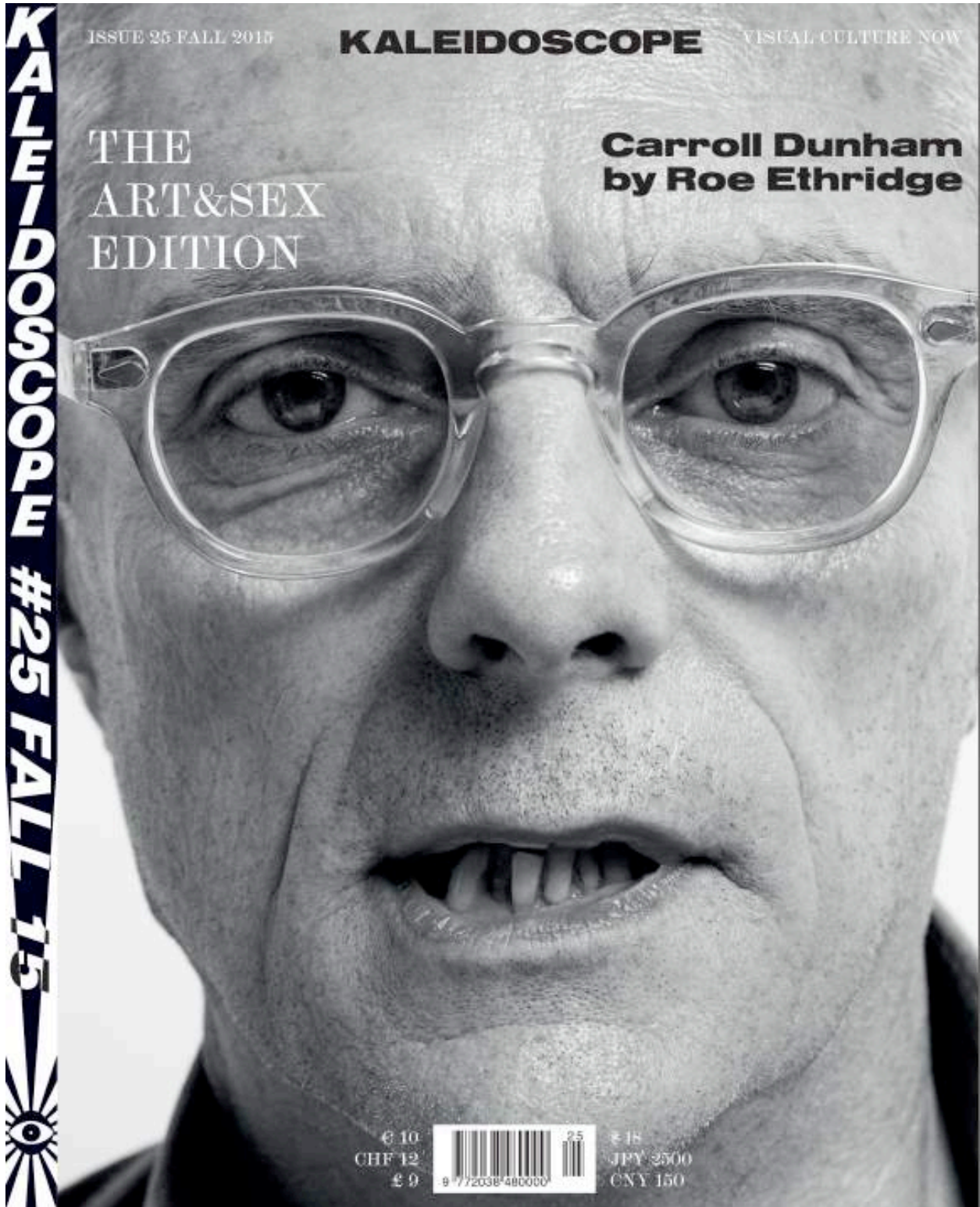


GLADSTONE GALLERY



ISSUE 25 FALL 2017

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VISUAL CULTURE NOW

THE
ART & SEX
EDITION

**Carroll Dunham
by Roe Ethridge**

