

GLADSTONE GALLERY

David Frankel, "Review," *Artforum*, March 2016

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Carroll Dunham

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Eight or nine years ago Carroll Dunham ended a period of focusing on male figures—figures comically, formulaically masculine, wearing suits and sporting cigarette-butt heads and penis noses, their hands sometimes wielding things that could have been pipes or guns or penises again—and went to the other side, developing an imagery of naked women gamboling in gardens. The women were large and big-boned and ungraceful, their sexual signifiers were as distinct and determining as the men's had been, and there were those who found them grotesque, but I thought their exuberant physicality was kind of great. They ran, they dived and danced in the water, they literally swung from trees, they surrounded themselves with foliage and flowers, and their



Carroll Dunham, *Now and Around Here (3)*, 2015, mixed media on linen, 88 1/8 x 68 1/8".

bodies, though schematically rendered and viewed from unexpected perspectives, were strong and imposing. Girl power had come to Dunham's painting, and was welcome there.

Dunham stuck with these women in his recent show, but in three paintings they were either accompanied or completely replaced by a male figure, his first that I know of in some time. An oddity of the earlier series reappeared in these works, but with a twist: Those pictures rarely show the women's faces, cropping them out or viewing the figure from the back, or through such devices as the feet-first perspective of Mantegna's *Dead Christ*; the male figure is also faceless, but that is because we see through his eyes. He lies on his back, and we—and the artist, suggesting that the two are alter egos—look down over his chest, knees, and feet to the view beyond: a female bather, perhaps, or dog. As with the women, the setting is an Edenic natural arena, and also as with the women, the man is naked, but where Dunham earlier made penises suggest guns, or vice versa, he now makes them mushroom-like and rhymes them sweetly with acorns and other flora. And whereas the women are wonderfully active, the man appears to be pacifically sunbathing. If Eve has gotten her Adam, he is a harmless one this time around, though something of a voyeur.

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These paintings have been on the way for a while; the first of them, *Now and Around Here (1)*, was finished last year but begun in 2011. The sense of a change in direction may be misleading, then, but the show remained surprising for viewers of Dunham's last several exhibitions at this gallery. Also included was a series of three works titled "Big Bang (actual size)," made between 2012 and 2015, showing squooshy biomorphic orbs recalling Dunham's earlier paintings of planets and suns, and *Culture as a Verb*, 2013–15, in which a squooshy biomorphic orb threatens to swallow a tree like those in the garden scenes. It is as if Dunham were showing that imagery coming to an end.

If so, I will miss Dunham's big women, and the splendid and prurient goofiness of those paintings. Their pastoral theme, and their fondness for bathing and swimming, set them in a long tradition going back, in the modern age, to Matisse and Cézanne, a history illuminating their ungainly vitality. But there may be life in them yet: The work that got pride of place in the show, being exhibited with a large suite of the drawings that led to it, was *Horse and Rider (My X)*, 2013–15, in which a woman on horseback raises her arms to the sun. To right and left, the stubby branches of trees poke out in different directions, creating visual depth in the same way as the lances of Uccello's Renaissance knights. (The drawings show that the woman herself once held a lance, though it is gone from the final image.) In *Horse and Rider (My X)* and in these works generally, Dunham likes to spell out such painterly devices, making it clear, for example, how he developed the composition's structure, that the branches and the horse's legs have been formed the same way, and that an airborne scattering of falling leaves is a kind of *repoussoir*. This knowing quality gives worldliness to the painting without undermining its fabulous pagan hedonism.

—David Frankel