

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Ariela Gittlen, "This Other Eden," *Elephant*, Autumn 2015



'If you can find me one kid in the United States who's masturbating looking at my paintings I will be extremely surprised.'
CARROLL DUNHAM'S provocative female figures have more to do with biblical foundation myths than pornography—and are more expressive of contemporary society's re-examination of gender identity than even the artist could have imagined, as **ARIELA GITTLLEN** discovers.

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Below
Portrait by Paolo Di Lucente,
taken at the artist's studio
in Connecticut, July 2015

Opposite
The Beach
2013-14
Mixed media on linen
241.9 x 190.8 cm



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arroll Dunham's Connecticut studio is a work in progress. The building, which once housed the cafeteria, kitchen and music rooms of a boarding school, stands just down the garden path from the artist's country home. The windows are still draped in translucent plastic, softening the light to a buttery glaze. Many of the walls, free of wood or drywall, are brown and soft with an occasional eruption of pink insulation. Stepping inside is a bit like entering a cocoon, the cool and quiet interrupted only by trills of birdsong from the courtyard.

'Get some of that Unabomber feeling into the picture,' Dunham instructs our photographer who has arranged him before an unfinished wall in the gentle light. Tall and rangy, Dunham's eyes are attentive, his delivery utterly deadpan. His long limbs fold together with the perfect economy of a cleverly designed collapsible table, compact or expansive as the situation warrants. He speaks at a clip, often revising his thoughts mid-breath, looping back to the beginning of a sentence in pursuit of greater clarity.

First known for his wood veneer paintings in the 1980s and later for his playful figurative work which teased at abstraction, Dunham creates paintings, drawings, prints and sometimes sculpture. His work resides in a long list of

museum collections including those of MoMA, the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Tate. For many years his primary subject was an army of rather savage penis-nosed goons, but Dunham has since shifted to a more peaceful motif: the bather. A woman, often shown from behind, in a landscape full of wild and unfamiliar verdure. Her body is pale and darkly outlined, her hair is a wild black tangle, her face is obscured.

Like Cézanne's, Dunham's *Bathers* are monumental figures at home in the natural landscape, yet unlike their nineteenth-century predecessors they refer to no real human woman or known earthly environment. These fantasy scenes are composed with a structured geometry, yet they feel exuberant. Liberated from the restraints of the real, they gesture towards the mythic, the elemental.

With tumblers of hot tea, among volumes on Cubism, Courbet and a *Life* magazine photobook enticingly titled *The Wonders of Life on Earth*, we sit in the studio's back room and begin by talking about place and space.

How does dividing your time between New York City and rural Connecticut influence the way you work?

I started being an artist as an adult in New York and I still identify as a New York artist, but for a long time my wife [the artist Laurie Simmons] and I have been leaving the city. When we had kids we started coming out to Connecticut, renting houses for the summer. And I always had a studio at the house we rented in the summer, where I got an enormous amount done. So, at a certain point, space being at such a premium in New York, my wife and I stumbled across this house and realized that we could pretty much have infinite space if we could

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find a way to make that work with our sense of being *New York* artists. I gave up my studio in New York about six years ago but I still go to New York every week and I work on my prints and drawings. I work on my paintings up here.

Since the move, have your paintings changed in terms of scale or subject matter?

Friends have said they see a shift, somewhat, in the subject matter, but really the emotional tone of my work, but I'm not sure I see that. I've always been interested in the things I've been interested in.

The paintings aren't greener, more fecund?

Well, they've been pretty green! But they were green before, you know? My greenest period was when I was using trees as my primary subject and I began exploring that when I lived in New York. So whether it was something about wishing for a future, I have no idea, but these things have always been in my work one way or another.

How did you make the transition from male to female figures as your primary subject?

The transition was during a period when the only thing driving my work was this dominant male subject, this character that evolved as a repeated motif. I got really sick of it and sick of the same visual structures. So I started messing around without any real sense of where it was going, and one day I thought: 'It would be so odd if my male character had female genitalia. How would I even draw that? Within my limited repertoire of abilities how would I do this?' It became a formal problem, for lack of a better word. I never said to myself: 'Okay, time to switch gender categories of primary interest.' It was really a combination of my own formal instincts and my fantasy life. That always seems to be what drives my work.

You've spoken before about a sense of embarrassment regarding your current subject matter—as a man painting nude women in your Bathers series.

Well, I've gotten over it.

Hey, that's good!

Yes, it is good. I think the embarrassment was a little bit tongue-in-cheek, because if I were



Ball Painting #2
1991
Mixed media on linen
107.3 x 160 x 6.4 cm

truly, deeply embarrassed I wouldn't have done them. It had more to do with trying to interpret other people's reactions to my paintings. I think also when you say that it's code for 'don't censor yourself'. Because life's too short.

You've spoken about these figures representing an archetypal female.

