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Tittel, Cornelius: Carroll Dunham  
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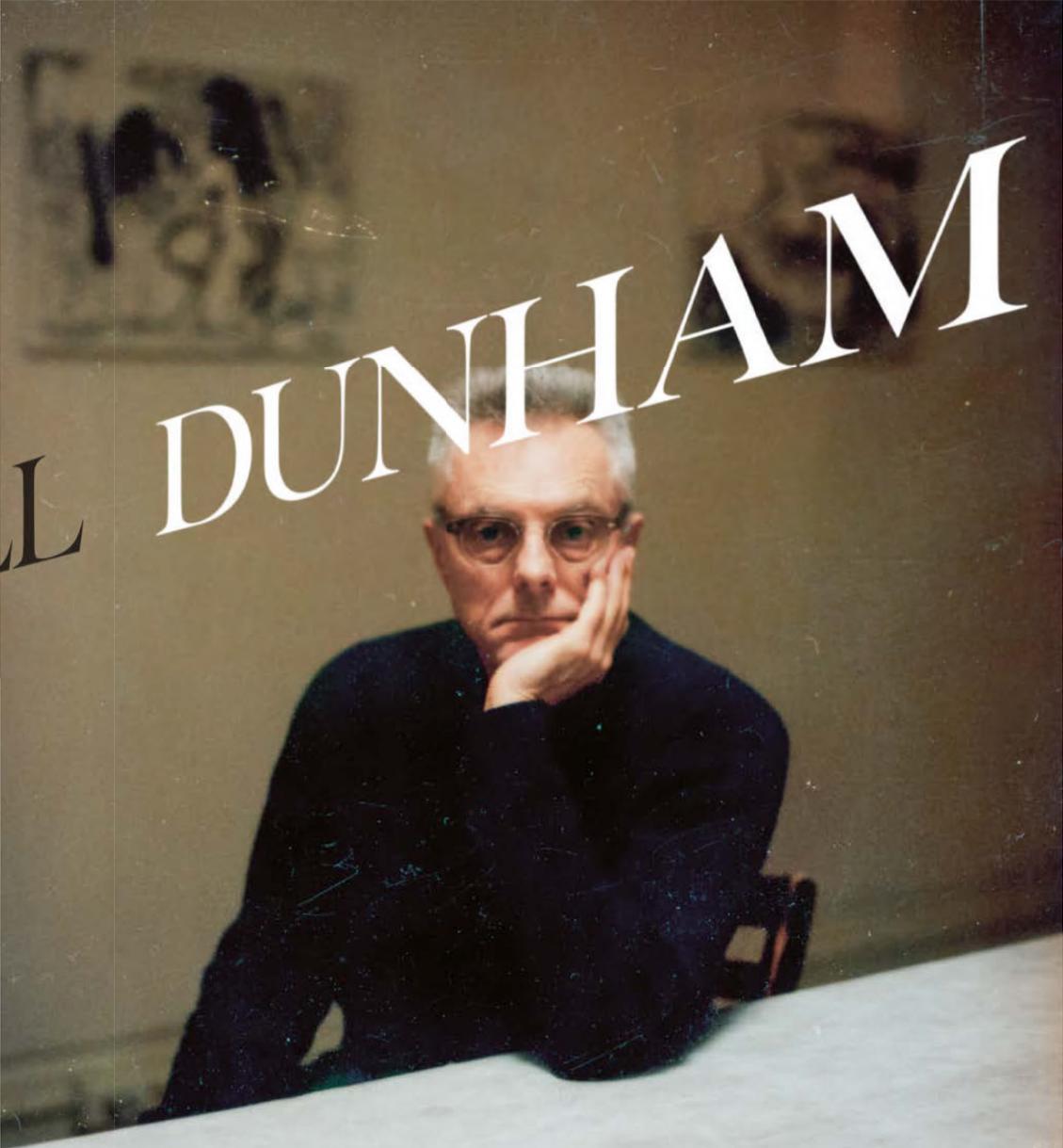
“Thinking things is usually a mistake” – Carroll Dunham

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From abstraction with a hard-on to his recent *Self Examination* paintings, CARROLL DUNHAM's younger self couldn't have imagined the twists his work would take. On the eve of two museum shows with fellow artist Albert Oehlen, the most unexpected of American master painters talks us through the many highs (and holes) of his 40-year career

Interview by  
CORNELIUS TITTEL

Cornelius Tittel: You have written that painting in New York during the late 1970s was a mess, that the domineering work by artists like Robert Ryman or Brice Marden was so radically empty that modernism looked like a dead-end to younger artists like you. You were in your late 20s at the time, what kind of work were you doing?

