

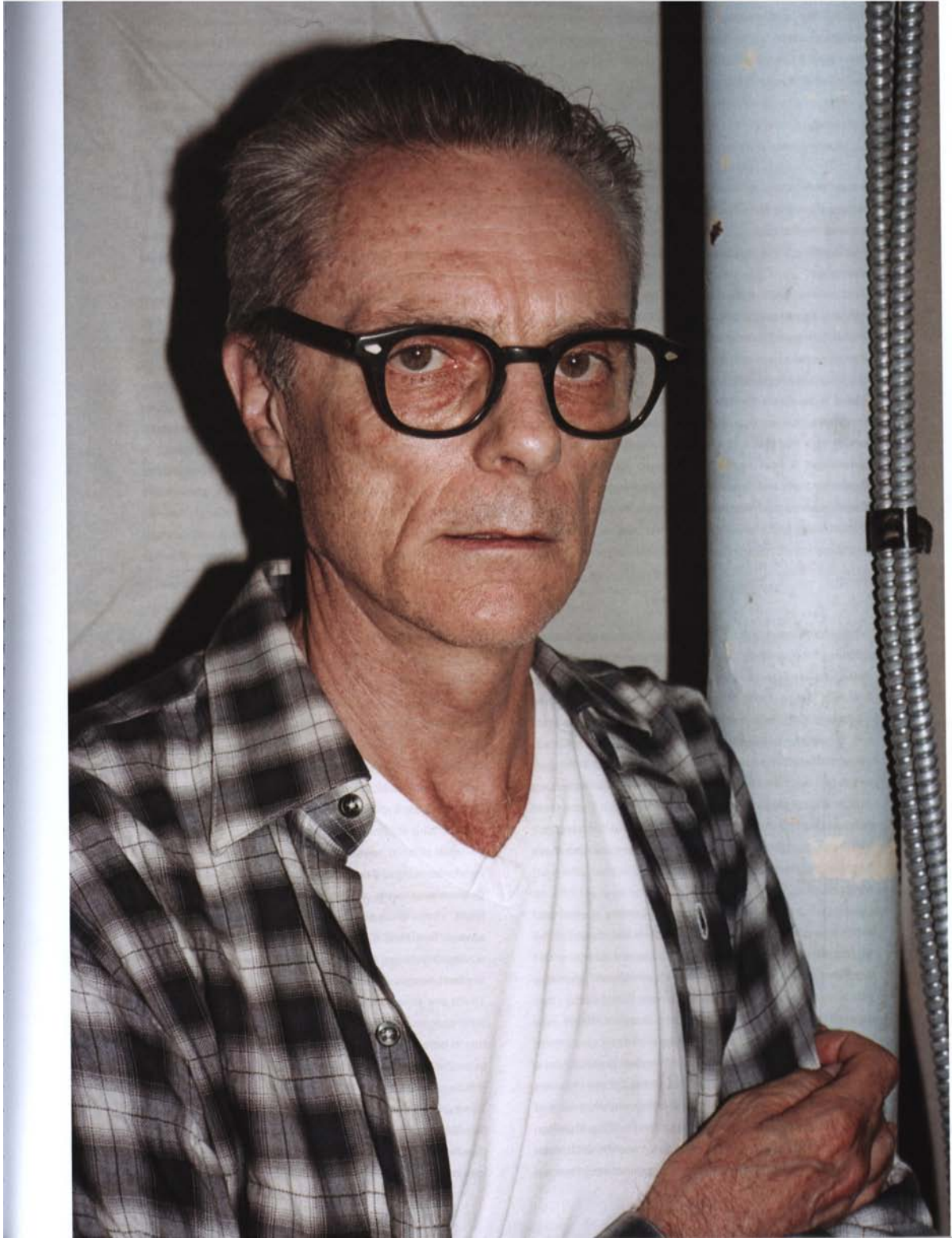
# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Joe Bradley, "Carroll Dunham," *the journal*, Entry 31, p. 140-157, Winter 2011/2012.



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CARROLL DUNHAM

*Carroll Dunham is one of the most exciting painters on the scene, and a personal favorite of mine for many moons. I spoke with Carroll over the phone about the evolution of his work and what he's up to now.*

**I saw your show in Brussels, which seemed to pick up where your last New York show left off. Both were based around the *Bathers*...**

The paintings in Brussels actually have that as the title...

***Bathers*...**

And before that I wasn't thinking so clearly about it as bathers. I was just thinking about it as "female."

**A goddess-type figure in an idyllic landscape...**

I guess some sort of archetype along those lines but without the religious overtones.

**There is an Earth Mother feeling to them. I was a little surprised after seeing the 2007 show at Gladstone, for which you had painted these apocalyptic images of the gunslinger. It was as if a bomb went off in the Carroll Dunham movie and then it cuts to birds chirping and Eden...**

I guess it could read like that. It's just that, I'm sure you know, things don't feel that dramatic when you're introducing them.

whole female section of this subject that was attached outside of the pictures, outside of the frame of the paintings, that I had never really thought about. And then, I really did feel like some kind of synthesis and conclusion had happened to the extent that those things ever happen, and I was moving on to the idea of painting trees, because I really wanted something much more abstract in my paintings. I didn't feel like I wanted to deal anymore with all this subject matter and all this interpretation, and I thought these trees were something that I had always used, almost like a glyph in the edges of things to turn the space of the painting more into a place, kind of.

