

**G**ustave Flaubert once counseled writers to “be regular and orderly in your life, so that you may be violent and original in your work.” It’s impossible to enter New York painter Carroll Dunham’s pristine Chelsea studio without being reminded of that advice to creative souls. On his thrift-shop worktable is a paper-towel mat on which lie precise arrangements of graphite, crayons, pastels, and art gum; next to them a looming whisk brush awaits erasures. Pencil lines on the wall allow Dunham to hang drawings in a neat row, like identical handkerchiefs on a midwestern clothesline. The tidy taboret fitted with squeeze bottles of bright acrylic paint could be featured in an ad for the manufacturer. And the artist himself is a study in understatement: his gray-flecked hair is brushed back neatly; his clear eyeglasses are held together in one corner by Scotch tape; and instead of the ubiquitous artist’s black, Dunham opts for chinos and a celery-colored linen shirt.

But as Flaubert recognized, the external order of the work space can belie the chaos and primitive urges that activate the imagination. In Dunham’s work, crude, angry characters—rooted to the edges of roiling planets as if by centrifugal force—wield knives, guns, swords, and that ultimate tool in Dunham’s arsenal, killer penises. In a seemingly eternal testosterone-fueled battle, a viewer can almost hear the “Bam,” “Slap,” “Splat” sounds so familiar to the generations raised on Saturday-morning cartoons. Blotches and blobs and squiggles and ghosts of half-erased imagery, often in the form of anuses or vaginas, add to the furious activity. And gaseous eruptions—seemingly of the human, rather than geologic, kind—contribute an implied odor to the artist’s pictorial worlds. As critic Peter Schjeldahl noted in a 1990 catalogue essay, Dunham’s pictures “can be like head-on collisions of Helen Frankenthaler and a toilet joker.”

Robert Storr, a curator at New York’s Museum of Modern Art, sees Dunham as something of an anomaly in the city; his work has a playfulness that is unusual on the East Coast. “He’s an incredibly witty artist—both in terms of the narrative and of the forms,” says Storr, who included Dunham’s painting *Age of Rectangles* (1984–86) in his 1996 “Deformations” show on the grotesque in art. This approach has won the 49-year-old artist an enthusiastic following, both in the United States and in Europe. Dunham’s work, which is represented by Metro Pictures in New York, has been exhibited around the globe, and his paintings now sell for between \$35,000 and \$90,000. He’s been a regular in recent Whitney Biennials, and his work is in the collections of such

museums as the Art Institute of Chicago, the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, and the Museum of Modern Art. “It’s some of the most intense and original painting being made,” maintains critic and curator Klaus Kertess, who hung Dunham’s *Ruby Vision* (1994) and *A Green Demon* (1993–94) in the 1995 Whitney Biennial.

Dunham himself brings up the subject of his tidy studio, anticipating a comment he seems to have heard before. His work space must be neat, he says, “in order to be able to go where I need to go.” The artist has gone far indeed from his childhood in the Waspy environs of Old Lyme, Connecticut, where his parents ran a successful real-estate business. “I came from a background where nobody ever told me I could do this for a lifetime,” he says. It was as a studio-art major at Trinity College that he got his first glimpse of the New York art world.

His professors led monthly field trips into the city to visit galleries, and he interned one summer as an assistant to the painter Dorothea Rockburne, from whom he learned the nuts and bolts of studio practice—using a level, stretching a canvas. At 22, he moved to New York, working variously as a gallery assistant, a cab driver, a framer, and, for seven years, as a layout artist for *Time* magazine. “It took me a long time to get my bearings,” Dunham remembers. “It wasn’t until about age 30 that I really knew how to work.”

