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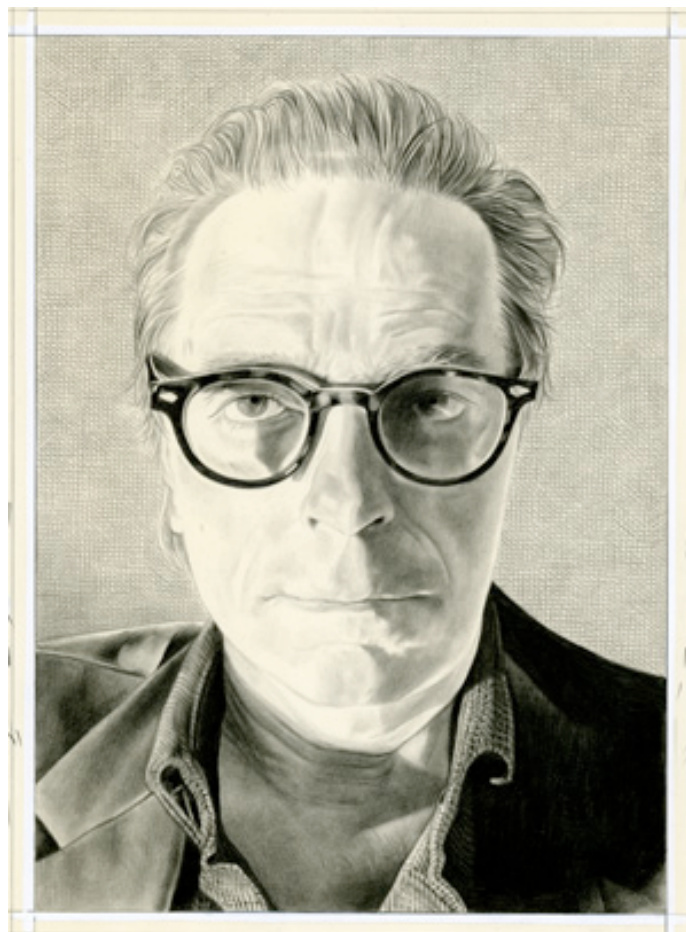
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BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

IN CONVERSATION



Portrait of the artist. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

CARROLL DUNHAM In Conversation with Phong Bui

by Phong Bui
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Just a few days before his new exhibit at Gladstone Gallery on 24th Street in Chelsea (October 30th – December 5th, 2009), the painter Carroll Dunham paid a visit to Art International Radio to talk about his life and recent body of work.

Phong Bui (Rail): Can we begin with the issue of blindness of your characters, which has been briefly discussed in an interview that Matthew Richie did with you and that was included in the catalogue of the major survey of your paintings at the New Museum in 2002? And I want to bring that up in reference to the way you draw, which I felt that Sandy [Schwartz] did terrifically in describing your doodling or drawing as similar to when you're trapped in a kind of mental nowhere, like

Carroll Dunham: Like your mind has turned off.

Rail: Exactly. That's when images tend to pop out. It's a different condition of seeing. It actually reminds me of [Jacques] Derrida's essay called "Memoir of the Blind," which he talked about writing without seeing. Not so much with his eyes closed per se, but while he was driving a car for instance with his left hand, the right hand would scribble on a piece of paper attached to the dashboard. He said these notations—unreadable graffiti maybe—were for his memory, and that he would later think of them as a ciphered writing. And since your characters have no eyes, they have teeth and flexing lips as substitutions, do you see them as visual signs or some other psychological situation?

Dunham: I only came to them through drawing; the whole thing evolved visually. So there was never any question of my having a preconception of what I was going to be illustrating. As I've pointed out in the past, it isn't precisely that they're blind—it's just that they never developed eyes [*laughter*]. There is no particular metaphor about blindness in my mind; it's just that when I tried to draw characters in my work with eyes they didn't feel comfortable as part of the image, so I had to eliminate that feature altogether. What it means psychologically or how one might extrapolate a story from that isn't on my mind when I'm working.

Rail: Does that mean that since it's blind it therefore reaches out physically into space as a tactile condition?

