

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Scott Indrisek, "Carroll Dunham On Art Fairs, Genitals, and Draftsmanship,"
ArtInfo, May 7, 2014.

Carroll Dunham On Art Fairs, Genitals, and Draftsmanship

by Scott Indrisek



While he's best known for explosively colorful, often ribald paintings, [Carroll Dunham](#) has also been sketching and drawing with a passion since the late '70s. At [Frieze New York](#), Gladstone Gallery's booth is dedicated to a solo presentation of some 215 drawings that span from 1979 to 2014. We spoke with the artist about his early ambitions toward abstraction, naked women, and why he's trying to be OK with art fairs.

These are all works that have never been exhibited before. Why did you decide to pull this selection from your archives now?

I've always done a lot of drawings, and I've held on to many, the small ones particularly. In the last few years I've gotten more interested in situations where people see them. I did an exhibition in LA a couple years ago and I really enjoyed doing it. When the idea came up of doing something with Gladstone at Frieze, I immediately thought of doing another selection that would show the development of the drawings over a long period of time.

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Looking back on those pieces, do you find that things you first worked through in drawing form ended up informing the paintings?

I made drawings before I even made paintings, and I've always used drawing as a way to think about my paintings — both before and after I've made them. There are quite a few cross-references and relationships between the two trains of thought, but none of the drawings in this project at Frieze are direct, one-to-one studies for any particular painting. I see them as things that exist on their own.

What can you accomplish through drawing that you can't with painting?

I think the main thing is that it's relatively quick and painless. Paintings can be hard to work on and they require a lot of organization and patience. The way I work with drawing, a lot of times, they happen very quickly, in a very intimate, immediate way. I encounter less resistance, and I find that once I've made drawings about something it's no longer in my mental space, it's in the physical space in front of me. I can look at it and think about it more clearly, and it helps me going forward.

Are you sitting down generally and drawing in the studio, or are you making work at home, while traveling, and so on?

Certainly over the years I've made a lot of drawings in hotel rooms. I have a tendency to do that when I'm away. But I have several places in my studio, different rooms where I'll have a desk and paper and I'll know that if I want I can stop and make a note to myself, as it were. The activity, the vast majority of the time, is me sitting at a little table, working on small sheets of paper.

You were in the recent, drawing-heavy show "The Age of Small Things," curated by Chuck Webster at Dodge Gallery. And fairly recently Knowmoregames in Brooklyn hosted "Draw Gym," a massive group show of younger artists working in the medium. Do you think there's been a general drawing resurgence?

It's possible. I've been aware of younger artists who seem to be doing an awful lot of drawing as part of their general approach to things. But I think artists always are interested in other artists' drawings — it's kind of understood that there's something very fundamental and basic about what someone does with drawing. It's hard for me to know in terms of the zeitgeist if there's been some shift, because I've always been very interested in seeing other peoples' involvement with it.

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Are there contemporaries of yours whose practice you learned more about once you saw their drawings?

When I was much younger and first living in New York, in the 1970s, I was lucky to meet older artists whose involvement with drawing was very pronounced. I worked in the studio of Dorothea Rockburne, who was doing a lot of important work with drawing as almost a primary medium. That made a big impact on my thinking. And in that same generation, someone like Mel Bochner, who's an old friend, or Barry Le Va, both artists whose drawings have been a main part of their work, one of the fundamental aspects. I saw artists using drawing in a way that seemed very committed, and that stuck with me. But I've drawn in one way or another, at intervals, since I was a child. It was something I always loved to do, even before I had the idea that I could be an artist in some serious way. I drew as a diversionary hobby. It's pretty deep in me, even without the connection to contemporary art.

Do you have an archive that goes all the way back to those childhood drawings?

I have a few my mother saved. Having raised two children of my own I realize how much material kids can generate when they like to draw. I don't even have a tiny fraction of what I made, but that's fine — I'm not even sure I'm the same person I was then. But I have a pretty complete archive going back to when I consciously decided to be an artist, which is when I was maybe 25.

