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THE HELD ESSAYS ON VISUAL ART Carroll Dunham: Eyes Wide Shut

“One more question,” announced the moderator, and a woman in the front row raised her hand. “What is it with all the female genitalia?” There was a ripple of nervous laughter from the crowd, who had come to hear Carroll Dunham being interviewed about his recent “Bathers” paintings.1 “Are you a pervert?” she continued, “Are you a feminist? What’s going on?” The laughter grew, acknowledging not only the glaring absurdity of the evening’s juxtaposition—two middle-aged guys talking while a procession of giant pink nipples and anuses and labia were projected above their heads—but also, an unexpected and curious detail: the questioner was Laurie Simmons. So the meaning of these oversexed images seemed suddenly awkward, personal, even theatrical. For anyone who had ever wondered how Dunham’s wife might feel about his orifice-ideation, well, here she was, asking the question herself. And not smiling.

Dunham hesitated, then offered an uncharacteristically rambling, inconclusive reply. When he finished, it was not his answer but her question that hung over the evening: *“What is it with all the female genitalia?”* Of course, other considerations were in the air too: Simmons’s presence couldn’t help but remind viewers of her own female-centric artwork, and of their daughter Lena Dunham’s willingness to push parallel boundaries about nudity, sexuality, and feminism. But what was most striking about Simmons’s question was simply its candor. She voiced an anxiety that the rest of the audience was too deferential to pose directly. Yet it’s been clear since 2012, when the “Bathers” paintings were first exhibited, that many people find Dunham’s images of women troubling—not just “troubling” in the honorific sense, but truly uncomfortable, actually difficult. “I just can’t look at that work,” more than one artist friend told me.

Even for admirers, the “Bathers” paintings can be startling, like a close encounter with a baboon in estrus. We’re confronted by a cropped, close view of a giant female torso—generally faceless, often handless and footless. Between her massive, curving buttocks are two graphic emblems, like electrical outlets or ATM slots outlined in pink. Again and again, the torso woman spreads her legs to expose these ideographs of asshole and vagina, making herself an avatar, not of chaste Kenneth Clark-style “nudity,” but of raw, Larry Flynt-style sexual display. Writing in *Artforum*, David Frankel praised the “exuberant physicality” of the “Bathers,” their “splendid and prurient goofiness.”2 But a genteel word like “prurient” doesn’t really capture Dunham’s gynecological insistence. Understanding his project means facing the obvious: These pictures are deliberately near to pornography—so near that pornography itself, and its meaning in our lives, is part of their subject matter.

So why does Dunham himself say otherwise? When presenting his work, the artist mentions the inevitable connection reluctantly, glancingly, and always with irritation. He flatly denies that his work is what it most seems to be. “It’s *not*,” he often says—italics audible—“about pornography.” In some senses, this may be true. His work is nothing like the evident adaptations of commercial erotica that we know from the work of Richter, Ruff, Dumas, Koons, Currin, and others. More important, the “Bathers” don’t seem intended to arouse. For all her apparent availability,

Dunham's Neanderthalic Eve is not conventionally voluptuous. She's not slim-waisted or youthful, neither cheerful nor sultry. Far from offering a beckoning glance, she seems too busy with her own arcadian calisthenics to sense, let alone encourage, any spectator's presence. As a final refutation of smuttiness, Dunham himself has suggested a thought experiment. "If you can find one kid in the U.S. who's masturbating looking at my paintings, I will be extremely surprised. To me that's it; case closed."3

The "hypothetical masturbator" test makes Simmons's original question even more puzzling. Why, if these images are not intended to arouse, do they adopt the iconography of arousal? Why the spread legs, the bent-over, look-at-this postures? Dunham's title for the series, "Bathers," calls to mind various nineteenth century precedents, but Cezanne's bathers didn't clutch their vulvas; Renoir's didn't blithely show us their sun-dappled assholes. Rather than take Dunham's disclaimer at face value, it seems more reasonable to suppose that his images in fact *are* about pornography, but in some oblique and even adversarial way. From the evidence of the paintings, and from occasional interviews too, it's clear that Dunham is (like most of us) troubled by our new condition of pornographic ubiquity, and that his work responds to that condition. In other words, Dunham is indeed a feminist, and a "pervert," and an artist trying to reconcile those imperatives within the peculiar constraints of contemporary painting. For Dunham's fans this isn't necessarily news. But there are viewers who see the "Bathers" in a different light, as "a highbrow brand of primitivist pornography," or even half-intended misogyny.4 Because I suspect that Dunham may be reluctant to fully explain his motives, and also because (it almost goes without saying) Dunham's work looks ever more central to many kinds of painting conversations, I offer this rambling, backtracking answer to Laurie Simmons's question.

