

ARTnews

Powers, Bill: "It's a Toxic Soup of Ego and Higher Callings": A Talk With Carroll Dunham

7 December 2015

# 'It's a Toxic Soup of Ego and Higher Callings': A Talk With Carroll Dunham



BY **BILL  
POWERS**



December 7, 2015  
10:00am



**Carroll Dunham** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/carroll-dunham/>)  
photographed in Berlin.

LAURIE SIMMONS

*Carroll Dunham's latest exhibition at Gladstone Gallery  
in New York closed December 4.*

**Bill Powers (<https://www.artnews.com/t/bill-powers/>): The inclusion of animals in your new paintings was a surprise to me.**

Carroll Dunham: It's almost like animals allow me to represent personality. The horse, some birds, a dog— it's not that I have a zoological obsession with the animal kingdom, but after I finished these paintings, I realized that the animals appear to have more of an inner life than the people do. It's given me a lot to think about.

**BP: Maybe because animals don't have a developed language the way that we do, so there's more invested in their expressions.**

CD: Also, their absence of language allows you to project onto them. I've always been interested as an adult in thinking about how animals behaved in the cartoons I watched as a kid. Bugs Bunny did all kinds of crazy, violent stuff.

**BP: Is it hard making a painting of a horse without thinking about Picasso?**

CD: A lot of the dialogue I have in my studio is with dead artists. There was a show at the Guggenheim of Picasso's black-and-white work, including one painting he did of the rape of the Sabines. The horse in that picture really stayed with me. There's a farm down the street from me in Connecticut, so I walked down the road once to stare at their horse, and I just thought, "There's no way this is going to help me at all." My *plein air* moment was a complete bust.

**BP: Another new development in these paintings is the self-portraiture.**

CD: For three or four years now I've been making little drawings of what it would be like if I woke up looking down at my own naked body.

**BP: But you have painted the male figure before.**

CD: Yes, in a very dominant, over-determined way, which I eventually grew out of. Then, with the “Bathers,” I kept wondering how maleness could re-enter this world. And then the idea came to me that I’m always in the paintings, so that’s how it started.

**BP: The perspective of the new male figure—the headless body looking down at itself—has a sort of locked-in quality.**

CD: Yes, you’re not looking through two little eyeholes. Your mind is distributed across the entire painting, which is beautiful and somewhat disorienting.

**BP: The way you speak about the male figure in these paintings, it’s almost like he’s waking up from a blackout—as if he’s coming to and not quite sure of his surroundings.**

CD: I thought about it partly that way. Or do you know the Philip K. Dick story “We Can Remember It for You Wholesale”? The idea is that in this moment you can’t be entirely sure of anything else, because it’s either based on memory or projection. I started to wonder if you could make a painting about that. So the whole group of paintings is called “Now and Around Here.”

**BP: Tell me about your “Big Bang” series.**

CD: Two years ago, I started making these yellow inflated abstractions, and it occurred to me that thinking of them as the birth of the universe was a way to get crazy about scale. It’s a completely insane subject to imagine painting and at the same time such a great metaphor. I liked leaving the dates all over the face of the paintings because they have to represent time and space.



Carroll Dunham, *Horse and Rider (My X)*, 2013–15, mixed media on linen.

DAVID REGEN/©CARROLL DUNHAM/COURTESY GLADSTONE GALLERY, NEW YORK AND BRUSSELS

**BP: It's also very sexual, naming these after the Big Bang.**

CD: Yes, except it's also such a given. Anyone reading about cosmology will come across the term.

**BP: So you don't project sexuality onto the outer-space phenomenon we see depicted here?**

CD: Well, if the world has an anus, it might very well be a black hole.



**BP: Who are some of the other dead artists you're having conversations with?**

CD: I think a lot about the Australian modernist Sidney Nolan. I mentioned Picasso earlier. Another artist is the Brazilian Tarsila do Amaral. She made these almost faux naive paintings that were part of the Tropicália movement. And then I have lots of French artists on the brain: Courbet, Matisse, Renoir.

**BP: Your piece *Horse and Rider (My X)* has very pronounced geometry. Were you using the golden ratio here to map out her proportions?**

CD: I've been very interested in center points for a long time. It's a way for me to orient myself in the space. So when I got this canvas, I snapped a chalk line corner-to-corner to form an X. I used it the way other artists might employ a grid to go from drawing to painting at a much larger scale. Originally I imagined I'd paint out the X, but then I realized how much it's determining the relationships within the painting. It felt disingenuous to cover it up.

**BP: Tolstoy said that our sense of beauty comes from identifying the infinite or the universal in the finite. Does that register with you?**

CD: When I finish a painting that I can identify as beautiful it's because I see it as being true. To debate which goes deeper, truth or beauty—all I know is that they're significant to the free play of the human psyche.

**BP: In an article ([http://prod-images.exhibite.com/www\\_carrolldunham\\_net/e72ccd69.pdf](http://prod-images.exhibite.com/www_carrolldunham_net/e72ccd69.pdf)) for *Artforum* you talked about the “anarchic lust” of Kara Walker.**

CD: There's so much libido in her work, deployed in the most horrific and politically incorrect social landscapes. It's amazing.

**BP: What about the Michelangelo prayer, “Lord, grant that I may always desire more than I can accomplish.” Is that both a painter’s dream and a painter’s nightmare?**

CD: I have very ambitious fantasies about painting. It’s a toxic soup of ego and higher callings. I certainly see paintings ahead of me far beyond what I’ve done so far.

**BP: As a married man with two daughters, how do you hold onto your masculinity?**

CD: Living in a house with all that female energy has been very challenging to my sense of self at times. I don’t think of my paintings as being connected to my day-to-day existence, and yet clearly they have to be. If I’m really honest, I started focusing on the female body and women in nature as a viable subject right about the time my older daughter finished school. I was very interested in the idea of female empowerment. It’s quite different from the female ideal that Renoir was working with as an old man.