Dunham: Well I had gradually developed and worked on that male icon about eight or nine years ago, then stayed with it much longer than I had anticipated. When it presented itself prominently, I realized it was something I had to work my way through rather than ignore. I started using it as the point of organization for all of the things I was composing, starting with many little drawings, which I would do over and over again, trying to understand its characteristics, and then worked my way up to big paintings. There were some visual environments that had fairly complex space and others that were almost pure field, yet they all allowed room for him to be part of the pictorial whole, and I don't quite know what that means.

Rail: Also, in [George] Berkeley's "Essay on the New Field of Vision" he proposes that spatial experience was predominantly a tactile phenomenon. Let's say a man born blind being made to see would at first have no idea of distance by sight. Yet the objects intromitted by sight would seem to him no more than a set of thoughts or sensations, each as near to him as the perceptions that already existed within him, which really means: emotion. It's pretty intense to see those figures without eyes moving about in their strange physiognomies, and finding their ways through space as if there is a spatial component to tactile experience. And such tactile experience informs to see more effectively, even when we're blind. Wouldn't you agree?

Dunham: I think that idea makes sense to me as you describe it in general terms, though I don't quite know what application it has to my work, other than perhaps my sculpture. And that did get me thinking differently about space as a physical situation, which involves more of those conditions, but for the most part I see my paintings being flat; they have no real space. Most of what happens occurs back and forth across a flat surface, and in my experience I don't spend a lot of time projecting my psyche into my painting spatially. I project more, I suppose, onto the materials, onto the linear construction and other issues more than I do the space.

Rail: Certainly now with the recent body of work from the last two or three years where the linearity becomes more pronounced. Just to go back to the beginning, you went to Andover, where a group of distinguished and older alumni including Frank Stella, Carle Andre, Hollis Frampton, and a few others have gone. What was your experience there as a student?

Dunham: There were some excellent art teachers at Andover, though most people think of it as George Bush's prep school. It was actually very progressive compared to most boarding schools today, which would seem progressive on the surface but they in fact have become much more politically correct. The teachers I had were remarkably erudite and complex thinkers, and I know in hindsight it had a huge effect on me even though at the time I wasn't that aware of it.

Rail: Did you know then that you were going to be an artist?

Dunham: No, not at all. Then I was very interested in photography.

Rail: What sort of photography were you interested in?

Dunham: Mostly the school of Edward Weston and Minor White. We were exposed to working with a 4 × 5 view camera, which was quite advanced for a high school. We were taught to think about various conceptual approaches in recent art history, which I didn't actually encounter again until I was out of college. In many ways it was a huge jump intellectually, at least in providing ways to grapple with contemporary art, but I never saw myself as an artist until much later.

Rail: But while you were at Trinity College you met Terence La Noue, who was very visible in the late 80s.

Dunham: La Noue was one of the teachers, and there was another teacher, a German artist named Dieter Froese, who has since died. They were about the same age, and 10 or 12 years older than I was. For a college kid they were still young enough adults to be relatable to in some way but far enough into their own work that they could impart useful advice. They were also the first practicing artists that I met.

Rail: Were you making paintings then?

Dunham: Short answer: No. I was only attempting to understand the landscape I had been born into and that didn't really include the idea of painting yet for me; however we were encouraged to come down to New York every month and look at art shows and the galleries in SoHo, which had just started to move downtown then. That was back when there were still Whitney Annuals, and it was a very different scene. It was those trips that gave me more of a sense of the atmosphere of the art world for the first time.

Rail: While you were in college didn't you take a summer working for Dorothea Rockburne, as her assistant?

Dunham: Well, La Noue organized this program that had no precedent in the history of Trinity College. He selected a group of his most avid art students and arranged for them to come to live in New York for a semester, what we now call "internships", where all of us would work either at architect's offices or with artists. Luckily, he arranged for me to be Dorothea's assistant for three months. I worked for Dorothea a couple days a week, then we would spend the other two days at a big loft on Broome Street, which La Noue had rented for us. That was our group studio where we would criticize what we were doing and exchange stories about our internship experiences. The rest of the time we were sort of exploring the cultural life of the city on our own while making our work. It was an amazing experience to have when you were 21.

