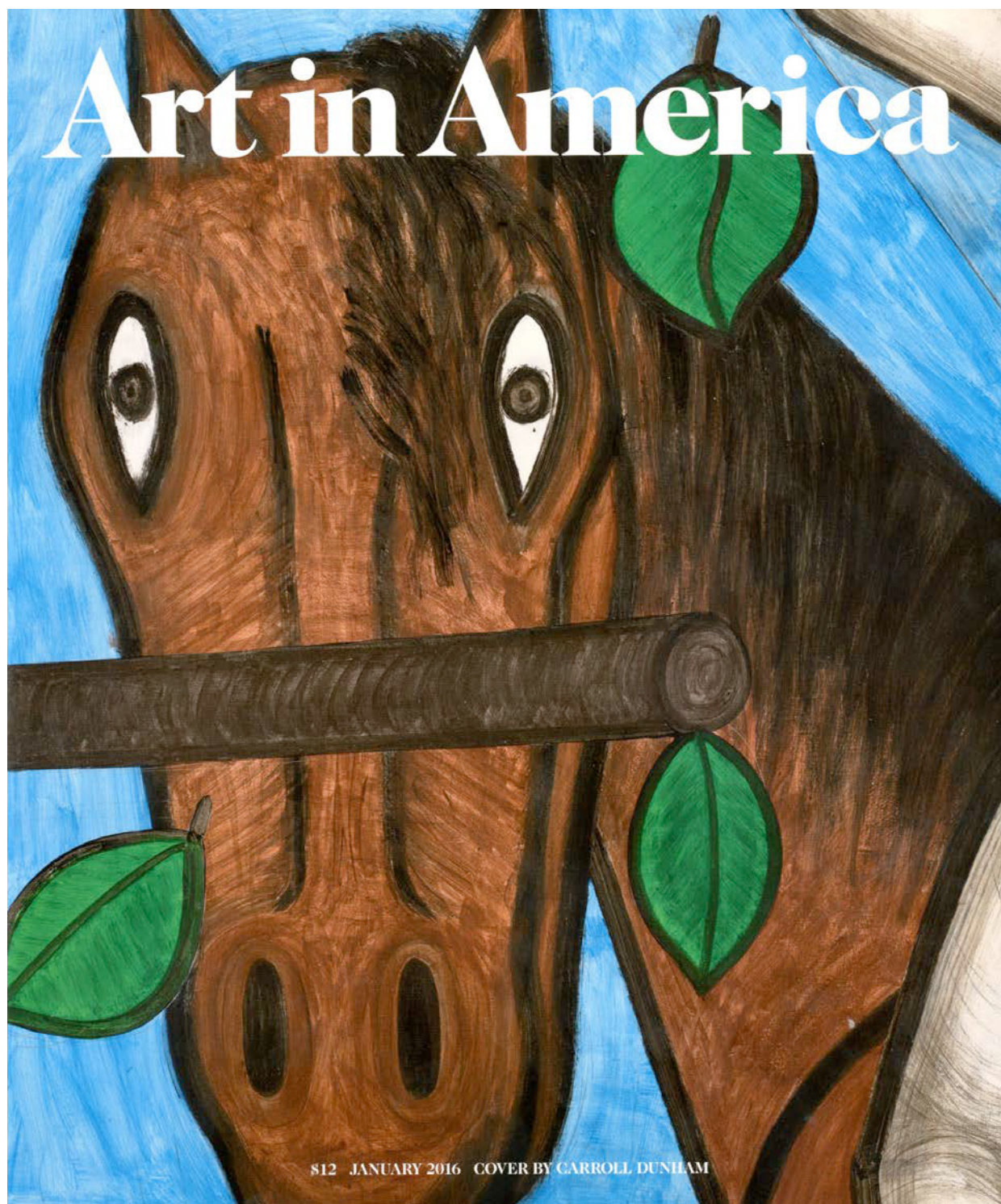


Art in America

Simonini, Ross: Carroll Dunham. In the Studio

January 2016



# CARROLL DUNHAM

CURRENTLY  
ON VIEW  
Works by Carroll  
Dunham in  
"Painting 2.0:  
Expression in the  
Information Age,"  
at the Museum  
Brandhurst,  
Munich, through  
Apr. 30.

