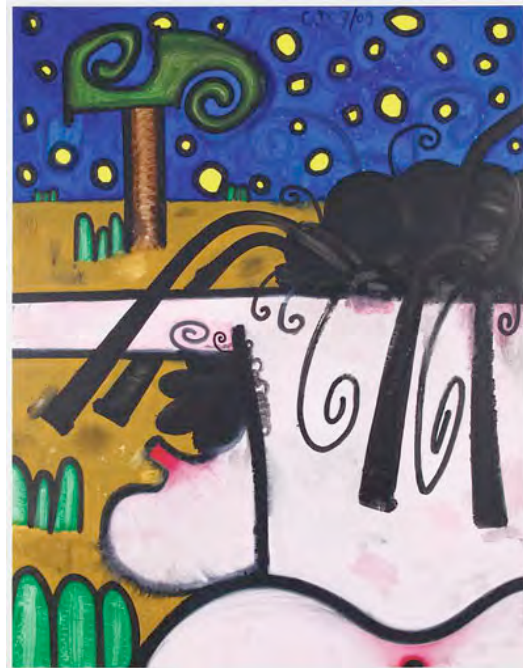


Carroll Dunham

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By Melissa Stern

Carroll Dunham is a naughty boy. His current exhibition, at the Barbara Gladstone Gallery, is a meditation, shall we say, on two female orifices. This is a disappointing exhibition from a gifted artist of whom I have been a huge fan. In the past, Dunham's drawings and paintings of our chaotic universe—angry men, guns, organs and cities—have embodied, along with their anger, a hysterical sense of humor. Dark and funny, he portrayed a cartoon world that also dove into the modern psyche.



His current paintings fall short. How many holes do you want to stare at? Gone is a sense of humor and irony. These paintings, most of which are titled "Hers," seem to want to recreate the kind of male obsession reminiscent of early 20th-century painters who painted the female nude over and over again. But Picasso and Matisse were experimenting with light, color and composition as well as examining the female form. Dunham has rendered everything nearly flat, both in perspective and paint quality. The focus is front and center on the two orifices, with an occasional detour past a giant nipple. The images just don't transcend a kind of cartoon fantasy world. I wish they did.

Every now and then, one of the exhibition's paintings moves beyond its organs, and there is a lyrical play between the abstracted forms to which the body is reduced. And these paintings—"Hers (Night and Day #4)" and "Hers (Night and Day #6)"—are really interesting. In these two works, Dunham allows his brilliance with the drawn line to emerge. The surfaces are not quite as dimensionless or opaque, and hints of wandering line and brushstroke enliven the surfaces. Coincidentally they are both breast paintings, where the organ is slightly off center. By not being so in-your-face with their content, these paintings let the viewer breathe a little. They become an interesting and humorous element in a larger, well, whole.