Rail: And you did come back to work for Dorothea once you graduated?

Dunham: Yes I did. It was really a combination of having La Noue as a teacher and having the experience of meeting Dorothea and her artist friends that gave me a sense of what an artist's life consisted of. That felt like the beginning of my actual art education, which is similar to what most students get out of graduate schools nowadays. I was very lucky that Dorothea actually had extremely creative ideas of how to make use of an assistant. It was not just doing her errands, I mean there was that part of it, obviously,

but because of the nature of what she was doing at the time, it required a lot of physical involvement with her thinking process and the use of materials.

Rail: You're talking about between 1970 to '73 when she was showing with Bykert Gallery.

Dunham: Yes, and the main part of my time with her was the tail end of the work she was doing with the big rolls of paper, chipboard and crude oil, and then again when she was working on the "Drawing which Makes Itself" series.

Rail: I know that you didn't really exhibit until the early 80s, so what were you doing during the interval?

Dunham: Well I was always working on my paintings but I had different jobs. I went from being a lousy carpenter to a cabdriver to a picture framer. That was basically my arc for a while, and then I eventually got a job as a magazine layout artist, which gave me a much better schedule for my own work. I worked three days really hard and then had four days off, so it was a great schedule for an artist. I was finally able to get some traction in my work, where I was able to make something and then follow up on it with some sort of intention.

Rail: About your "Wood" paintings, in addition to the explosive use of color, the biomorphic forms were viscerally painted along with a variety of mark makings while allowing background and foreground to move back and forth. There's a certain inherent embrace of automatism—

Dunham: There was a return of interest in Surrealism that was shared by a number of artists at that time. Although it took different forms, my interest did perhaps lean a bit more towards the automatistic part of it. There were others like Peter Schuyff, whose work was more connected to the hyper real, Tanguy side of Surrealism, while George Condo was maybe somewhere in between. Basically I think you go through a period where you're trying to shed interests and influences that you think are trivial and take onboard the ones you think are more profound. This involves throwing a lot of babies out with the bathwater when you're young, and then maybe you go further into your work, and you get a little more clear on what your territory is, and some of those earlier interests can come back in another form.

Rail: I'm also thinking about the way in which the "Wood" paintings were done in a vertical format. Were you thinking about them being subjective?

Dunham: I never have quite understood why they needed to be that way, except for the fact that they felt better as verticals. And the next group of paintings I made, which took up the following several years, was all horizontal.

Rail: The "Shape" paintings?

Dunham: Yes, which can be seen as some sort of counterbalance maybe, but I can't really explain.

Rail: In thinking of La Noue's work, which is very highly textural with elements of collage and occasionally includes strong vertical bands along with color diagrams, I wonder what your thoughts are about his work in relation to your "Wood" paintings?

Dunham: The thing that I really found fascinating about his work, and still do, is that the paintings were never as he saw them while he was working on them. They were castings of latex rubber that had been dyed with pigment, poured and painted on his studio floor. It's a strange and rich pictorial experience in that the artist is more or less blind until it actually exists. I found that really interesting. The other thing is that he was one of the few artists at the time who was embracing all of the ideas in what we call "process art"—the physical side of what you've made—but attempting something more lyrical and rich with associations. I think it was quite special and unusual, and I've thought a lot about it over the years.

Rail: I know he had a strong interest in Eurocentric tribal cultures.

Dunham: Yes, and there was a strong feeling of that in his work.

Rail: As you described earlier about the “Wood” paintings being in vertical form, then inclined to the horizontal insistence in the “Shape” paintings, it occurred to me that every time you do something very complex in one body of work, you tend to simplify in the next one. As in the changes that took place from the “Wood” paintings to the “Shape,” not only just the format orientation, going from vertical to horizontal, but also the shift that took place from various scattered images to monolithic imagery. They’re rather simple in forms but quite monumental in scale.

Dunham: That was the intention. I think the “Wood” paintings were the first body of work I made that I felt was really self-generating, but inevitably there is a feeling that it’s all gotten a little stale and formulaic. This can be very discouraging. I felt I couldn’t really go forward in the terms I had set for myself, so I basically stopped working on paintings for a while and did a lot of drawing. Most of the time I realize that the key to the next paintings is already present in the previous ones; I just have to see it.