**Mmhm.**

I guess landscape is a simple way of putting it. And so I started working on that, and I wasn't thinking about figures of women or anything like that, but I started doodling this thing that wouldn't go out of my head, which was an image of the human ass, a woman's ass, the way that it already had been in my paintings, but trying to imagine that it was actually a woman in nature. I don't know where it came from. It was just something I started doing in sketchbooks, and it wouldn't really go away and I started to get more involved with it. And then I started to see paintings and they kind of went parallel for a while and then started braiding together. **So is it typical for you—I know you are a prolific draftsman and printmaker—that the paintings are generated through**

**Right.**

Everything feels like it kind of evolves out of what you're doing and I always thought it would be much healthier, and on every level just better, if maleness and femaleness could somehow coexist in my paintings, and I still don't feel like I have figured that out. But to me, these paintings of the females are the necessary counterproposal for those earlier paintings.

**Mmhm.**

I guess they do have a very different mood.

**They do. I was wondering if paintings like *Garbage*, *Ratio* or particularly *Square Mule*, these kind of suicide images, were an attempt to kill that character, the gunslinger.**

Really, I think I spent about, I don't know how many years thinking I'd reach the end of the line with that character, and I was still finding that I couldn't really get it out of my paintings. It stayed central and when I made those paintings you're referring to, like the *Garbage*, *Ratio* paintings, they had those images of asses in them and I think—you know, the way language messes around in your head—in some way I really thought those were the end. And they were!

**It felt like a dramatic conclusion to the story. Something shocking and unexpected being revealed about this character.**

That was my experience of it. To myself it was sort of surprising and a little bit amazing that there could be this

**drawing?**

Yeah, mostly. I do lots of very small drawings, things that take 10 seconds. And I look at those and keep them around, and they tend to rise to the surface of my awareness as I'm doing other things, and then, if the image really sticks around, I try to elaborate on it.

**Mmhm.**

I think what has also been typical for me is that things that turn out to be really generative, so-called "new ideas," start out seeming really stupid. I have to go through some kind of denial of what I actually want to do in order to get to the point where I do it, and doing it is a way of trying to make it go away and then it all flips around and has to be embraced.

**Right. Those ideas are the ones that tend to stick around. I always find that if an idea seems embarrassing or just wrong, you know, if it looks terrible on paper, it's probably the best avenue to pursue.**

That's my experience too. I have thought about this a lot. Why I am or we are made up in a way that we have to do this in order to get to a new place I don't know, it just seems to be the way one's psyche operates.

**It is tempting to think of your work in terms of evolution.**

**The early paintings on wood, the abstract paintings, don't feel like proper abstract paintings to me. They feel like parts of a body that are in the process of arranging themselves into something more complex. The DNA for your paintings**

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**seems to have been present from the beginning.**

It's interesting that you've put it in those terms because I think about it very much that way.

**And I imagine that this is something you are not aware of in the moment but—**

No, not at all. There's no plan. We're not talking about intelligent design here. It's really—to the extent I know—it's really blind.

**Mhm.**

The work I made before I started exhibiting my paintings, before those paintings on wood, it would even bear out your observation more thoroughly, because it is true, I wanted to make abstract paintings when I started thinking about painting. I thought that was where everything that was interesting to me was.

**Mhm.**

The kind of painting I was interested in when I was young was all emptied out. Robert Ryman and other artists he was associated with, that was what I was interested in. And I thought a lot about his work and how decisions about process could become subject matter and together they could become content for painting.

**Right.**

So when I decided I wanted to make original things and not just be influenced by people, the first thing I tried to do was to bring drawing into my painting, and originally through

one of them is horrible. So obviously, subject matter isn't what gets us interesting paintings.

**Right.**

And I've always thought that and because of my age and the point at which I began to really seriously look at contemporary art, abstraction seemed sort of like the forward edge of things. But, I think now we look back and really, these things don't even mean anything, there is no real line, and lots of artists move back and forth across it or jam things together that are from different sides of that line, and it's really the deficit of language that we even talk this way.

**Right, right. You mentioned that the paintings of trees that you are working on are a way of re-approaching abstraction?**

Yes, because I'm not going to stand there and draw trees as I see them, and it seemed like something that could be almost ridiculously simplified. You know, green shape, brown shape, end of story.

**The tree as sort of the central icon in your paintings. It ends up loaded with character, anthropomorphized.**

I think that's not untrue. But again, there's this necessary level of denial in order to get oneself to do something, and I don't have a particular interest in trees, you know. It's not a hobby of mine. I'm not an amateur tree scientist. First, it already existed in my work as this almost unconscious detail, and I think it is part of this idea that things evolve. You know,

these very simple—calling them systems even gives them too much credit—but simple organizations of things that are put in very simple terms, it just started to build. I feel like there were no disconnects, it's step-by-step to this, and to where it goes from here. I trust it now, to the extent that one can, because it seems in hindsight like it's gonna go the way it goes. But I thought my paintings on wood were completely proper, real abstractions with sort of odd kinks—

**Mhm.**

And I didn't understand the implications of representational imagery for a long time. I was kind of undone when I realized I was going to have to step across that line and acknowledge that I was actually representing subjects in my work. That was hard for me. And I still kind of wish I didn't.

**You have some reluctance about the whole thing?**

Well, subject matter is such an easy way to read visual art. You could put all kinds of verbal maps on top of these things we make and none of them is correct, and, particularly in our culture now, there seems to be this desire to be able to talk about things and think you've grasped them, and subject matter is a kind of a—

**Crutch.**

A trick in a way. Yeah, well it's either a crutch or a red herring, you know? As I've always said to students, it's a very simple thought experiment to imagine two paintings of what appears to be the same subject, and one of them is great and

nothing comes from nowhere. It's always already there.