Carroll Dunham: I had a job. And I made my work as well as I could around that structure, because I always had jobs that allowed me to pay my rent and not take them so seriously that they consumed my mind. And I was working on paintings that were also quite empty and fairly representative of the kind of thinking I was involved with, which I guess was a way to try to take all these things that had interested me when I first really threw myself into the art scene in New York, and somehow allow them to merge with my own real personal interests and hope that they would turn into something that didn't look like something else I had seen.

You worked as an assistant to Dorothea Rockburne. She was a major figure back then, a very systemic, minimalist, process-oriented artist. What was it like seeing her work every day? Did it impress you or did you want to escape it?

—Well, both. I mean, it was absolutely my school. You know, I didn't really go to proper art school. My friends and I would read *Artforum*, smoke pot, and go to art galleries. You know, that was our basic thing. And when I got to New York I had no interest in staying in school, but I knew that I wanted to just be around artists. I wanted to see what that would feel like, and one of my teachers set me up with Dorothea for I guess what we would now call an internship—you know, basically free labor. And we got along very well. She was important to me because she had such a strong point of view. Though she was a bit younger than Sol LeWitt, they were close. I believe he actually invented the term conceptual art—or it was invented for him. Their ways of thinking were similar: very systemic, very rigorous, very influenced by philosophy, but also very attached to materiality, which made it different from other Conceptual Art that was trying to get away from physical things. So the history of painting was always on Dorothea's mind. That was the beginning of my realizing how, working in the present in the culture where you are, in order to go anywhere deep, you also have to know about where you came from. The things Dorothea taught me were the importance of art history and how to use



FIRST PINE, 1982, Mixed media on pine, 145 × 122 cm  
Precious spread, left: ALPHA, 2000, Mixed media on linen, 100 × 74 cm  
Next spread: TWO THINGS (MOUND D), 1992, Mixed media on linen, 65 × 110 cm



a hammer, or how to draw a level line on a wall—a combination of intellectual and physical things.

You once said to me that back then you felt like you were competing with five living artists and a few dead ones. You didn't have much to do with artists your own age?

—I didn't know anyone my age who was making paintings. I liked the idea of their limitations and I loved the history of painting, so I decided that was going to be my path. And there were only a handful of painters whose work resonated with me. I mean, Dorothea was very interested in Robert Ryman and what Brice Marden was doing at that time. Robert Mangold, Agnes Martin—you know, certain types of responses to earlier New York painting and Minimalism. So that's what I started out thinking was important, and I immediately realized that I had to find a way past that or I would just be at a dead end.

