

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Amy Sillman, "Bless This Mess," *Bookforum*, December / January, 2017.

## BOOKFORUM

### Bless This Mess

AMY SILLMAN

**INTO WORDS: THE SELECTED WRITINGS OF CARROLL DUNHAM**  
EDITED BY PAUL CHAN; INTRODUCTION BY SCOTT ROTHKOPF  
NEW YORK: BADLANDS UNLIMITED, 256 PAGES, \$25.

Carroll Dunham is weird. (It's a good thing.) *Weird* is the most-used adjective in his new book of essays, *Into Words*, followed by *perverse*. To Dunham, a renowned painter and frequent essayist on art, these are credentials for interesting, indicating that you might crack the nut, push the envelope, make a break for it, or run the ball out onto the fields of the crazy. Takes one to know one: He guides you to his own end zone of painting with texts from 1994 through 2016, waxing eloquent, or sometimes cranky, about the work and contexts of twenty-five or so far-flung artists, living and dead, canonical and outlier, mostly painters. The texts are presented chronologically, helpful for tracking Dunham's deeper intentions as his rig drills down into the bituminous depths. As he gets older and wiser, his prose blooms in complexity, containing wild list-accumulations ("Dada, V-2 rockets, and the discovery of LSD"; "Food, farts, reincarnation, semiotics") or punctum-like moments, like the opener of his Picasso essay: "Pablo Picasso can be exhausting to think about." Or this, on some aspect of a Jasper Johns: "This sounds like such a bad idea." Or, when fed up with doxa: "The entire Greenbergian paradigm seems... vaguely irresponsible." In two forensic interviews with artists Peter Saul and Jim Nutt, Dunham reveals these subjects as *rogue nerds* from the plains who refuse the usual New York cultural politesse. Pushed to make the admission, Saul finally blurts out, "When I go to the Museum of Modern Art... I am simply not interested." Nutt spits, "I read no Greenberg, or who's the other guy, Rosenberg?"

From funny-peculiar, Dunham expands outward exponentially (past crazy, zany, odd, nutty, awkward, eccentric, scruffy, bouncy, loopy, fuzzy, inscrutable, embarrassing, crotchety, uncomfortable, dizzying, unnerving, jarring, kinky, depraved, squirmy, and freaky). His greater purpose is not just to nail down what weirdness is but to take it on: He invokes it, caresses it, blows on it, and eventually *becomes* it, his prose reaching certain pinnacles of wiggly delirium, e.g., on late Renoir, whose "zafzig demigoddesses" he describes as "rolling, doughy estrogen bombs animating the glowing surface of their pulsating electric Eden... Everything seems composed of a gassy alloy of substance and feeling, like a higher-dimensional Impressionism." No one writes about art like this. At these points, Dunham's language billows like a cloud, past painting's bracketed rectangles, to consume art's biggest questions: What is it, anyway? Grappling with its very existence, he asks, "Could this be a painting?... This?... This?... This?"

This marks Dunham as a quintessential inheritor of the New York School, an enterprise I would describe as having the same conditions as archaeology and Freud. Same diff, actually: to dig shit up in the field. Stating that "a painter's body is his first and primary tool," Dunham shovels down beneath art's murky rectilinears, past the known and even the unknown, into the murkier area of the unknowable. His thinking is clearly structured by binaries: He paints a planet of

protuberances and holes, and a population wrestling with Eros and Thanatos, and in his writing he thinks through the language and material of both canonical and outsider figures. Yet, reading his book, one also senses his drive toward a psychic singularity, a mysterious black hole located at the center of his thinking—the hole of the eye, the asshole, or the grave—and the sheer tactile craving to wrap the mesh of language around the mystery of artmaking, to respond to art's forms with language's invisible force.

His process is both dirty and productive, a two-handed affair: He rubs language against art, and vice versa, to see what sticks after the frottage, and blows cross-pollinated seeds into the wrong holes. This dirty process is also a thrilling form of magic, desecralized and generative, which contaminates the teleological, fucks up a categorical imperative, and scumbles the idea of art as illustrations in an art-history story. And Dunham loves to describe this mess. He writes attentively about Rauschenberg's "chromatic shitstorm" and Johns's "decayed pictorial mulch"; he even notes people as a mess, as in Picasso, where "when women appear... they are kind of a mess." Opening his eloquent essay on Elizabeth Murray, Dunham writes, "Painting in New York during the second half of the 1970s was a mess."

The '70s form the psychic center of his book, a derelict time and place after modernism's breakdown, with sculpture that is "squishy" and painting that is already "being stripped for parts." And in an essay on his own anthropomorphized paintings, he declares, "He was a mess, and so were the paintings. They came to life in a storm of garbage... gripped by the black hole at the dead center of the polluted field." Dunham wants to get us in deeper, not provide a ladder for self-help. Writing in 2007 on Kara Walker's films, he articulates a greater ethics of mess as inevitably containing collapse, an important antimoralistic argument, which for Dunham serves to purposefully vex any easy standpoint where "our values will provide solace." This is how his view is truly Freudian: the belief that art is a place where form, feeling, and fuckup churn together in a dynamic of irresolvable problems, fertilized by our collective shit.

By demanding new questions about and uses for form, his book lays down a pragmatic kind of polemic: Artists (and other weirdos, witches, gumshoes, alchemists, provocateurs, and poets) must take the power of language into their own hands, with love and antagonism. This project is political, especially if you see art as more than junk bonds or tchotchkes—"a forward exit strategy," to quote Dunham on Murray. Speaking of politics, I wish he had accounted for more of gender's specific struggles, given his choice of subjects and images. But, while out looking for the weird, Dunham arrives at the Brechtian *strange*, and articulates an art and ethics of multivalence, excess, contradiction, and defiance. Other artists should take the ball and run with it out into their own end zones. □

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