**Interview by Ross Simonini**  
**Portrait by Grant Delin**

ROSS SIMONINI  
is a writer and artist  
based in New York.

# IN THE STUDIO

76 JANUARY 2016





Carroll Dunham:  
*Big Pine*, 1981-83,  
mixed mediums  
on pine, 62 by 48  
inches.

Images this article  
courtesy Gladstone  
Gallery, New York  
and Brussels.

Opposite,  
*Game*, 2013-15,  
mixed mediums  
on linen, 95¼ by  
75¼ inches.

EARLY LAST FALL, I spoke with Carroll Dunham at his drawing studio, a small, sunlit room in the corner of his Williamsburg apartment overlooking the East River. At the time, he was preparing to move to another floor in the building, and there was scant trace of any artistic presence in the space. The walls were bare. A collection of gleaming silver rulers lay on a table alongside a pencil sharpener and little else.

We drank black tea, and Dunham reclined in a T-shirt, shorts and socks. He had a charming way of laughing at his own observations, often for extended periods of time, as if his remarks were surprising to him. This playful, childlike sense of humor is reflected in his paintings, with their fairytale depictions of a psychosexual shadowland. For the last 10 years, his images have almost exclusively depicted mysterious, faceless women cavorting in utopian landscapes, their anuses and vulvas always front and center, pulling the viewer's gaze into an abyss of femininity.

Dunham's latest pictures reveal a painter who is still actively integrating new subject matter—the nude male, barnyard animals, cosmological imagery—while simultaneously reconsidering the abstract impulses of his early work. These recent shifts are particularly noteworthy because Dunham has previously spent up to a decade compulsively working with a single theme or form in a wide array of mediums—drawings, prints, paintings and sculpture.

In the late '70s, Dunham began creating what he calls his "primitive" visual language. This formal vocabulary originally manifested as quasi-psychedelic biomorphic abstractions and has since evolved to include concrete figures—women, men, suns—that are as clearly defined as those in a coloring book. He's slowly built a graphic world of "nameable things"—tree, flower, house, gun—in a purposeful evasion of subtlety, an attempt to purge a subject of its nuance and reduce it to an essential visual archetype. When he paints a horse, it's not a specific horse. It's just "horse," every horse, the idea of horse.

In his foundational years, Dunham assisted the mathematically oriented Dorothea Rockburne, who taught him the importance of using a bubble level to draft precise lines, and he spent a lot of time thinking about the formal concerns of painters such as Robert Mangold and Robert Ryman. He developed a restrained relationship with images that continues to serve as a cooling counterbalance to his bold palette and imagery reflective of his recent fascination with spicy underground comics.

While many artists seem to bristle when discussing the context surrounding their work, Dunham directly engages with the art he loves, writing about predecessors like Otto Dix, peers such as Elizabeth Murray and younger artists including Kara Walker. Our conversation was informed by this generous, panoramic approach to art, with Dunham opening up about the motivations behind the development of his creative process over the past four decades.

**ROSS SIMONINI** You have six rulers on this table.

**CARROLL DUNHAM** I like a lot of rulers. I just like them. A steel beveled ruler has got to be one of the most beautiful objects. I have a drawing studio and a painting studio and I have rulers, carpenter angles and levels in each one. I use those things frequently. The level I use when I'm hanging drawings. I draw level lines on the wall of my studio all the time. I mostly just draw freehand, really—even things that look like they were done with tools—but I use the level to check myself. The carpenter angles I use to see how a right angle might appear in a painting. I'm interested in these relationships. When I was young I was profoundly, to the point of paralysis, influenced by the very systemic, pictorial side of Conceptual art. Sol LeWitt. Agnes Martin. But I needed to get away from rulers and systems in the worst possible way, so for a long time I didn't even keep rulers or anything like that in my studio.