More than most artists, Dunham's career is a single, wayward but continuous train of thought. Starting out in the 1970s, his original loyalty was to minimalist painters like Robert Ryman and Brice Marden, whose art suggested a pictorial endpoint. Where could painting go? Unburdened by nostalgia or formal skills, Dunham took his mission—to begin from nothing—seriously. He started by doing automatic drawing, doodling in a void. Gradually, like a new planet, his art evolved primitive life-forms: colorful molecular soups swarming with improvised larval motifs. From the outset, sexual imagery was a constant, offering not only proof the work's unconscious origins, but also a link between abstraction and subject matter. With their interpenetrating phallic "figures" and invaginated "grounds," his early paintings suggested a wry, Freudian formalism. By the 1990s, they had become crowded laboratories of graphic misbehavior, sprouting pubic cilia, rude peninsulae, and mouths of all kinds—including the ancestors of today's
schematic vaginas.

In the years that followed, Dunham's art moved through a strange double evolution—biologically forward and art-historically backwards—to arrive at ever more recognizably human figures: first quarreling cartoon couples, then odious penis-headed alpha males, and finally, the "Bathers." At first glance, the "Bathers" looked like a jump, a striking departure. In fact, they were thrifty self-recyclings, an example of Dunham's preference for advancing by recombining old motifs (so that, for instance, the big white "double fist" gesture of *Integrated Painting One* had become, two decades later, the buttocks of *Bathers Twelve)*. Less conspicuously, the tone of the paintings had shifted. The biomorphic paintings, no matter how freewheelingly raunchy, were at least ambiguous. Those folded pancake shapes in the foreground? We might be seeing lips, or ears, or Martian pita pockets. But in the "Bathers"' foregrounds, we know exactly what we're seeing. The viewer's initial experience becomes a negotiation between feelings of wounded decorum and nervous humor.

We might prefer to emphasize the humor, to see the "Bathers" as a good-natured spoof of the male heterosexual imagination. That is certainly part of their affect: Dunham's stubby flora do seem like phallic mockeries, especially the branches and cactuses that point, with erectile wistfulness, towards the central female torso. But the paintings as a whole seldom feel casual, joky, or sardonic. Perhaps that's because their subject, the Woman herself, is drawn with such sober exactitude. Her proportions are odd, but plausible and remarkably consistent. In picture after picture, she has the same geometric buttocks, oval shoulders, ruler forearms, pear-shaped breasts, and long, tangled dreadlocks. Far from mocking a cheesecake archetype, Dunham is wholly intent on creating his own new cartoon species. It's a species whose anatomy doesn't fit into available niches of beauty, or manga cuteness, or contrarian ugliness. She is a construction, that much is clear: not a fluent, idiomatic version of a familiar thing called "a female body," but a rough composite of generic parts. Her contours seem to have been joined together provisionally, as though by someone with a fairly limited knowledge of how actual nakedness looks.

How *does* nakedness look? There are easy answers. For 150 years, photographic pornography has offered us virtual mastery over strangers' bodies. Now, in digital forms, it offers such bodies instantly and infinitely, granting us the illusion of sexual omniscience. By contrast, Dunham's "Bathers" imply a clumsy, stumbling unfamiliarity. The desired body is a startling sight, to be regarded with unembarrassed carnal appetite, but without expertise. Especially in the most cropped, genitally focused, and porn-like of the several groups of "Bathers" paintings, the group called *In the Flowers*, Dunham creates a counter-pornographic fantasia, a vision of adult sexuality as a childlike paradise. It's a welcoming, blossoming world, marked by nearness, energetic activity, libidinous openness, and above all, authorial naivte. Leaping and stretching, happily mud-stained, this Woman shows no sign of sexual self-consciousness, let alone shame, deference, or subordination.