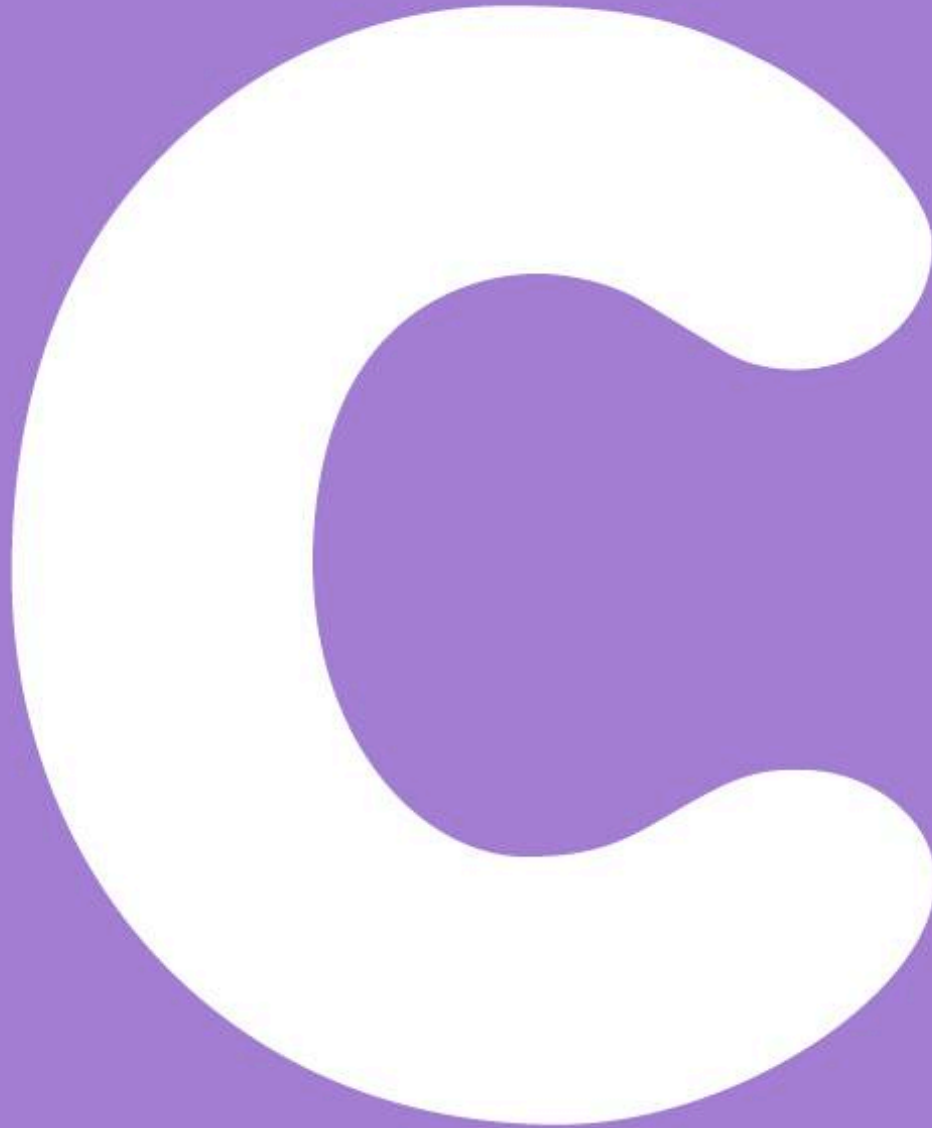
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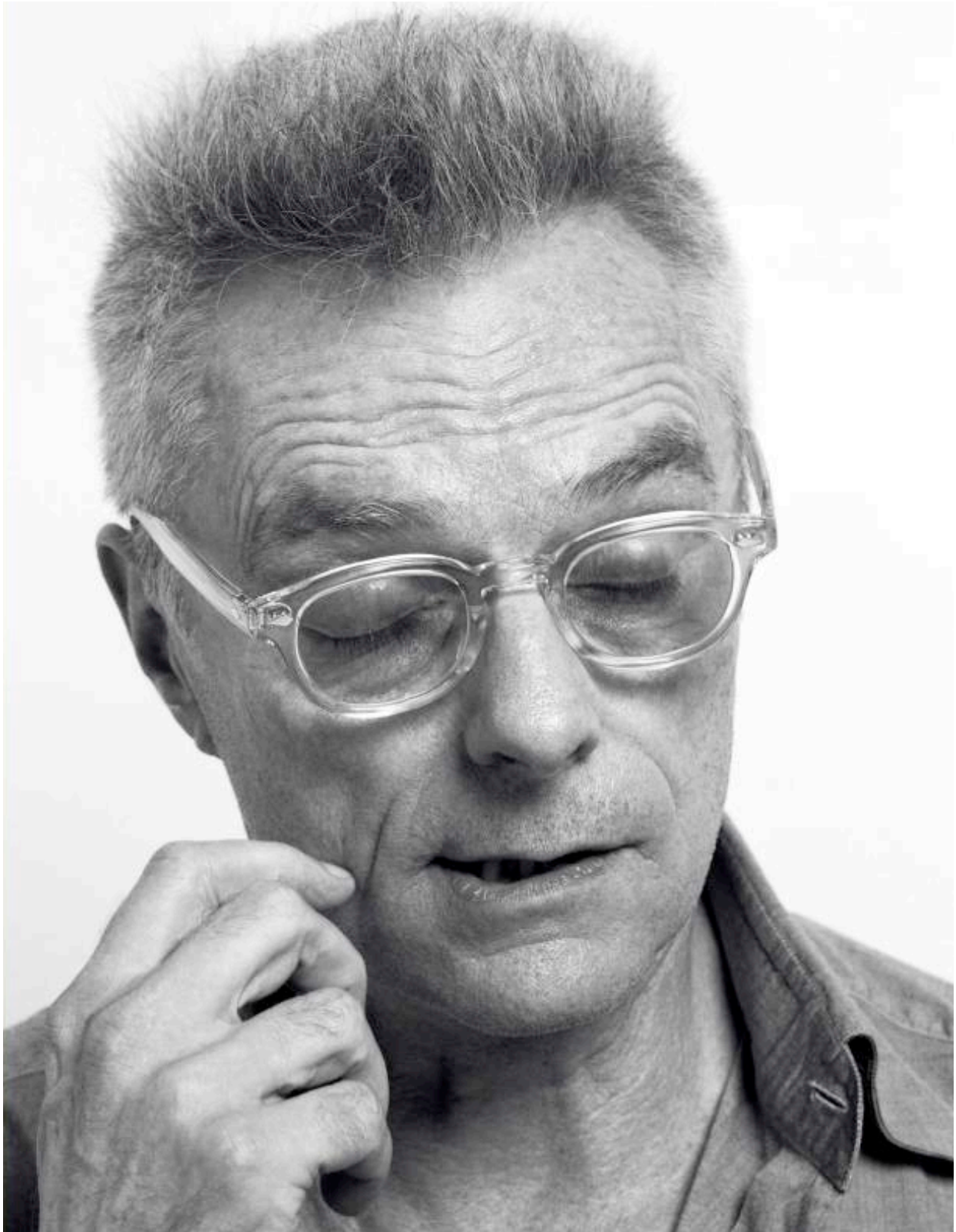
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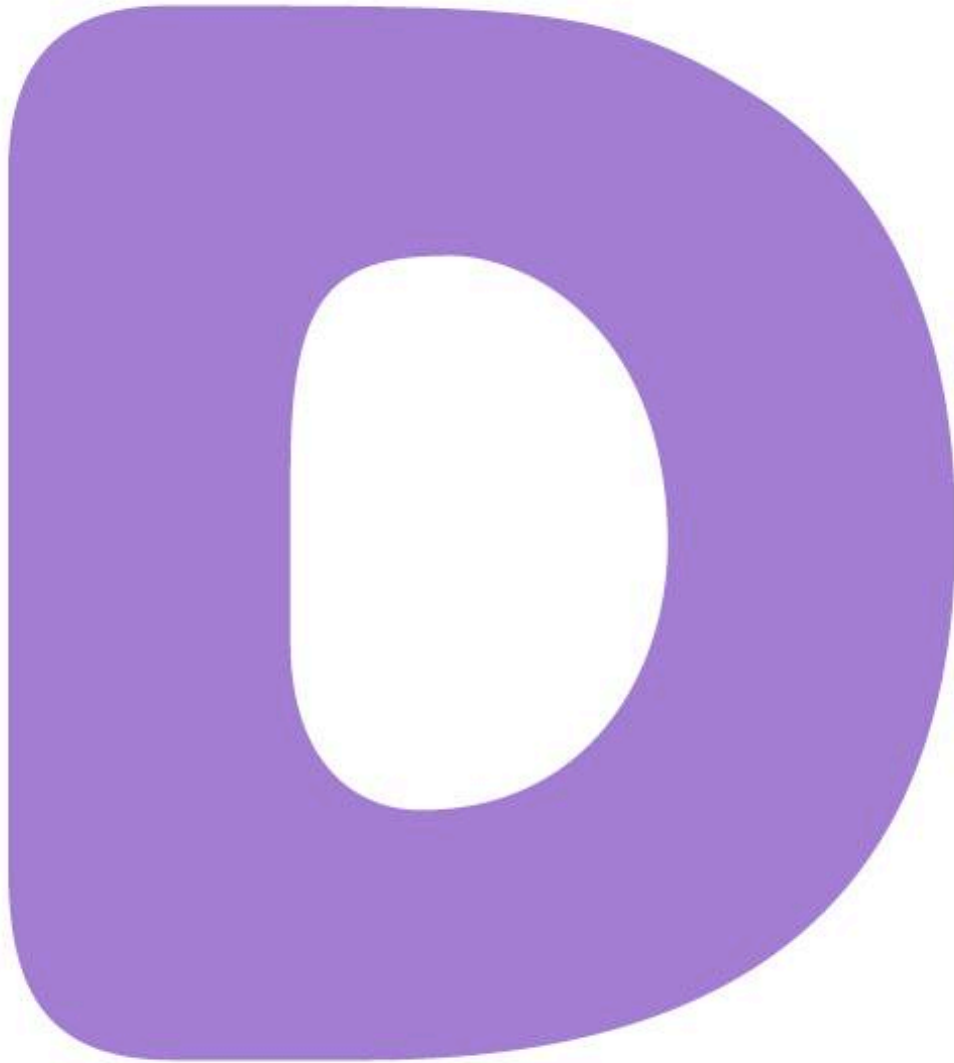


Carroll

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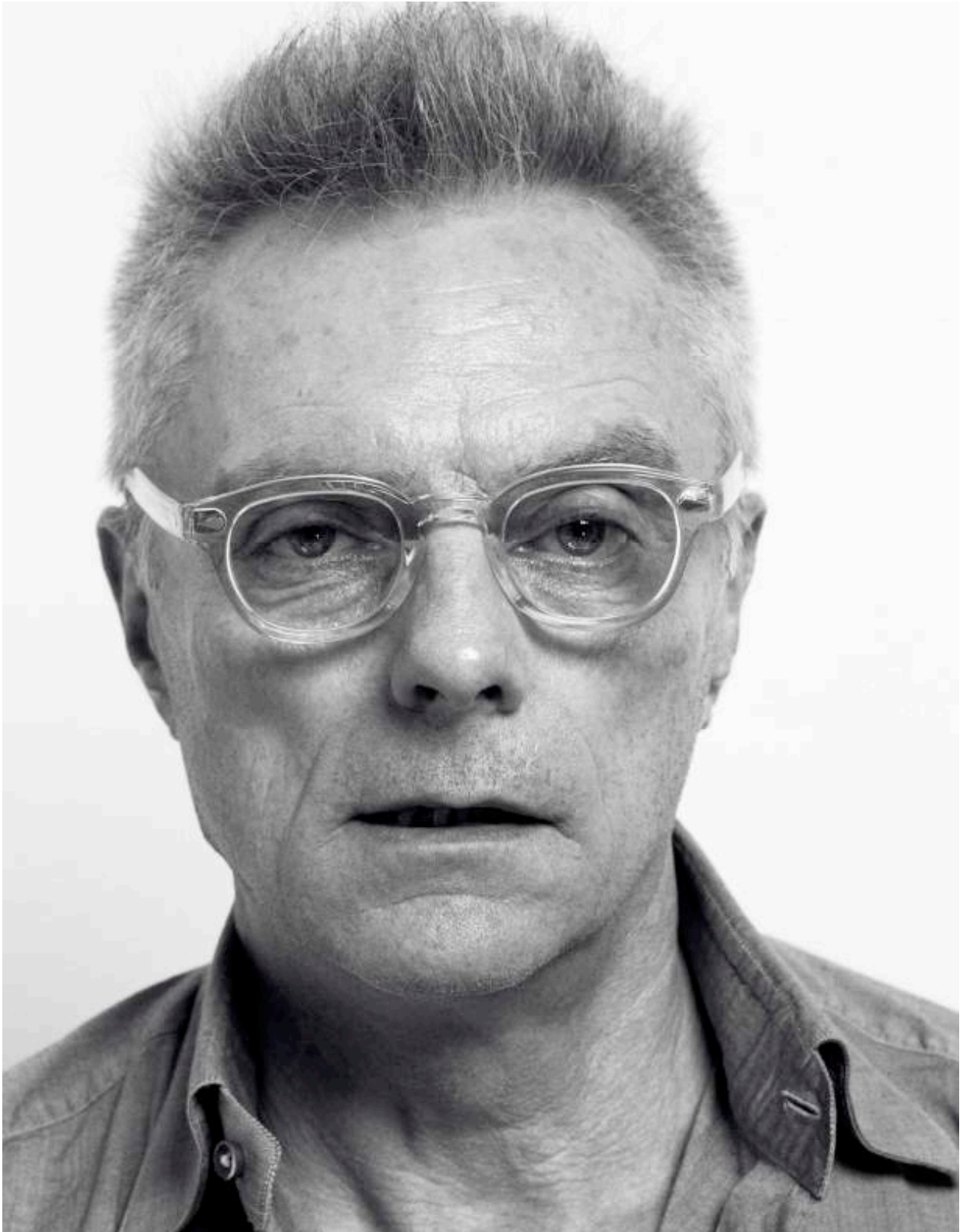


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Dunham

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WITH *an* ACUTE REVERENCE
for THE TRADITION *of* ART
HISTORY *and* SHIFTING
FROM ABSTRACTION TOWARDS
FIGURATION, FOR THREE
DECADES NEW YORK-BASED
PAINTER CARROLL DUNHAM
has SERIALLY TACKLED *the*
DEPICTION *of the* HUMAN BODY
and THE TROPE *of* NUDITY.
ESCHEWING PROPER
EROTICISM, HIS FACELESS
GENITALS CONFRONT US *with*
SEXUALITY *and* GENDER *with*
A SUBJECTIVE, UNIVERSAL,
QUASI-FEMINIST APPROACH—
WHILE THEIR SUBTLE SEXISM
EXPOSES A COMPLICATED
REALITY, *for* BOTH ART *and*
THE HUMAN PSYCHE.

PORTRAITS BY
ROE ETHRIDGE

GLADSTONE GALLERY

ESSAY BY CATHERINE TAFT

A certainty protects it from the shameful—a certainty of which it is proud holds on to it. But simultaneously, just the same, that impetus, that spasm, that leap is drawn toward an elsewhere as tempting as it is condemned.

— Julia Kristeva

“Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection,” 1980

The woman’s back is turned but still she faces you: two ass-cheek-eyes and a sideways vagina smile make an unapologetic gaze; the nose (anus?), an exact mid-point from which a face, a body, and a landscape unfurl. Around the woman, trees have fallen, plants are trampled, yet the sun still shines over a coastal Eden. The woman’s arms and legs are visually amputated by a frame-like composition of nearly bare tree trunks. Her dark hair is disheveled and contrasts with her bleached-white skin. Black, white, and pink: a heavy white breast with erect pink nipple hangs on her right side; the same pink colors her *vagina dentata*, which is surrounded by a beard-like mass of more black hair. Her body is energetic and outstretched; it seems drawn toward an elsewhere, tempting a leap. Is she making an escape or is she trapped there, sinking in quicksand?

The body in *Large Bather (Quicksand)* (2006–2012) is typical of the legion of female figures that populate Carroll Dunham’s latest series of canvases, which he began around 2006 and continues to date. Like this large bather, the other women are typically submerged in water, baptized in a fall-out not yet fully understood. Their faces are always obscured—cropped, hidden by hair, or demurely turned away—and instead their genitals confront the viewer through prominent face-like depictions.

Large *Bather (Quicksand)* was among the most recent works included the Whitney Museum’s latest historical inaugural exhibition at its new building, “America Is Hard to See,” a survey recasting 115 years of American Art. As one of the six curators of this exhibition, I can attest that the *Large Bather’s* appearance at the end of our show—an exhibition with a narrative defined by the cultural and aesthetic politics of the specific era that produced each work—served as an emblematic conclusion to a challenging story, with Dunham’s canvas punctuating the theme of the imminent decline of first-world puissance

(or at least that of the American empire). By the last gallery, where the work was displayed, it became clear that contemporary American art has adopted the zeitgeist of cultural chaos. Hung with a generous sightline nearly a football field in length, *Large Bather (Quicksand)* was featured alongside works by artists like Mark Bradford, Nicole Eisenman, Rachel Harrison, and Ed Ruscha among others, all of whom channeled pressing issues like the rise of global capitalism, the outsourcing of labor, the rape of the environment, urban alienation, terrorism, the corruption of the American health care system, and so on.

Among such pointed content and commentary, Dunham’s bather became a metaphorical stand-in for contemporary subjectivity in crisis. Hardly the pastoral communal scene of Cezanne’s *The Large Bathers* (1900–1906), this “bather” is the lone survivor of some candy-colored perdition. Accordingly, the work flirts with and provokes the authority of art history itself. By taking on the trope of the nude bather, Dunham invokes a loaded tradition of Western painting, but it is unclear whether he is moving beyond the trope’s classical, impressionist, and modernist baggage, or rather lingering in its weird imperialist history, an unintended affront to the rapidly evolving gender politics of the present.

Carroll Dunham has an acute reverence for both the traditions and marginalia of art history. As a writer and intellectual, he is perpetually versed in the nuances of the canon. As a white male painter, he seems thoroughly aware of the privilege of his vantage, yet he may attempt to suspend that identity (intentionally or not) when painting. An indistinct quasi-feminism haunts his series of bathers, as if he envisions a female-only dystopia within a landscape of yonic symbolism (swirls, crevices, holes, and openings). Perhaps not surprisingly, Dunham’s immediate family is also dominated by decidedly “alpha females” (as nearly every text on the artist wants to note, Dunham is married to artist Laurie Simmons and their daughters are actress, author, screenwriter, producer, and director Lena Dunham and writer and activist Grace Dunham). This female subjectivity feels present in his work, though never explicitly feminist in politic or agenda. Interestingly, Dunham explained in a 2008 interview with Simmons, “Because of my name, I was occasionally referred to as ‘she’ in reviews

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MONO

of early exhibitions, which was odd but strangely pleasant. I liked thinking about how the work would seem to someone who thought it was made by a woman.” A kind of “womb-envy” exudes from many of the new works, which celebrate the female body while simultaneously sublimating it into a monstrous thing.

Dunham’s statement about gender was in reference to his abstract works from the 1980s, in which earthy biomorphic forms meld into undeniably phallic mounds and tubes. *Ceiling* (1985-86), for example, reveals a characteristically layered ground of brushstrokes and graffiti-like lines over which two phallic forms protrude on opposite sides, with smudgy, pinkish-white cloud forms taking on an ejaculatory presence in the abstraction. Around 1993, the artist began introducing figurative elements into his compositions, which by that time had a distinctly cartoon-like approach to form and surface. The works had a freshness that seemed influenced by earlier generations of American painters such as John Altoon, Eldzier Cortor, Phillip Guston, Jim Nutt, I. Rice Pereira, and Dolly Preutz. The first signs of bodies in Dunham’s paintings included lips and teeth rendered in profile; crude, warring men with flat, geometric top hats, guns, and other weapons; scrotum and erection-shaped noses flanked by toupee-like hairdos. The gun-wielding man became a central motif for the next decade of his painting; the killer or gunslinger—with phallus nose, top hat, tufts of hair, ties and collars, and strange indoor and outdoor settings—repeated in sharp detail, cropped into a series of geometric lines, rendered in hazy, brushy blurs, and used as a carrier for thick saturations of color.

It’s important to note that his series of female bathers developed directly out of the gunslinger compositions, as well as from a series of paintings of trees began around 2007. The trees—a substitute body—are nearly color field paintings: as large muddy masses of smeared paint, they repeat the geometric forms of a brown trunk with concentric circles of wood grain and a leafy-green shape delineated by black outline and one prominent spiral shape. These trees get digested into the landscapes of the women, offering inanimate companions for the otherwise lone subjects. When Dunham first introduced his female figures, he rendered them in the same pose as that of the men depicted in works like the “Garbage, Ratio” paintings (2006): painted from

behind, slightly bent over, with their assholes becoming focal points. As he continued to paint these male figures, their anuses became more linear and vertical, as if to suggest a vagina or perhaps a castration. By the time Dunham painted works like *Hers/Dirt (One)*, *Hers/Grass (One)*, and *(Hers) Night and Day #1* (all 2009), this same composition had been employed for a female body. The women are presenting their sex, that which is truly “hers.”

As Dunham has described, these paintings have “more to do with my mother and the kind of universality of that: we all have one.” Here, the mother (her genitals) is synonymous with an origin story, and certainly Dunham’s paintings might be interpreted by a mythos of beginnings, blossoming, and birth—think Courbet’s *L’Origine Du Monde* (1866), anything by the great Georgia O’Keeffe, or medieval representations of the biblical first woman Eve. The original nudity of Adam and Eve—the history of the fig leaf in art not withstanding—offers an interesting departure point for considering Dunham’s nudes within the Judeo-Christian tradition of Western art history. Historically, the representation of Adam and Eve marked the platonic idealism of absolute purity, an essential state of innocence before the arrival of original sin. Here, the nude body became a text through which forms of social control were imparted. From this moralistic position, the significance of a nude body versus a clothed body began to express various sorts of social transgressions. As philosopher Mario Perniola has written in his essay “Between Clothing and Nudity”: “Christianity made the consummate representation of eroticism possible in the figurative arts because it introduced a dynamic that was insufficiently developed in biblical and classical antiquity. The force of this dynamic could be directed toward taking clothes off or putting them on...From the first action—undressing—came the erotics of the Reformation and Mannerism; from the second—dressing—the erotics of the Counter-Reformation and the Baroque.”

Perniola continues to describe the kind of striptease that art has enacted for centuries in the service of both political agenda and human desire. He conjures Georges Bataille’s *Eroticism: Death and Sensuality* when he quotes, “Nakedness offers a contrast to self-possession, to discontinuous existence, in other words, it is a state of communication... obscenity

GLADSTONE GALLERY

CARROLL DUNHAM

is our name for the uneasiness which upset the physical state associated with self-possession, with the possession of a recognized and stable individuality.” Looking closely at Dunham’s nude bathers, we are not confronted by sex itself, yet as a viewer we may experience uneasiness, shame, or upset, even within the pornographic imagination of our present day and age. Is it that these subjects have been granted a kind of self-possession in their nudity? Or, as Roland Barthes would describe it, do they “signify, through the shedding of an incongruous and artificial clothing, nakedness as a natural vesture of woman, which amounts in the end to regaining a perfectly chaste state of the flesh?” (*Mythologies*, 1984).

For all the theory on sexuality and art that gets bandied about, there remains a very human instinct that viewing a naked body arouses: the consciousness of our own bodies. Here, nudity in art can function like a mirror, inverting the subject/object relationship of spectatorship. We are made to confront our own potential nudity, our own potential sexuality, our own gender and genitals, and its difference or similarity to that which is depicted. Perhaps that’s what makes Carroll Dunham’s distinctive stylistic depiction of genitals all the more compelling: he’s painting faces where none anatomically exist. These genital faces—eyes crafted from ass cheeks or breasts, noses from assholes or belly buttons, mouths from hairy vaginas—are looking at you! In *Flowers (Monday)* (2012-14) is both a mature female body seated among the foliage, and a horrific mask-like face situated somewhere between a *Nancy and Sluggo* comic strip and the maw of hell. *Bathers Sixteen (small Spectrum B)* (2011) is a similar composition, yet here, ass cheeks submerged in water act as droopy jowls flanking a pursed-lip mouth formed by a perky vulva. The faces are abject, comical, debase, celebratory, and entirely characteristic of Dunham’s constantly progressing aesthetic and technical acumen.

The notion of seeing with “the naked eye” may be useful here. It speaks of the possibility of an unadulterated seeing, a purity of understanding, and a direct experience of that which is beheld. Tellingly, Dunham rarely, if ever, paints the actual eyes of his figures. They are typically defaced with an emphasis placed on the profile and nose. These figures oppose the body’s actual anatomy, favoring instead the anatomy of a

painting itself—the application of paint, the brushstroke, the color, the shading, the composition, etc. Dunham’s figures are free from the mimetic function of depicting exterior original, and in turn are free from the constraints of reality itself. The real corpus here is the materiality of the paintings themselves.

Explaining the work of Kara Walker in *Artforum*, Dunham wrote, “Given art’s dubious ability to really effect anything other than itself, artists have the luxury, if not the duty, denied many others to represent the true multivalence and anarchic lust that characterizes much of human inner and social experience, without the limiting—and comforting—construction of being ‘right.’” To apply this philosophy to his own work is both to acknowledge a subtle sexism in operation and to allow it as a complicated reality for both art and the human psyche. The prospect is risky and fraught, particularly for an artist that traffics in a healthy marketplace; the discomfort here is real and compelling (sinister?). Dunham’s nudes might not exist outside of political, social, and economic reality; nor apart from the history of feminism, without the actualities of gender and race; nor free of Judeo-Christian narratives and art historical canons. But that he takes all of this on through the erotics of desire leaves us in a critical space to question what exactly is revealed when looking with a naked eye. ☉

Catherine Taft is a curator and writer based in New York and Los Angeles. She served as assistant curator on the Whitney Museum of American Art’s exhibition “America is Hard to See” (2015). A regular contributor to monographs and magazines including *Kaleidoscope*, *Artforum*, *Art Review* and *Moderne Painters*, Taft is currently working on her first novel, forthcoming from Badlands Unlimited.

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LEFT
TERRIBLE SUN, 2013

DOWN
OVER THE WATER, 2001



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DOWN
(HERS) NIGHT AND
DAY #4, 2009

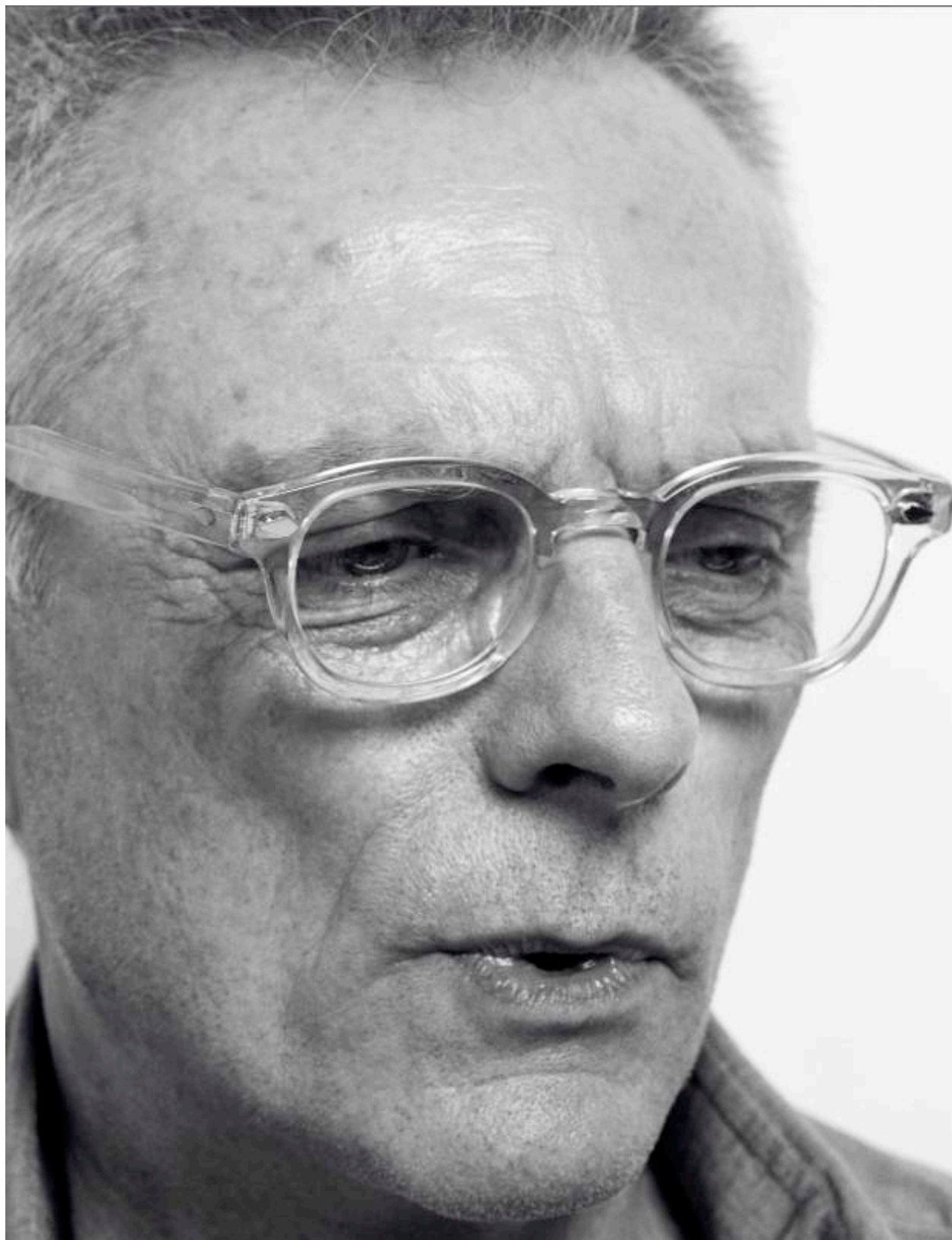
RIGHT
IN THE FLOWERS (TUESDAY),
2013-14



GLADSTONE GALLERY



GLADSTONE GALLERY



GLADSTONE GALLERY

Without
faces,

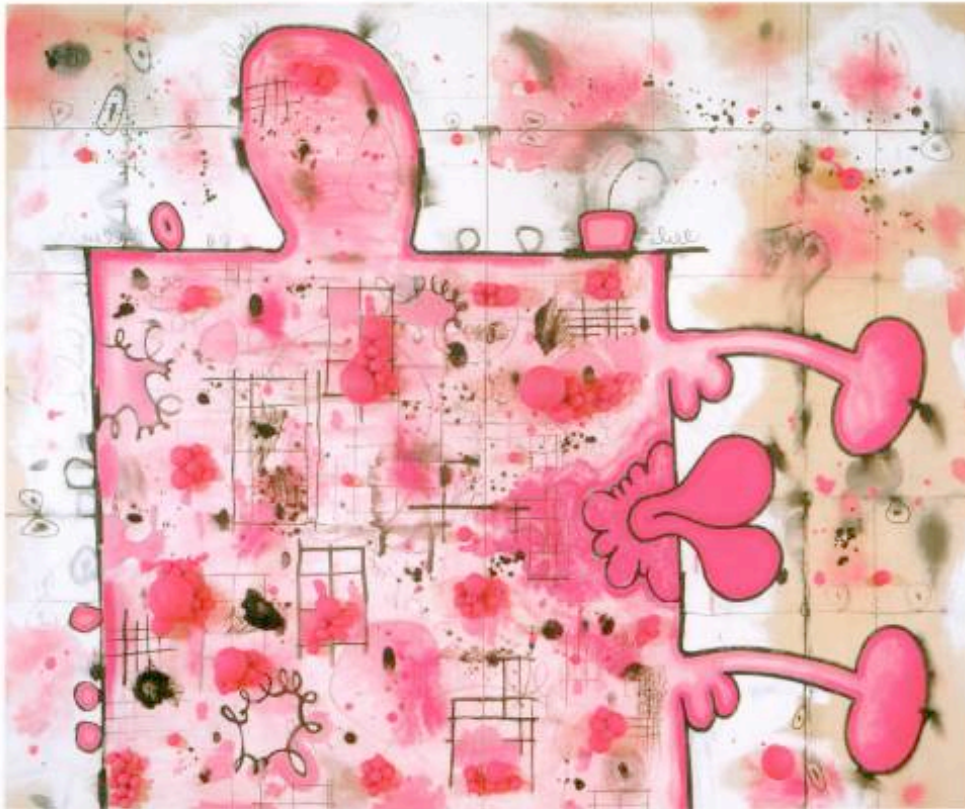
they
seem
more

like
arche-
types.

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DOWN
PINK BOX WITH TWO
EXTENSIONS, 1995-96

RIGHT
IN THE FLOWERS (MONDAY),
2012-14



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LEFT
UNTITLED (5), 2011

DOWN
SHAPE WITH ENTRANCE, 1990



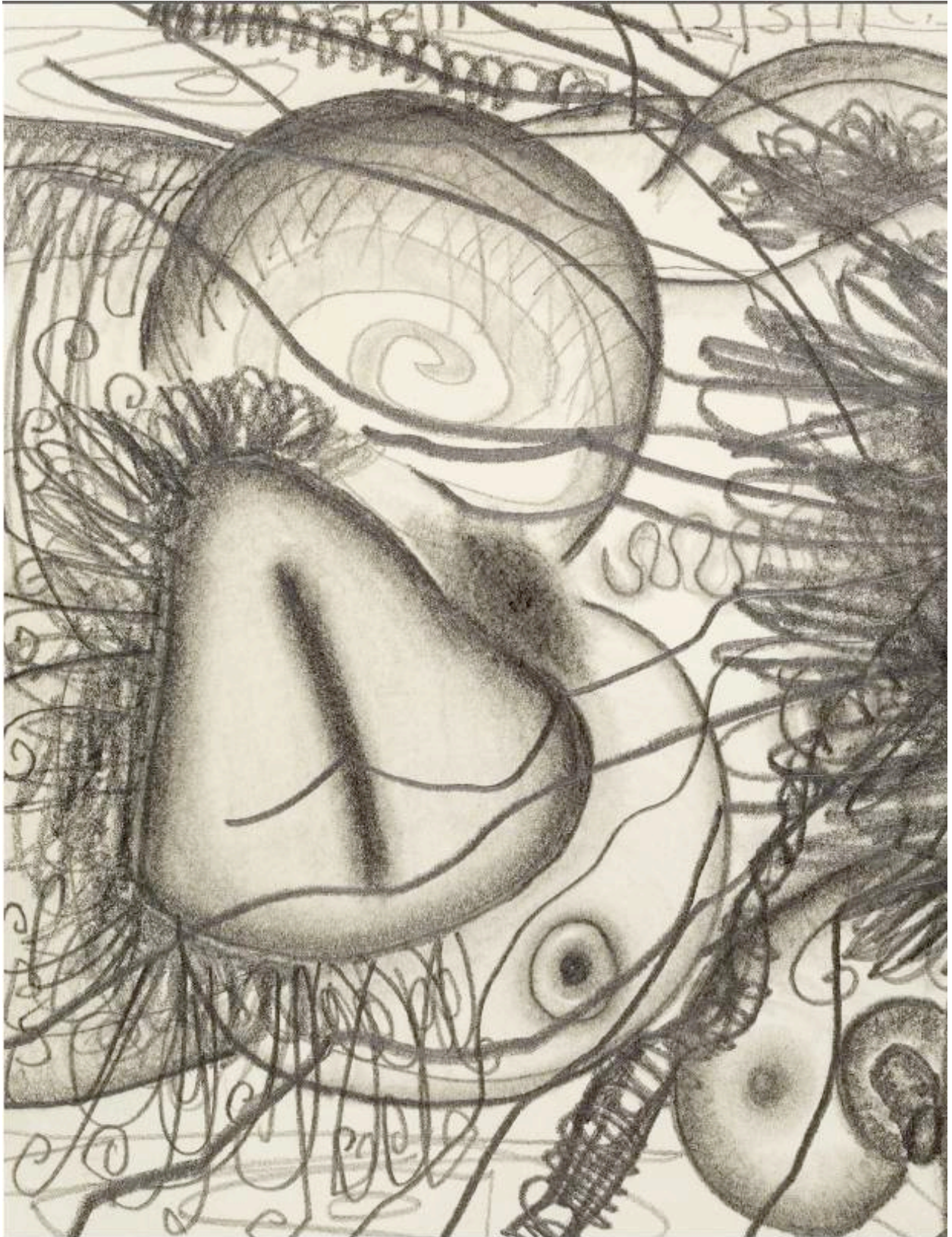
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DOWN
BATHER / NIGHT, 2009

RIGHT
UNTITLED (12/3/11), 2011



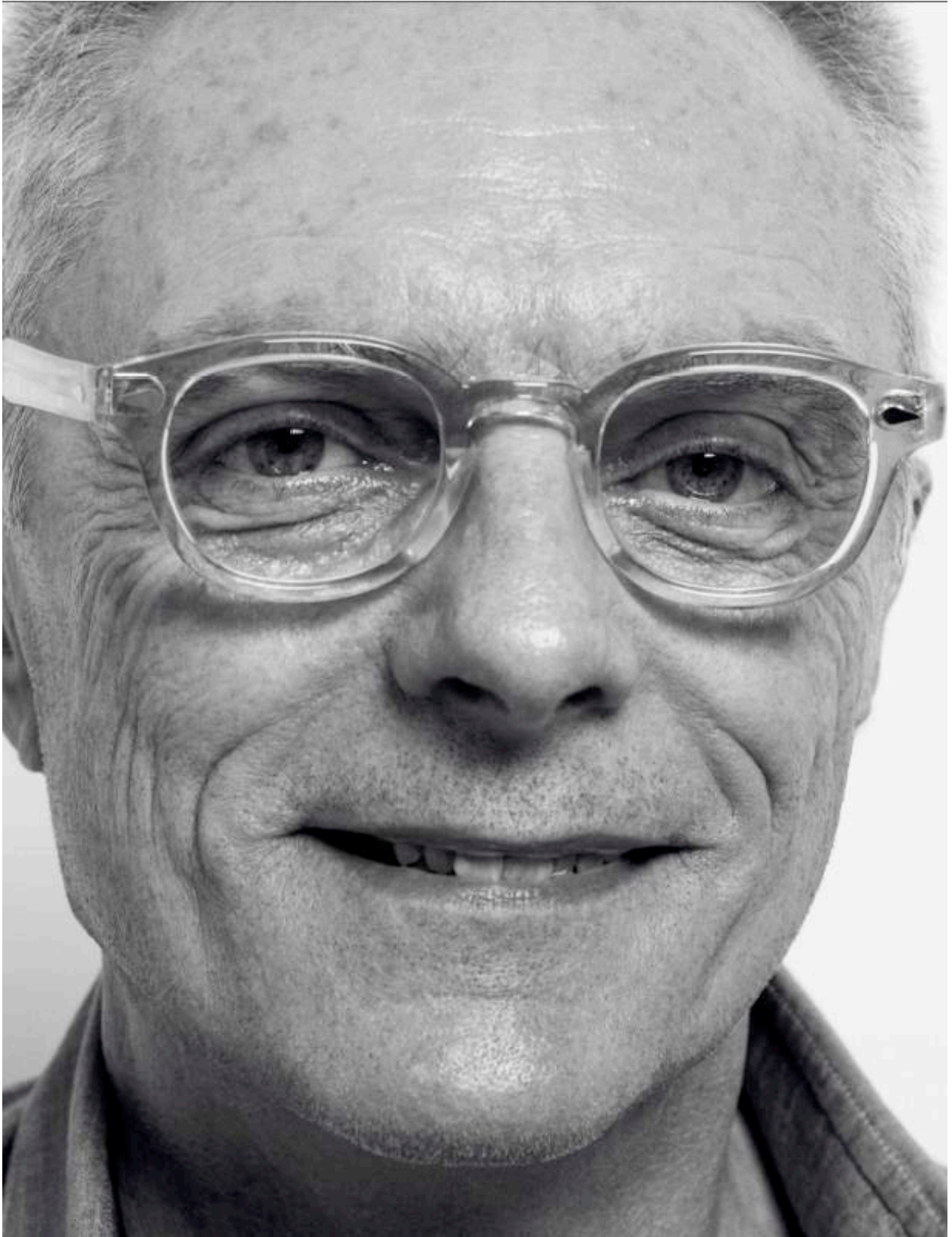
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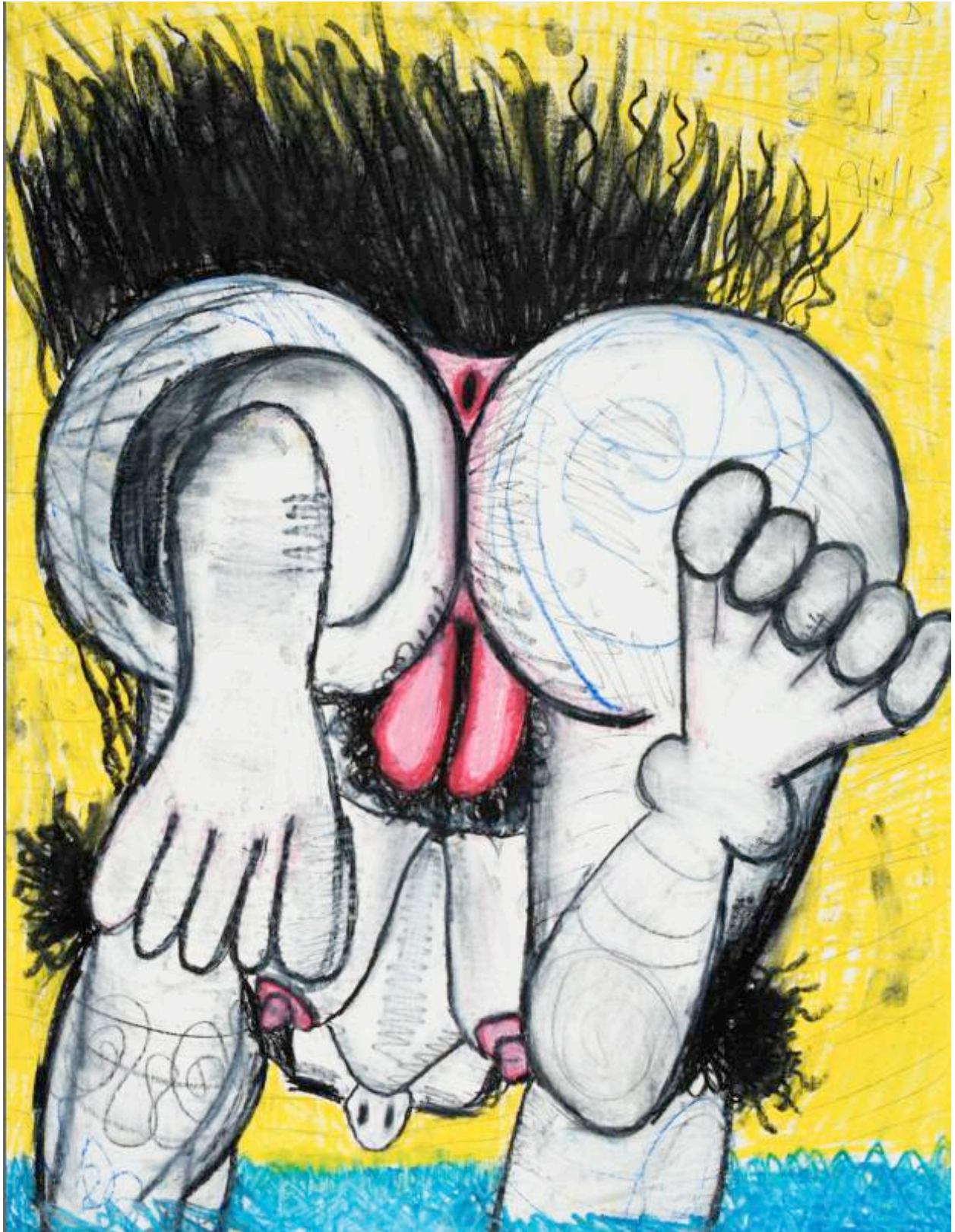
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Idle
hands are
the
devil's
work-
shop.

GLADSTONE GALLERY



GLADSTONE GALLERY



GLADSTONE GALLERY

LEFT
UNTITLED (8/15/13,
8/31/13, 9/1/13), 2013

DOWN
ANOTHER ISLAND, 1998-99



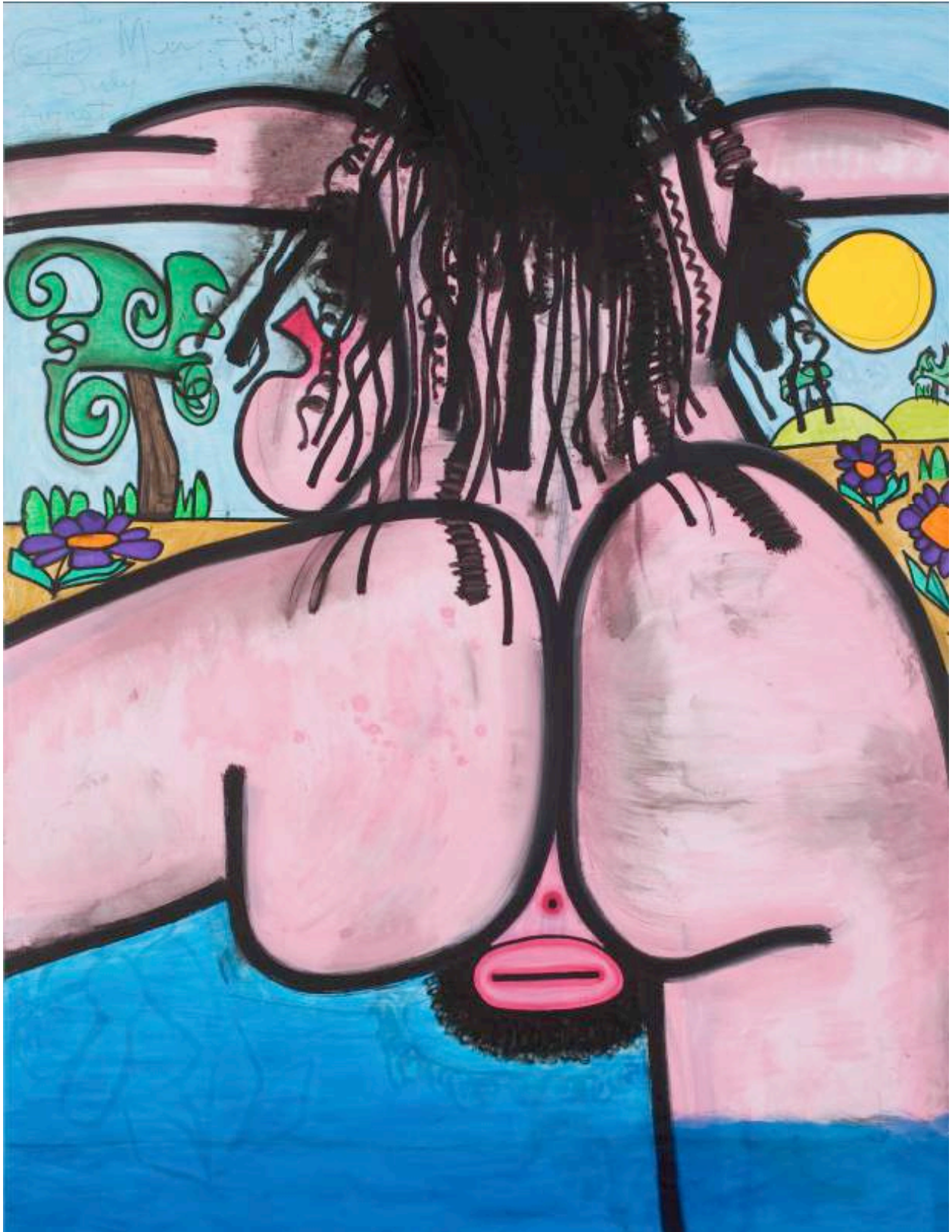
GLADSTONE GALLERY

DOWN
ORANGE GLOVE, 2000

RIGHT
BATHERS TWELVE
(SPECTRUM A), 2011



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INTERVIEW BY JUDITH BERNSTEIN

I've been a great fan of your work from the beginning. It's wonderful to have the opportunity to interview you.

Thanks Judith. I appreciate that you wanted to do it.

I'm interested to hear about your childhood. You were born in New Haven, CT. Could you describe growing up there? Can you think of certain childhood influences that led you to create your art?

My family lived in rural Connecticut. My father had a large chicken farm for much of my childhood. Our house had a lot of unpainted pine walls, which I now see could have opened my imagination to wood as a pictorial field. Also, I climbed trees a lot.

How has family affected your life and work?

The way water "affects" fish. It provides a world.

I find a lot of your work to be quite humorous, which I love! I incorporate a lot of humor in my work as well. Could you tell me about the role of humor in your work?

I don't think about my work in terms of humor when I'm making it, but am sometimes capable of seeing that aspect later. I know anecdotally that my work can elicit that reaction, which I used to be defensive about but now mostly seems nice. I try to let the work take me along with its implications and to be honest about the sorts of things my imagination gravitates to, and I

think the "personal" (in the general sense) nature of some of the images has overlapped somewhat with the subject areas that humor frequently explores.

Many of your figures are faceless — for example, *Large Bather (Quick-sand)*, which I recently saw at Barbara Gladstone, and *The "New" Whitney Museum's inaugural exhibition*. Why are the faces obscured and facing away?

I haven't wanted the images to depict specific personalities, and in our culture, the face basically is the personality. Without faces, they seem more like archetypes.

Bathers have obviously had a big presence throughout art history (Renoir, Cezanne, Picasso, Gauguin, Seurat, Eakins, etc.). Voyeurism comes to mind when I think of bathers: seeing a private moment, catching sight of someone who is unaware. I use the theme of voyeurism in my own work, but I often feel more like an exhibitionist. My CUNTFACE paintings, for example, are very charged and demanding. When it comes to your art, do you consider yourself to be a voyeur, an exhibitionist, neither or both?

Well, certainly not an exhibitionist, although that may be a ridiculous thing to say for anyone involved in making things to be looked at... It's a funny question to me because it's all so internal. I don't imagine myself ever in the places that are depicted in my paintings, or that I am "gazing" at the women I draw.

There is some disembodied point of view that is implied in the construction of any painting, but it's hard to talk about.

In my work, there's a strong connection between drawings and paintings. This seems to be true for your art as well. Could you describe that relationship?

Everything I make originates in drawing. I can't know how to paint anything if I can't draw it first.

When I look at your new work, I feel like I'm taking the view as the aggressor and the painting becomes the fantasy. The landscape is idyllic and the figure is almost asking to be penetrated. In my art, I use the painting as the aggressor. It's fascinating to think about art evoking an emotional reaction. Does your art offer you a refuge?

Yes and no. In a worldly sense, maybe a refuge from the world when one is deeply engaged, but then there are also the various negotiations, inner and outer, necessary to achieve that condition. In a more metaphorical way, thinking about my art and bringing it into existence represents a kind of continuous parallel reality for me, and as such, perhaps a refuge as well.

You refer to your current paintings as the Garden of Eden. Could you expand on that concept?

It's an almost generic name for a common human fantasy, a pre- (or post-) civilization paradise.

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CARROLL DUNHAM

What kind of films do you like to see? What type of music do you like to listen to? Do you listen to music while you work?

I like silence when I work, or rather ambient noise. My painting studio is in the country, so it tends to be quiet. When I work with music playing I feel manipulated.

Like many others, my viewing habits of late have tended away from going to the movies and more toward binge watching so-called “quality cable.” I actually believe that some of this material is very important and “good” (*Breaking Bad* will be taught to college students of the future), but that is certainly not the primary standard.

Where does the stove top hat come from? Is it a reference to something?

Like most subjects in my work, it came to me when I was drawing, as a recombination or distortion of elements that were already there. Usually I have “noticed” these things rather than “thought of” them; then it proves useful and I latch onto it more consciously. Once I started thinking about that hat, it seemed iconic of a certain kind of earlier, upright American maleness, and the geometry of it was fascinating.

When people see my work, many seem to feel at liberty to say anything to me in person. Because I use crude imagery and text, they think that I’m the go-to person for all things sex talk. Do people see you as an authority on sex as well? Does it invite sexual conversation and sharing of experiences?

Oh God, no. Maybe my stern demeanor discourages it!

Do you consider your work to be provocative? What do you find provocative?

I think provocation in a deep sense is more a questioning of assumptions than a challenge to standards. I would like to think my work operates that way. Some things are annoying and others are disquieting; the latter are interesting to think about and the former aren’t.

What motivates you to make art today? And what motivated you in the past?

Ha. Would you be able to answer that question? As the saying goes, idle hands are the devil’s workshop! ☹

Carroll Dunham (American, b. 1949) is an artist who lives and works in New York. He is represented by Gladstone Gallery, New York/Brussels; Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich; Blum & Poe, New York/Los Angeles/Tokyo; and Gerhardsen Gerner, Berlin/Oslo. He has had solo exhibitions at various international venues such as Denver Art Museum (2014); Museum Ludwig, Cologne (2009); and New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York (2002).

A major solo exhibition of Carroll Dunham will open at Gladstone Gallery, New York, on 31 October.

Judith Bernstein (American, b. 1942) is an artist who lives and works in New York. She is represented by Karma International, Zurich, and The Box, Los Angeles. She has a solo exhibition at Kunsthall Stavanger coming up in February 2016.

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