**Yes.**

It's a big mystery, but there it is. And using trees in the most generic imaginable way as a subject seemed like a way to bring something that was latent to the surface, and it would just let me work. I mean all these subjects are really just things that let you make paintings.

**Sure, an excuse to paint.**

I think so, and the deeper truths, if there are any, are probably more or less unconscious anyway, until they're made manifest as a work of art. So I wasn't thinking about all the metaphorical implications of trees or anything having to do with the tree as a thing in the world or in mythology or fairy tales. It's that trees are incredibly rich in all those ways but I just wanted something to draw and paint. I didn't feel like it was burdened with a lot of narrative. I made those paintings, the painting of the guy shoving the gun up his ass, and I looked at it and was like, "Whatever do you mean?" And, you know, I still wonder about it because there are a lot of different ways one could think about it.

**It's a shocking image. It's rare in contemporary painting to come across something that's truly troubling. I mean, that stuck with me for sure. It was very disturbing.**

I guess it stuck with me too because, minus the gun and the maleness, that way of constructing an image was really the beginning of my getting back to the female. It must have had

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a lot of meaning for me on some deeper level. So I was really fascinated when that painting was shown, that there were political interpretations. I never saw it in those terms, I only saw it as a kind of horrible personal statement. It's all self-referential in the end, one can't get out of that.

**Well, your project, so to speak, seems particularly self-generating and inward. It doesn't seem like you're borrowing a lot from the popular imagination.**

Well I'm really, really clear on the fact that photography has nothing to do with my work, and I think that the ubiquity of photographic imagery and the sampling of imagery in painting in our time is very different from what I'm interested in. **Mmhm.**

That's just my disposition, it's not something I sat down and thought long and hard about. My spontaneous desire is to doodle and to draw and to see what comes out if I just draw. **Mmhm.**

Frequently, I don't even know what I am going to draw before I draw and I think that the premise of building pictorial art on photography is very different, and it's not that I have any particular access to anything, it's just all about how I work, you know? If I had been drawn to a different way of working, obviously it wouldn't have gone down that same path, yeah.

**Sure, sure.**

Not that many people have seen my recent paintings, but

in a certain way, I would hate to think that the paintings I was making were repugnant to women. That would not make me happy.

**Sure.**

And I haven't felt that at all. I'm sure some women may read this interview and go, "I beg to differ," but I'm saying—this is just anecdotal, subjective—this is what I've noticed. Again, here we are with subject matter. Like, it is charged up and it is the easiest way to get into a conversation about art, and I know that the subject in my paintings, on one level, is very easy to talk about because it is completely obvious.

**Well, no matter how bizarre the subject matter in your painting, it seems to share equal footing with how it is painted...**

Well you know, Robert Ryman once was quoted in some publication I read when I was young—I forget if it was the question or the problem, whatever—"The problem isn't what to paint but how to paint." And when I was younger, I heard that as being something about process. Now, as I've gotten older and I keep doing this and keep trying to find ways to interest myself and to go deeper or further with what I am doing, how to paint has kind of a different meaning and it's more about how to continue than it is about some idea of process. And how to paint, in both senses of the term, I think, really is the deeper question. Not because painting is, whatever BS, you know, dead or not dead or

the questions they ask tend to be around issues of sexuality and pornography and things like that, and I don't see it in those terms at all. You know, you're much closer to my interests when you mention archetypes of mother goddesses and things like that. If I were going to unpack this stuff and try to create a frame around it, it would be more along those lines than along the lines of the way females are represented in our culture now.

**What kind of a reaction have you gotten from your female friends? What does your wife think of it?**

Oh, well she's very supportive. I don't mean to generalize, but it's been really quite interesting. I've given a couple of lectures about my work since I've started making these paintings and I'm a good post-feminist guy, you know, but I also have a wife and two daughters and I feel like I have the perfect right to represent these subjects because of the life I have led. But what's been really interesting is that if I give a talk and people ask me questions afterwards, the questions that lean towards discomfort with the subject always come from men. And again, I certainly don't mean to generalize, because this is a highly anecdotal and selective survey, but the women I know have been incredibly positive and supportive of what I am doing. And that makes me feel really great because—

**You're validated.**

Well, you're never validated really, but it has eased my mind

embattled or... That's not of great interest to me. It's just the fact that one chooses to do this, this is your life, you have to try to do it as seriously and go as deep as you can, and I don't believe that for me, it would be interesting to just be thinking of new subjects over and over and to tell myself that it represented growth. So, I think much more about so-called process—I'd rather call it procedures in materials—because if I can imagine how to make something then I can make it, you know?

**Mmhm.**

I was never the kid who could draw. I drew all the time but I didn't draw the real world, I only drew fantasy.

**Mmhm.**

And when I was in school I took one figure drawing class and hated it, it isn't something that I am at all interested in. So, I can only know how to do something if I can imagine really how to do it, you know, the nuts and bolts of it.

**Mmhm.**

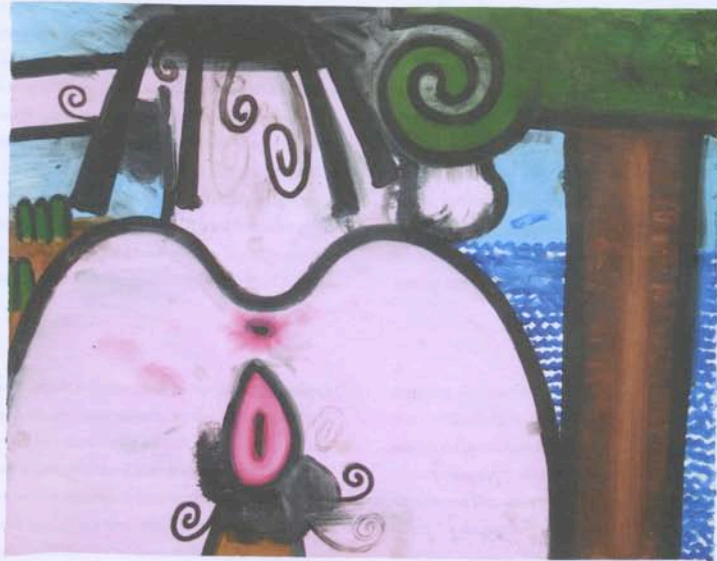
And this isn't to get into some romance about "the paint." That's horrible, it's all mental in the end.

