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Charnel Knowledge

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Carroll Dunham's Square Mule

DAVID REGEN/(C) CARROL DUNHAM/GALDSTONE GALLERY

By now I no longer know if I like Carroll Dunham's paintings because we're friends or if we're friends because I like his paintings. So anything I say about his work is biased—although over the years I have relentlessly ribbed Dunham about how limiting and wrong it might be that he seems to paint the same male character over and over again. For his part, in published interviews Dunham has denied that this thing is a character at all, identifying it instead as a “shape” or a set of “formal concerns” and “painterly events” in “graphic fields.” Whatever it is, it's a no-eyed, blind, fedora-wearing cipher, gangster, rogue detective, or man in a gray flannel suit with a dick for a nose and a scrotum on his upper lip or testicles sprouting from the back of his neck. He often sports an L-shaped gun or sometimes a bullwhip. His activities include running amok in some exploding star-filled universe, madly defending homesteads, fighting to keep his head above water, wandering across landscapes, or just posing for an endless array of surrealistic portraits against Art Deco, Cubistic, and Constructivist backgrounds.

By my figuring, this character appeared in Dunham's work as early as 1990, albeit as a multicolored biomorphic blob with multiple sexual organs and a cilia-covered membrane that floated in a psychedelic amniotic sea. Eventually, Dunham gave birth to a brood of similar-looking geometrized monsters, clowns, goons, freaks of nature, snake-oil salesmen, dapper Dans, mercenary businessmen, roving caballeros, and demented goblins.

In the main room of his current exhibition five of these figures are pictured against canary-yellow backgrounds. Writer David Colman brilliantly complimented the series as “Men's wear Malevich.” However, if this show had only contained these paintings, I'd admire that Dunham was expanding his formal language, but I wouldn't break my own rule against writing about friends.

But something somewhat shocking, sensationalistic, and to my mind sensational, has happened in Dunham's work. In two other rooms, Dunham seems to be

painting from a place that not even he knew he had, someplace formed by experience, observation, id, current events, mythic history, black magic, and the imagination. Two of these paintings, *Giant* and *Square Mule*, are so intense I felt as if they knocked me down, gathered me up, and tossed me about the room again. Three other irregularly shaped diptych-portraits look like fragmentary ruins from some ancient Mayan or Roman fresco cycle. Dunham's character is in all of these paintings but something has happened to him, or to us, or to the worlds we inhabit. In these two imposing pictures he's bare-assed and bent over with his anus in the viewer's face like some mad humanoid Baboon in a state of sexual presenting. On his left thigh he sports a decorative tribal tattoo, on his right there's an ovular mole or mark-of-Cain. Things turn really savage, voluptuous, and schizoid, however, as he also displays his...vagina, which is painted to resemble a squishy éclair in one canvas and in the other, a bagpipe with flutes and pubic hair. It's as if Dunham is simultaneously painting the power of the vagina while his characters act out Oedipus's woeful words, "I come to offer you a gift, my tortured body."

In *Square Mule* this latrine-based incubus sticks a gun into his own ass in order to blow his own brains out and to send him, and presumably us, to kingdom come. This may be what Dostoevsky meant by, "He who is ready to kill himself becomes a God," or what Nietzsche had in mind when he wrote "One must have chaos in oneself." Regardless, other precedents in Western art for this type of image include Mapplethorpe's photograph of him putting a bullwhip up his ass, Peter Saul's depiction of Clement Greenberg inserting a paintbrush into his vagina, Tom of Finland, Hieronymus Bosch, Dali who wrote about "monstrous excrescences...and a delirium of auto-strangulation," possibly Otto Dix, and Picasso's great way of painting Marie-Therese's anus.

What's remarkable about *Square Mule* is that not only are you beholding this full-blown abject subject matter, you're *seeing through it* to deeper content. This is an image of the end of empire. It is someone getting medieval on his own ass,

embodying Homeland Security and turning himself into a war machine. While the word *Square* in the title describes the painting's shape, the word *Mule* alludes to the hybrid animal that can't reproduce itself—which is a perfect metaphor for the endgame America may currently be engaged in. This is America as a failed state. Thus, the painting is a picture of humiliation, bloodletting, armament, defiance, kowtowing, idolatry, annihilation, and pleasure. The character becomes a God of death and sex as well as an anal-sadistic warrior. Not only is this creature a suicide bomber, a lone gunman, and a wounded beast, he's us—a collective body in psychic civil war.

Meanwhile, *Giant* may not be a literal picture of battle, but it is a rendition of the torpor and confusion of this moment, the vacuity, power, waste, and cynicism of it all. This toxic creature—neither man nor woman but both—dominates and cannibalizes itself and its surroundings. He is a Sade-like sphincter that exudes forces of darkness and desire.

Giant and *Square Mule* are images of occupied territory and the divided self. They speak of Hell on Earth and a netherworld of ghosts and demons. Dunham's art may strike some as dogged, simplistic, overly antic, repetitious, and too wedded to modernism and cartoons. Perhaps, but he's also painting from a very pre-modern, almost talismanic place, while coming close to portraying the deadlock (and maybe death struggle) we're engaged in.

Optic Nerve

Karel Funk turns inward

For this alluring, transitional follow-up to his outstanding debut at this gallery three years ago, Karel Funk, 36, who lives and works in Winnipeg, continues his

attempt to ravish the eye with his hyper-realist paintings. As with his debut, this exhibition—somewhat disappointing though still impressive—is composed entirely of images of young men outfitted in contemporary dress. In the two best paintings, Funk’s males are situated so that we can see their faces, although each has his eyes closed. These paintings radiate exile and are rife with feelings of concealment, isolation, shyness, and shame, as well as the mysteries of the inward-turning Buddha.

Funk’s rendering of synthetic fabrics and plastics already makes him a Robert Ryman of Gore-Tex, hoodies, headphones, and windbreakers. Three big changes are evident in his new work. The paintings are slightly larger, the color range is narrower, and more figures are have their backs to us. Unfortunately, this results in a troubling loss of psychological and visual density. The hallucinatory hyper-lucidity that formerly triggered off an almost unbearable optical alertness, and made it feel as if our eyes were on amphetamines, is now being neutralized by the expanses of white.

Still, Funk is an amazing painter. His techniques and how his figures are posed restage what a painting actually is. Just as his figures turn away from you and are unaware of your presence, so all paintings are inanimate, and in that sense turned away from you. Just as these young men seem to be in an indeterminate philosophical and private space, Funk’s paintings make you feel that way about the space you inhabit.