All this might sound a little early-1970s-ish, a little over-idealistic, free-spirited and starry-eyed. It probably is. Consider that Dunham's Woman appears to be roughly the same African-haired, tattooed, skinny-dipping, aging flowerchild in every painting. Unlike the crowded seraglios of Cézanne's or Renoir's bathing idylls, we are confined here to a solitary, monogamous relationship with a biracial Eve. Her masculine sidekicks (the tree branches and cacti) are deferentially puny. When actual male bodies finally appear, in the latest groups of "Bathers" paintings, they are subordinate to the female protagonist, who rides a male horse and raises her arms in a gesture of primordial, queenly triumph. The "dark secret" of the "Bathers" paintings may be, not that they are misogynist, but that they are almost abjectly conscientious—an instance of visionary male feminism run amok.

And yet the genital-centrism, and especially Dunham's insistent foregrounding of the anus, doesn't necessarily suggest an elevated political agenda. Perhaps no painter since Picasso (not exactly famous for his feminism) has focused so repeatedly on this one body part. Why such prominence? In Picasso's art, critics have often associated anus-exposure with a more general desire to splay and possess the female body in its entirety, from every angle. But Dunham does not disjoint or distort his iconic Woman. His odd geometric emphasis, with the asshole often placed at the canvas's exact centerpoint, and even marked with a pencilled "x," suggests another explanation. In Dunham's idiom, female orifices are diagrammatic, almost Euclidean: a line and a point. The biological basics appear as geometric basics. As geometry, they offer an autobiographical link from figuration back to abstraction; as biology, they function as reminders of egalitarian truths. Their message, in other words, is as anti-prurient and anti-genteel as the word "asshole" itself. Instead of compromising Dunham's feminism, they show that it is part of something larger, an unsensuous but implicitly moral vision within which—even in Arcadia—sex

and shit are central facts.

Perhaps that's why Dunhams' paintings, despite their sunny Crayola palette, can seem strangely solemn, almost dour. The flat acrylic surfaces never have any sense of artisanal *matière*, let alone the caressive modeling you see in say, John Currin's nudes. Dunham and Currin are in fact illuminatingly vivid opposites. It's not just that the latter's work explicitly avows its fascination with pornography, but that Currin affirms his own tremendous technical skills as a kind of wealth, a culminating inheritance from all of European painting. Dunham by contrast is a technical pauper. The shock of encountering his paintings comes not just from their obscenity, but from the sustained, willful meagerness of his formal resources. In taking on the "Bathers" theme, surely Dunham, just as much as Currin, is addressing a central subject of Old Master painting, the Nude. He invites the same comparisons, but rejects their terms. Luminous tonal delicacies, voluptuous fabrics and surfaces, nuances of physiognomy and atmosphere: in their place he offers a kind of resolute self-discipline, an insistence that painting can subsist and thrive without all that; that its proper food is not empiricism, but thought.

Without empirical help, thought (meaning line) tends to be clumsy. Dunham's clumsiness represents a giant long-term effort of will: an effort to look away from the vast ocean of available imagery, to resist learning what a foot or a knee or a horse "really" looks like, to accept as sufficient the resources he has, to remain locked in the silo of his imagination. Like a punk musician who won't trade up his junk guitar, Dunham has shown, freshly, how much can be done with very little, how many resonant and difficult melodies can be made with two chords. With its strange combination of subjectivity, stubbornness, and thrift, his art recapitulates abstraction as figuration, and offers us a provoking rough-hewn alternative to our own media-infected daydreams.

Does all this make the "Bathers" great paintings? Can something so coarse, so close to amateur cartooning, be "great?" My own sense of their stature wobbles, in the way that estimations inevitably do when an achievement remains unassimilated. But within the world of recent pictures, it's hard to think of any that are more principled and startling, more radically interesting, than these. In the "Bathers," Dunham offers us not just a quixotic erotic innocence, but—even more impossible and valuable—a new belated infancy of painting.