**Right. Another question I had was concerning the face in your painting. It is usually obscured...**

Yeah, there is one painting, which you must have seen in my show in Brussels, where I was trying to address that for myself, and it's probably the painting I am most uneasy about in terms of its implications, I suppose.

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*Untitled*, 2009 Mixed media on paper 33.25 x 42 inches Courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York

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**Right, right, I know the one you're talking about. I was wondering if that was the one that would, you know, point the way to the next body of work, because it seems the most strange, and the idea of you approaching the face—**

Well again, this is all the way that one's unconscious or your way of keeping out of your awareness becomes crucial. I was thinking about how I would represent the front of the woman's body and I was interested in this idea of a kind of X-shaped composition, like her arms and legs make the diagonals of the canvas. She has her arms raised going towards the upper corners and her legs go towards the bottom corners, and I made a lot of different attempts to draw the painting, its setup, how I would compose it, and it seemed like, OK, this is the time to see what would happen if I drew a face. I don't draw faces, and I'm not interested in these things. One of the reasons, I think, is that I don't really want there to be any kind of specific personality in the paintings, and culturally we read personality mostly from the face. So I started drawing it, and I realized after a time that I had made this Rorschach face composed of her nipples and belly button and pubic hair.

**Mmhm.**

Basically, there was this huge animal staring at me out of the painting. And at first I thought "Oh God, this can't happen," and I kept trying to make it less pronounced, and then I realized that on some level that was the subject of the

about the female principle into my paintings and I was just struggling with that whole other group of issues. The sculptures evolved out of a printmaking process in the beginning and seemed like a very exciting new direction and I really saw them, at that time in my personal cosmology, as representing this parallel dimension that I couldn't get to through my paintings, a dimension that was all about the female principle. They all have the word "shadow" in the title.

**Right.**

And that was the generative notion that kept me going with it, and they are fabricated.

**I wondered if they were fabricated, because somehow the subject was alien and keeping your hand out of it made sense.**

Well, I think that's perceptive. I don't think I was completely conscious of that. Again, it was very step-by-step through a process rather than having some full-blown image in my head that I then set about to make.

**Sure.**

The first sculptures I made were flat cut-outs that were held up by bases and then I made several groups of those and then I made a group of 10 sculptures that were all crumpled up and folded and, you know, complex forms. But they originated as flat sheets in the same way that the earlier sculptures had.

painting, that her so-called "real face" is obscured by hair and that there is this other face, which is far more bizarre and unsettling and generalized. Half of the human race has those anatomical features, which, in the proper state of reverie, one could see as a face.

**Sure.**

Magritte made a fantastic painting about this very thing.

**Right.**

There's a face—I don't have any particular interest in drawing faces because that isn't how I imagine constructing these things, but I've learned that a lot of the things I think I'll never do are the things I have to do, so I can't really make a prediction of where it's going. And that painting defines the outer bracket of that problem for me right now.

**The oddball in the group.**

I don't know if one would perceive it that way when one walked into the gallery cold and saw the five paintings, but it certainly felt odd to me.

**I wanted to ask you about your sculpture...**

Oh! How exciting! No one ever asks me about that.

**The paintings are obviously very handmade and, correct me if I'm wrong, the sculpture is fabricated?**

Yes, they were fabricated. To me the most interesting aspect of my sculptures right now is that they were all built on female subject matter, and I started to make them at a time when I had really given up on the idea of getting anything

**And was that your first approach to sculpture or has sculpture been a part of your practice through the years?**

No, it hasn't really, but it's been a part of my mental practice from the beginning. If you had talked to me when I was 25, I certainly would not have believed I would be making the paintings I'm making now, and if you had talked to me when I was 22, I probably wouldn't have even believed I would become a painter. I was rather dismissive of that, actually. When I was in school, and the stuff that I did right when I moved to New York and what my friends and I were thinking about, was much more out in the room, three-dimensional, physical, sculptural, I suppose.

**Mmhm.**

And then I basically just pushed all of that out of my mind because I was too confused, it just felt like I needed a limiting condition and I had no idea that there were all these people my age that were off making paintings, because my friends weren't making paintings, so I decided to make paintings almost because it just was so different from what everyone I knew was doing and I needed some space for myself. I was really fascinated by the history of painting and I loved earlier painting and I loved thinking about painting, so I just said, "OK, it's going to be painting." And, for a long time I thought I would get back to sculpture in some way and about 15 years ago, I can't even remember, I had some ideas that I thought were pretty good about making sculptures, and I

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started to work on it and it just didn't mean anything to me. I was trying to force it and it didn't feel right so I dropped that, but I was always hoping that something would come up that would feel organic within my way of working.

