

The New Yorker Interview

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3 April 2022

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CARROLL DUNHAM'S PAINTINGS MAKE YOU SQUIRM

The artist discusses his most recent work, how the art world resembles a cult, and what it's like having a famous child.

By Naomi Fry

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"Our culture has relegated thinking about the human body to some pretty creepy domains," Dunham says, "but art's been around an awfully long time, and the human body has been a subject since the beginning." Photograph by Sasha Rudensky for The New Yorker

There is something enigmatic about Carroll Dunham's work, even though the painterly vocabulary he employs appears to be straightforward. Using bold planes of color and almost cartoonish outlines, Dunham often depicts naked human figures in imagined natural landscapes, populated with naïvely rendered trees and birds, dogs and flowers. In his paintings and drawings of heavy-breasted, thick-thighed women bathing, or of hirsute men wrestling one another, Dunham allows the viewer to encounter life in vivid, animated action. And yet, there is a palpable opacity to his subjects: Who are these half-Biblical, half-science-fictional figures, with their button-like nipples and dark tufts of pubic hair, their bodies splayed jarringly against an indifferently cheerful landscape? What is the purpose and meaning of the obscure rituals that Dunham paints these characters engaging in, with their eyes averted from the viewer, as if reluctant to have their private customs disturbed or even looked at?

The dropped-from-outer-space oddity of Dunham's protagonists might remind us that the artist's path to the figurative nude has been unconventional. Born in Connecticut, where he attended Trinity College, Dunham moved to New York City in the early nineteen-seventies, and began working as an assistant to the painter Dorothea Rockburne. His own work was influenced by the cool-to-the-touch, pared-down, post-minimalist approach of Rockburne and her milieu, where art was being "thought of as a philosophical exercise," Dunham told me. "I had a very, very reductive vocabulary in my work." From the late nineteen-seventies through the nineteen-eighties, Dunham's paintings and drawings hewed closely to abstraction, depicting spare, systemic whorls of line and color. And yet, as the years went on and his career developed, Dunham found himself increasingly drawn to depicting the human figure, first as part of a semi-abstract pictorial language, from which certain repeating symbols nonetheless emerged—top hats, guns, mouths, penises, vulvas—and then, increasingly, in the fully fleshed-out images of men and women, a rich vein that he has now been pursuing for nearly two decades. "My whole thing as an artist is backing into things," he told me. Later, he added, "At some point, life starts creeping in."

Now, at seventy-two, Dunham is one of the most successful and well-respected American painters of his generation. His work has been collected by numerous art institutions here and abroad, among them the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Museum of Modern Art, and the Museum Ludwig. Most recently, his paintings were shown in a solo exhibition at the Eva Presenhuber gallery, in Zurich, where Dunham depicted his familiar women and men not separately but together, for the first time, in acts of copulation. (For the first time, too, these subjects were painted green.) Since the early nineties-eighties, Dunham has been married to the artist Laurie Simmons, with whom he has two children—the director, writer, and actor Lena Dunham, and the writer and activist Cyrus Dunham. The couple shares their time between a house in Connecticut, where Dunham also keeps his painting studio, and an apartment near Union Square. I have been a fan of Dunham's work for the past decade—a small ballpoint-pen drawing of his, in which a naked woman is depicted from the back, is one of my prized possessions—and, a couple of years ago, I met him and became more intimately familiar with his paintings when I wrote a catalogue essay about one of his series. Recently, I got to dive even deeper when I sat down with the artist at his New York City home for a conversation about painting, the body, repression, and family.

You've just recently returned from Zurich, where you had a one-person show at the Eva Presenhuber gallery, which has been your gallery for roughly a decade. I looked at the images online and I saw that, even though the art is very much of a piece with your past work, for the first time your characters are . . . green?

That's a big change. It's quite a change.

For the first time, too, these characters, men and women, are having sex.

