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## Carroll Dunham

By [Dennis Kardon](#)  March 5, 2013 11:13am

A “peculiar blend of slapstick idiocy and gallantry” is a phrase that captures the spirit of [Carroll Dunham](#)’s new paintings. Tellingly, it was written by Dunham himself in a review of Picasso’s late “Mosqueteros” oils (*Artforum*, Sept. ’09).

Indeed, paradoxical lunacy taunts us from every crazy treetop, wacky flower, hairy armpit and pneumatic nipple. Yet each painting is exquisitely formally balanced. Everywhere, irrationality and control are trying to screw the daylights out of each other. As thin, stained-glass-like washes of cobalt, viridian and ocher are often deliberately smudged with a dirty gray, so each quixotic attempt at spontaneous sincerity is undermined by a calculated, self-conscious gesture.

Three paintings portray “trees” in extremis. Toppled, windblown or smooshed, these obvious male surrogates, with foliage heads and limbless bodies, either look as though they have been ravaged by storms or suggest genetic experiments gone awry. Strange geometries collide with organic form. But while meriting analysis, these “Late Trees” are dramatically overshadowed by the six “Bather” paintings.

In each of these, a sole female bather is composed of outlined, subtly shaded, organic shapes created from the painting’s white ground. And unlike the other forms in the painting, she is not filled in, which emphasizes the constructed nature of her presence. Sexualized but faceless, voluptuous but unerotic, she sports features that might belong to a specific woman without representing a real person. Her depiction veers from intellectually formal to adolescently sarcastic, as Dunham makes our point of view feel surreptitious, as if she were Susanna and we, peering at her from behind a tree, the judgmental Elders.

Why bother with a naked bather? The subject seems so hopelessly archaic that the foolishness of considering it is anathema for contemporary painters. But Dunham’s writing on other artists can be clarifying. In another review (*Artforum*, Summer ’10), he refers to the “voluptuous, mad-looking muse with vividly rendered body hair,” in Otto Dix’s *Self-portrait with Muse* (1924). This description also characterizes Dunham’s bathers. Reimagining the artist’s muse in the digital 21st century is the sort of absurd endeavor that would attract Dunham. It provides just the right note that makes these paintings simultaneously uncomfortable and brilliant.

At 8 by 10 feet, *Large Bather (quicksand)*, 2006-12, was Dunham’s signature work here. Seen from behind, the bather is leaning forward, her limbs spread in all directions. Hands and feet disappear or are amputated by trees, the other quicksand or the edge of the canvas. She is formally suspended but supports the whole structure of the painting. A bearded pink cartoon face, composed of anus and vulva with horizontal labia, smiles grimly between her buttocks and stolid spread legs, which could be seen as ham-fisted arms rubbing sleep out of eyes.

Further examination reveals a faint penciled X behind the concentric circles of the anus: the intersection of two imaginary diagonals marking the painting’s center. A typical Dunham conflation of formal and corporeal.

But reigning over everything is the bather’s hair. It protrudes in large tufts from her armpits and spreads out in dreadlocks and tendrils from the inky mass of her head, which acts as a black hole mocking the spiky cartoon sun to the left.

What finally elevates these paintings is Dunham’s interrogation and uneasy embrace of willful pictorial decision-making. Dunham directly challenges high painting’s prevailing dogma of wimpy indifference, arbitrariness and accident, and dares to insist it is time to move on.

Photo: Carroll Dunham: *Large Bather (quicksand)*, 2006-12, mixed mediums on linen, 96¼ by 119 inches; at [Gladstone](#).

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