CARROLL DUNHAM



**“It used to drive me nuts when people immediately connected my work to cartooning. But the fact of the matter is I’ve looked at a lot of cartoons. I’m totally into this stuff again.”**

When I was 21 I went to work in Dorothea Rockburne’s studio, and the first thing that she did was teach me how to use a level. Mel Bochner made some pieces with levels around that time. It was in the air. I studied drafting. Also, I was a layout artist at a magazine for seven years—before computers—and that was all cutting, measuring. I started to realize, I’m *good* with these things.

**SIMONINI** Your new work seems to refer back to some of the abstractions of your early days.

**DUNHAM** I’ve been thinking a lot about what I thought I was doing back when I got into painting, and what the climate was at the time that made me think I would even want to make paintings. I hadn’t consciously thought about digging around in my old work to see what paths were left untaken there. I’ve been working on these recent abstractions on and off for several years now and I’ve always had a sense of them being some kind of step into a new thing or the next thing that I would take up. I had this idea that I wanted to use only the certain signs, glyphs and drawing moves that I’ve been using since the very beginning of my work. The loop-the-loop and an arrow thing with the point are among these recurring motifs. There’s a handful of them. It’s a very primitive vocabulary of little marks and ellipses. In one way or another, they account for almost everything I’ve ever drawn. And I tried to think about these as non-subject paintings, just making marks with no sense of where I’m going. But after I finished the first one, it hit me. The Big Bang metaphor. The origin moment. That’s why they’re all titled with some variation of *Big Bang (Actual Size)*. The title took them back into subject matter—cosmic subject matter—in a strange way, although it’s a ridiculous subject, one that can’t be represented. So the paintings also become what I originally thought they were—abstraction, in the literal sense.

**SIMONINI** There are dates scrawled on the surfaces of these paintings.

**DUNHAM** I’ve always dated everything. I see time as a total continuity. I don’t see any breaks. I know that my body of work can, when viewed as a whole, give the appearance of having ruptures or shifts in approach, but my experience of it has been completely continuous, probably because I always draw my way through things using the same basic set of marks.

**SIMONINI** The new paintings do seem like a shift in a few big ways. They include the first appearance of a man in about eight years, for example.

**DUNHAM** It feels like maleness needs to be in my paintings again to balance all the femaleness.

**SIMONINI** Is the man you?

**DUNHAM** Yeah, for sure. Or, I don’t mean to say that he’s me, but certainly in my extensive research for the painting, I stared at my own body to try to understand how you would even think about such a thing. I mean, you could look at Mantegna or you could look at Joan Semmel. There are plenty of precedents for thinking about the body in space in that kind of way, but I had something in mind that seemed pretty particular to my own train of thought.

**SIMONINI** Does it have anything to do with what is often called the “male gaze”?

**DUNHAM** It has to do with the male problem [*laughs*]. It has to do with the fact that I seem to be one, a man, and can’t get out of that.

**SIMONINI** The animals are also a new addition. Did you have any reason for choosing these particular animal archetypes—dog, horse, crow?

**DUNHAM** I spent a lot of my childhood on a chicken farm in a rural place and I saw a lot of blackbirds. I feel like anyone who spent a childhood in any contact with animals or in any outside environment would know that you project quite a bit onto horses, blackbirds and dogs. You have a very different relationship to each of those animals. Blackbirds seem to stand for all kinds of fairytale things, and dogs have been with us since the beginning. I think dogs are inseparable from us becoming human. And to speak to your comment about archetypes, in painting women I avoided any idea of a *specific* woman, depicting mostly women who don’t have faces—and that’s been completely conscious. Whereas the animals somehow need to have faces, personalities. I spent a lot of time working to make sure that the eyes were doing what I felt they needed to do. It’s a little unnerving to me.

**SIMONINI** Because of that animal personality, there’s also more humor in your new work. Is that something that you considered?

**DUNHAM** I never really think about the humor part as a goal. It’s more something I experience as a byproduct of things that interest me somehow. It’s very hard to talk about. I know, because people tell me so, that paintings of mine can elicit an amused response, and I think I used to be defensive about that, but I don’t feel that way anymore at all. I guess I just don’t think that there are too many paintings that I like very much that anyone would think are funny.