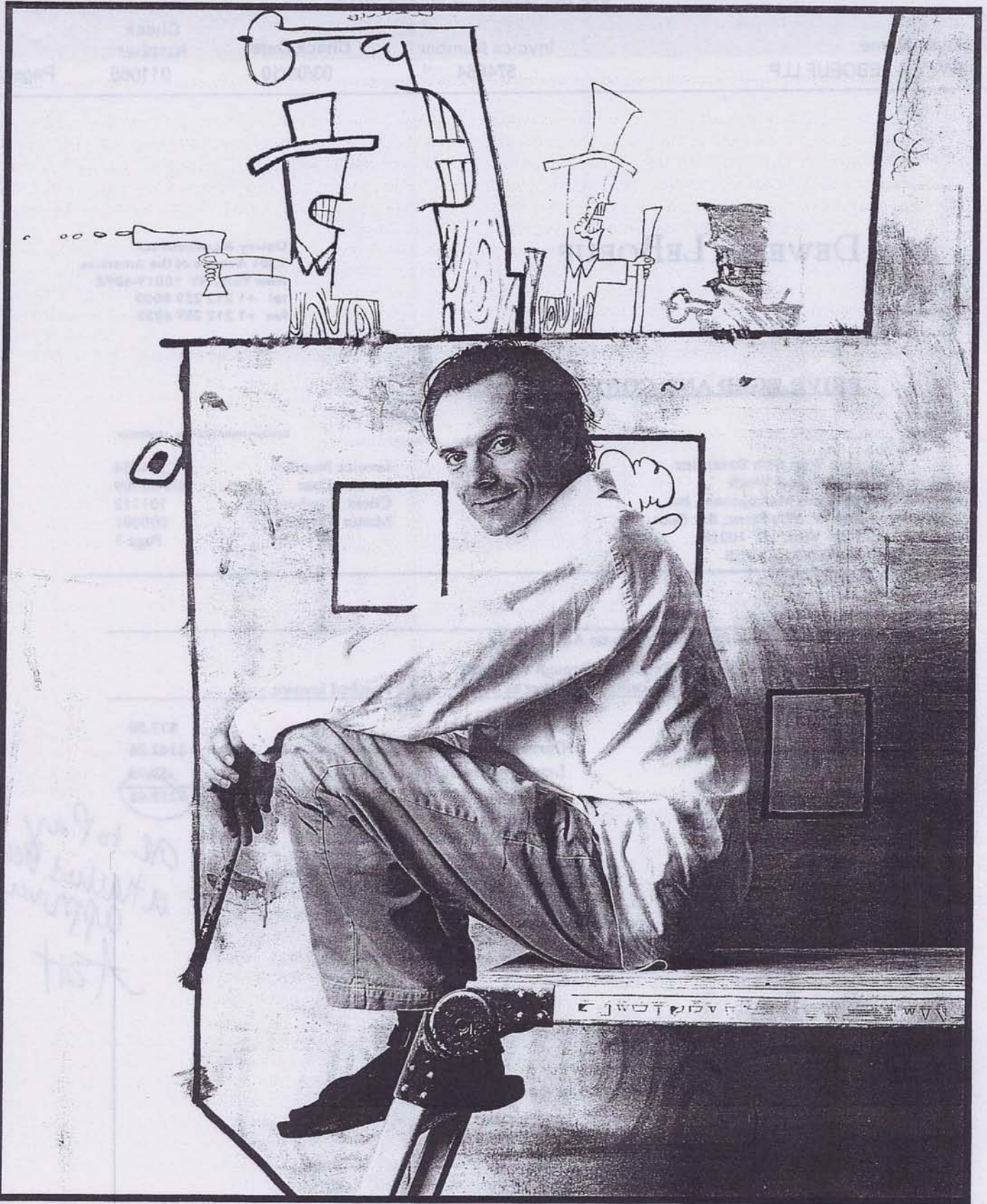
Sculptor Mel Kendrick, a high-school friend and Trinity classmate who moved to New York at the same time as Dunham, remembers how different the art scene was in the early 1970s, with, it seemed, “all the points already staked out.” The young artist had to work hard “to break in with new ideas.” Still, says Kendrick, thanks to the small size of the art community—and to bars like Max’s Kansas City—“you started right out getting to know another generation of artists.”

Dunham credits these friendships with older artists—such as Mel Bochner and Barry LeVa—with helping him find his direction. Through them, he says, “I saw what it meant to have a life as an artist.” Those cross-generational relationships are also behind Dunham’s long-standing commitment to teaching; currently he works with students in the graduate program at Columbia University. “There is an understanding [in art] that the different generations need to interact,” he says. “Teaching is a really positive, clarifying experience for me.”

