Glenn O'Brien, "stronger than paradise," *Purple,* F/W, 2016

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stronger than paradise

Carroll Dunham, or Tip, as his friends call him, is a perfect painter. Do you know what I mean by that? Me, neither. But I'm pretty sure it's true. He has a vision — a discrete, evolved, impeccably worked-out vision. It's not exactly utopian, but it depicts a flawed Eden that is, perhaps, as good as it gets, in that it cannot be improved upon.

I have a little piece of paper with a tree on it, a species grown only by Tip, and when I look at it, I am transported, just as if I had taken a very good drug — one that makes you relaxed, bemused, mystified, and improved. That's art at its best. It's probably the one picture in the house that I would take down when my in-laws come to visit. It's certainly not obscene, although it has sexuality oozing like sap from its not-biting bark, but it denies all of the assumptions that we make. It says: But there is another world. Look, it's right here. It's private. It's nourishing, but it's exclusive and perhaps even scary. It's the same quality that made my mother cry when I put on Ornette Coleman and the Master Musicians of Jajouka. Hey, Mom, somebody moved your entire frame of reference.

GLENN O'BRIEN — So Tip, how did you get the name "Tip"?

CARROLL DUNHAM — I've had it since I was a kid.

GLENN O'BRIEN — Who gave it to you?

CARROLL DUNHAM — Either my brother or my cousins. But I'm sure I would have ditched it if I

hadn't been stuck with a girl's name.

GLENN O'BRIEN — Well, in England it's not a girl's name. Carol Reed made tough-guy movies.

CARROLL DUNHAM — No, I know. But it's the kind of name you take a lot of crap about growing up, so I kept the nickname.

GLENN O'BRIEN — I guess it's better than being a boy named Sue. It wasn't, like, "Well, there are a lot of famous Carrolls, but there are no famous Tips." There was one guy on death row called Caryl Chessman when I was a kid. That's the only Caryl I knew about.

CARROLL DUNHAM — He was the most glamorous murderer of our time.

GLENN O'BRIEN — When you were becoming an artist, it was not really a time of painters. Right?

CARROLL DUNHAM — No, not in the way it became maybe a bit later.

GLENN O'BRIEN — Painting was kind of declared dead by various conceptual artists and their pet curators. So did you become a painter just to be perverse?

CARROLL DUNHAM — Partly, I think. The idea that painting isn't something you can really do in a relevant way anymore has been around the whole time I've been an artist, in one way or another. So I think it was something I resisted. I was young, and I had to do something, and I liked the idea that painting seemed to have limits. People think they know what painting is, even if they really don't. It could always be something else. And I like the idea that there's this place to operate that seems to have a kind of definition and a framework, and within that you can really do anything. It helped me get started as an artist. It helped me get grounded and get focused.

GLENN O'BRIEN — What excited you about art for the first time?

CARROLL DUNHAM — Well, I had two excitements about art. One was when I was young, and I had this sort of naive excitement about art that you have… In my case, it was Salvador Dalí melting watches and things like that. I always thought I was excited about art, but I didn't know anything about contemporary art until I came to New York on this internship program when I was in college. Then I started to understand that there was a New York art scene, and there were people who were thinking about it really seriously. Part of what I was learning was that there was some painting that was really interesting to think about, and a lot of other painting that maybe wasn't. So I certainly had examples of older artists who were making paintings that appealed to me or that made sense to me. But there was a lot of other stuff going on, too. I can't really say that the environment specifically encouraged me to make paintings. But there were definitely examples that were inspiring to follow.

GLENN O'BRIEN — Anyone in particular?

CARROLL DUNHAM — I worked in Dorothea Rockburne's studio for a few years when I came to New York. She wasn't making paintings specifically at that time. But the whole thing she was about was based on thinking about the history of painting, and we talked a lot about that in her

studio. There were other people around then that she and the people she was in dialogue with were interested in. Somebody like Robert Ryman was very important, and that was somebody I looked at a lot. Stuff like that. The whole sort of "post-minimal" aesthetic and approach were the things that really got me thinking clearly about how I might approach painting, and also, I guess, I soon realized these were the things I had to get out from under if I was going to find some sort of original way to go about it.

GLENN O'BRIEN — But was abstraction a big influence on you?

CARROLL DUNHAM — Yeah. That's all I was interested in. I came to New York in the early '70s, as you did, and there was absolutely nothing going on in what you would call representational or figurative painting that was of any interest to me whatsoever. It was all abstraction. I actually couldn't even philosophically believe the idea that you could make so-called representational paintings that would have any relevance or any kind of teeth at all. No one would be more surprised than the younger version of me to see what I've eventually ended up doing, I guess.