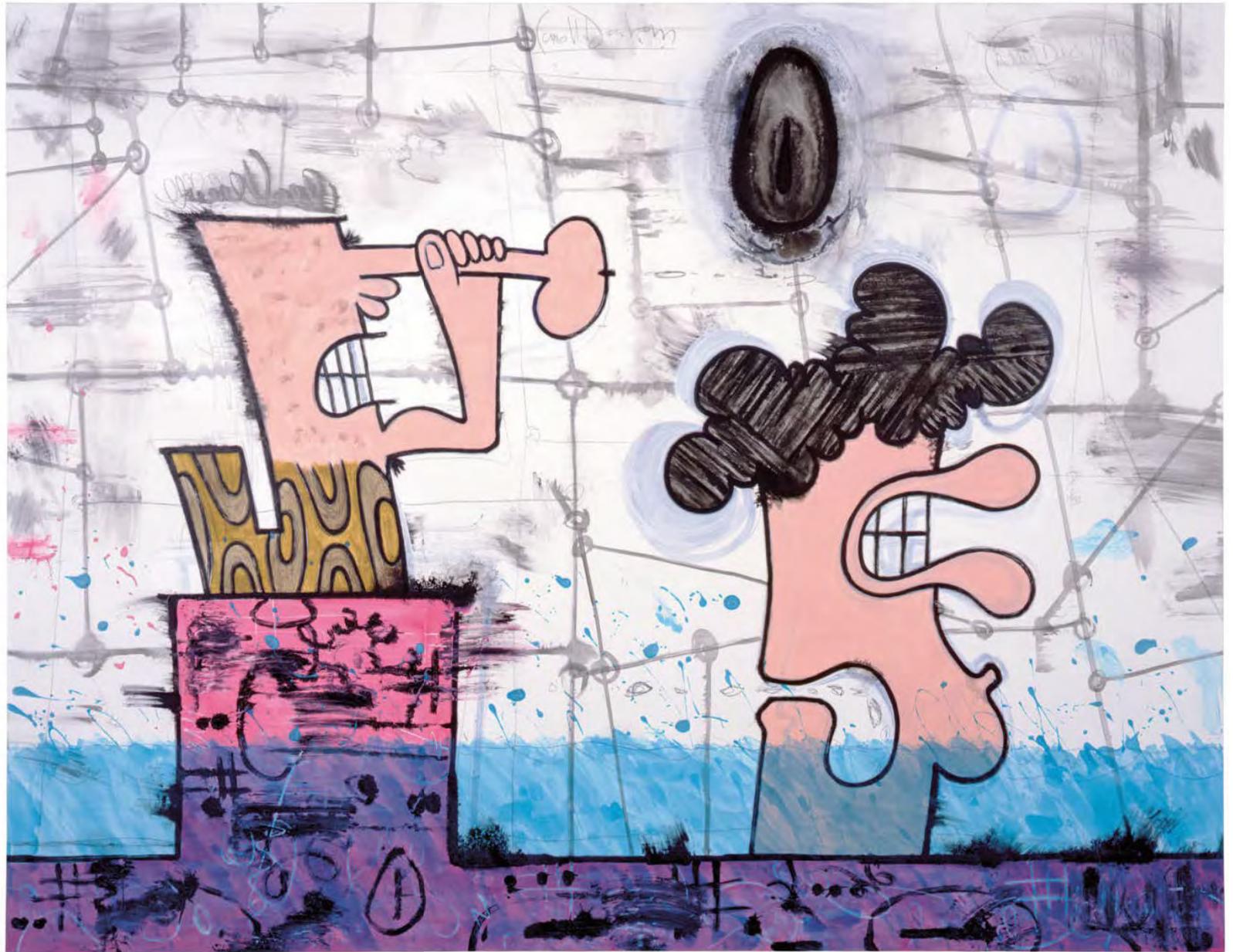
But then, while you were still figuring things out, the 80s started, and suddenly all these painters had big exhibitions in huge galleries, winning major prizes: Julian Schnabel, David Salle, the Italians. Did it make you nervous to see that there was a whole generation of painters your age and that they must have done their homework?

—Yeah, I think that's a very accurate description of the situation. Before that happened, I felt like I had a lot of space to operate, because I didn't see anyone else near me. And then these artists appeared almost completely realized—at least that's how they were being talked about. It was very disturbing, and I had to give up on the idea that there was something quite unique about my own pursuit of painting. This combination of insecurity and competition, and my own criticisms about their conclusions about what painting could be—it was all very confusing. But it was also good for me because it sort of woke me up, you know, made me more ambitious for myself.

From the time when you made your minimalist doodles until the first paintings on wood that you started to do around 1984, there's not much work of yours that's known. You must have destroyed it all.

—Oh, I didn't destroy anything. The weird thing is how little I made.

Then let's talk about the first grown-up Carroll Dunham paintings, so to speak, like *First Pine* from



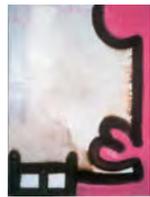
ANOTHER ISLAND, 1998–1999  
Mixed media on linen, 152 x 196 cm

1982, all of them painted on wood. How did you come up with these?

—I started to use wood because I didn't want to be so ordinary as to use canvas, and I didn't like stretchers and canvas and all that stuff. It felt too much like a received idea of painting for me. So I started painting on these boards and I immediately realized that I could use the "pictures" in the wood grain. Working with these panels felt like someone had already done a bit of work on the painting for me. The wood was something I could respond to, rather than just starting with a blank and having to impose myself.

Looking at these paintings now, having seen your last shows at Barbara Gladstone and Eva Presenhuber, we realize what a great painter of assholes you've become. It seems like this polymorphous perversity was already present in your early paintings. They are still abstract, but the viewer gets the sense that something is growing out of these wooden knots, something very weird indeed.