I use the word archetype because I don't know a better word. It's a category of thing rather than a specific thing. The whole Jungian model of psychic life—well, there are aspects of it that seem pretty silly from our juncture, but there's something valuable there. The idea that humans need stories and symbols, that there are these repeated motifs—all of that is a very valuable contribution to thinking about what we are. Archetype implies a sort of timelessness, and I try to think about my work in that way, even though I know it's all a self-serving fantasy that keeps me working.

It's an interesting cultural time. We seem to be in a period of intense re-examination of what gender identity even is. It's amazing to me that I can look at my work from the last ten or 15 years through that filter very easily. This is the funny thing about art, I don't know what I'm thinking about, I'm just trying to follow my nose. I'm kind of fascinated that there's a link between my apparent subject matter and something that's actually happening in the culture. It's surprising to me.

But what could be more closely connected than your psychic environment and your cultural environment?

Quite so! But artists tell themselves all kinds of things in order to keep going. I'm not interested in narrative in my paintings, and that may not be my main interest, but there has to be some sense of the path you're on. Mine has been so closely tied to: I draw, I make things. It's an interesting time to be doing that.

And an interesting time to be making paintings in particular.

I'm really excited by it. I find it fascinating. I think that art has a way of operating under the cultural radar that's really exciting. It has nothing to do with auctions or any such thing, it has to do with what artists are doing, and within that you can find fascinating things that are

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completely different than what the culture at large is concerned with.

It's almost impossible to look at the Bathers without seeing faces revealed in the women's naked bodies, even though their actual faces are always obscured.

Yes, it was part of trying to hold to this idea that it isn't a woman. I did make one painting in the first series of *Bather* paintings called *Face* and there's a woman's face in it, but it's also where I made the alarming discovery that the sort of Rorschach created by two nipples, a belly button and the V of the crotch made something that you could not see as a face. That was so idiomatically mesmerizing to me, that strange layer of letting there be a face without there being a face. Once I discovered it, or it discovered me, I couldn't really stay away from it.

In your newest Bather paintings the perspective seems to have shifted.

Well, that's a shift to trying to acknowledge maleness and also a way to introduce some idea of relationships. All these paintings until now have involved an image of one human being and I'm trying to think differently about that now too. These new paintings are my attempt to introduce my point of view. This way of drawing one's own body is probably age-appropriate to maybe a 14- or 15-year-old boy—which I think is probably above the developmental level of most of my drawings, but I try to really take it seriously.

These paintings feel very Edenic.

We had some people here recently, a nice group of people on a museum tour, and a woman said something to me about the Garden of Eden. She was sort of embarrassed to say it, and I said: 'No, no, it's all there! That's a foundational myth to us for a reason.' I'm not illustrating the Bible, but at the same time to be thinking in terms of a woman with absolutely no technological artifacts in a natural setting—it certainly brings that to mind.

I don't see why making that suggestion is any more embarrassing than saying the work is pornography.

That's the interpretation that really drives me up a wall. I refuse the idea that the only way you can think about images of human bodies is with a pornographic frame. It's a completely disgusting idea to me. I said this to a bunch of kids I was lecturing because I knew it would be good for a laugh, but I really mean it: 'If you can find me one kid in the United States who's masturbating looking at my paintings I will be extremely surprised.' To me that's it, case closed. Do you look at medical textbooks and you think about pornography? I don't think so.

Possibly if you had limited access to pornography? Maybe, but it would have to be pretty limited. Look, I know what I'm making. I know what it looks like, and I get it. But that's part of why I feel like I should do it.

You have to imagine that level of discomfort has to point towards something, or be productive in some way.

Well, that certainly is what we would all like to think. I choose to think it because it doesn't matter if I'm right or wrong. I want to make art that I want to make. I don't know how to do it without having a certain amount of desire toward doing it. And if that means that my interests seem to generate work from me, to me that's self-justifying somehow.

You seem adamant that your work is something that you are channelling, something that has chosen you.

I don't mean it in some new age-y, I'm channeling spirits kind of way, but I don't know what my artwork is about until I see what I make and then think about it and look at it for a while. I talk about it like that because it's the most honest representation of what I experience. That part of me that thinks it knows what it's doing isn't really the smartest part of me. The part of me that I may not even be fully in touch with also has things it wants to do, and I have to mediate that. That is, as we say, the job.

An exhibition of work by Carroll Dunham runs at Gladstone Gallery, 515 West 24th Street, New York, from 30 October to 4 December.

Below
Maple White Land
1984-85
Casein, dry pigment, casein emulsion, pencil and carbon pencil on wood (maple, alio ash, white ash, zebrano and oak)
177.8 x 127 cm

Opposite
In the Flowers (Tuesday)
(detail) 2012-14
Mixed media on linen
170.2 x 137.5 cm