**Right, I guess I'm a 2D guy. I have no idea how to wrap my head around sculpture.**

Well that, I think, that's a very different way of thinking. And I have a great appreciation for sculpture. I love looking at it and, you know, I am very interested in what's going on with that and how it does and doesn't relate to painting or whatever, but when I started to make those silhouettes, I was in the print studio and learning about laser cutters and all these kind of new tools. David Lasry, a print publisher that I collaborate with on my prints, showed me how laser cutters could make silhouettes and it really triggered something. It made me imagine—just as you said—that something that was completely my work could come about without my hand. And that interested me, just because it is so counter-intuitive to the way I have always made my work, and then it got richer as I started to realize that it would be a way to get access again to subject matter that I hadn't been able to figure out how to keep in my paintings. I think you hit it exactly right, that, on a metaphorical level, it really was important that these things would be more detached from me, cleaner and more antiseptic in some way, and that makes them feel quite different from my paintings, I guess.

have been sort of waiting to see if in my studio something would occur to me to make that was an object, but so far it really hasn't.

**I have a similar feeling, like I am just waiting for it to happen, you know, for someone to hand me a lump of clay or something...**

Yeah, it's just a very different way of thinking. Picasso is a rare artist in many ways, and one of the most amazing things about him is that he was able to think sculpturally like he thought two-dimensionally. I think very few people can do that.

**Your sculptures seem like a painter's foray into sculpture... de Kooning's sculptures feel similar to me.**

I think de Kooning sculptures are fascinating, more or less... Even if I am skeptical at times, I am fascinated by the fact that he did them and how he did them and all of that. There is a way that his use of paint and his use of clay were kind of analogous. I have been told for a long time that such-and-such would make a great sculpture but it is always such an idiotic notion because it's like tie-in toys to your paintings or something. You know, like they sell at McDonald's.

**Like an action figure?**

Yeah, *Monsters Inc.* was a great movie but the tie-in toys at McDonald's—not so great. I don't like that, that's like thinking about prints like posters of your paintings. I just think it's horrible.

**Sure. So should we expect to see more sculpture, or was that an isolated experiment?**

Well, I don't like to think of it as isolated, but I haven't made any more since. I think that exactly what was interesting about having things fabricated, was also—it's like, we have good news and we have bad news: These are fabricated.

**A dirty word.**

Not in that sense, but I like to work by myself and I make sense out of things for myself just by moving them around, even down to a really stupid level of moving canvases around the studio. We all do that, it's like you move the crap from one side of the table to the other, and somehow that feels like you're doing something.

**Sure.**

And I didn't feel like I had this ability with this way of working. When I made the moquettes for that last group of sculptures, it was very much like that because I just had a bunch of silhouettes cut out of black construction paper and I sat in my studio and crumpled them up and folded them and imagined them larger and made of steel, and that was a great process. But then there's a whole secondary and tertiary phase of having to stand there with a big strong guy while he's bending metal and hammering things and having to go to a fabricator, and it was all fascinating and great, but once that group of things was made, I didn't feel like I was going to jump right back into that way of working, and I

**Right.**

And all these things have to have their own logic, it isn't like there are just these pictures that are disembodied and then you make them as a painting or you make them as a sculpture. There has to be an inner logic to the process in order for it to mean anything.

**I agree. I wanted to ask you about your habit of dating the paintings really specifically.**

Because I want to remember.

**For your own records?**

Well, I guess everything is for me, and then to the extent that anybody else cares, it's for them. I've always dated things since I realized that I was probably going to keep doing this. I've always dated things because I want to remember the order in which I did them, it's really that. And my idea about painting is really quite conservative in a certain way, and I like the idea of signing my work. I love the fact that you look at those big Barnett Newmans and his signature is down in the corner. I think it's less usual to see signed paintings now.

**Yeah, it's sort of a painting faux pas...**

This is something I've always appreciated about Cy Twombly, the extent to which the making, the dating, the signing, all of it seems like a drawing, and it's just that I know that my paintings are done when I sign them and if anyone else is interested they can know that too. I always try to keep track, because I will work on something for a while and then

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throw up my hands and leave it for a time and then go back to it. Drawings I sometimes make over the course of a few days... I'm sure I've missed a lot, because you do, but I try to be very scrupulous about notating it on the surface, because I want to know, I want to remember.

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*Bathers 6 (wading)*, 2010-2011 Mixed media on linen 47 x 43.125 x 1 inches Courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York