—As a kind of smart remark, I've described my early work as abstraction with a hard-on, but that literally became true! My interest in painting was based on the history of abstraction and modernism. That's why I was so disturbed and critical of the art of many of my peers in the 80s. Because other than my girlfriend being a photographer, I had no personal interest in photography, or



UNTITLED, 2003  
Acryl on canvas,  
61 × 41 cm

in any ideas about representation or subject matter. I was trying to find a way to go beyond this emptying out that had happened in painting, and to try to reclaim some of the things that I thought had been left behind by the rigor of post-minimal thinking. This also had to do with the influence of science fiction, which I've read since I was a kid, or, as I mentioned earlier, psychedelics—the whole aesthetic around that, artists like Robert Crumb, who I'd looked at a lot. I wasn't 100 percent aware that I was trying to make an alloy out of all these things, but I think in hindsight that's what was happening.

Looking at a painting like *Two Things (Mound D)*, it's beautifully abstract, but it also looks like a placenta,

there's orifices. From the mid-80s on, it becomes clearer and clearer that your abstraction is kind of a breeding ground for something else.

—Yes, breeding ground, that's a very good way to talk about it. I guess I was trying to understand what my territory was. And to me that meant trying to understand a repertoire of marks and gestures and ways of thinking about material that felt like mine. And to let them talk back to me. Somehow from early on I had this idea that—if I really committed myself and gave in to it—my paintings would show me what to do. And I still feel as though my paintings are leading me along rather than the other way around.

## “I was trying to find a way to go beyond this emptying out that had happened in painting”

So it was never a conscious decision to bring in these weird sexual organs that then were slowly but steadily starting to inhabit your paintings?

—When my work literally became abstraction with a hard-on, I realized that that line had been a myth I told myself in order to make it possible to do anything, that there was a kind of profound disconnect in my work. I had made a group of paintings that were just based on a pink rectangular shape, very large paintings with these kinds of tower-like shapes, and then I would just turn myself loose. I've always done an enormous amount of drawing—it's sort of how I engage my thought process—and now I just did it all over the painting. And while the paintings were interesting to me, they felt like they were on a threshold. For some reason it occurred to me that I could take little rectangles and turn them loose as these idiotic characters, and I found that idea so unsettling and subversive at the same time; it was very attractive. I just decided: if you really are doing what you say you're doing all the time, you have to just go there. So from that point on I was allowing characters to move around in the paintings—things that had no rela-



UNTITLED, 2003  
Acrylic on canvas,  
51 × 41 cm

tionship to realism. These animated rectangles traveled around in the space of my paintings and started to show me what was possible.

Rectangles slapping each other, stabbing each other, pissing on each other—if someone would've come up to you back then to ask whether these paintings were your commentary on the dog-cat-dog New York art world, what would have been your answer?

—I would have really been embarrassed and I would have turned them in a very different direction. I don't really like to think about my work as a metaphorical statement. I'm not against that, and there are other artists whose work I might even be interested in for whom that might be a useful tool to unpack their work. But I was just trying to figure out a way to make a painting that actually interested me. Now I know that could justify a multitude of sins and probably has, but a commentary like that really was not what I was thinking about. I tend to like the work of painters where I see their painting as a kind of hypothesis about painting, rather than just, you know, a good painting. I like the idea that every painting is a hypothesis about what a painting could be. And it was probably around the time I was doing this that I really got involved with that idea consciously.

In a way, if we think of where you were coming from and what you wanted to get away from—working with Dorothea Rockburne, thinking about Sol LeWitt—as much as your work is crazy and trippy and out of this world, it also has a very systemic, very anal approach.



UNTITLED (TEETH), 2003  
Mixed media on linen,  
51 × 61 cm

—Well, I now know myself well enough to know that I have a very conservative side to my personality and I also have whatever the opposite of that is. The two are in a kind of tension, and my work comes out of that tension. So in hindsight

that period of my work was incredibly important for me. When you're young, you need to first think you know what's good, and then you have to kill off your parents; it's a whole oedipal process of becoming yourself. By this time I was a bit older, I'd gotten married, I had children. I was in such a different place in my life. And I think I knew that this idea of systems didn't have to be as dry and cold as I had been taught, or as I had thought when I was younger; that it actually could support a kind of investigation, that I'd never really understood before.