**SIMONINI** What about Picasso?

**DUNHAM** Yeah, he’s funny, but it’s like god-laughing type funny.

**SIMONINI** Art funny.

Opposite,  
*Culture as a Verb*, 2013-15,  
mixed mediums  
on linen, 78¼  
by 61¼ inches.



*Orange Glove*, 2000, mixed mediums on canvas, 50 by 59 inches.

Opposite, *Now and Around Here (2)*, 2014-15, mixed mediums on linen, 77 by 63 inches.

**DUNHAM** I've looked a lot at Picasso and read a lot about him, and I think he was having a good time at different points. There's humor in that work—there's no question—but to me it's a byproduct of something else that's much more ruthless and cold. Like the humor of a psychopath [*laughs*].

**SIMONINI** Who else pulls off humor?

**DUNHAM** Peter Saul, an artist who I think has made, arguably, some of the most consequential paintings of our time—some of them are funny. I mean, Jeffrey Dahmer taking a dump on the electric chair—these things are funny, but also harsh. [William] Copley is another artist I'm very interested in, and you can certainly see something funny there. So it's present in serious painting. I'll take humor. I don't feel threatened by the idea. It used to drive me nuts when people immediately connected my work to cartooning, and I had a whole speech about how modernism is filled with painters who use black outline, blah, blah, blah. And it's all true. But the fact of the matter is that I've looked at a lot of cartoons. I just bought the entire Fantagraphics facsimile edition of *Zap*. I'm totally into this stuff again.

**SIMONINI** Do you see your work as American? Or as taking place in America?

**DUNHAM** I see it as representing a place or idea about a place that's either very early in time or much later in time, like either after all this shit's gone or before any of it happened. And I think that's a very American fantasy, that it's either a peaceable kingdom or, you know, the end times. But the American thing is so elusive. I think about Roy Lichtenstein and I almost feel like you can't know what Lichtenstein's work is really about if you're not

American. Of course I'm being facetious, but in a way I'm not. I feel that way about Georgia O'Keeffe. And Stuart Davis, his *Colonial Cubism* [1954]. Talk about painting and humor. Davis and *Colonial Cubism* pretty much says what we're talking about. I guess I feel like I'm doing *Colonial Cubism*.

**SIMONINI** You recently wrote on Chris Ofili. He's someone who uses African mythology in a way that parallels the way you use American mythology.

**DUNHAM** I've only written about a few artists who are younger than I am. Ofili was the most recent, and I have huge admiration for him. I've found his work very challenging and exciting. The way he's turned blackness into something that has both narrative and this incredible formal power, that's just fascinating. When I realized the figures in my painting needed to be white, I wasn't thinking specifically about someone like him, but I find his work confirming of my instinct. And that room of his at his recent New Museum retrospective, with the lights turned down, is one of the most awesome things I've ever seen. I don't have any problem saying that in writing. I like doing it.

**SIMONINI** And as an artist it can be generative to extend praise.

**DUNHAM** When I was younger I used to hate everything.

**SIMONINI** At what age did you stop?

**DUNHAM** Pretty recently, really. I don't see anywhere near as much art as I used to, but I think I see what I need to see and I have gotten interested in a much more diverse range of older things.

