

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

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## THEGUIDE.ART



### CARROLL DUNHAM

By Matt Mullen

*Photography* Laurie Simmons

I've never had much interest in wrestling, but I could look at Carroll Dunham's paintings of wrestlers all day long. In this era of social distancing, Dunham's paintings of nude bodies banging up against each other—limbs intertwined, fingers in mouths, hands full of hair—are like a shot of adrenaline to the soul. 14 of his latest works, all made within the past two years, are now on view at Gladstone Gallery.

It makes sense Dunham would be drawn to this most corporeal of sports. The 71-year-old artist—silver-haired and slender, not a wrestler himself—has for a long time been interested in bodies. After a decade of biomorphic abstraction, humanoid figures began to emerge in his work in the 1990s, mostly vaguely male forms with big mouths and penis-shaped noses. Females appeared in the 2000s,

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frolicking in turquoise waters and Edenic gardens, their anatomy on full display. Sometime around 2014 Dunham wanted to return to the subject of men and began sketching out wrestling scenes. His last series was shown at Gladstone in 2018.

These new paintings depict the same two men—one dark haired, one yellow haired—engaged in furious hand-to-hand combat. Eight of them (the “Winners and Losers” series) capture the end of a match, with one man pinned atop the other; the other six zoom in on scenes from moments throughout the fight. The men are positioned against a flat and arid landscape: it could be a desert or a distant planet, ancient history or the future. These are paintings out of time and place and yet they feel most needed right now.

MATT MULLEN: I know you’ve been asked this before, but I’ll just go ahead and ask it: Why wrestling?

CARROLL DUNHAM: I honestly don’t have a fundamental, underlying explanation. It came to me, as most things do, from other work I was doing prior. I had been making a series of paintings about female figures, and I’d known for awhile that I’d wanted to make a series of paintings about male figures. Or a body of work about that. And I wanted to make the space and the structure of the paintings more complex by having there be two figures. So when I thought of two men in a painting space, wrestling popped to mind. Then it started to seem richer and richer the more I thought about it and tried to make it work as an image.

MULLEN: In a [video](#) on the Gladstone site, you described wrestling as a metaphor for painting itself. What did you mean by that?

DUNHAM: There’s many levels to it, actually. One is physical—not that making paintings is in any way comparable to wrestling in terms of how strenuous it is, but painting, as I think of it and as I do it, is a very physical thing. There’s also a formal discipline to wrestling which underlies even the most apparently random and unstructured painting behavior. I’m fascinated by the ubiquity of rectilinear limits in sports, which seems to run parallel to painting. Basically in certain kinds of combat inside of a rectangular limit you can pretty much do anything you want—and that’s true of painting, for me.

MULLEN: Compared to your last series of wrestler paintings, which had dogs and birds and flowers and a lot more colors in them, these new compositions have much less going on: it’s just the two men, a single tree, and the sun. Why did you go in that direction?

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DUNHAM: I was kind of over dogs. I just didn't feel like drawing them anymore. It all started to seem extraneous to the main point, which was that these two guys were in this rather empty landscape whose elements keep changing. It needed to be like that. At one point my wife [the artist Laurie Simmons] came into my studio, and I said, "Well, I guess this will be the exhibition." And she said, "Aren't you worried all the paintings are the same color?" It's true, the experience of these paintings in their current setup is very different from that previous show, because the colors are very repetitive.

MULLEN: The pencil work on the "Winners and Losers" paintings is quite heavy—those scribbles and notes to self. It looks heavier than in previous paintings of yours. When in the process were you doing that drawing?

DUNHAM: If you were to come into my studio when I was beginning that group of paintings, you would see eight white canvases leaning around on blocks, and they'd have a lot of very approximate pencil scribbles on them. So by the time I start to paint on the canvases there's already drawing there, and some of it stays through all the various layers of paint. I used to not want to see that, and for some reason now I really want to see it; I want it to be part of any experience of looking at the thing. And then there's the aspect of drawing and scribbling over the mens' bodies. I realized pretty early on in figure painting that the skin of the body is a void. It's the least painted part of the painting, actually. I've made all this stuff happen and there's this world and in the middle of it are these white shapes that are shaped like men but they're just empty, so I do all that drawing and rubbing and wiping. That's the last thing I do to the paintings.

MULLEN: Is it clear to you when a painting is done? Or do you fuss at the end?

DUNHAM: More the former. I always sign my canvases, so I know when it's okay to sign it—when I can let go of it on some level. Sometimes a few days later I'll notice some silly little thing that no one else would even see, and I'll change it or I'll add something. But I'm not really improvising my paintings lately, in the same way that I may have at different times in the past.

MULLEN: Do you ever abandon a work?

DUNHAM: Pretty rarely. It's funny you ask, because I was just looking at my storage racks in our basement, and I realized there are in fact some paintings down there that I never signed. They tend to be the end of series, like the last gasp of a thought. Much more of a whimper than a bang. At some point I want to throw it all away, because it's a horrible thing to leave your children.

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MULLEN: Are you world-building when you're conceiving of paintings?

DUNHAM: That gets right to the heart of what I'm grappling with right now as far as where my work wants to go. I guess the short answer would be yes and no. Someone asked me recently if I imparted these guys in the paintings with personalities or if they had secret names, or that sort of thing, and there's absolutely none of that. They're utter ciphers to me. Now, in previous paintings the men could have been mirror images of each other, I had no way of knowing which was which. But with these new works I wanted to start to home in on some kinds of differences. And in painting you're left with color and form, and for a number of reasons I wasn't ready to take color in the direction that was explicitly or metaphorically implying race. I wanted to use it to make a different kind of distinction, something more about clans or tribes. My inspirations were probably cartoon-y images of Vikings or crusaders. Different weird sources have affected how I draw things and represent them. For me it boils down to the question, "Is narrative now driving my thinking and my painting?" It never felt like it did before. It always used to be about process and structure—very formal values, very analytical and distanced from the hotter aspects of my subject matter. And now I have to face the fact that I got myself tangled up in the process.

MULLEN: In past interviews I've read, it seems like you've resisted the idea that narrative or autobiography is informing your work.

DUNHAM: For so long, I was so hostile to the idea of painting running parallel to narrative. But I've tried as I've gone along to be less defensive as to how I receive other people's emanations around my work. Way back when I first was exhibiting it was all this stuff about cartoons—or as it was called back then, "low culture," which was something I was never directly interested in, but a lot of observers seem to think I was. It was just annoying when people were insisting you were thinking about Donald Duck, when in reality I was thinking about Kandinsky.

MULLEN: Painting, more than any other medium, is constantly being declared dead or in a period of creative rebirth, and then dead again. First of all, do you subscribe to that? And do you think we're in a high period for painting now, or a low period?

DUNHAM: It's always both. What we think of as a high period or a low period depends on where the attention and money are, which are oftentimes the same thing. Painting seems to be doing fine, and is also extremely well supported by the financial structures that prop up the art world. This "painting is dead; long live

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painting” thing is a maneuver that very early modern artists, if not before, figured out because it makes their own work more interesting to themselves. Some artists take painting too seriously—they revere it too much, they’re not disdainful enough of it. I worship the history of painting in the sense of Western art history, but I also think it’s a bogus, corrupt tool of the white patriarchy. I can hold both those thoughts in my head at the same time.

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*Carroll Dunham was on view at Gladstone Gallery, West 24th Street, through January 09, 2021.*