When I was working in Dorothea's studio, she was making all these drawings that were based on folding sheets of paper and then tracing the edges, so the resulting structures were a combination of pencil lines and folds

that looked like Xs, triangles, things like that. Then later I started to make these drawings of men in suits in this extremely reduced geometry, and it dawned on me that these were exactly the same shapes, but functioning in a completely different way. That was a huge realization, and it freed me.

I wouldn't be able to do what I'm doing now if I hadn't realized that it's all still the same thing. It's basically a geometrical construction that becomes a subject.

In 2006, you did a painting called *Square Mule* that the artist Michael Williams calls the best American painting in the last 50 years. In it, your famous "dickhead" character now has a vagina and is sticking a gun up his ass. What the hell were you thinking when you painted this painting?

—I wanted to see what would happen if I really confused this character, this collection of male archetypes that made up this character. Before, I never engaged the idea of a complete physical body. I thought, "Well, the implication is that this thing continues outside the edge of the painting, but it could really be anything." I thought it would be really interesting to do a very simplified idea of female genitals and stick it onto this profile I'd been working with. So I made a series of paintings



UNTITLED, 2003  
Acryl on canvas,  
51 × 46 cm

called *Mules* because of the idea of different species mating. As far as the gun, guns had been moving in and out of my work at the time when all those little characters were in the paintings—I would sometimes draw them with weapons. Again, it was based on this idea of attributes, like human gender attributes, tools that were used to violent ends, very cartoonish ideas about representing those things.

Looking at some of these *Mule* paintings, I thought of Malcolm Morley, who said that if you want to learn about how the painting has progressed over time, you should look at the edges: if you zoom in on the edges of a painting in a dominant style, you can see the next phase in painting. Now if we zoom into the left-hand corner of your last *Mule* painting, there is an escape, a kind of paradise garden, and the next painting you did is of a tree! So you finally got rid of the character.

— I knew when I was making that group of paintings that it would mean the end of that character. I wasn't sure what was going to come next, but I knew it'd be something different, and I found it in the work, which is what seems to always happen. So, in the corner of that painting, in the far distance, are these little trees which had been moving around in the work. I thought it might be something I could use as an armature to make paintings. And I started out not really understanding what would happen, but just sort of trusting it. I wanted my work to move back toward abstraction. I didn't want any more dialog with human bodies and

**“I have a very conservative side to my personality and I also have whatever the opposite of that is”**

human sexuality and gender, or any of that. I was really sick of it. A tree was such a neutral, if not actually idiotic, premise for someone like me to make paintings about that I felt it could be such a bad idea it might actually work.

But you failed miserably. The sexual would follow.

— [laughs]: I failed utterly. I made a lot of paintings which I think of as paintings of trees. And I'm still very involved with that as a subject. But after certainly no more than two years I started to have these annoying thoughts pop into my head, like, “What if you actually really tried to draw a human being?” “What about a naked woman next to a tree?” That sort of thing. It seemed very hard to imagine how a person with my skill set and my interests could make what were undeniably figurative paintings and also have them be true to my ideas about painting. It started out as a kind of challenge to myself to see what that would even mean, while I was still working on the trees in parallel. I had a residency in Rome for three months, and I gave myself an assignment to try to convince myself that this terrible idea was actually as terrible as I thought it was, and the opposite happened. I made a lot of drawings and I also looked at a lot of painting in Rome, where of course there's naked human flesh everywhere. And I realized I had to do it. I had to do it. So, when I came home, I started really trying to figure out how that would work, and it's pretty much the path I've been on since.

Michael Blackwood made this really nice documentary following Roberta Smith, the *New York Times* art critic, around your studio. There's a comedic element to seeing her wandering around, looking at one vagina after another.

— And talking about it as though she's looking at, you know, some Malevich paintings. [laughs] That's Roberta.

And then she says something like, “Oh, I think they have to be about strong women.” Your answer is, “Yeah, that's pretty much the story of my life.” And it's true, you are surrounded by very strong people. Your wife is the artist Laurie Simmons, your older child, Lena, has become world-famous through *Girls*, the TV show she wrote, directed, and starred in. And your younger, Cyrus Grace, recently published *A Year Without a Name*, a memoir about their gender transition. How have they affected your work?