Rail: That’s how from the monolithic image in the “Shape” paintings came forth the “Group” paintings, the sprouting off of its body parts where the image and the field become more integrated, and the color turns louder and more expressive.

Dunham: I suppose so. It was a shape that was sort of odd in the vocabulary of the things I was doing but seemed to have a lot to offer for further exploration. In terms of color, I thought of it then as an act of will. This color goes here because I say so. Purple looks good next to green and pink because I put it there. That was really the logic behind those paintings. I wanted, in a way, to push it past a place where I could really understand what all the relationships were. Also they were influenced by making lithographs: very flat, and thinly painted; the color is mixed through layering of transparent sheets of color, not really mixing color in the normal sense.

Rail: And from there emerge the “Mound” painting series, where the images tend to be centralized and assert a strong visual distinction between inside and outside, figure/ground relationship, in some way becoming more figural.

Dunham: What felt like a big change was the story I was telling myself—that I was making abstract painting—that I had no desire to do anything other than making abstract painting, whatever that may mean, and I thought I knew what it meant. It basically meant images that didn’t have an exact relationship to anything in the world that you could name. That’s the kind of painting I was interested in and thought was historically vital and needed to be taken forward in some way. There were all kinds of disconnects and inconsistencies in that position, but I didn’t fully get that until much later.

Rail: But that’s always been your strength.

Dunham: Well, I hope that I accept myself enough to accept those elements as part of how I think. But I didn’t see that as built in automatically to the type of abstraction I was trying to make. But I arrived at that place and had to deal with this fact that it took the form of human genitals and human mouths. Once those things really strongly asserted their presence, wanted to be drawn, wanted to be a part of what I was actually representing in my paintings, then it became more difficult to understand what abstraction as a mission would even mean.

Rail: When I think about those paintings, especially “Untitled (Yellow)” (1993-94), which was basically painted in one key of yellow, and then “A Green Demon,” where this strange form comes out of a tree, which may be the first time you included the teeth motif, though the way you paint it is very matter-of-factly and seemingly fresh. When I look at the black outline, there’s no revision, it was painted rather quickly as if you wouldn’t go back and repaint it to make it neat and even. Was that the condition you were thinking of?

Dunham: More or less. I mean there’s always probably been a little more fiddling around then it might appear. And there’s a kind of rough and slightly unraveled quality that I was trying to get in my work then. Also, I wanted to find a way to build painting in my own terms from the ground, up so to speak. I never worked with oil paint. I was reluctant to work on stretched canvas. So a lot of things that might characterize just the hand in a lot of peoples’ paintings are missing from mine. I really decided to make

paintings out of an act of will. It wasn't people telling me I make such wonderful paintings, and I should make more of them. It was more about me deciding that painting was a philosophical category that I wanted to operate in, and what would that mean to a person with my interests in this time and place? And that was what I began with. Everything since then has been a way to restate that hypothesis, and that's why I don't really like to use the term figurative art in what I'm doing now, even though I know a lot of people might see it that way.

Rail: Again, in thinking about a particular language of drawing that you allow to operate, there is this wonderful paragraph from Ionesco's essay that he wrote on Pierre Alechinsky's work, in which he said, "it's easy to draw poorly, it's more difficult to draw well, but it's even more difficult for a person who draws well to draw poorly." And I thought Alechinsky really embraced the madness of caricature as much as he did with the volcanic relationship between form and gesture. I think he's more exceptional than some of his contemporaries in that in his own way of reacting against cubism, he began to adapt the spontaneous brushwork, drips and blobs of paint, graffiti-like mark making, and so on. Actually when I look at the rotating planetary bodies such as "Green Planet," "Blue Planet" (1996-97) or "The Red Planet" (1997-98), I also thought of Wols's paintings.

Dunham: He's somebody that I've looked at a lot and have tried to understand. I'm not sure what the visual residue of that interest is exactly in my work, but his attitude about painting interests me a lot, and I find his photography fascinating.

Rail: That makes sense since you had an early interest in photography.