It's been in my mind for years, but it's the first time I've ever figured out how to make paintings work that had males and females together in the same paintings. They appear to be copulating so there's something for them to do together. It took me years to imagine a way that I could work with a subject like that without it being gratuitously sensationalistic. That's the way it goes with painting, for me. It just takes a long time for things to come about.

But even with your figurative images where there isn't copulation, one could think of them, potentially, as sensationalistic, in the sense that they have very graphic orifices, they have appendages . . .

I just was trying to make things that felt honest in terms of how one is fascinated by human bodies. Having one and looking at them. And I completely reject any association with porn or anything like that, because that's just not an interest of mine. As I've told people for years, the images that involve females to me have more to do with the idea that everyone has a mother than they do with any idea about sexuality, per se. And the images of men which do involve pairs of humans messing with each

other, that has as much to do with my experience of having horsed around with my brother. At least on a conscious level, it has nothing to do with sex.

Is it because, for the painting to have something to do with sex or porn it would have to attempt to titillate, and these images aren't interested in that?

If you can find me some kid somewhere who's jerking off looking at pictures of my paintings, I'd love to meet them. But I find it highly unlikely. [*Laughs.*] That's just not the zone. There's nothing about that in what the paintings look like or in the intention behind them, as far as I can see. And I'm not saying that to be disingenuous. Our culture has relegated thinking about the human body to some pretty creepy domains, but art's been around an awfully long time, and the human body has been a subject since the beginning.

But something that's interesting about your work is that it can also be creepy—not in a sexual way, exactly, but in that looking at it makes us confront something that we're not necessarily thinking about. When we're sitting here, engaging with each other's bodies, in the same way we do on the subway, or in a family, there is a concerted repression. Thoughts of people's protruding penises or their orifices are not things that are top of mind.

I agree completely. I think that's true. But that's how I see art, I guess. Art allows for things that we don't use in our day-to-day social space to understand each other, to categorize each other. Art is a kind of free zone. I see things that I think are much more provocative on the sides of buses here in New York than I do in my own work. And maybe that means I'm blind to the effect of what I'm making.



"Qualiascope: Coitus Diagrams (one)," 2020-21. Photograph by David Regen / Courtesy Galerie Eva Presenhuber



"Qualiascope: Female & Male Captured Together," 2021. Photograph by David Regen / Courtesy Galerie Eva Presenhuber

I have a drawing of yours, and it's a woman from behind, and you see her labia from behind, and

she's splayed open, and I have no problem with it—I appreciate having it in my home. But it's a matter of convention. It's a question of the way the body is packaged. There's something more open about it in your work than what we see on the sides of buses.

Well, there's a whole almost science of erotics in our society. We're being exposed to and having it inflicted on us constantly: to sell things, to engage us, to stimulate us. It affects our fantasy lives, it affects all kinds of things. And I didn't come to it that way.

You didn't start out by painting the human figure.

I have no background in that sort of training. I built these things out of the same ridiculously simple vocabulary I've used since the beginning of my work. There are constructions, and I really think they're much more analogous to making sentences out of words and letters than they are any kind of conventional notion of representing the human body.

Because you also don't paint from life in any way.

Not in any way. Which I think painting green humans should make clear.

So would you call yourself a formalist?

I'm more interested in the idea of "formal" the way we use it more colloquially, like formal dress.

How so?

Painting, for me, is a much more formal activity than drawing, for example. Like, I draw a lot. Most days I make a drawing at least, even if it only takes me five minutes. It's a very informal activity. Painting is a much more formal activity. I haven't really worked on paintings for three months or so, and I'm just starting to get very involved again with a group of things I'm working on. And it feels formal. It feels like I have to get prepared and organized for it.

Is your process tortured at all? Do you worry about it?

"Tortured" might be a little too dramatic, but I do worry about it. And it never stops being difficult to go back to work.

Are you in some ways concerned that it wouldn't come out this time?