Dunham was introduced to Bochner by a Trinity professor and installed a show for him in 1975. Bochner saw Dunham’s decision to be a painter as “rather radical” during the heyday of

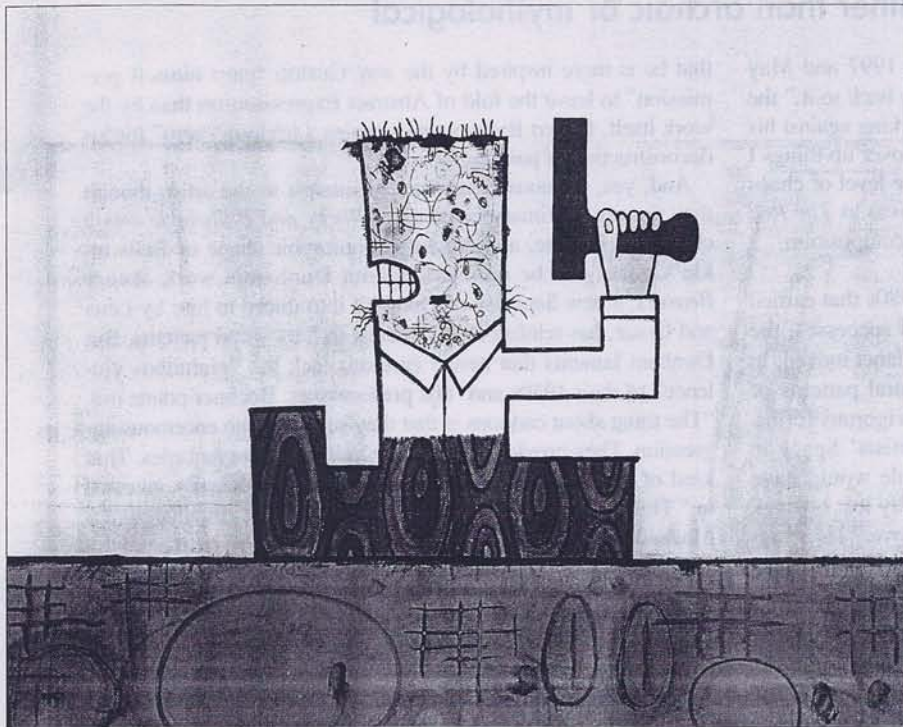
## BLOB APPEAL

Roiling planets.  
Animated arsenals.  
Perverse forms in  
perpetual manic combat.  
Welcome to the chaotic,  
comic universe of  
Carroll Dunham  
By Gail Gregg



©JOE GAFFNEY

Carroll Dunham, in his New York studio, is a stickler for order in his surroundings—the better to let his characters run amok on canvas.



The gun-toting *Killer*, 1997, borrows from the pop vernacular of TV cartoons.

installation, performance, and video art. "His is a process-based abstraction combined with imagery from pop culture, then mixed up with a surrealist perversity. It's a very original combination," Bochner says.

The pop vernacular and surrealist subversion are interests that Dunham shares with his wife, Laurie Simmons, a photographer whose theatrical explorations of popular culture have earned her widespread critical acclaim. Simmons and Dunham are unusual in the art world: two artists who have managed to sustain a long relationship and highly successful careers. Both are devoted to their daughters, Lena, 12, and Grace, 6. He escorts the girls to school each morning before boarding the bus or subway to his studio; she works in a studio at home.

Along with their dedication to making art, the two share a passion for their country retreat in Salisbury, Connecticut—"a place where time stood still," as Simmons describes it. The family moves up in mid-June and returns reluctantly just after Labor Day. After a summer of painting, coupled with an annual outdoor project that requires him to "level something and cover it with stone"—building a terrace or wall, for instance—he returns home recharged. "New York is overstimulating and ridiculously overpriced," he adds. "But one needs the contact with one's own people."

For the past two years, Dunham and Simmons have shared something else—the same dealer. After 9 years at Sonnabend, Dunham moved to Metro Pictures in 1997, where Simmons has been showing for two decades. Though it's easy to imagine the potential pitfalls of such an association, both artists say they enjoy it. "All parties are grown-up enough to know that careers and lives have to be separate," Simmons says. Dunham says that he "loved" being at Sonnabend, but needed a change: "I felt like I wanted to see my work in another situation." Nolan-Eckman in SoHo has long shown his works on paper and mounted an exhibition of his latest drawings last fall.