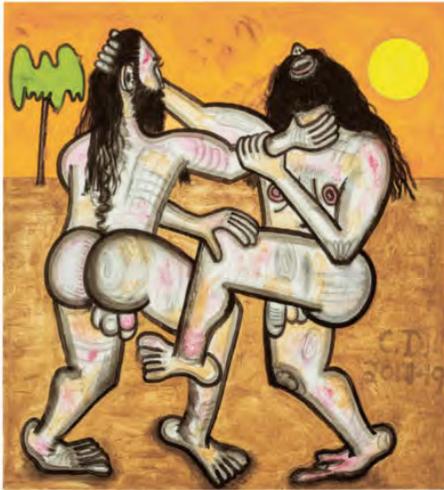
— Roberta's a very close friend of mine, and she's sort of reflecting back at me something which she knows to be true. I am trying to get more relaxed about these connections between my so-called real life and my paintings—I've never really understood that Rauschenberg remark about the gap



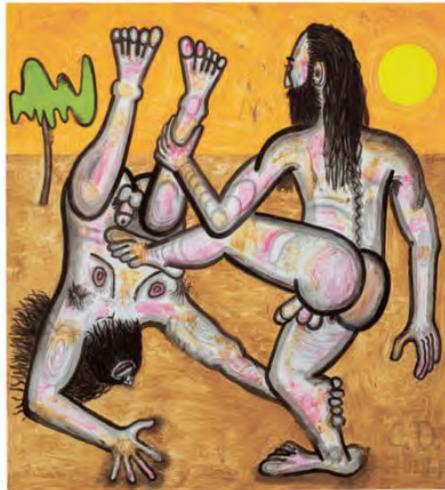
SQUARE MULE, 2006  
Mixed media on linen, 190 × 190 cm  
Next spread: LATE TREES #3, 2011–2012, Mixed media on linen, 224 × 173 cm  
IN THE FLOWERS (MONDAY), 2012–2014, Mixed media on linen, 171 × 138 cm



REVUE



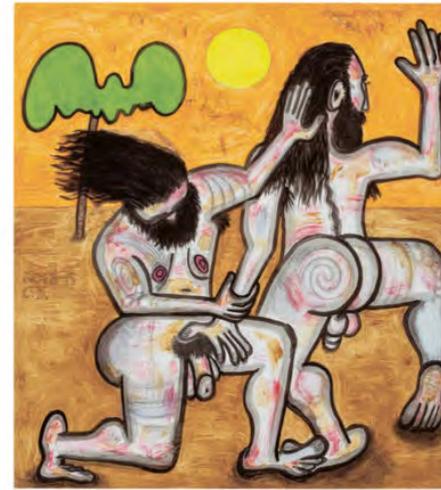
ORANGE SKY (1), 2018–2019  
Mixed media on linen, 128 × 117 cm



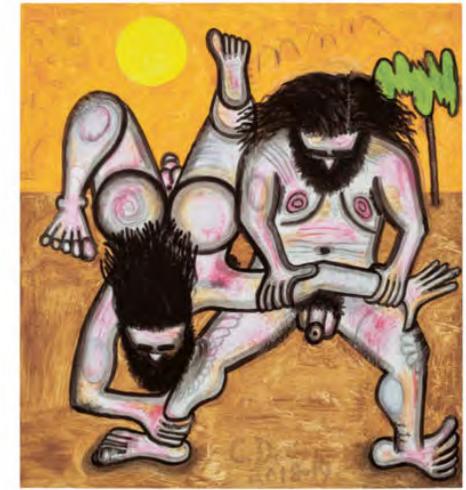
ORANGE SKY (2), 2018–2019  
Mixed media on linen, 128 × 117 cm

REVUE

Carroll Dunham



ORANGE SKY (3), 2018–2019  
Mixed media on linen, 128 × 117 cm



ORANGE SKY (4), 2018–2019  
Mixed media on linen, 128 × 117 cm

between art and life. In my own case, if I really look back over the history of my work, the changes I experienced as my work trying to take me to a new place do correspond to rather significant changes in my real life: getting married, having child number one, having child number two, realizing that I needed to have a studio in the country in order to focus the way I wanted to. These are all significant changes in the way I lived my life, and each one of them does correspond with a shift in my work. It's annoying to realize that, because it doesn't go with the kind of artist I tell myself I am.

But still you're saying that these paintings you were doing are basically just solutions for formal problems, like it does not matter what you paint. And there you are standing in a room full of breasts and vaginas, and it's not completely convincing.