Dunham: What got me interested in Wols was really the abstract paintings he made after WWII, which were made more or less at the same time as a lot of the important developments in New York. It's been interesting to me to compare that parallel history of a certain approach to painting that happened in the mid-20th century.

Rail: In a variety of ways, most of the forms in your paintings tend to come out of the earth, or at least from the bottom up. We can see such evidence in the *Mound* paintings, "It" (1994) came out of tree trunks, same thing with "Fly-Agaric Men" (1994), and also the painting "Killer" (1997).

Dunham: I was playing with that idea that these characters were emerging in relation to some substrate, almost the way some mushrooms can only grow out of the roots of certain trees. Probably it also relates to the fact that I had already made paintings on sheets of wood veneer. Obviously, I wasn't interested in representing wood in the normal mimetic sense, but just as a kind of icon of wood. That was as far as I really went with it consciously. And that's been an interesting idea to hold onto as I've gone along, particularly now that I've been working in the last few years on paintings of trees, images of trees. So there it is again.

Rail: And it's very compelling to see how "Killer" has gone through many different manifestations.

Dunham: "Killer" was an image that sort of popped into my pictorial mind, which very rarely happens to me. It was the first time I had drawn one of those boxy little characters holding a gun, appearing to emerge from this substrate. Since then, it could embody the urges or instincts of a killer. This notion of the character as a killer, as a gun-wielding doer of violence became the subject of around half a dozen paintings between 1997 and 2006.

Rail: Do you think that he came out of the whole series of the "Sun" paintings?

Dunham: Originally, yes. I made a fairly large series of paintings based on heavenly bodies. And there was something about the set up for those paintings that I found quite pleasurable, which was essentially painting a big monochromatic blob of a color in the middle of a big canvas, then I would spend the rest of the time fiddling around with the painting. And in turning this blob into a living world with my characters and my marks, I felt that this explicit and ridiculous, extreme representation of male-on-male violence was interesting to look at.

Rail: And every now and then they tend to get into some strange geometries that you impose on them.

Dunham: A large group of work ensued that I didn't particularly see coming. When I finished, I drastically simplified the terms of the deal sometime in the year 2000. I can't remember the exact series of decisions, but I decided that color was confusing me in these paintings and that I didn't have any other real ideas about what to paint, so I thought I would go about painting them in a completely different way. I limited myself to only black and white paint, and made paintings accordingly, for a about a year and a half. When I finished them I thought I'd gotten rid of that character, but I hadn't. In all of my attempts to find ways to push the character out of my paintings, either literally push him off the side of the paintings or distort him or look at him in such a way that he didn't remain himself, he persisted for another five or six years. The paintings included in "He, She, and It," the name of an exhibition I had at Gladstone in 2004, were part of that process. That show also included sculptures, which were the "She" part. And the paintings, which were the "He" part and "It" which was...

Rail: Somewhere in between. *[Laughs.]*

Dunham: And everything else. Yes.

Rail: Not to mention how the cropping device became so amplified in that body of work. The way that a certain motif, like his chest or part of his head, gets extreme against the frontal plane. More importantly, the way they were painted, the way that the black outline, which functions almost like a scaffolding while exerting its architectural and monumental presence, sometimes bleeds from underneath or around the edges. Even though they are so matter-of-factly flat and frontal, there is an essence of air in them.

Dunham: I'm glad that you would see it that way.

Rail: And all of a sudden, it became nearly a full image again. This time it became very aggressive. For instance, the painting "Square Mule" (2006), which Jerry [Saltz] thought was a political image.

Dunham: That was a nice reading. Interesting for me because it's so different from how I think about it.

Rail: Could you talk a bit about how the recent paintings get made?

Dunham: I think of my work as being a kind of painting that anyone, without very much skill, who had made a decision to make paintings, would make. *[Laughs.]* I don't see them as complex technically or even remotely mysterious. I sort of see myself as a person who has no technique, but recently I realize that that is not literally true and that in fact I may have certain—I don't even like to use the word abilities because that makes it sound as though there's something to learn—personal tics in the way that I handle liquids on a surface that make my paintings look different than someone else's. And that's a more interesting idea to me now than when I was younger. Then I wasn't at all interested in the history of technique; I was only interested in the history of thinking about painting. As I grow older, I see it as a much more nuanced situation.

