

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Schad, Ed, "Carroll Dunham," *Art Review*, Summer 2010

REVIEWS: USA

Carroll Dunham states, simply, that 'the idea of making a picture that could allude to more exalted states of mind is as interesting as one that alludes to more base states of mind'. All told, Dunham might be considered a secular Hieronymus Bosch, painting the horrors of a disenchanted world that is total and comic. Rightly so, the fascination with Dunham's work owes nothing to a contemporary destruction fetish or well-rehearsed imaginings of the apocalypse. Instead, Dunham increasingly meditates on the base, and the base for him is no extraordinary thing – the base simply is. Consciousness is never as wild as our imaginings; it's only as wild as our circumstances.

The base for Dunham is a primal but formal and ordered exercise, an aesthetic biological culture that bubbles below and before rationality or intention. Considering his last five years of work, especially his 2006 show at London's White Cube and his current show at Blum & Poe in Los Angeles, Dunham can finally be taken seriously when he downplays the imagery and narrative impulse of his works and claims that mostly formal concerns push his practice. The events on his older canvases – usually heralding aspects of abject human existence involving bodily secretions and colourful sexual organs – have decreased, while the formal punch of the work has expanded. He is painting better than he has in years.

The Blum & Poe show roughly divides in two, with several works focused directly on trees in isolation and a series showing an exaggerated female figure, outlined in black, flashing her parts in sparse but vibrant landscapes that recall the wordless comics of Jim Woodring. Small details of certain works become the focus of others – all the paintings picture the same land from varying distances and angles. For instance, an upturned breast/kidney in *Hers/Dirt/One* becomes the entire composition of *Hers/Dirt/Two* (both 2009). The scrolled, decorative trees found in the background of the *Hers* paintings become the specific subject and focus of *Time Storm Three (Tree of Life)* (2005–10) and other tree works. The trees are sober bushes of hatches and washes while the women are built from solid blocks of brushy pinks, browns and greens. Earlier blizzards of swirls, lumps and soupy primal colour have contracted into confident, strident statements, graphic displays of his favourite images – anuses, phalluses and pudenda – now served straight up.

Critics are familiar with the darkness of Dunham's work, finding the relevance of his practice by linking his dissolving primal oddities with a fractured contemporary self that is fuelled primarily and wantonly by the chaotic underbelly of the unconscious. The critical inverse of this thinking, however, is the idea that Dunham simply revels in the abject like a man-child still clinging to the comedy of bodily fluids and fart jokes. Certainly both Dunhams do exist, and both are present in the Blum & Poe presentation. However, Dunham gets stronger with age, increasingly sure-handed, like a late Philip Guston, and less prone to being juvenile and distracting, meditating on the base that achieves civilisation and less on the base that simply refuses it. *Ed Schad*

Carroll Dunham

Blum & Poe, Los Angeles
9 April – 15 May



Time Storm Four, 2009–10, mixed media on canvas,
198 x 168 cm. Photo: Josh White.
Courtesy the artist and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles