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Brienne Walsh, "In a New Body of Paintings, Carroll Dunham Explores A Taboo: The Male Nude," *Forbes*, May 18, 2018

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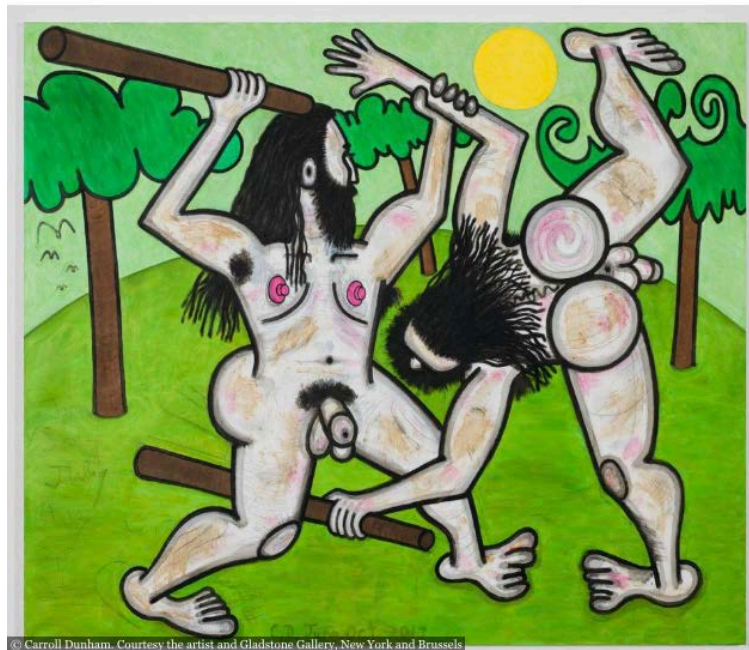
In A New Body of Paintings, Carroll Dunham Explores A Taboo: The Male Nude



Brienne Walsh, CONTRIBUTOR

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© Carroll Dunham. Courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels

Green Hills of Earth (1), 2017

Urethane, acrylic and pencil on linen

68 x 79 inches (172.7 x 200.7 cm)

73 1/8 x 84 x 2 1/4 inches (185.7 x 213.4 x 5.7 cm) framed

Unlike some painters, who begin by painting figurative works, and later veer towards abstraction, Carroll Dunham has evolved in the opposite direction. He began his career in the late 1970s painting abstract canvasses. "Originally, it was that I was picking up the baton of abstract painting," he told me over the phone. "I was going to try to do something that incorporated from emotional and physical life, but was still on the other side of any representation."

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Over time, his work led him to incorporate body parts and other figurative elements into his abstract canvasses. Eventually, with a body of work called “Bathers,” which was begun in the aughts, and depicts nude women, their labia and breasts exposed to the viewer, frolicking in a trippy version of the Garden of Eden, Dunham stepped firmly into the world of figurative painting. “There was a point at which I realized I had made a transition into something you could call figurative painting, and it was a weird realization,” he said. “It was so counter to the story I had told myself.”

A new body of paintings currently on view at Gladstone Gallery in New York through June 16 builds on the visual themes established in the “Bathers” — and really, throughout Dunham’s career — only this time, with nude males instead of nude women. “In this present cultural moment, it is still vanishingly rare to see full frontal nudity of men on television,” he said. “You see it once in a while, but it is basically taboo. I don’t know. I want to look at pictures of naked men. I want to make that. I want to see that.”



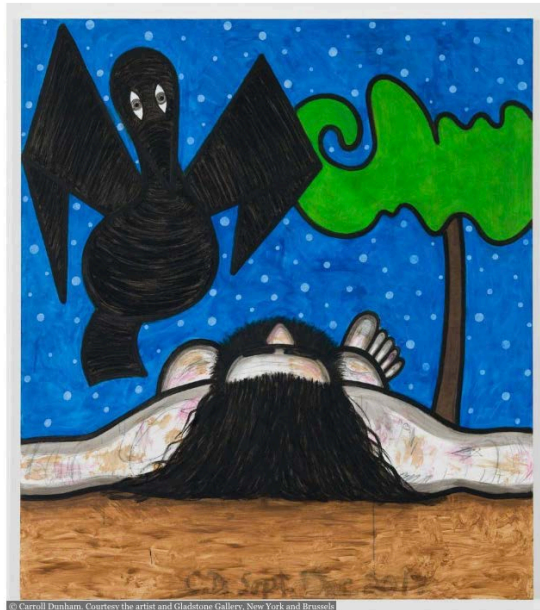
© Carroll Dunham. Courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels
Carroll Dunham
Any Day, 2017
Urethane, acrylic and pencil on linen
78 x 100 inches (198.1 x 254 cm)
83 3/4 x 105 x 5/8 inches (212.7 x 266.7 x 1.6 cm) framed

As he came to the end of his exploration of painting the female nude, he began thinking about how he could depict nude men without the compositions being sexual, or bro-ish, or overly violent. He settled on the idea of wrestlers, an ancient tradition that, because of its association with the foundations of Western civilization, carries elevated connotations despite involving naked men. “I wanted to capture men doing their bullshit with each other, and I thought, ‘What is the most general, classical, archetypal kind of way?’ [Wrestling] is not sexual, it’s not particularly violent. It looks more like calisthenics than something violent.”