Rail: Do you wet the surface with water first before you paint? And do you paint both on the wall and on the floor?

Dunham: It really is a combination. A lot of the work was done on the paintings while they were lying flat, moving things around in a very thin puddle of water for quite a long time, until I'm happy with where things have arrived. The first paintings I made I painted with casein. Then when I decided I wanted to make larger paintings and embrace a more generic idea of what we culturally consider a painting, meaning painting on stretched canvas, I realized that casein wouldn't be good because it's too brittle. That was when and why I started using acrylic because it was the most modern kind of paint, which appealed to me, and I liked the fact that I could use water and not turpentine. Since then I've been finding ways to make acrylic paint as interesting to myself as I can. All of the characteristics of acrylic paint that I always hear about as being a problem for many artists, for example, it dries too quickly and doesn't lend itself very well to the blending of tones, those are the things that I have embraced and made work to my benefit.

Rail: Whatever it takes to elevate the medium into different heights for visual pleasure is all good. Let's shift the subject to the five paintings of trees, painted in one uniformed and slightly off-square format, how did they come about?

Dunham: They were essentially commissioned by Pauline Karpidas, a collector who has an exhibition space in Hydra, Greece. Schematic images of trees had appeared as part of the landscape in quite a few earlier paintings. Several years ago I started to develop images focused only on trees; I don't quite remember how it came to me initially. I like trees as a metaphor, and there is the recurrent theme of my interest in wood.

Rail: There is also a recurring motif in your work that deals with birth and death. We see the figure gets buried horizontally like a landscape in the painting "Passing Away (Dead Version III)" [2000], then he gets resurrected with his left hand raised up with the gun, though without a head, I mean, he goes through so many transformations. And then comes forth the tree with its own different configurations. And out of the tree appears the female figure, a bather, for the first time in this new body of work, which I think is the most luminous, pleasurable, joyous painting you have ever painted. And she's not aggressive, maybe not yet.

Dunham: I'm glad that they look that way. As I said, I really felt like I was done with any sort of humanoid characters in my paintings and I was focusing on these images of trees and how I might find a way to make a so-called abstraction that felt believable to me. And in the middle of all this I made a couple of drawings in my studio in New York when I was feeling at loose ends, which were really a sort of absurd exercise. I took the thing I could draw in my sleep, which was the image of the ass, the human posterior, from that last group of paintings I made, and put a woman's upper half on it, just to see what it would be like if it were anatomically normal in some way, even though I can't draw figures and I don't do figure drawing. It was like the doctor deciding to make a female version of Frankenstein out of spare parts.

Rail: [Laughs.] Right.

Dunham: So I made a drawing of this naked woman in a garden and I, somewhat to my horror, found the drawing really kind of beautiful, and it spoke to me in some way that I didn't expect. So I started fiddling around with it as a sort of side project, and it just evolved and grew. I had a residency last year, I spent two months living in Rome, and I decided that I would make it a project while I was living there to just work on drawings of the woman in the garden and to see how the drawings would end up. That experience turned out to be a very rich one for me, and led to this new group of paintings. Whatever ideas about cropping, details and orientation that I had developed in the paintings of the male character also play a part in these newer things, but the relationship to the landscape is central.

Rail: And the landscape is certainly given a greater depth than the previous paintings.

Dunham: It's almost similar to the way you might simultaneously be having the most intimate look at someone's body parts and out of the other side of your eye see a tree way off in the distance—that collision of subjects and that collision of space.

Rail: One last question: I know your interest in Aztec and Mayan Art is fairly evident in the way you construct the form flat while being frontal and the edges are treated, but your admiration for Sydney Nolan is hardly talked about.

Dunham: I took a trip to Australia with one of my kids several years ago. I needed to understand Nolan better and that's the only way to see enough of his work. I had originally discovered him when the Met did an exhibition of the Ned Kelly paintings. Nolan was previously unknown to me but has subsequently become a big interest. He represents a side of Modernism that is still relatively unexamined in this country where something like history painting is possible, not even to mention his innovative approach to representation through materials and procedures.