**SIMONINI** Has any critique ever had a negative effect on you?

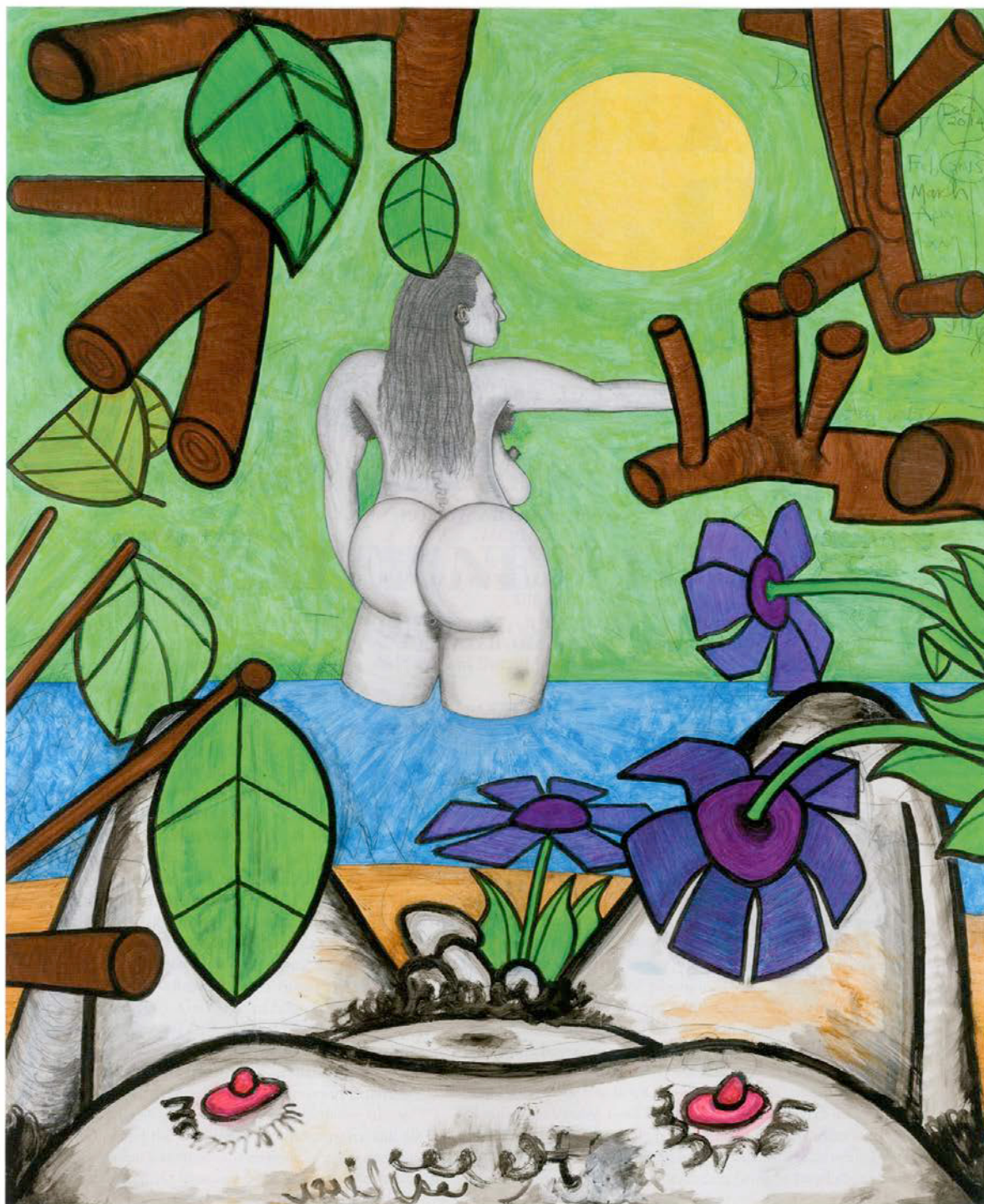
**DUNHAM** Not written criticism in the sense that we think about a show being reviewed. But with friends. I think you have to try to hear things from people. It gets harder as you get older also because you're in your studio by yourself more. I just used to have a lot more people in my studio.

**SIMONINI** Like who?

**DUNHAM** My friend Mel Kendrick. John Newman. Terry Winters and I used to live in the same building. And those people all had friends who came by. And there was a group of older artists that some of us had assisted and our group of friends extended to that group of friends. That kind of thing.

But it changes as you get older, not just because people change but because I have more to do now than I did when I was younger. My paintings take longer, and I think more long-term about them, and I have a much more developed sense of how my painting and my printmaking and my drawing all work together. I have a lot I could be doing. This coherence feels like is a part of my "project." I remember starting out trying to make work and thinking, What am I supposed to do? What am I supposed to do? But I just don't feel like that anymore. ○





CARROLL DUNHAM