

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

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## ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

# A Reaction to Abstraction

By KIMBERLY CHOU

Carroll Dunham's recent work is startling to see in person: exaggerated female nudes in cartoon landscapes, painted in stark black lines and what the painter calls "coloring-book colors" of pinks, blues and greens.

It's beautiful and vulgar, in its way. It's also difficult to print in a newspaper.

Mr. Dunham's continuation of his series of "bathers" paintings of female nudes and a related series of less risqué paintings of trees are on view now at Chelsea's Gladstone Gallery through mid-January. The artist, who is 63, first earned attention for his abstract canvases in the 1980s, coming up in New York alongside such peers as Terry Winters, Bill Jensen and Laurie Simmons, who is Mr. Dunham's wife. Today he splits his time between homes in TriBeCa (where Ms. Simmons has a studio) and Connecticut (where he has his).

Mr. Dunham spoke with *The Wall Street Journal* this week about bathers, representation versus abstraction, and politically correct males.

### What do people say when they see your bathers?

Mostly [they're] kind of worried about some political level—kind of, 'Is it OK for a straight male to be making these paintings?' I think that there's so much of an association of images with naked people with either porn or sort of porn-inflected advertising imagery that it's hard to see that my intentions are quite different from that.

### What are your intentions?

[It] really connects much more with my interest in earlier painting than it does anything immediately in our cultural surroundings. And men, men know the score. We're all trying to be good, politically correct guys and I could see how if you came at it from the wrong angle or what to me is the wrong angle, you could say that these have something to do with debasing images of women. But that's the farthest thing from my intentions. I al-



Above, painter Carroll Dunham in his Connecticut studio. Below, one of his new works, 'Late Trees #6,' which is on view at Gladstone Gallery.



ways feel like I have to try to correct that.

### How did you settle on the subject of bathers?

I'm just following where my paintings take me. I've had this kind of [interest] for the last five, six or seven years about turn-of-the-19th-into-the-20th-century French painting. Bath-

ers were a very common subject among a lot of the important artists at that time, and I started to the extent that I know my intentions. It's really to try to not deny things that occur to me that might be embarrassing or stupid.

### Such as?

Such as making a painting

of a naked woman in nature in 2012, without using photography. That didn't seem like such a winner of an idea [at] first. It's a highly intuitive thing. I never thought five years ago, "Gee, it would be awesome to be the guy who's doing this." It comes up as I experience it and I try to commit to it, if it's the right thing.

### Do you consider yourself a representational painter now?

Well, everyone else seems to. It would be preposterous for me to say I'm not, because that's so much the framing that people have around my work and the way people seem to read my work. But I actually—honestly, no, I don't. Because I know that nobody whose initial agenda was to make representational paintings of the human figure would make things that look like this. You could only make things that look like this if you came at it on a vector that started with abstraction. In a way, I see what's happened to me as a reverse of the sort of thing that happened to a lot of artists in the early 20th century. If you think about somebody like Mondrian, the breakdown of representation into pattern and structure. I feel like I'm riding this thing out the other end.