I would imagine that, among artists, trading drawings is a pretty common way to pass your work on and exchange it for someone else's...

It's a lovely thing, to meet someone who is very active in drawing, and you like what each other does. Trading is great. I've acquired some of my favorite things that way.

The early drawings in the booth, from '79 and '80, are really different from your work now.

They are. It would've been difficult for the person back then to imagine the work that the person today is doing. But subjectively, the experience of being that person and working through time is also very seamless and connected. I've never felt like I stopped and regrouped and said, "Oh no, you have to rethink things, your whole approach is wrong." Everything feels like it leads from one thing to the next. Looking at this group we've put together for Frieze, the attempt on my part was to show a train of thought that was continuous. It's like following a trail of breadcrumbs that was never really interrupted. But, for example, the most glaring difference is I was very clear when I started to make art that I wanted to work within abstract painting. That was what I felt like I might be able to contribute to. And through the kinds of things my work has called upon me to do, I've changed my attitude about that quite a bit. At various times, and recently quite a bit, there's a lot of recognizable subject matter in my work... which I don't see as a case of having crossed from one territory to another, but I can see how it would look that way to someone else.

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Sexualized forms make an appearance in the early drawings, and then eventually come to the fore. How have you used drawing to work out ideas about anatomy, or sexuality?

Originally, the first element that appeared in my work was drawings of male body parts, which seemed to very much want to be drawn and have a presence. I tried, to the extent that it's possible, to get out of my own way and follow what seemed to be my work's real desire. I had quite a bit of resistance to allowing images like that into my work; it went against this notion that I was doing abstraction. But I did make use of it. That was the beginning of an evolution toward more elaborated images: not normal human bodies, but at least something like a body, or a shape that could operate as a substitute for a body, in visual terms.

In my recent work I'm less focused on the sexual element. It's not that I'm not aware of it — I'm a straight male drawing naked women, I get it — but it's about a lot more than that. For a long time I've been interested in male and female archetypes, and how our ideas of ourselves is formed by our physical self. I'm also very interested in the "everybody has a mother" aspect of the human condition. It's an important subject — women, and women's private parts — and the idea of the doorway that every single human being took to get here. In some chain of associations that goes to sex, but that isn't necessarily the main emphasis. I think I'm drawing these naked women over and over for reasons other than sexual obsessiveness — even though that may be an element, and I may be the least able to see it.

Maybe it's just our own repression, as viewers — to see nudity and assume "sex."

It's funny — it used to be that one of the few places where images of naked women were OK in Western culture was in so-called fine art. Nobody looks at paintings of cherubs from the Renaissance and finds them dirty. But there's something about the way contemporary culture is spun that people can't *not* see it through a filter of pornography. I've been a little taken aback by the repetitiveness of that interpretation of what I've been doing for the last few years. If I were called to make representations of sex, I would make representations of sex. I think I could figure out how to draw that! But that's not what I'm drawing.

You mentioned that what first started appearing in the work is male genitals. You walk around New York and see graffiti, for instance, and it seems like it's an oddly universal human impulse to draw male genitalia wherever there's the space to do so, and a pen.

That's an element of the subject that I always rather liked, that it spoke to an impulse. And when that was a determinative subject in my work, I was much less interested in anything resembling a coherent, realistic scene of the world. The images came together out of spare parts and geometry, and I wasn't trying to draw real-looking men with real-looking bodies. And the image of male genitalia seemed really like an icon more than a subject for realistic rendering, or any such thing.

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That's always been my attitude. I've resisted art fairs the entire time I've been exhibiting my work — I've never been interested in them or cooperative about them. But I've been thinking a lot over the last few years, trying to be realistic about what's going on in our so-called "art world," and one thing that seems clear is that fairs are proliferating, and that a lot of people go to them. I'm trying to think differently about them. They may be, by my standards, horrible venues to look at things, in the sense that it's a very commercialized environment, only there for a few days, quite ephemeral. But that's only a difference in degree from our entire system of galleries and shows. I decided that maybe I'd learn more by being less negative about it. I can always go back to being negative if I don't have a good time.