I have all these concerns that somehow everything will go sideways, and it won't work out. I think there's a lot of fear of being embarrassed, making a fool of yourself.

Yes, a hundred per cent.

Which is an odd thing, because that ship's sailed a long time ago. [*Laughs.*] If that were the concern, I suppose I've made a fool of myself many times over since I started taking myself seriously about this. Just the initial negotiation with oneself to take oneself seriously enough, to say, I am an artist. That's a big deal. At least, it was for me.

When would you put that?

I didn't really know that this would be my life until I was twenty-five. When I was in college, I came down to New York for a semester, on I guess what we would now call an internship program. And I was exposed to what was, in hindsight, the teeny-tiny downtown New York art world, but it was the first time I'd seen any kind of situation where I really thought I understood it. This was in the early seventies. I worked in the studio of Dorothea Rockburne, and that was very formative for me.

Dorothea and her crew were very powerful. I'm very grateful for the experience, but it was also a lot of influences on my thinking, about what was possible or acceptable to do, that I needed to get it out of my system. It was very conceptually heavy. It had a certain point of view with a take on art history, which was very strict. The thought line ran through a certain aspect of New York painting into minimal art into whatever we now call it, post-minimalism. I guess that's what people like Dorothea and her friends were doing. And I still think extremely highly of that art and those artists and that period, but it wasn't necessarily clear to me what to do with it all. And I had a lot of other things that interested me. Before I started learning what was so-called good and bad ideas, my favorite artist was Salvador Dalí.

Was that embarrassing, in a way? Confronting something that was more conceptual when your first love in art was seemingly not as sophisticated?

Absolutely. But I also have a stubborn and perverse streak which wasn't willing to let that go, either. So squaring a circle between those things which seemed to be completely contradictory was a big part, I think, of what I needed to do to come to my own work. [. . .] Being able to call myself an artist was synchronized almost to the day with figuring out how to be able to stand being alone long enough to actually make something.

How did that switch flip?

That was kind of sheer will, if such a thing exists. Now I love being alone, but back then, it's hard to remember, it really frightened me. I was good at having jobs. I liked that structure. I liked having things to do. I even, in a certain way, liked being told what to do when I was younger. Now I hate it. However that works, I almost created these avatars of myself that tell me what to do. I kind of split off these parts of my psyche: the part that structures my time, the part that obeys, the part that makes things, the part that looks at what is happening while it's happening. We all have this. But it

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took a long time for me to find my way to anything like a comfortable relationship to it.

The earliest stuff that I know of your work are those wiry whorls from the later seventies.

In the beginning, I told myself, no more rulers, no more measurement, no more systems, but then of course I set up a system. I basically made monochromatic paintings but in completely arbitrary, kind of fruity colors. I had a very, very reductive vocabulary in my work.

It's amazing to me when I think back about it now how little any of this had to do with anything other than just the problems of art. It had zero conscious connection to any sort of lived life, other than living your life within something called the art world. It really was like being in a cult. I could no more explain my work to my aunt and uncle up in Connecticut than I could have explained quantum physics. It was so abstruse and turned in on itself. And I'm not really saying this as a criticism. I sort of miss that art world.



"I don't enjoy performing," Dunham says. "I like being the center of attention when it's about my work and people are

interested, but other than that I hate being the center of attention.” Photograph by Sasha Rudensky for The New Yorker

When do you feel that started to loosen up somewhat for you?

Because of the atmosphere I was breathing, because of the people I was around and the influences, I began my art in a very pure way. I wasn't going, I really, really, really want to paint landscapes, but I don't know how to paint them. There was none of that. It was an absolute demonstration of, let's call them aesthetic philosophy premises. But, because of the rules I set for myself, they almost had built into them that eventually my lived life would find its way in [to my art]. That the boundary would become permeable. And that seems to be what's happened. But I still think my work is basically a meditation on what painting is about.

So, what is painting about? [Laughs.]

Poor choice of words. It's a sequence of hypotheses about painting, and the hypotheses take the form of more paintings. It's completely tautological, but within that tautology things fly off, things leak in. As a boy, I went to the beach every summer, and I watched my mother and my aunts and their friends go in and out of the water every day. And then fifty, sixty years later, I get the bright idea of making paintings of women in the water. What does that mean, quote-unquote? I haven't a clue. But I can imagine that my pictorial imagination was branded by that experience. At some point, life starts creeping in.

So, what kind of life? Way before figuration, some symbols began to appear in your work, whether it's a hat or a nose or a penis or a gun or an orifice, and certain bumps got certain colors. The world started clarifying a little bit.

I wanted to encourage this idea that the representations in my work would feel more like life. So, more diversity of color, willingness to let more curvilinear, swollen kinds of shapes into the paintings, things that probably echo morphologically something to do with living creatures. I think there was a disconnect in my thinking from the very beginning, which was wanting [my art] to be this very self-contained meditation on painting at the same time as I wanted it to squirm around and get busy. I don't even see it as a disconnect anymore, I suppose, but when I was starting out and starting to realize I had these different impulses, I had no idea where it would lead me. I look back now over the way my works developed and it almost looks like tracking. . . .

A cell?

Exactly. Like really tracking a coherent development. But there was no point at which I saw ahead further than five months.

Do you impute the changes in your work to a different cohort you found yourself in? Your marriage to Laurie and the kind of work she was doing? Becoming a father?

All these things contribute to clarifying your life. Definitely getting married and having a family sorted me out about a number of things, largely about realizing how I wanted my painting to take place within that kind of space. I wasn't going to be a person who just lived alone forever and had this kind of monastic existence. That wasn't going to be productive for me, and I needed a rich emotional life in order to feed myself as an artist.

When did you guys get married?

We got married in 1983. And having children is another step. That definitely affected my relationship to time, because I wanted to be very involved with my kids so I needed to figure out a way to work that made that also possible.

Also, I would imagine that being married to Laurie, who has her own aesthetic interests and obsessions and so on, . . . was that, artistically speaking, a fertile exchange?

Yeah, I think so. In ways that are a little surprising, maybe. We didn't really then and we still don't spend huge amounts of time in each other's studios. But I knew when I met Laurie that I really liked what she was doing in her art work. We were both white kids from reasonably comfortable families; there were things that were not different, but it was different enough that it felt both enriching and safe to be around. I didn't feel like we were going to breathe each other's oxygen, and I assume she felt the same. It was kind of inspiring to be with someone else who was fighting some of the same battles with themselves and hoping for some of the same things to happen in the world.



A younger Dunham in his studio. Photograph by Laurie Simmons



"One of the things that interested me about art was that it seemed like you can be really radical as an artist and be really old," Dunham says. Photograph by Laurie Simmons

Laurie's work, more overtly than yours at the time, was dealing with life. What it means to be a woman, what it means to grow up in a certain household.

A hundred per cent. And there was a conversation going on that Laurie's work fit into, and it wasn't really clear that that was the case for me. I wasn't really hanging out with anyone who was making paintings at that point, but that was fine; that wasn't a source of discomfort for me. I kind of liked it, actually. My work didn't fit into any of what we now call the Pictures Generation conversation. It had nothing, really, to do with any of that.

Did that feel at the time strange or alienating?

I was fine being strange and alienated at that point. I liked the feeling that I had found something to do that was kind of off by myself. And I still had a full-time job. I was a layout artist at *Time* magazine. A job that no longer exists. Weekly news magazines had crazy schedules, so I would disappear for three days, work until very late at night, and then sleep for a day, and then try to work

on my paintings.

Were you showing then?

No. But I invited people to my studio; I started to have more confidence about that. And then this guy came to my studio and bought a bunch of paintings from me and then I quit my job. That was in 1983, I think. Things started to happen.