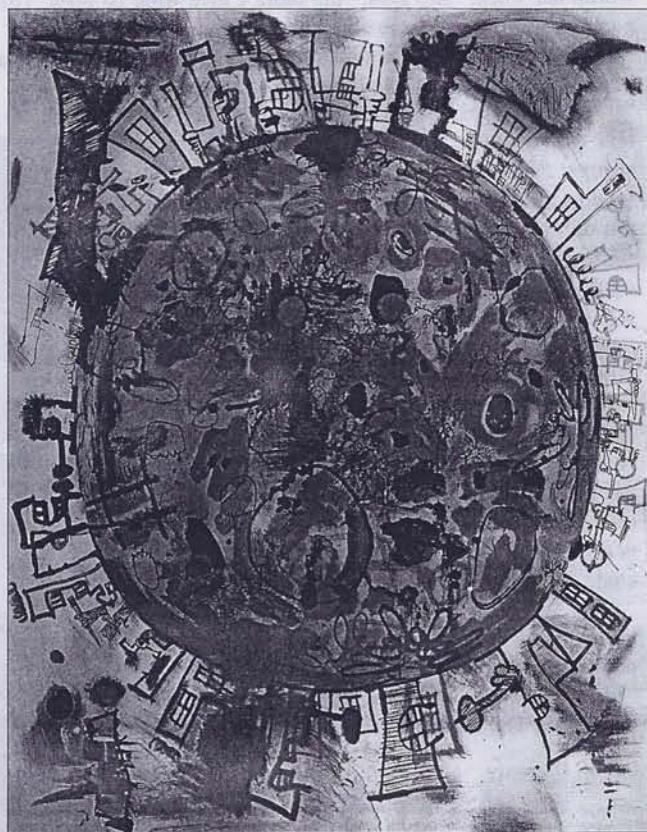
Dunham dates his newest body of work—scheduled for exhibition this spring at Galerie Ghislaine Hussenot in Paris—to the time of his move from a home studio to Chelsea. "I've gotten an enormous amount back from my kids to help me continue my work," he says. "It's been a very energizing thing." But the

move permitted him to "separate those two worlds a little." And the new studio—several times larger than his space at home—allows him to have a number of pictures in the works at once. Large canvases sit around the periphery of his two-room space, their whitewashed surfaces scarred with black doodles and drawings that will form the "skeletal structures" of the final paintings. These marks may be white-washed and redrawn as many as half-a-dozen times, forming a kind of X ray of the information underneath. In some pictures, color will be added only after the structure has been established; in others, such as *The Red Planet* or *The Orange Planet*, color may take the lead from the beginning.

Acrylic paints and additives are Dunham's preferred media, and fussing with custom mixtures seems pointless to him: "It's what you do with it that matters." A careful viewer may discover in the current work blobs of what look like asphalt, sand, crushed glass, or even

the skin that forms at the top of a paint can, but the Styrofoam balls of several years ago now are gone. Though the pictures often wind up looking like the product of a manic graffiti artist, they are made slowly, with "really crummy" paint brushes. One week *The Red Planet* was propped against the wall; the next, laid out on the floor, as Dunham studied it, adding "a little blob" every day. Each work tends to be made in a series of "many, many, many small moments," Dunham explains.

Symmetry anchors the chaos of *The Red Planet*, 1997–1998.



COURTESY METRO PICTURES (2)

## Dunham regrets that many people have come to see his new work as ironic—rather than archaic or mythological

*The Red Planet*, painted between December 1997 and May 1998, is a picture that “kept wanting me to come back to it,” the artist says. “I needed to wreck the painting.” Working against his natural instinct for order, he forced himself to “cover up things I might have liked, to destabilize it” to enhance the level of chaos in the narrative. But even in as “wrecked” a canvas as *The Red Planet*, there is an inborn sense of symmetry and composition.

