

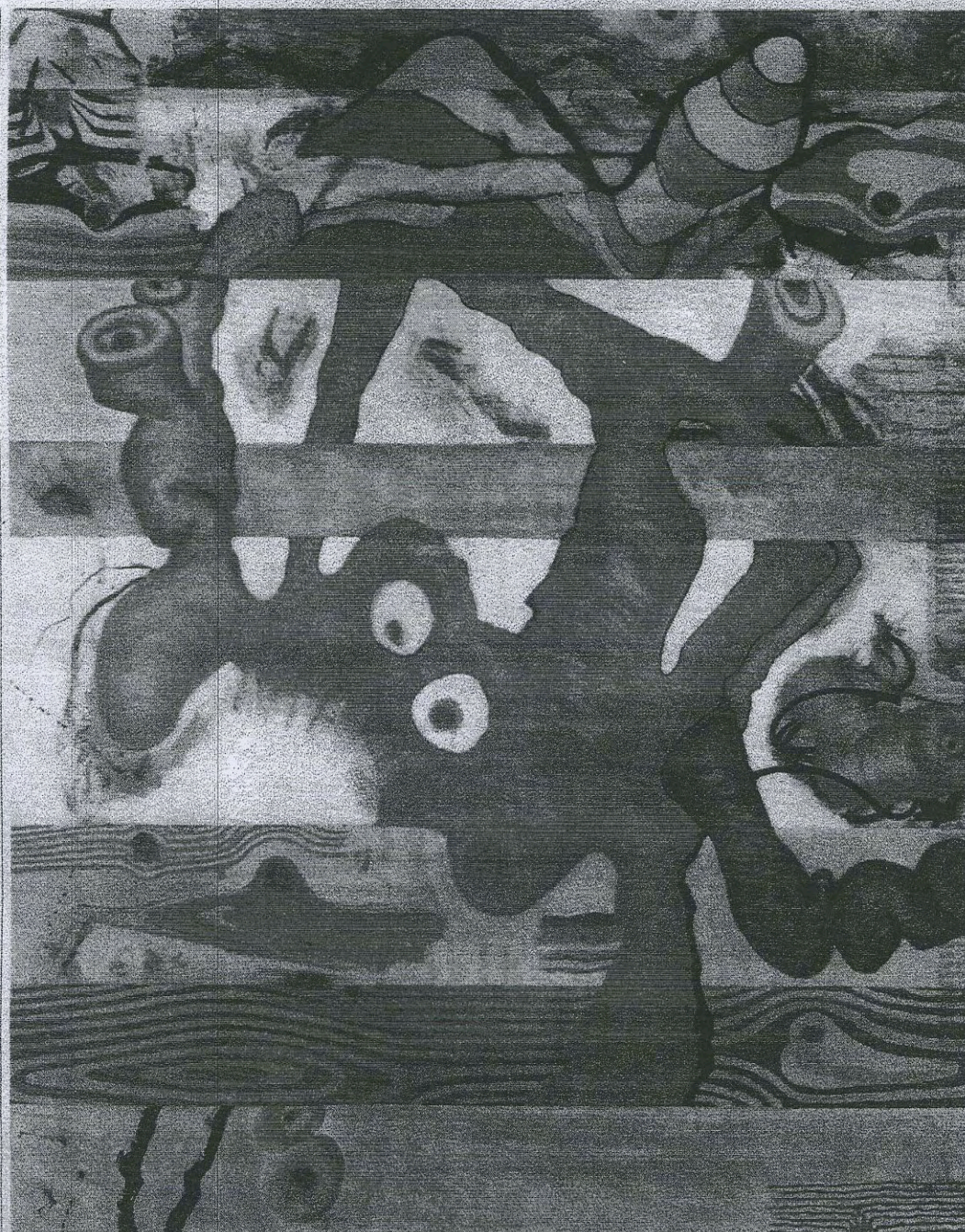
GLADSTONE GALLERY

Johnson, Ken, "Suggestive Forms That Come Out of the Plywoodwork."
New York Times, Tuesday, March 25, 2008

THE NEW YORK TIMES, TUESDAY, MARCH 25, 2008

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Carroll Dunham A large detail from "Fourth Pine" (1982-84), which was painted on knotty wood. The grain is worked into the composition.

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Suggestive Forms That Come Out of the Plywoodwork

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New York Times, Tuesday, March 25, 2008 (cont'd)

Bigger names have come and gone, but few careers in painting have been more consistently interesting over the last 25 years than Carroll Dunham's. Mr. Dunham, who is 58 and lives in New York, is known for his cartoonish paintings of block-headed men with penis-shaped, bullet-firing noses, who star in hectic stories of sexual conflict and global warfare. Driven equally by rage, anxiety and hilarity, his paintings deliver an uncommonly potent combination of formal punch, narrative intrigue and metaphorical resonance.

It all began for Mr. Dunham back in the early 1980s, when he discovered plywood: from 1982 to

"Carroll Dunham: Paintings on Wood, 1982-87" continues through April 5 at Skarstedt Gallery, 20 East 79th Street, Manhattan; (212) 737-2060, skarstedt.com.

ART REVIEW

KEN
JOHNSON

1987, he painted on ordinary pieces of laminated pine and later on panels covered with more exotic veneers, creating abstract, funny, strange duets of grainy wood and polymorphous paint.

Now a selection of these breakthrough paintings is on display in a vibrant, must-see exhibition, "Carroll Dunham: Paintings on Wood, 1982-87," at Skarstedt Gallery in Manhattan.

Like a teenage stoner doodling on his classroom desk, Mr. Dunham painted in response to the natural patterns and textures of his wooden surfaces. In different places he would copy the grain pattern in paint or trace it in pencil. He would draw circles around knots and then connect the knots with rubbery, tubular forms. Most conspicuous are brightly colored, bulbous shapes suggestive of sexual and digestive organs, gnarly tree branches, tumors and fungi.

While many elements seem to arise from an instinctive, quasi-

R. Crumb could feel at home in Carroll Dunham's paintings.

primitive intuition, other parts suggest a more intellectually sophisticated play with the codes of Modern painting. In some works organic forms are entwined around straight-edged, horizontal stripes. In others there are passages of brushy Abstract Expressionistic marks or lines defining Cubist spaces. Confettilike fields of colored dots hark back to Pointillism, while cartoon outlines of bulbous forms evoke Pop Art's appropriation of comic books. R. Crumb's underground comic drawing is in the mix, as is the classic Surrealism of Dalí and Miró.

What these paintings add up to

is a kind of delirious, barely contained psychic pluralism. Various dualities and contradictions play out: between wood and paint; abstraction and representation; geometry and biology; the phallic and the vaginal; body and mind; nature and culture.

In contrast to the monochrome painters of the '70s (Brice Marden and Robert Ryman) and the Neo-Expressionists of the '80s (Julian Schnabel and Anselm Kiefer), Mr. Dunham did not try to achieve formal or stylistic unity in these works. Painting was a joy-riding vehicle for realizing and delighting in the contradictions and complexities of consciousness.

This exhibition offers a revelatory window into an extraordinarily fertile time in recent art history, yet the paintings don't seem at all dated. Exuberantly alive to their own possibilities, they feel as fresh as if they had been made yesterday.