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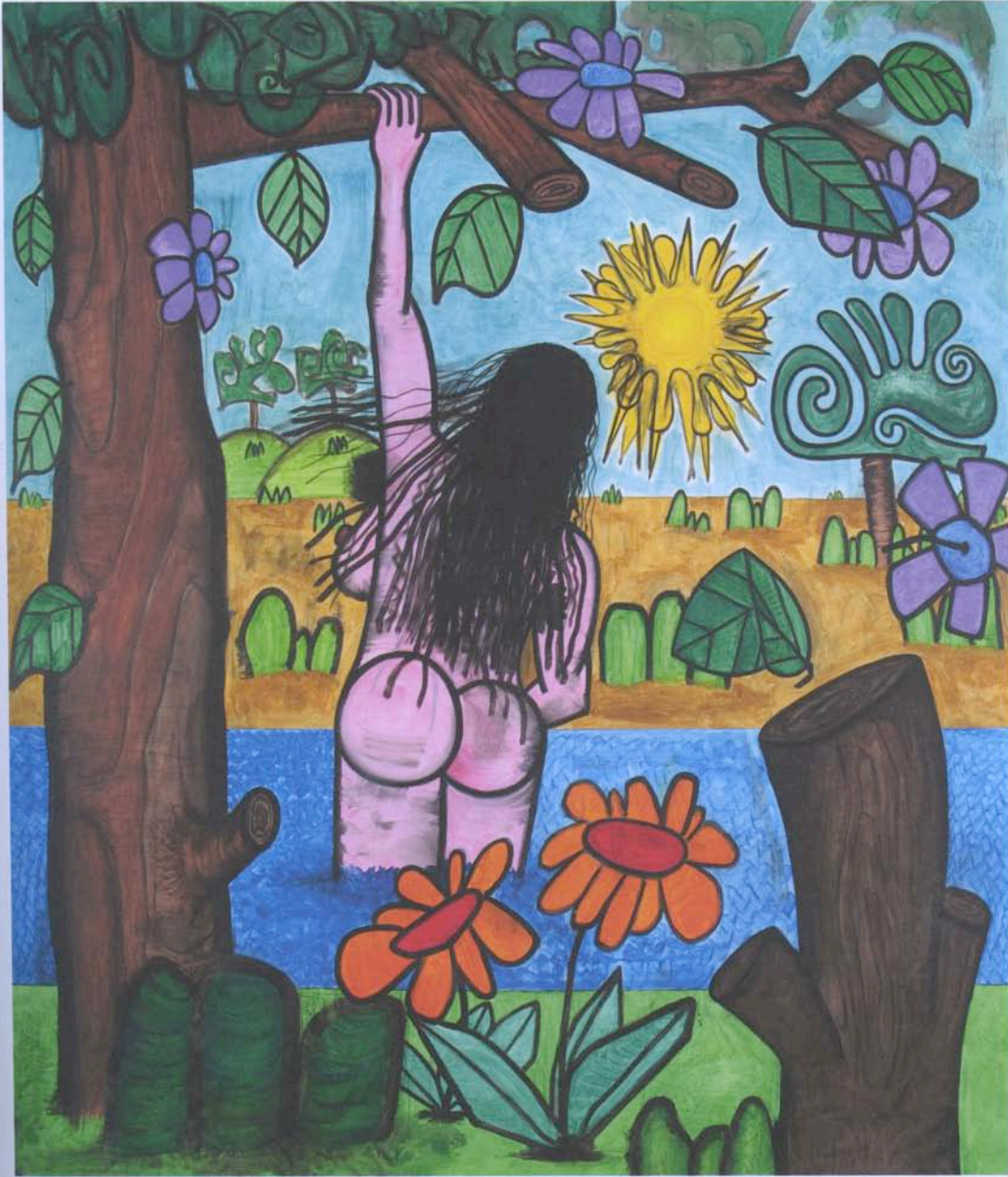


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*Untitled*, 2009 Mixed media on paper 42 x 32.75 inches Courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York

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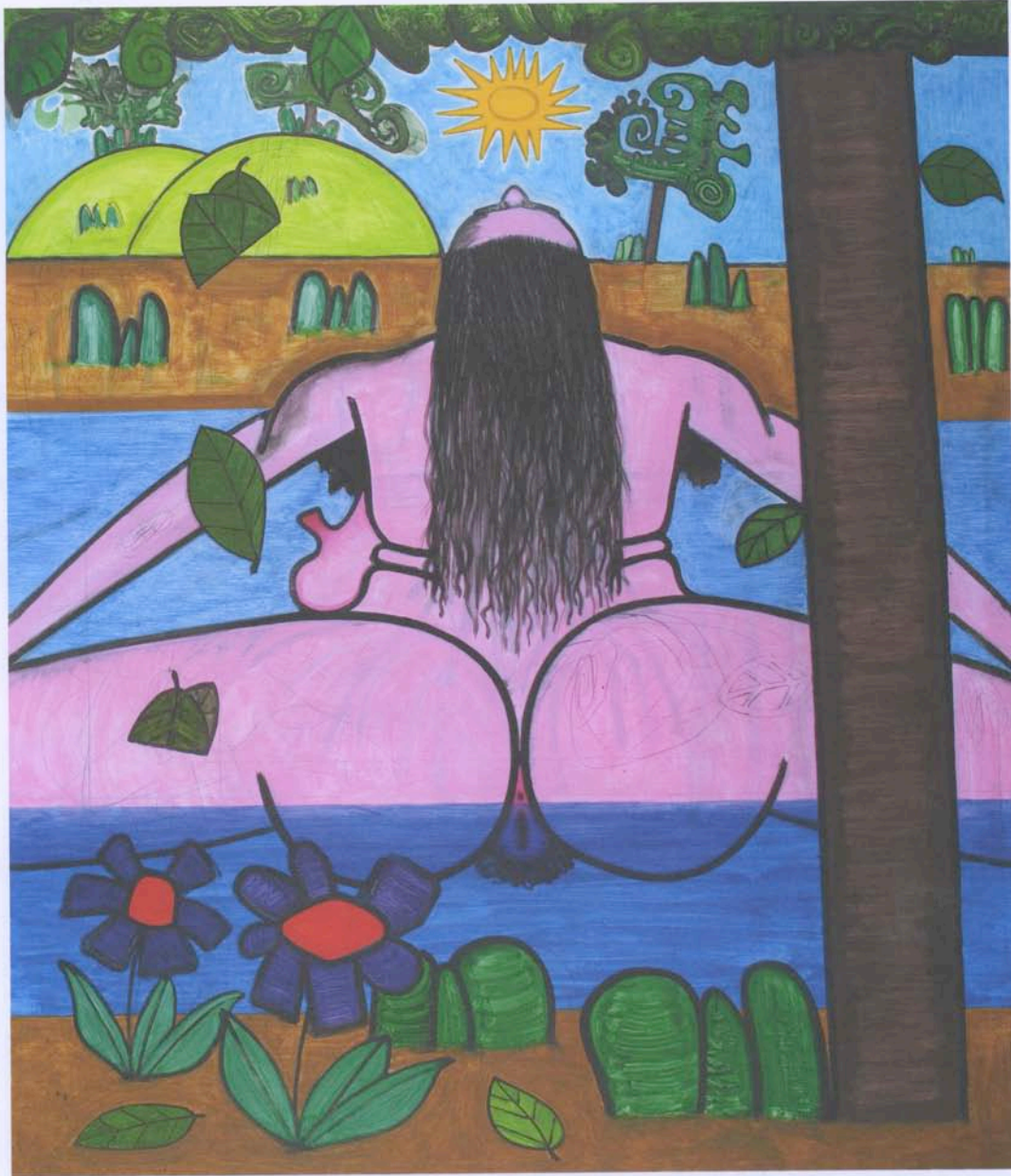