Do you remember a point where you were, like, I'm starting to make it?

[Laughs.] I don't think I, even now, think I've made it.

When I went to MOMA yesterday there was a huge painting of yours in the lobby.

That doesn't translate into any sort of ease for me, even though I'm thrilled it's there. It was a big deal when the museum bought that painting, when I made it. That's over twenty years ago. I think I finally finished the painting in 1999.

In my first few years when my work was getting seen publicly, it was a great set of feelings. But one of the things that interested me about art was that it seemed like you can be really radical as an artist and be really old. That really appealed to me. That there didn't seem to be any notion of slowing down and getting lazy. You could do those things, but that would be up to you. There was nothing culturally determined about that.

That's why being an artist is probably preferable to being, like, a model. [Laughs.]

Yeah! It's very different from being a model. [Laughs.] It's almost being an anti-model. The older and flabbier and more out of shape, the better you're going to be as an artist. So, I always kind of knew that, and I also knew that there were going to be ups and downs. So much luck involved.

At some point, you guys moved away from the city, to Connecticut.

Right before the big financial wipeout of 2008, Laurie and I bought a house up there. And then shortly after we bought the house, the economy wiped. Art sales basically stopped for a year, and I had to do something pretty dramatic, so I gave up my studio in New York at that point. I had no real desire to do that. The jarring thing about it was, with all this money stress and family stress, I was still getting a lot done, for me. And I was also feeling very located in my work in a way that I hadn't in a while, which I found really exciting. I had started making those paintings of trees, and as I was making them I got this strange idea: What would it be like to try to figure out in my work how to represent a woman next to a tree? After we got our house in Connecticut, I was offered this three-month residency in the American Academy, in Rome. And the project I set myself was that I was

going to look at as much painting as I could look at and make drawings to try to figure out if this horrible idea of women in nature was something that I could just get out of my system. And then when I came back I thought, Well, it's not out of my system. I want to make paintings about this.



Carroll Dunham's drawing studio, in Connecticut. Photograph by Sasha Rudensky for The New Yorker

Do you think it was so hard for you because of the whole caboodle of, What the fuck am I doing as a man painting a woman, this is such a cliché?

Yeah, it was a stupid cliché, but also deep, human stuff, which is why it's a stupid cliché. And I kept going around and around that, just in circles, trying to think my way past it. I had thought I could make trees the central motifs of the paintings: I thought it was a way for me to circle back into something I would think of as abstraction. And the last thing in the world I wanted on a conscious level was to be making paintings of naked people. I was really, like, That's not me. But it turns out it kind of is. [*Laughs.*]

It's hard for people to answer this question about themselves, but do you think you're a repressed

person? The language that you use to talk about the emergence of a figure in your work—“against my conscious judgment, this thing kept bubbling up, and I’ve kind of thought I’d get it out of my system but it kept taking over the work”—

I don’t know why, but some things can’t be just immediately and directly revealed to oneself. I don’t really think that there was some charged-up thing that I was afraid to look at. I think it’s more that, you come to a certain point in your life—call it maturity, call it immaturity, call it whatever—where you’re willing to try something that before would have seemed dumb. And the actual dumbness of it becomes an attractive element because it takes you out of what you think you already know about yourself.

Yeah, I love that.

I don’t think that repression is precisely the idea. I’m a very self-conscious person, I know this about myself. I don’t enjoy performing. I like being the center of attention when it’s about my work and people are interested, but other than that I hate being the center of attention.

Speaking of public attention, obviously also you’re Lena’s father. In her 2010 movie, “Tiny Furniture,” Laurie is in it, and Cyrus is in it, and Lena’s in it, and it’s quasi-your-family. But there’s no father.

[*Laughs.*] No, there was no father.

Did Lena want you to be in the movie?