—I'm afraid I have to agree, solutions to formal problems don't get the reaction from people that paintings like that get. I had an exhibition of these paintings at Galerie Presenhuber in Zurich. And I was very proud of them, I felt totally convinced that

they were the right paintings for me to have made. But being alone in your studio and telling yourself to, you know, move the leg this much or change the color blue a little, that sort of stuff is very different from putting these things out in the world. And then when you show them, all anyone wants to talk about is, "What is this guy's issue with women?" Or I would give talks at art schools and somebody would ask, "Why isn't your work pornography?" Suddenly I was in that conversation.

I remember someone asked you that and you said, "If you really find someone jerking off to my paintings, I want to meet that person."

—Exactly. Case closed. You know, it may be crap, but it certainly doesn't have anything to do with pornography.

And then you started to paint *Wrestlers*, single male figures inspecting their assholes while black crows fly above.

—When I was working on this series that I bracketed as *Bathers*, featuring these female nudes,

I knew that maleness had to come back. I mean, it had to be balanced somehow. I am a product of my times, and my ideas about various gender roles and things are very influenced by feminism. As you commented earlier, I'm surrounded by women who embody feminist ideas. So I thought I have to put more of myself back in there, otherwise I'd just get that bullshit about the male gaze.

The title *Self Examination* came to me after I had made the paintings, but that's for sure what led me to them. I had been drawing images of a man just looking down at his own body lying down, then I got this idea of turning them into something more like stretching, or a yoga position, and I liked the formal qualities of it. It felt like I was building a sort of totem image. So I took the drawings and I turned them into this group of paintings, and the bird came as a sort of visitation—because the top of the painting was empty, I had to put something there.

If we think back to your very first works, those minimalist doodles, if we think back to you at 28

working for Dorothea Rockburne, what would this younger self think of the *Wrestlers* paintings you are doing today?

—I can't even imagine what my young self would make of any of this. It's strange, you go along in your life and you just follow. I mean, that's been my experience. I'm following my work. It just feels like going deeper into the same tunnel. But if I could imagine a person with my attitudes as a young person, I would have thought this work was idiotic, I'm sure. It may well still be idiotic, but, you know, it's an example of how thinking things is usually a mistake.

Actually, if you look at the bodies you're painting now, there's still the same doodling. I believe Cy Twombly would have appreciated the kind of stuff you're doing on these bodies.

—Well, Twombly was an enormous influence not only on me. To many painters of my generation, he seemed like one person who showed a way forward. This is something I am always trying to explain to people. I don't have any aptitude for

drawing the figure. When I was younger and I was supposed to go to figure-drawing class, I'd do anything I could possibly do to get out of it. I was terrible at it, and I found it utterly retrograde. So when it came to me as an idea, as something that had meaning for me that I needed to pursue, I had to figure out how to do it really from the most basic beginning. I was drawing lines and shapes on pieces of paper in my notebook until they coalesced into something that I found believable. That's really how I approach my work now.

It's sweet because a lot of young guys who work at galleries, they always say, "Are you really interested in wrestling?" And I used to watch professional wrestling on TV—these ridiculous theatrical performances—but no, I don't know anything about wrestling. I start by drawing something that might be a foot or a hand or something, and then I just build them. It's very much the same process as when I was making my paintings on wood, and while back then I had patterns in the wood to respond to, now I have more of an inner template. It's almost like a set of words in my head—you know, white men wrestling—and then there's a list: they have four hands, four feet, two sets of genitals, two heads, like that. I just have to find a way for all that to fit into a rectangle and be both plausible and stable as a painting. That's how they happen. But it's all the same shapes that I've always worked with, all the same. I think that's why I'm always surprised that more people don't ask me about the black outline. It's like they just accept it as the way you draw people. But this isn't the way you draw people. It's the way I draw people, because this is what's involved in my work. It's all the stuff that's basically been there from the beginning.

When I was in Chicago recently, I went to the Art Institute, maybe my favorite museum in the world, and I turned a corner and there were three of your *Wrestlers* paintings and one late Guston. And then I learned that it was Richard Prince who actually bought these paintings at Gladstone Gallery and gifted them to the museum.