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*Bathers 9 (here and there)*, 2011 Mixed media on linen 78 x 66 x 1 inches Courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York

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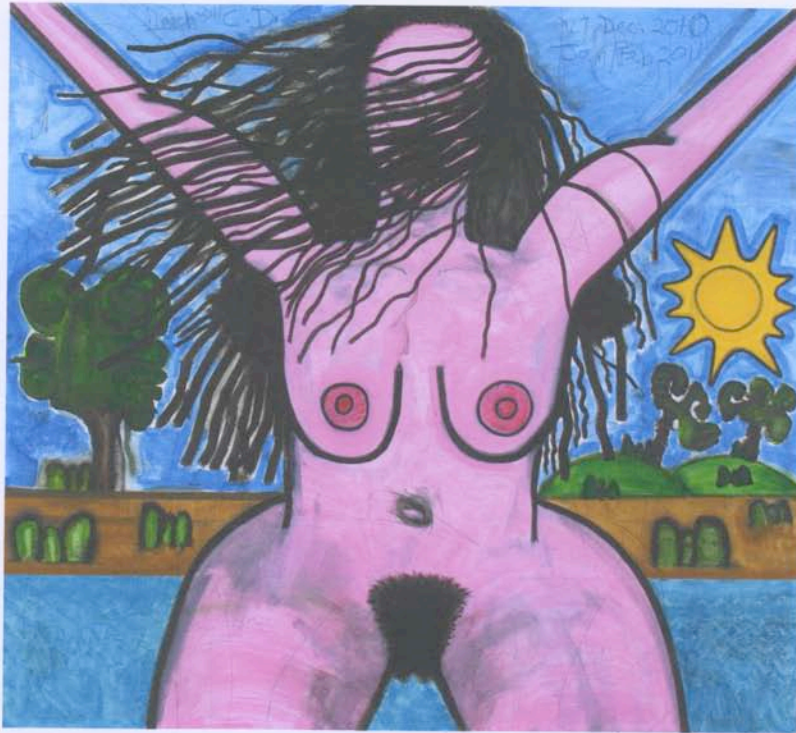


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*Bathers 4 (posture)*, 2010-2011 Mixed media on linen 78 x 66 inches Courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York

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*Bathers 8 (face)*, 2010-2011 Mixed media on linen 43 x 47 x 1 inches Courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York.

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*Bathers 7 (running)*, 2010-2011 Mixed media on linen 43 x 47 x 1 inches Courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York

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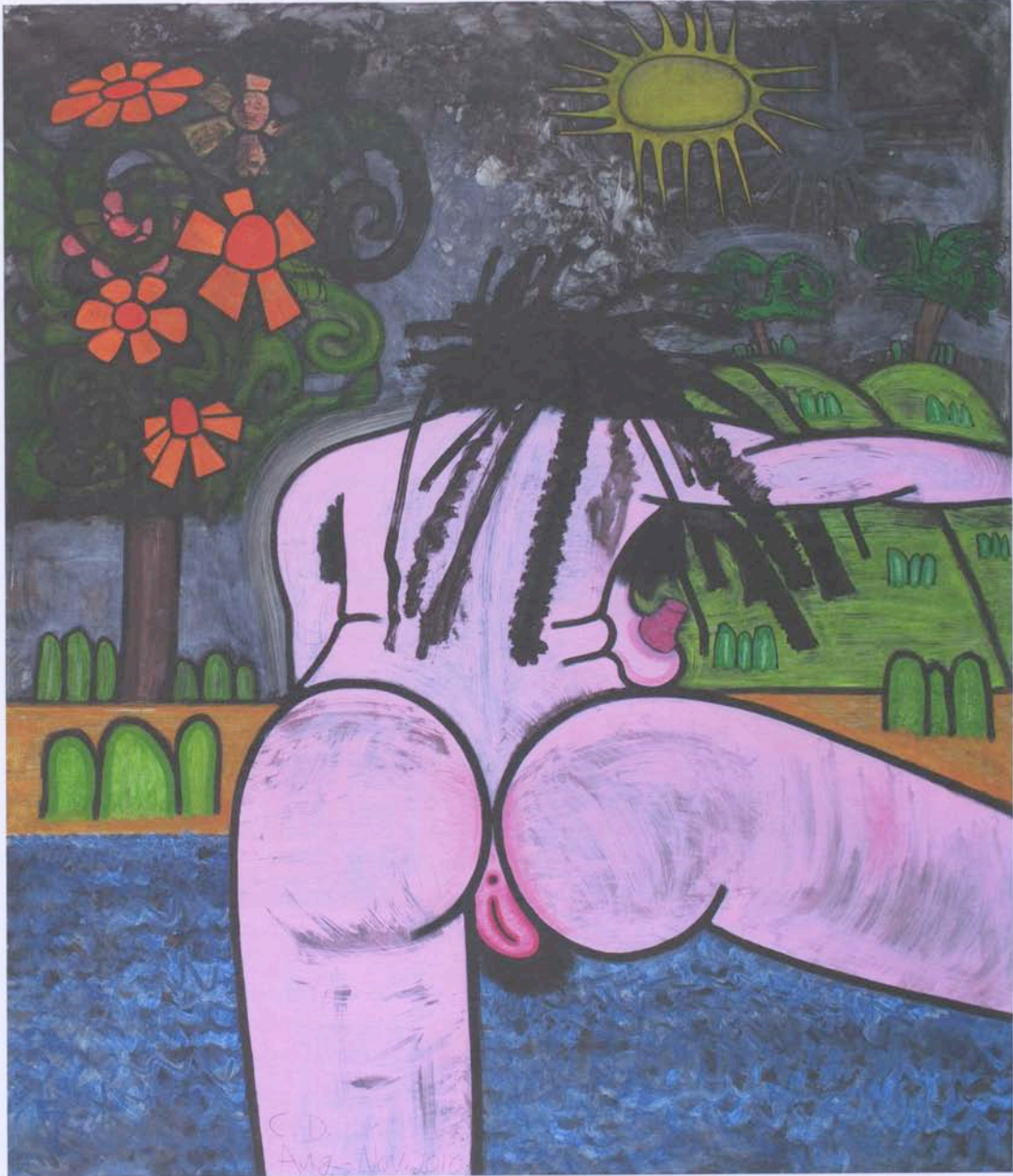
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*Untitled*, 2009 Mixed media on paper 32.75 x 42 inches Courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York