Compared with the paintings of the early 1980s that earned Dunham his first critical and commercial successes, the raucous new pictures seem from another planet indeed. In the earlier work, Dunham made use of the natural patterns of wood veneer, staining and morphing them into vigorous forms. Critics loved the paintings—first shown at Artists’ Space in 1981—and Dunham recalls that “a lot of people would have liked me to keep making them.” But he eventually lost interest. “I had come to a point of—like falling out of love.” He struggled to find something that he could “associate off of,” finally salvaging the floating shapes. When they started to feel stale, a new way of thinking about materials was his way out of the woods. While playing with the texture and viscosity of acrylic paint, he also began attaching elements such as Styrofoam balls to his compositions. Most recently, though, figuration has become his focus. Despite the changes of the last two decades, Dunham ruefully observes that “my experience in my own work is that I do the same thing over and over again.”

Dunham’s two-year-old involvement with figuration took many people by surprise—not least of all himself. “At a certain point these characters were there waiting to come in,” he says. Simmons remembers her first studio visit to see the new work: “I was really nervous. When I saw *Killer* and *Wanderer*, I started wondering, ‘Where is he going?’ I had to excuse myself from commenting until later.” On reflection, Simmons began to understand the new work and to appreciate a connection to her own brand of figuration. “The more he creates these complete worlds within the work,” she says, “the more I love what he does. The pictures are so much more about places to go, people to see.”

Dunham frequently compares the work of an artist to that of a medium: his personal challenge is to maintain “an open channel.” Asked to decode the characters that animate his current work, Dunham shrugs: “I’ve often wondered. They all have mouths and arms. They’re basically blind. They are deformed rectangles. They have a limited sensory array. Why arms, mouths, penises are on this side of the line, and eyeballs and feet on the other, I don’t know.” Nor is he certain what they’re up to. Though many critics cite his affinity for cartooning and the vernacular, Dunham sees his real inspiration in such archaic cultures as the Northwest Coast Indians, the Maya, or the Paleolithic cave painters. He regrets that many people see his new work as “ironic” rather than archaic or mythological. “Low [art] is the closest we can come culturally to the archaic. It’s something everybody understands.”

In its playfulness and sexuality, Dunham’s work shares similarities with Miró. “There was no irony in Miró’s work,” Dunham said recently. “He was just free.” Guston is also often cited in relation to Dunham—who maintains, however,

that he is more inspired by the way Guston “gave himself permission” to leave the fold of Abstract Expressionism than by the work itself. Robert Ryman also remains a lifelong “hero” for his deconstruction of painting.

And, yes, cartoons clearly are of interest to the artist, though they are not a primary inspiration. *Rocky and Bullwinkle* was a childhood favorite, and the anthropomorphic shape of Bullwinkle’s horns can be seen throughout Dunham’s work. *Angry Beavers*, a new Saturday morning hit introduced to him by Lena and Grace, has reinforced his interest in faux wood patterns. But Dunham laments that newer cartoons lack the “gratuitous violence” of their 1950s and ’60s predecessors. Bochner points out, “The thing about cartoons is that they’re filled with enormous aggression. They provide an outlet for kids’ negative fantasies. That kind of psychodrama is something Dunham’s heavily invested in.” This resonates in Dunham’s drawings for the Brazilian writer Machado de Assis’s 1881 story *The Alienist*. The book, about a mad psychiatrist, was published last fall by Arion Press.

In a recent catalogue interview, Dunham said he had unearthed a childhood drawing of a pirate ship capsizing under a tidal wave—with pirates flying all over the place. “It’s the same thing I’m drawing now, and it’s drawn the same way,” the artist explained. It was the discovery that drawing could also be painting that propelled his work to maturity in the early 1980s. And drawing remains a critical part of his practice today. A new idea for a painting will be worked out and refined in many small sketches in which a character, for instance, is stretched or squeezed or bent until it feels right.

“It should be possible to think up a painting and then make it, but it’s not,” Dunham says resignedly. “These things end up being weirdly about themselves.” Through these comic universes of character and chaos, this very serious artist is attempting a kind of high-wire act of the id and ego. “More and more, what I think I’m doing is to have access to my nonrational mind,” he says. “That involves letting down shields you’re very careful to keep in place in the rest of your life.” ■

Gail Gregg is an artist and journalist in New York City.

*Shape with Points*, 1989–90, shows Dunham’s whimsical fascination with genitalia.