Lena knew from an early point that I really don’t like performing in front of a movie camera. She kind of asked-slash-tricked me into being in a couple of her very early smaller projects when she was still in school, and I just never liked it. I loved what she was doing, I was always a-hundred-per-cent supportive, but I never wanted to be part of it in that way. Laurie and Cy just had a different relation to it. Lena was writing plays and stories and stuff about different distorted creepy versions of our family since she was a teen-ager [*laughs*], so I was really used to that. And I was just happy [that in “Tiny Furniture”] there was no artist father who was fucking his assistant and all this stuff. She did that in high school. It was just part of her process, taking aspects of so-called reality and stretching them and twisting them.

You and Laurie have had your own version of art-world fame, not TV fame, when both your children were younger. Was it a strange experience to have a later-in-life-by-proxy experience of fame at a level that you hadn’t experienced yourself?

I don’t think anyone who doesn’t have a kid who’s experienced celebrity can really understand what it feels like. It’s very, very disorienting. You’re thrilled for your kid, and you feel proud of the work

they're doing and happy that their work is hitting so many people so strongly, while at the same time being really kind of repulsed by the culture of fame. The most famous artist in the world doesn't experience the kind of notoriety that the cheesiest soap-opera actor experiences. I remember when I realized I couldn't go for walks with my daughter anymore around New York.

Was that during the "Girls" era?

Yeah. When "Girls" hit, everything changed really fast for Lena, and she was kind of shot out of this rocket, and suddenly she was in magazines, and . . . and it changed for Laurie and me in the sense that you got all these people that you really don't know coming up to you and telling you all these things about your daughter, but they don't know her, either. It's just a machine that kicks in and gets going. And I tell you, if you haven't been through it . . . [*Laughs.*] I wouldn't wish it on my worst enemy, even though I couldn't be more proud of my kid. But it's all good. These are problems of privilege, not problems of lack or deprivation.



A young Lena Dunham in her father's arms. Photograph by Laurie Simmons

To get back to your own work, and to the newest body of work. We have this green tint, and we have the copulation for the first time—

I've read science fiction my whole life, and green humanoids are ubiquitous in that tradition for all kinds of reasons. Also, things out of Celtic mythology, those green forest men covered in dirt and vines. It just seemed like a rich associative area. And then I had been thinking about an image I had doodled of people copulating, thinking it was a beautiful structure for a painting, and also because it was unavoidable that one would read it as that but it also was extremely chaste. There was no representation of genitals or anything, really. It was a beast with two backs, an idea of people together. And then in my imagining it came together. I started out making drawings of this image of people in a sexual embrace that were green, and it triggered a whole set of fantasies. What if somehow green people did turn up? Whether they were from another planet, or another dimension, or hiding in the jungle in New Guinea? What would that be? And I realized it would be like when white European culture hit all those other things. It destroyed them, studied them to death, turned them into resources, basically.

It's not a coherent narrative premise, it's more a set of fantasies and associations that made me feel like it was a pretty rich area for me to pursue. It's funny, because the sorts of things that I think about now are much more like stories than they've ever been before. Green people discovered, studied within an inch of their life, their love for each other reduced to some sort of clinical data set. That sounds like a short science-fiction novella, but that's not something I'm going to write. This is something I seem to be making.

There's also a question of what meaning other people might gain from your painting. Is that something that you ever think about, that you ever let yourself think about, that even interests you in any way?

If you have the opportunities come to you, and you allow them to happen, and your work is seen in public places, I think it would be ridiculous to claim that you don't care. Until you actually encounter another person's reaction, you're just in a big circle jerk with yourself. My mental landscape is inhabited by many, many imagined people. Dead artists, other living artists, people that make me angry, people I like. All this stuff is going on all the time because that's being conscious, that's just being alive every day. But, I don't know, I don't feel too burdened by some concern about being misunderstood. Paintings are facts. They're really real, and that's something that really appeals to me. You can dislike what I make but you can't tell me that's not what I made. [*Laughs.*]

It's still a green man. And a green woman.

Yeah. Guilty as charged.