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William Corwin, "Carroll Dunham," *The Brooklyn Rail*, June 5, 2018

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CARROLL DUNHAM

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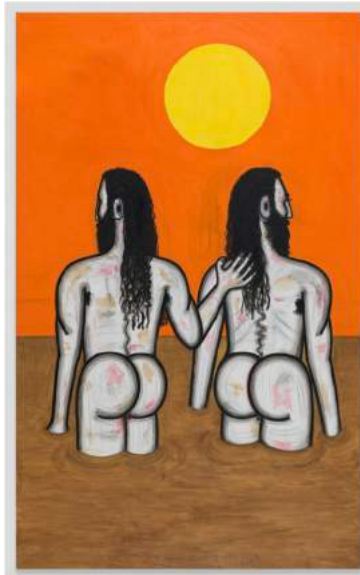


Carroll Dunham, *Any Day*, 2017. Urethane, acrylic and pencil on linen, 78 x 100 inches, 83 3/4 x 105 x 5/8 inches. © Carroll Dunham. Courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels.

My friend, a Greek, Latin, and Hebrew scholar, introduced me to the activity of watching Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) at various watering holes in Greenpoint and Williamsburg. Besides the typical Barthes-ian subtext of mass-catharsis and our eternal need for good-versus-evil, there is the comfort of knowing that unlike boxing there is little evidence of serious neurological trauma, but still healthy doses of blood and gleaming bodies of both males and females rolling around on the mat. There's a similar sentiment of deep mythological plot accompanied by relatively harmless violence that plays out in Carroll Dunham's new cycle of ten paintings, which depict two bearded combatants with long, wavy black hair—reminiscent of Etruscan or archaic Greek warriors or athletes—battling it out as day turns to night and, then back to day. The men fight with sticks, grab each other's hair and bodies, and are eventually pummeled into submission. In the painting *Any Day* (2017), a woman bathes in a paradisaical pond, and we get a general sense of the hetero-normative reason over which the men are fighting. Dunham heightens the sexuality of the interaction by drawing painful attention to the buttocks, genitals, assholes, and nipples of the fighters through his trademark heavy outlining of forms and simplified details. At times he plays with the bizarre frozen moments of

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ambiguity that arise in a fight (such as in the UFC) when two faces are pressed together, or as in *Green Hills of Earth (2)* (2017) when one fighter crouches down to gain a better hold on his adversary's ankle, but appears to be kissing that adversary's knee tenderly as well. The aesthetic of gaudy flowers and *Heckle and Jeckle* crows seeks to add a humorous and glib interpretation of violence when perhaps this might be a time when dark humor should be much darker to be effective.



Carroll Dunham, *Mud Men*, 2017. Urethane, acrylic and pencil on linen, 100 × 62 inches. © Carroll Dunham. Courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels.

Dunham employs a dictionary of forms to tell his story—men are penises, women are breasts and vaginas, and nature is reduced to google-eyed beasts and the placid and bland but vaguely threatening background of the forest. The oh-so-round buttocks, scrotums, and nipples of the figures are both industrial and sexual à la [Fernand] Léger, while with his faces, organs, and various details rendered in heavily outlined repetitive form and simple jarring colors, Dunham signs on as the bad boy of the Michael Craig-Martin and Julian Opie hyper-simplified painting gang. Within the expanses of color, the artist does seem to let go of his graphic mannerism, allowing a microcosm of pencil swirls, text, and smudges of primarily brown, but other colors as well, to function as an abstract monologue muttered under the artist's breath as he tells his story.

The combat over the woman ends with the fighters separated on to their own canvases. They lie on the ground, stars in a purple sky, while a cartoon bird frolics (perhaps mischievously) around the bodies and stares the viewer unflinchingly in the eye. The denouement is the transfiguration of both warriors standing knee deep in a field of brown paint, one hand clapping the other's

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shoulder. We see Achilles and Hector, or Herakles and Antaeus, or any number of archetypes embodied in these ten paintings. The cheery palette and the focus on composition rather than detail positions the narrative far above any verisimilitude that might provoke empathy. One is reminded of the intensity and nausea induced by the frequency with which Homer describes spearheads penetrating cheeks and teeth clenching down on metal in the *Illiad*. Or even just the occasional bloody gash or dislocated shoulder in the UFC. Homer's warriors fought to kill and to entertain; UFC fighters are entertainers. Dunham's combatants seem somewhere in between; if it is the woman for whom they fight, then there can be no victor for the woman pays them no mind. The only other audience is a lone dog and some black birds, who do seem compelled by the combat, even if its objective is a moot point.