imagine yet. You must actually be a big fan of Richard Wagner or J.R.R. Tolkien.**

I've only seen *The Lord of the Rings* movies, never read it. And Wagner? If I'm honest, I don't have much of a clue about classical music. I always feel like I should, but it hasn't worked out so far. Maybe that will come. One thing is for sure: I'm interested in mythology, the ancient Greeks, Native American myths, that kind of thing.

### **Have you ever read the Bible?**

Yes, I was raised with religion, I went to church every Sunday with my parents, and we picked up my grandma on the way. But I broke away from the church when I was a teenager. I always had the feeling: organized religion causes more problems than it solves. But I don't mind the idea of spirituality.

### **How important is a sense of humor to understand your paintings?**

Very important. A sense of humor is important for art in general, first no one should take themselves too seriously, and second because it can act as a weapon to address injustices. I love Marcel Duchamp, especially his last great work, the spatial object *Étant donnés*, on which he worked for twenty years. I first saw it in a book I pulled off the shelf at my school's library because we had the same first name. I had no idea what it was supposed to be — a painting, a collage, a sculpture? But something about it captivated me. I first saw it in the flesh in Philadelphia; it was a life-changing experience. A work unlike anything he had done before. Without a sense of humor, this art remains foreign to you. I read everything about Duchamp. As soon as a new book comes out, I order it. We could speak of an obsession. A lot of my works are directly or indirectly related to Duchamp. I even made a film about him called *\*A Jester's Dance\**.

### **You are someone who is reserved, almost shy. You have to work a lot with other people to make a film. How difficult is that for you?**

Don't get me wrong, I like working with other people. I usually feel uncomfortable at parties or Get-togethers. I never know what to say. It's probably because I don't really drink alcohol.

### **How do you feel at your own exhibition openings?**

I don't like being the focus of attention, so it's not the easiest thing. Even at school, I had problems speaking in class. It's gotten much better since I've been living in New York, but I don't think I'll ever have that charisma that is needed.

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**You have designed album covers for Beck, produced a video for Bob Dylan, worked with writer Dave Eggers and director Spike Jonze. Actors Brad Pitt, Jim Carrey, and Nicolas Cage are fans of your work. Is there any difference between having your paintings hanging in the living room of a Hollywood star or an unknown investment banker?**

I don't know, I guess I can probably connect better with actors much better than bankers. There is more overlap. I've been in a couple of friends' movies myself, but I don't know much about investing.

**Is music more powerful than painting?**

Yes, definitely because music gets right into the soul or heart. A good song can communicate much more strongly than a painting, no matter how good the painting is.

**Are you jealous of musicians?**

No. I played in bands for a long time. Maybe I could have been a musician, but now I'm glad I didn't. The life of a musician is not that easy — constantly on the road, always on stage. It loses its appeal as you get older.

**Many works of art, movies, books, and paintings come with trigger warnings, particularly in America. Some people are genuinely worried about artistic freedom. Are you?**

Obviously, I don't want to hurt anyone with my work. Even then, I hope that art remains free. As an artist I don't have the restriction to constantly think about every little possibility that could hurt someone's feelings. When I draw, I don't like to censor myself. Art is freedom, without it it's just propaganda or furniture.

**Can you think of a painting, movie, or song that would definitely deserve a trigger warning?**

I'm not a fan of art that tries to just shock the viewer. It can be interesting for a few seconds, but it becomes quickly boring. Sure, some works are unsuitable for children, and those should be flagged. But surely most people over the age of 18 or even younger are capable of properly assessing and processing works of art. A lot of the noise online is agitation for attention.

**Your favorite painting?**

Oh, there are so many paintings I love. Francisco de Goya's *The Hermitage of Saint Isidore*. Or *Saturn Devouring His Son*. Wait, no, it's Francis Picabia's *The Adoration of the Calf*. Do you know it? Picabia painted it in response to the fascist dictators of his day. It shows a hybrid of a cow and a man, similar to the Minotaur, leading people towards their doom. I first saw it at MoMa, a few days after Trump was sworn in as president. Evidently history repeats itself, people just don't learn from the past.