—Yes, it was an amazing gesture, though calling it a gesture kind of trivializes it. The museum was very happy to have the paintings, which was great too. And I'm with you, I adore that museum. Richard and I aren't close friends; we've known each other for a long time, and I think we have quite a bit of mutual respect. But this wasn't a personal favor or anything like that. He apparently had the

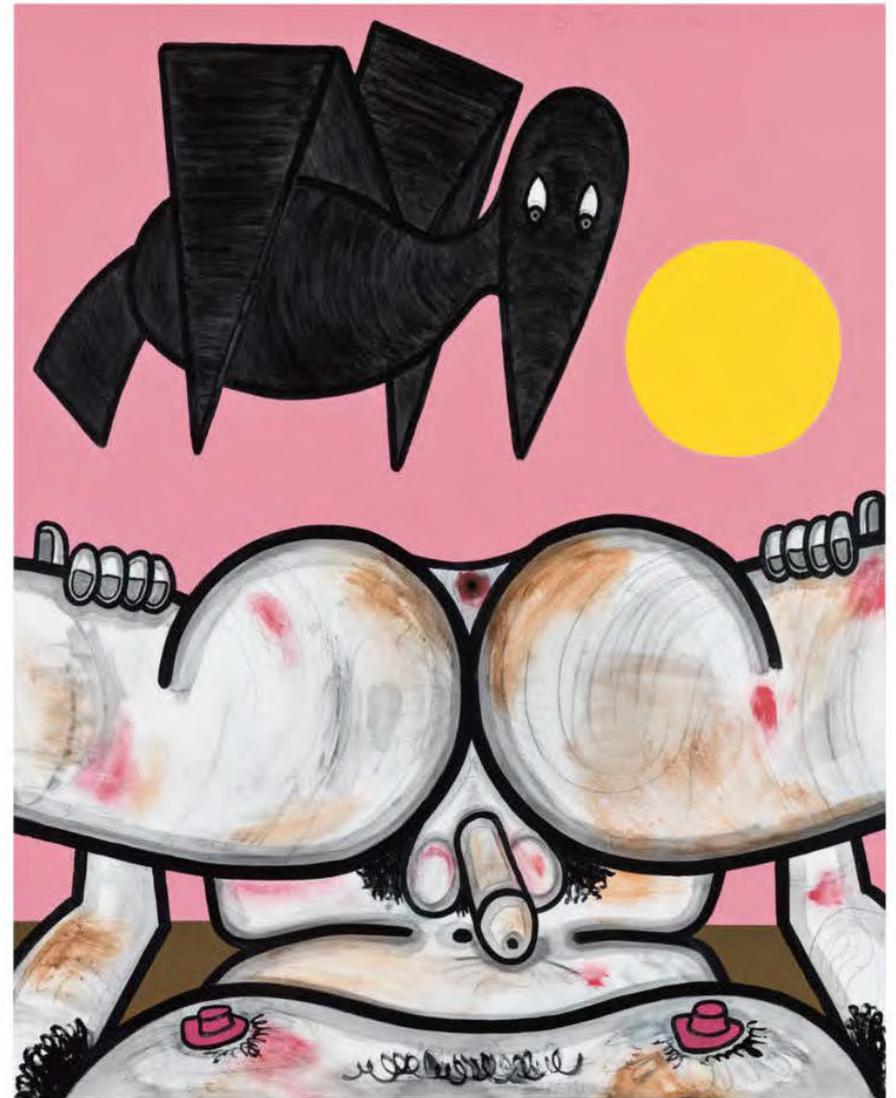
**"I'm surrounded by women who embody feminist ideas. So I thought I have to put more of myself back in there"**

means and the desire to do it, and I don't know many artists at his level who think like that. I was extremely impressed, actually.

When you started in the late 70s, you didn't have many artist peers you were close to. And even though you've showed with great galleries, you've always been an outsider of some sort. And now there's Richard Prince, there are two museum shows coming up in Germany with Albert Oehlen. Are you finding a peer group after all?

—You know, it's funny, because I never felt embraced by the German art scene when I was younger. But I really liked Albert's work, that goes without saying. I've been following it as closely as I could for a long time. And the more I get to know him, the more I realize we actually share many attitudes, though I would've had no way of knowing that. But life is long, and I really like these exhibitions that Albert and I are doing together. It's exciting to me. But as far as a peer group, feeling like we're in the trenches together, I've never had that feeling. I've always felt like I was off on my own thing. And I guess I still am.

ALBERT OEHLLEN/  
CARROLL DUNHAM: *Bäume/Trees*,  
November 30, 2019 to March 1, 2020  
Kunsthalle Düsseldorf; from June 5, 2020  
Sprengel Museum Hannover



SELF EXAMINATION (5), 2017  
Mixed media on linen, 140 × 112 cm