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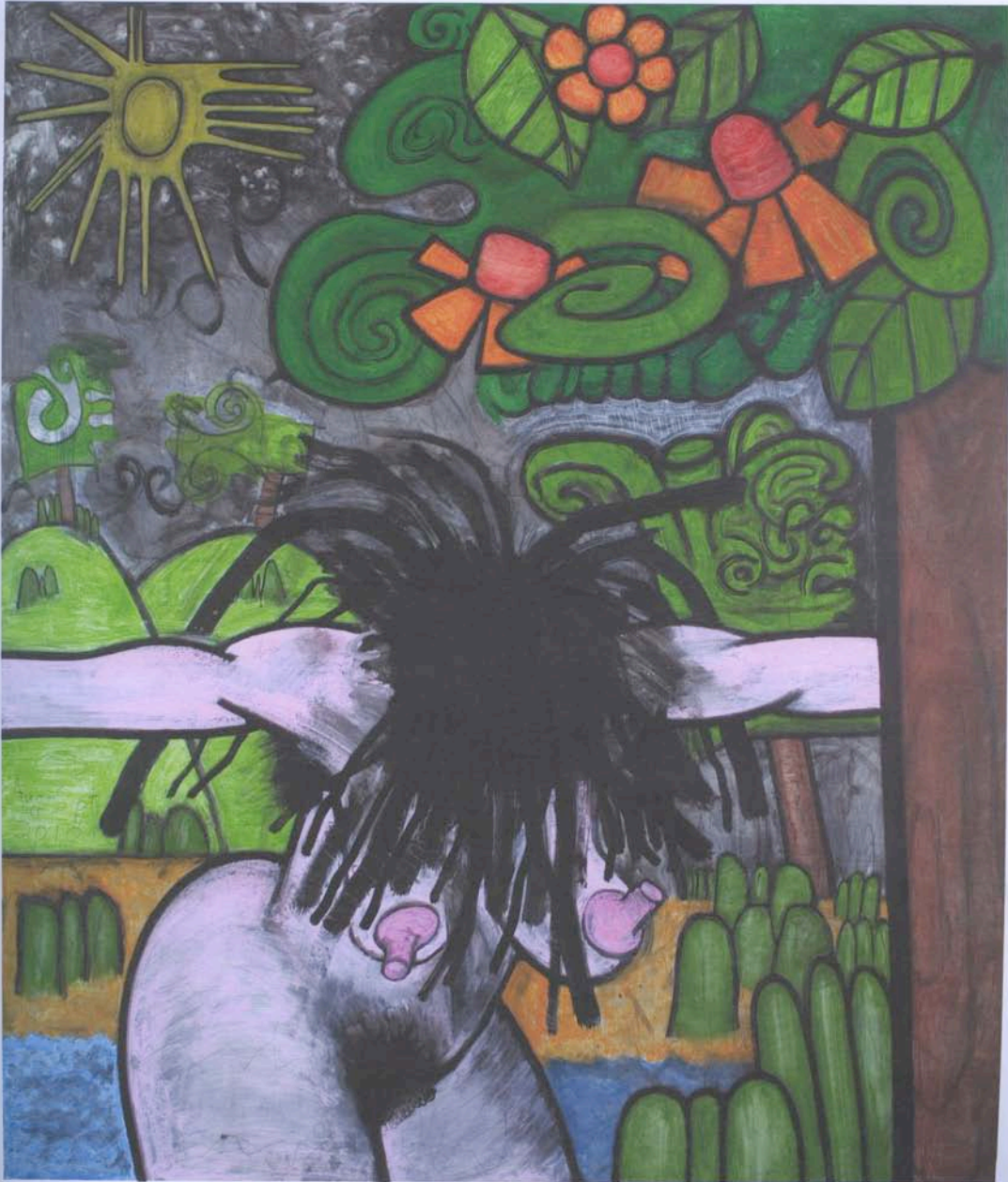


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*Bathers 3 (black ground)*, 2010-2011 Mixed media on linen 78 x 66 x 1 inches Courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York

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*Bathers 1 (dark entry)*, 2009-2010 Mixed media on linen 78 x 66 inches Courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York