GLENN O'BRIEN — In a way, there was a kind of late Abstract Expressionist generation that went the other way. Right? Well, like Philip Guston and somebody like that, who starts out in abstraction and then…

CARROLL DUNHAM — I was living in New York when Philip Guston first exhibited his — at that time — very controversial late paintings. I didn't understand them at all. It seemed to me that most of the older artists I knew were very dismissive of them or very confused by them. I just thought it

was really fascinating that a 65-year-old man… I think when Guston started those paintings, he was probably slightly younger than I am now, which is hard to understand. But I was very impressed that a man that age could be that annoying and controversial to people. That really stuck with me. It wasn't until quite a bit later that I found a use for those paintings in my own thinking about painting. I saw him as a fascinating, almost sociological phenomenon on the art scene. Then, probably 10 to 12 years after that, I started to swing back to the paintings and appreciate them as paintings.

GLENN O'BRIEN — It always seemed to me that there was a connection because what you do is very abstract, but it's almost like it's within a representational or quasi-representational context. Maybe a ritual context.

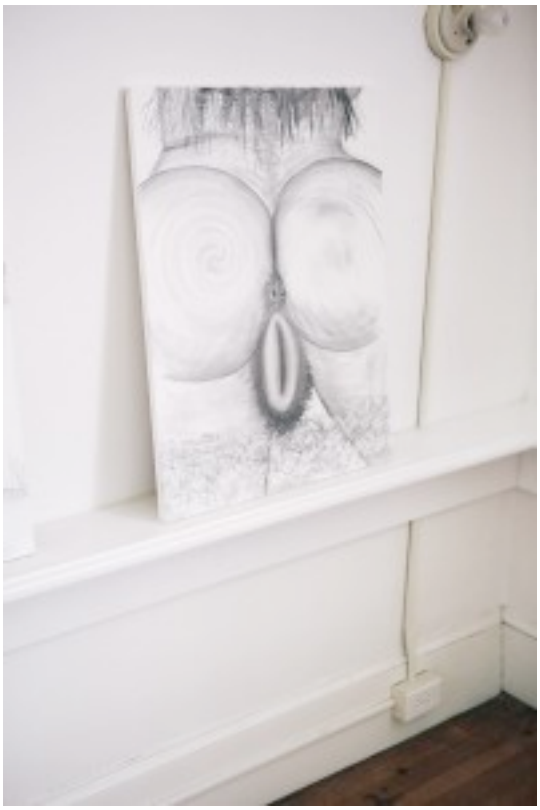
CARROLL DUNHAM — I don't think there's any doubt now that for quite a long time, I've been making paintings that you look at and go: "That's a tree, that's a bird, that's a leaf," whatever. If that means representation, then I guess it's representation. When I started making painting, I think I and most of my friends who are influenced by the same kinds of things, we saw art as a kind of model or a sort of demonstration of some — I don't even want to say a set of principles, but a demonstration of something. I wouldn't have ended up making the work I made, or certainly made it in anything like the way I make it, if I hadn't started with that idea. I mean, Guston is an interesting example. It's hard for me to relate to how his paintings were painted because somebody my age, with my influences, has such a different idea about how to construct a painting. But there's a lot in the subject matter and in the kind of larger content that I find really fascinating. But abstraction, whatever… I mean, our vocabulary is pretty impoverished around this. But I guess what ;I thought of as abstraction is basically pictures of things you can't correlate in the world or can't name exactly. For a long time, that's really what I thought I was doing.

GLENN O'BRIEN — Ultimately, the problem of abstraction goes back to Turner, or especially the James McNeill Whistler-John Ruskin trial, where people would look at his paintings and say: "That's not a sunset, that's not a bridge, that's just like a mist," or something like that. "How long did that take to paint?" And, of course, it was made in a scandalously brief time.

CARROLL DUNHAM — I always say, "That's not a woman," or "That's not a tree," even though it certainly is in another way. I mean, it's a silly thing to say.

GLENN O'BRIEN — What was the first mode or way of painting that you felt was really yours?

CARROLL DUNHAM — I made some paintings in the mid-'70s that I believe I thought were my work in some way. But I had a really hard time working because I had full-time jobs and also because it was just psychologically hard for me to get myself in there and be alone and work. The way that I work on my paintings, I've always been alone in a room. So I think in 1975 I might have made three paintings. I don't know. But they felt like something. They felt like I was connecting to something, and that they would give me an idea of how to continue. That's kind of what happened. I've just been looking at them recently because I was messing around with my painting storage, and it really is like a continuous thing to me, from those paintings onward. In my memory, I don't experience a single break. It's an absolutely smooth line.



GLENN O'BRIEN — That's what I was saying to you earlier: that if you look at the work from the very beginning of your career, and you look at the recent work, it looks so different. But every step along the way between here and there makes sense. Maybe the ones in the 1970s almost look like something happening on the cellular level, and then you're going into some biomorphic, scary stuff that, you know … you hope one of your paintings isn't growing on the back of your neck.

CARROLL DUNHAM — I sort of see it that way, I think — the way you just said it. To call it DNA or whatever is sort of hackneyed. But there's some set of premises in my really early paintings that gave me a vocabulary that I could build on that turned into all these different things. But the kinds of marks I make and the kinds of structures I seem drawn to, and the way I like to compose things and all of that, I really do see as all the same, just much, much more elaborate and much deeper, hopefully, because I've been doing it a long time now and I think about it so much. So one hopes it gets deeper. But I do think that the abstract representation, on some other level it's all the same stuff, over and over again, recontextualized.

GLENN O'BRIEN — It's almost like it starts in the gut, and then it works its way out into moving beings or something. Where did the biomorphic thing come from? The "it's alive!"

CARROLL DUNHAM — I don't think I would have put it to myself this way when I was in my late 20s, but I think I wanted to rehabilitate Surrealism. It was so revelatory to me to see my first Salvador Dalí when I was 12 years old, that I've never had a comparable art experience. I'm not even interested in him now. That isn't what I'm saying. That way of thinking, what you're calling biomorphic formal development, couldn't really have been more outside of the discourse that I was around when I was first starting to make paintings. I remember being in my studio, thinking to

myself: “Man, you’ve got to lose the rulers, you’ve got to lose the measurement, you’ve got to lose all this justification for everything.” Because that was such a big part of the influence of conceptual art, that there had to be a reason for everything. The idea of these other kinds of shape, this other morphism that was outside of grids and Euclidean geometry — that interested me a lot. I also think there was a desperation. Like, I had to break something open and get out of this diagrammatic premise.

GLENN O’BRIEN — Do you think that’s related to you working on wood?

CARROLL DUNHAM — I think my working on the wood panels was the thing where it finally clicked, where I could use a different kind of drawing vocabulary, and the way it connected to the material supported it all in a way that really connected up with these other kinds of painting I was interested in. Back then, the whole conversation, the ones I was in — the premise was always that the painting was an object.
It interested me a lot, the idea that there could be “illusionistic space,” so-called, that covered the surface of what was clearly an object.
And the wood veneers seemed to make that really ambiguous. They almost became pictures of themselves. So it reinforced what I was trying to do pictorially and also added this whole new dimension to it. It’s been a surprisingly insistent subject for me — woods and the patterns in wood, and more recently, these images of trees. It’s really been quite persistent.

GLENN O’BRIEN — Have the shapes always been coming from here? Or do you sometimes see something and trace it, or…

CARROLL DUNHAM — Actually, the real world doesn’t really help me very much, I have to say. I’m not good at that kind of drawing. I never was, and it’s never been the way
I think about it. When I started working on these things that I recently exhibited, I had the idea I wanted to do a painting of a woman on a horse. I drew a couple of horses, and I thought, “I have no idea how to draw a horse.” So I walked down a street near my house, where I knew there was a horse, and I looked at the horse. And that was slightly helpful, but it was actually more like: “Okay, just figure out the horse.” The real world has an odd lack of relevance, even though of course that’s probably some sort of denial on my part, something I need to tell myself in order to do what I’m doing.

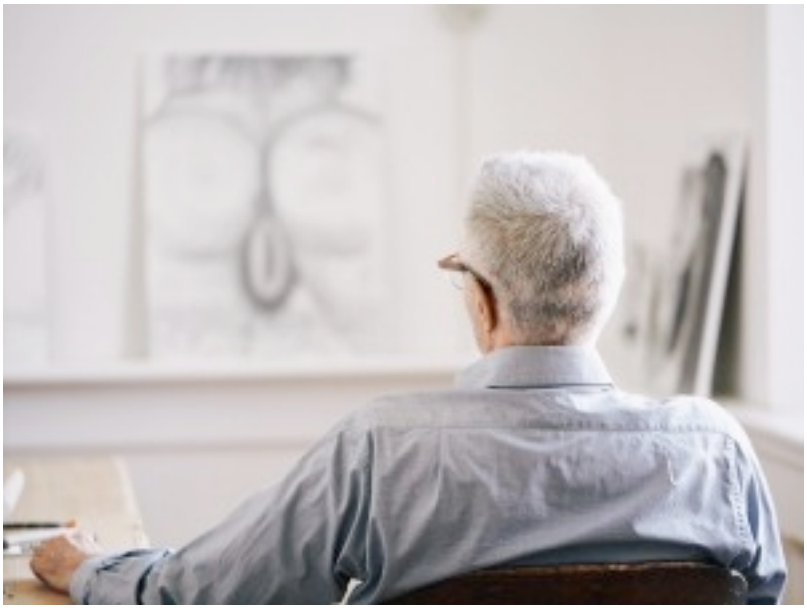
GLENN O’BRIEN — Did you try looking at a drawing of a horse?

CARROLL DUNHAM — I looked at photos of horses, paintings of horses, drawings of horses. They were much more helpful than the actual horse.

GLENN O’BRIEN — When certain shapes first appear in your work, like what turned out to be lips, it seemed at first they looked like blue lips from the Simpson family or something like that, but you didn’t know — they could have been something else. It was only when suddenly teeth appeared that you knew what it was.

CARROLL DUNHAM — That’s sort of what happened to me, too. What became very irritating to me was this… There’s a so-called “biomorphic abstraction” that is very rich in associations. You can look at what is nominally an abstract picture and be reminded of a lot of things in nature. Anyway, I started to get really annoyed by that idea, the sort of evocative ambiguity of all of it… I was still very convinced that

I was making abstract art, and I was drawing these ellipses with lines in them, and saying, “Oh, it looks like a mouth,” and it occurred to me:
well, what if an abstract painting actually had a mouth? What if you really couldn’t look at it and not have the word “mouth” in your head? That was a huge breakthrough for me personally. I’m not making any big claims. It’s simply that that was my experience… It was quite an eye-opener to make what is basically the same painting again but with this snarling mouth. It was the beginning of a kind of slippery slope that led me to much more nameable kinds of subjects and eventually to people.



GLENN O’BRIEN — I remember looking at your paintings from a certain time, and they look like heads. I guess they were heads, maybe free-floating heads. Sometimes they had hammerhead shark eyes. Then I started thinking, “Wow, those really look, in a way, like a Mayan temple.” Something about a Mayan temple.

CARROLL DUNHAM — The Mayans were a big influence on that stuff.

GLENN O’BRIEN — Then I started thinking: “Maybe the Mayan temple was really like the Pirelli calendar. There’s something erotic going on here.”

CARROLL DUNHAM — [Laughs] I was a little confused about where the work was trying to take me, and there was an exhibition that I happened to see at the Yale Art Gallery in New Haven of painted Mayan pottery, and it absolutely blew my mind. It was like cartoonists on mushrooms 1,000 years ago making these pictures. There were so many things that felt familiar to me. Everything had outlines. The way the forms were simplified. Even the way Mayan writing looked, which really looked like strange pillows and things. It opened something up for me. I thought, “Gosh, you could really just pursue this and not be worried about it.” That’s when the things I was drawing went from being just simple rectangles to things that had more contour and more odd things going on around the edges.

GLENN O'BRIEN — Like plumage, kind of.

CARROLL DUNHAM — Yeah. Then I tried to draw buildings with plumage. I was trying to move it around. But it definitely had to do with some impulse to elaborate on these simple things and let them be more — just more active, more organic maybe.

GLENN O'BRIEN — Did you ever take anatomy?

CARROLL DUNHAM — No. I took figure drawing, but I was just awful at it. The first teaching job I ever got, I actually was given a part-time job teaching a figure-drawing class, which was really mortifying because I had no real idea… It's so funny to think about now because now it would be kind of fun. But back then, it just was a nightmare because I felt like I was a big liar. I could criticize someone's drawings, but I could not have made them myself.

GLENN O'BRIEN — Did you ever have that experience on the other side of the equation?

CARROLL DUNHAM — You mean as a student?

GLENN O'BRIEN — Yeah. Having a teacher who didn't know what they were doing enough to tell you what you were doing wrong.

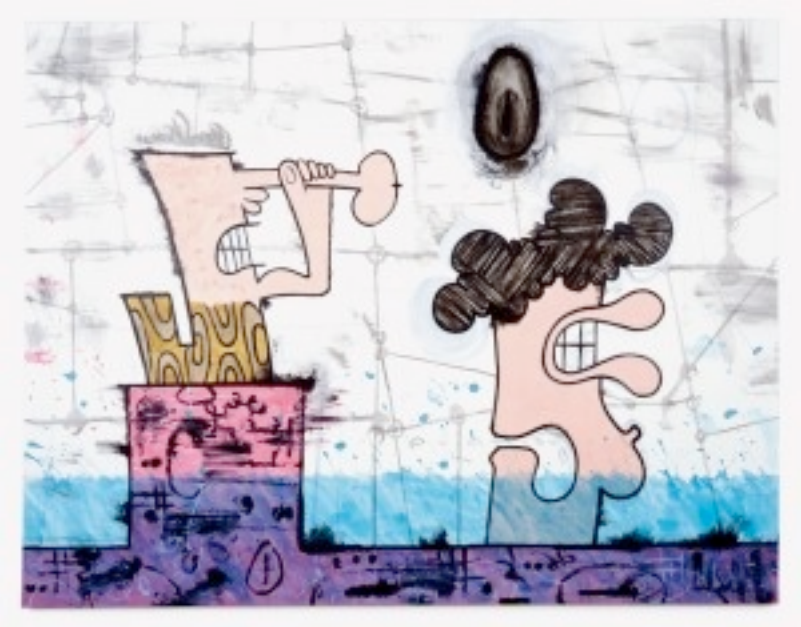
CARROLL DUNHAM — Probably. But I didn't want structure when I was in school. I didn't want to be taught to draw. I wanted to be taught to think. I wanted to know what was going on. I wanted to read art magazines. It was a different time. I had zero academic art education, really.

GLENN O'BRIEN — Is there any sort of Pop influence in your work? A certain character of yours looks to me as if one of the Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers had gotten a shave and a haircut. You know whom I'm talking about?

CARROLL DUNHAM — Yeah. Zap Comix was a big thing for me. I mean, for me and all of my friends, really. I don't think I understood at the time. I wasn't thinking about it like art. I just thought: "This stuff is a gas. I love this." I used to draw a lot, just hobby drawing. I would get stoned in my dorm room and draw — whatever. Zap Comix was over there as a sort of beckoning, interesting thing, but I would never have claimed that it had some influence on my art consciously. It was later that I realized that it was all kind of in the soup when I started. It was all in there somewhere. But I wasn't conscious of it.

GLENN O'BRIEN — But there was a connection between Surrealism and certain things like the Marx Brothers, Zippy the Pinhead, and the Freak Brothers.

CARROLL DUNHAM — Totally. As those guys took more and more drugs and got more and more intense about what they were doing, the drawing… There's a new thing out of all the Zap Comix I've been going through, and the late Zap Comix are insane. You can't even really tell what's going on in half the drawings. Everything is melting and exploding, and it is a kind of meth-driven Surrealism. But it's certain that if there's something called a "Surrealist impulse," I don't know, but certainly one of the places it was perpetuated was in that drawing sensibility.



GLENN O'BRIEN — You did an interview, and you were talking about … um, who wrote The Invisible Landscape…

CARROLL DUNHAM — Terence Mc-Kenna.

GLENN O'BRIEN — When did you read McKenna?

CARROLL DUNHAM — During the '90s, around the time that I was discovering Mayan pottery. I had read a lot of philosophy when I was younger, and I'm no scholar, but [it was] something that interested me. I would dip in and out of different things. I was looking for something, and I saw one of McKenna's books in the New Age section of my local bookstore. I was interested in McKenna's model of consciousness and how he talked about us: the mind and its relationship to nature. I was always sort of a closet Jungian. I wouldn't have called myself that for a long time. But that idea of a transpersonal notion of human inner life has always interested me a lot.

GLENN O'BRIEN — I think the figures that you repeat and modify work on that level because they're almost like hieroglyphs or something that is not really specific, but is adaptable.

CARROLL DUNHAM — You mean in the way they get deployed and moved around in different situations?

GLENN O'BRIEN — Yeah.

CARROLL DUNHAM — I think I see it that way. For myself, maybe the vocabulary is marks. I have these kind of go-to marks, like a loop-de-loop, or an ellipse with a line in it, or a line … something that makes points. These are just these few stupid things that I seem to draw. I guess I think of that as an alphabet, maybe, that builds these sort of structures that move around in my work and have different identities. My very first paintings in 1975 have these circular shapes in them that abut each other in some funny way and bear a strange relationship to the hindquarters of people I draw. It's all the same stuff.

GLENN O'BRIEN — You also have these squiggly figures that are a bit like Keith Haring's, and they're often interacting, but they're more unpredictable.

CARROLL DUNHAM — I didn't appreciate him that much when I should have, really. It used to drive me insane. When I first started exhibiting my work and the first couple of times I got reviewed by critics, they would talk about my work in that context, as though it had something to do with the graffiti guys — I think because of the black lines and because of the bright colors. Kenny Scharf was always mentioned. I like Kenny Scharf's paintings. They were fascinating to me. But they could not have been more different from what I was thinking about, or at least what I thought I was thinking about.

GLENN O'BRIEN — So you didn't tag my building?

CARROLL DUNHAM — No, I didn't, Glenn! I promise. I didn't do it.

GLENN O'BRIEN — I feel better now.

CARROLL DUNHAM — Nor did I tag my own building.

GLENN O'BRIEN — You're not wild style.

CARROLL DUNHAM — No. Quite the opposite, really.

GLENN O'BRIEN — What is the opposite?

CARROLL DUNHAM — I don't know. We're pretty conservative, really. I think that's one of the reasons I was drawn to painting — because you can be as crazy as shit inside of this very conservative framework. I mean, painting is a pretty conservative thing to do. But it can really be anything. Those guys were really doing something, and I'm more interested in it now, looking back, than I was at the time because I was so concerned about making it clear that I was doing something quite different.

GLENN O'BRIEN — Where did the black lines come from? In the new paintings, it's almost like cloisonné.

CARROLL DUNHAM — Yeah, it is a bit like that. It's also a little bit like making your own coloring book. Except I like to think there's more going on in the paint than that, but you can certainly see it that way.

GLENN O'BRIEN — When did that come into your work?

CARROLL DUNHAM — In the very first paintings. All my paintings were, for a while, configurations of a single line that I figured out and that seemed to do what I needed them to do, and I drew them and embedded them in monochromatic fields of paint. So for a long time, really, all my paintings were … color and a black line. Then, when I started to do the work on wood, I started to feel, like, "Well, it can't only be black lines," and there are quite a few of those paintings that have shapes in them that are handled differently. Some have black lines; some don't. But they were always built on a structure of lines. Then, at a certain point, I just gave into it. It just seemed like everything for me

really is drawing, and I always start my paintings by drawing on them, and the black lines really are my structure. It's almost like an armature. I find the painting in those lines, and then I go from there.

GLENN O'BRIEN — I guess they've become more prominent in the last 10 years. Maybe it's just their context that calls attention to it.

CARROLL DUNHAM — That's what I was about to say. I feel that, too. But if I really think about it clearly, it's not exactly true. If I looked at a painting I made 20 years ago, I'm sure that it would have just as much linear stuff in it. But there's something — my recent paintings are fuller. That's one thing. They have a lot more stuff in them. That means, I guess, a lot more black lines. So maybe you're more aware of them. But I also think it has something to do with what you said — what the black lines are actually describing or delineating.

GLENN O'BRIEN — Also, when there's more black — I mean, when you have the man in the black hat, then it becomes really prominent, I think.

CARROLL DUNHAM — Well, as you know, I made a whole series of paintings around that time that were all made with black and white paint. That was a very important thing for me to do, to get color out of there and just to see what would happen with only black. It's probably true that after I made that series of black and white paintings, and I got back involved with color again, I really doubled down on the black lines. I started to mess around a lot more with how wide they were, and how I was actually painting them, to the point where they would almost become shapes sometimes. It's just something that's been in my thinking really all along.

GLENN O'BRIEN — I think a lot of your early work is almost scary. More recent things are a little

more recognizable in terms of sexiness and figuration and stuff. What was I saying…?

CARROLL DUNHAM — You lost me at "scary." I'm curious about "scary."

GLENN O'BRIEN — As your figure has become more voluptuous (let me put it that way) in recent paintings…

CARROLL DUNHAM — You don't find that scary?

GLENN O'BRIEN — In a more fun way, perhaps. I don't know.

CARROLL DUNHAM — I thought my paintings for a while were kind of scary. Not scary — they were just weird. I look back on the paintings I made in the '80s, all those things on veneer. It sort of amazes me. I don't remember actually how I did a lot of those paintings. Not that they're such wizardly accomplishments. Just that I literally don't remember how I went from A to B to C to get the painting made. Because I could never do it now. I would have no idea how to make a painting like that now. Which is kind of funny because I'm pretty sure I did it then. They look a little scary to me just because they're so outside of the vocabulary. Not scary. Just weird. As I said, like "other."

GLENN O'BRIEN — But with some earlier paintings, you think: "Is that what the thing on the back of my neck looks like? I hope not."

CARROLL DUNHAM — [Laughs] It doesn't.

GLENN O'BRIEN — Your recent work, I think, is more voluptuous and sexy, on some level, and seemingly more harmonious. Idyllic, in a way. Especially the one with the butthole right in the perfect center of the painting. It's the Golden Mean, gone slightly brown.

CARROLL DUNHAM — [Laughs]

GLENN O'BRIEN — Am I babbling?

CARROLL DUNHAM — No, not at all.

GLENN O'BRIEN — It seems like suddenly you hit some kind of serenity and joy. The new paintings are less dark and foreboding than your early work.

CARROLL DUNHAM — I can't really explain it in terms of anything in my life. I don't think about my work that way, like…

GLENN O'BRIEN — It's not like the kids finally got out of school and…

CARROLL DUNHAM — Well, I think it is kind of like that. What I was about to say was: I don't remember, over time, thinking, "Oh, I am now married," or "I now have a child," or "I now have two children," and "so it's having this and that influence on how I think about my work." I keep all that stuff totally out of my head. But if I look back, like the proverbial slide show, it's clear that my work changed when I had a family. It's clear that my work changed when I had all kinds of things happen. In the last seven or eight years, I've been spending a lot more time out of New York. My kids are more or less grown-up, and more or less fine. My personal life is happy. And I really, really want to

make paintings. I didn't experience it as: "Yes, harmony is now with me." It was more like certain things just clicked, like… I was messing around with the idea of putting an image of a woman in my paintings, and I went to live in Rome for two months on this residency. I looked at a ton of painting while I was in Rome, and when I came back I just thought: "Screw it. I'm going to do this." It's probably where I was in my life, and where I was in my family life — all of that. I can't say it doesn't have an effect. But it feels like it's all about art all the time. That's what I consciously experience.

GLENN O'BRIEN — Where did the sun and the planets come from?

CARROLL DUNHAM — Again, it was a sort of blending of certain very powerful personal interests of mine and certain so-called formal ideas. I've read science fiction since I was a kid, and I'm very much in outer space in terms of my imagination. I remember having the initial impulse to put a big blob in the middle of a big canvas, thinking it would be interesting to just see if you could make that activate, if you could activate a big yellow blob. Then this big yellow blob — I started to just draw on it and do all these things to it, and it became what was obviously some sort of image of a world. That opened me up to the idea that I could make a group of these things. So I did. I made a lot of paintings around that idea of celestial bodies and stars. Then I moved on to other stuff. But when I started to work with these images of women and landscapes, and these things I called "the bathers," in order to populate this world I started to fill it up with things. They were almost like icons — you know, like, sun. And I had that earlier work to draw on. I could remember thinking that way. It was nice because it connected this recent stuff up to earlier things.

GLENN O'BRIEN — I think it was the first time I ever saw the sun depicted as a female. Right?

CARROLL DUNHAM — I never really thought about it as a gender thing. Although when I was making those paintings that were called "planets" or "sun" or whatever — this is, like, I don't know,

20 years ago maybe, something like that — I was quite struck by how hard it was to avoid the thing looking like a face. Then I made a couple of paintings where I just decided I didn't care. I was going to let it be a face. I think that probably was more important than
I realized at the time.

GLENN O'BRIEN — The scorched earth? It's not just the earth, but a lot of your paintings have this kind of ravaged look.
CARROLL DUNHAM — It's probably just my taste. There's a way that I like things to feel. I'm not trying to paint a real place. I'm trying to paint a place that exists in a painting. So kind of using the most simple ideas of geometry to build a landscape — horizon line, sky, earth. It's always stayed, for the most part, sort of brown and empty. I thought recently maybe it has something to do with really early things I like. Like, I got so excited about Yves Tanguy when
I learned about him. Things that I can see having a little bit of an influence on what this place in my paintings looks like. But I'm not trying to represent any kind of particular idea or agenda about the world by doing it.

GLENN O'BRIEN — The guy with the penis face, penis nose — is it a penis nose?

CARROLL DUNHAM — Yeah.

GLENN O'BRIEN — Does he have anything to do with Boris and Natasha? Did you ever meet that guy?

CARROLL DUNHAM — The drawing on Rocky and Bullwinkle was a major influence on my thinking about drawing, that's for sure. A couple of things came up when I was in my nominally abstract phase of art-making that really disturbingly looked like moose antlers, and I quickly got them out of there.

GLENN O'BRIEN — I thought they had a pretty good run.

CARROLL DUNHAM — Well, anything that really felt like a moose antler, I got out of there. To me. But I can't say what it felt like to anybody else.

GLENN O'BRIEN — I have written down here: "Aztec Bullwinkle."

CARROLL DUNHAM — Well, there you go. That cartoon was magic to me. I thought it was so fantastic.

GLENN O'BRIEN — Then, more recent paintings, where you have the voluptuous figure in the water. Freud said, "Water is always the mother." Did you go to a Freudian shrink?

CARROLL DUNHAM — I did.

GLENN O'BRIEN — What did your shrink tell you about that one?

CARROLL DUNHAM — He didn't talk much. So I really don't know what he thought about that. I don't think I know what he thought about anything, actually. I only know what he made me think I thought about things. Having said I'm a closet Jungian, I think of these things as having a kind of archetypal existence, but I don't go to the point of interpretation. I went to the beach constantly,

growing up. I was at the beach all the time as a kid. I watched a lot of women go in and out of the water. So who knows where it all comes from?

GLENN O'BRIEN — That's what I was hoping you would say.

CARROLL DUNHAM — From a very young age, I was watching women much larger than I am go in and out of the water. Now I seem to be making paintings of women much larger than I am going in and out of the water. That isn't lost on me. But I don't do interpretation with myself in terms of explicating my own paintings.

GLENN O'BRIEN — Maybe it means you have to go back to abstraction.

CARROLL DUNHAM — Well, it's sort of what I was partly thinking was happening with some of these recent paintings. I'm really at a point where I am not even entirely sure what that means in terms of how
I am working. But, like, these yellow things, I started out with the idea that I was not going to have a subject, that I was just going to work with these few marks, these kind of go-to things that I do. I think of them as things that … aren't held together by their subject nature. So I guess I think that's abstract in some way, or more self-referential within painting.

GLENN O'BRIEN — Or maybe universal. I think that will go over big with the Aztecs.

CARROLL DUNHAM — Maybe. If there are any left to appreciate them.

GLENN O'BRIEN — We've talked about a very old-school painting term that's Italian, pentimenti, which if I'm not mistaken translates as "first thoughts." I think about how it's meant to be the initial mark that you make on a canvas. In your case, maybe it's graphite, or maybe it's also the build-up of acrylic. But the allowance of that first thought to remain in the final composition — I wonder if you could speak to it. In tandem with that, the way that you mark time in your signature, that you actually list the dates, I think might be related to the "first thought" idea. I wonder if you could speak to
that, also.

CARROLL DUNHAM — What you're calling pentimenti, I think it has to do with the transparency that I'm trying to keep in my paintings, which I've always been interested in, but now I'm taking it really literally. I've always liked the idea that process was available to be understood in some way as part of the experience of looking at the thing you make. But it wasn't until relatively recently that I got focused on how there's this sort of archaeology that's in everything that you make, and just to allow that. So I changed some things I was doing. This is very, like, what we do in the studio — like figuring out how to get really rich, deep color in a transparent place. Everything that I draw on these paintings is pretty much visible through the whole painting. So that's a real interest of mine. The dating probably did originate in some impulse to show process. But I haven't thought about it that way in years. I think about it much more practically than that. I really like being able to look at things and know when I made them, and know the order in which I made them. People who know me and have been in my studio know
I make really a lot of drawings, a lot of very small drawings, and I date all of them. It's amazing to be able to look back over all these drawings and have them dated, and be able to reconstruct some sort of a narrative of what one went through. It's much more about that now. It has been for a long time.

GLENN O'BRIEN — I think there are women who feel that you are not entitled to your subject matter, particular the erotic geometry of it. A man painting women's genitalia in a way that might be regarded as humorous or satirical. A man who's married to a highly regarded woman artist and has two prominent feminist daughters. You're like an archfiend under the protection of untouchable women. Are you a feminist, or are you a pervert? Are you an appreciator? I don't think I've ever really heard your position on that?

CARROLL DUNHAM — Probably all of those things. I can give an answer to this that really is just blah-blah about art history, but I am not going to do that. Even though I think that's a valid way to think about this kind of subject matter. I am a straight white guy of a certain age making paintings about things that get me excited. I like women. I always have. I liked my mother. I like my wife, my daughters. And I work with a lot of women. I don't even know what it means to say I am a feminist. But it's pretty clear to me, and has been for a while, that women are really sublime… The whole thing with women in the world now is changing so fast and in such a great way. It's a great time to have daughters. It's a great time to be a young woman. I don't know if that makes me a feminist. I really keep going back to the idea that we're humans, we all have bodies. I'm a straight man, I can't help it. I'm making paintings of what I want to look at. Somebody else can make paintings of what they want to look at. I'm not trying to offend anybody. I'm trying to make something that feels true to me. I don't really know what
else to…

GLENN O'BRIEN — I think all we can do, Tip, is to say, "Yes, dear, whatever you think."

CARROLL DUNHAM — But I don't want to do that either. Is that an answer?

GLENN O'BRIEN — Yeah, just kidding. I find the paintings enlightening and mysterious and erotically sacred and comedic in the highest American Aztec Pop tradition.
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