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To capture figures of men entwined, Dunham worked from his imagination. Rather than work with nude models — even as a student, he hated figure drawing — Dunham just began sketching nude men in different configurations.

“I built the men out of spare parts from earlier work, just the way I did the women,” he told me. “I like the idea that everyone is equally strong, everyone is equally voluptuous.”



© Carroll Dunham. Courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels

Carroll Dunham
Left for Dead (2), 2017
Urethane, acrylic and pencil on linen
52 x 46 inches (132.1 x 116.8 cm)
56 5/8 x 50 x 5/8 inches (143.8 x 127 x 1.6 cm) framed

He admits that drawing a nude form of any body, either male or female, is bound to enter into discussions about exploitation, idealization of a certain type of body, and gender politics. As much as he can, Dunham would like to avoid these discussions. “I’m basically drawing a human body, and then attaching these secondary sex attributes of categorization. There’s no conscious politics behind that.”

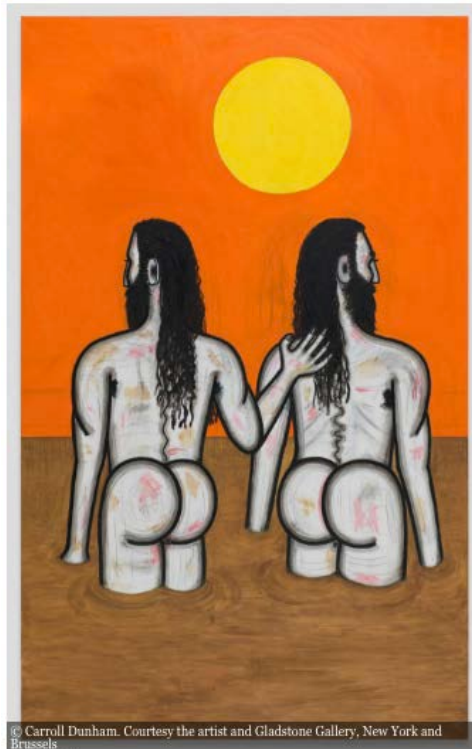
However, he also admits that even without meaning to, he is making a statement. “One of the only critical things ever said about Michelangelo was that he sculpted strong men and put cupcakes on them to create women,” Dunham said. Then he laughed. “I kind of have the same problem.”

At first glance, the paintings are so sparse, and the figures so exaggerated, that they almost look cartoonish. Immediately evocative of Paul Gauguin’s

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Tahiti paintings, as well as the surreal canvasses of Nikki Maloof, and even the drawings of Roger Hargreaves, Dunham's canvasses immediately appear friendly thanks to a bright color palette. Within seconds, they reveal how strange and eerie they are, as if they were pulled from a weird dream you can barely remember, but that occasionally gives you intense flashbacks.

Looking at them, I was reminded of the world constructed by Ursula K Le Guin in her novel *Lavinia*, which tells the story of the last wife of Aeneas in a stark, pre-historic landscape. And also, Jeff VanderMeer's *Annihilation* trilogy, which largely takes place in a malignant alien landscape. It turns out that comparisons to science fiction are apt. Dunham is a voracious reader of the medium—in fact, science fiction is almost all he reads these days. “The Green Hills of Earth,” a triptych of two men fighting while wielding sticks, takes its name from a short story by Robert Heinlein. Dunham specifically imagined the landscapes as occupying a space outside of known history. “I see them as representing either a space that predates civilization, or a space that postdates civilization,” he said. As a science fiction reader myself, it is a delight to enter his strange worlds.



© Carroll Dunham. Courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels

Carroll Dunham

Mud Men, 2017

Urethane, acrylic and pencil on linen

100 x 62 inches (254 x 157.5 cm)

105 3/4 x 67 x 5/8 inches (268.6 x 170.2 x 1.6 cm) framed

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In the process of painting the canvasses, Dunham deliberately made decisions to jar the viewer's sense of reality. For example, *Mud Men* (2017) features two men standing looking at the setting sun in a landscape composed of yellow, orange, and brown. Their upper torsos are nude; their lower bodies submerged in a body of brown liquid. "I thought it was kind of apocalyptic – some kind of ocean of mud," Dunham said. "It's not like it's in the water, it's more like 'ugh.' [The painting] does have this ambivalent tone of peace and friendliness."

Even if you're not a fan of science fiction, the paintings are captivating. It is strange to see the male form so shamelessly displayed. Not only the penis, but also the asshole, the inner thighs, and the rounded buttocks. Looking at them, I was struck by how tender the inner thigh is on both a man and a woman — and also, how much Dunham's nipples resemble that of a nursing mother.

"I think quite a bit about how, for hundreds and hundreds of years, in rather prudish societies, it was acceptable for men to paint naked women, and that was somehow seen as pure form," he said. What if the same interest is applied to naked men, from artists across the spectrum? In the beginning, arguably, you have Dunham's wrestlers. What comes next is exciting, and unknown. The male nude is outside of known history.