

BOMB Magazine

Sussler, Betsy: Carroll Dunham

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Carroll Dunham by Betsy Sussler

"That's why coming back to dreams, I know what people mean when they say that but dreams are not abstract. In my dreams I use images from the world to make stories. I don't think of my work in terms of storytelling. Perhaps as instantaneous potential for a story, you could look at one of my paints and say, something's happening. But not in the sense of a plot line."





Carroll Dunham. © 1989 by David Seidner.

Disorder belongs to the totality of life, and the spirit of this disorder is the trickster. His function in an archaic society, or rather the function of his mythology, of the tales told about him, is to add disorder to order and so make a whole, to render possible, within the fixed bounds of what, is permitted, an experience of what is not permitted.”¹ Dunham’s paintings cross the boundaries of taste, belching disorder in an experience of painting that is simultaneously accomplished and uncivilized. What is beautiful and what is grotesque become mated in a world that uncovers a revelry of the spirit.



Carroll Dunham's studio, 1989. Photo by Laurie Simmons.

Betsy Sussler

Much has been written about the dream world that seems to be in your paintings. Do you think it's true?

Carroll Dunham

True that that's what's been written?

BS

Do you create a dream space when you paint? A space for revelry.

CD

I think of it much more in terms of just a painting space. The paintings don't specifically represent a dreaming part of consciousness.

BS

There's one called *Left Side*.

CD

That title was meant to be prosaic. It's a description of how the shapes relate to the edges of the painting. Then it started to seem more interesting as a title because I'm left handed and so, in a sense, everything I do comes out of my left side.

BS

Do you think about other painters?

CD

It goes in phases. I appreciate a lot of different painting.

BS

Like now.

CD

Right now, I'm thinking about myself. I'm very preoccupied with the idea of trying to find more of myself in my pictures.

BS

There's a character who runs throughout mythologies and folklore called the trickster. Have you ever heard of him?

CD

Isn't that a figure in the tarot deck?

BS

There's a joker in the tarot deck. That's one aspect of the trickster. I have thought of him when looking at your larger amorphous characters; the sort in your paintings who are noisy, sexual and busy. The trickster's the great deceiver, who is duped himself. He's the creator and the destroyer, not a god and not the devil, amoral—the transformer. The Sioux describe him at one point as having so large a penis that he wraps it around his neck like a tie, his scrotum hanging off his waist. He takes an elk's liver, and fashions it into a vulva and marries the Chief's son. And they make children together.

CD

Sounds like quite a guy.

BS

Br'er Rabbit, Reynaud the Fox...

CD

I know what you're talking about. A lot of those characters are in African fables.

BS

Exactly, the spider. There is a character in your paintings who has always been but who has recently come to the fore. He reminds me of the trickster.

CD

Well, that's a very appealing reading to me.

BS

Good. Do you think of them as characters?

CD

I suppose on one level I do. I don't mean them to be necessarily funny and certainly don't mean them as a joke. I'm trying to draw and paint things that are true for me.

BS

I mean a joke in that it contains both good and evil.

CD

It relates more to ideas about beauty and ugliness. I don't know about good and evil.

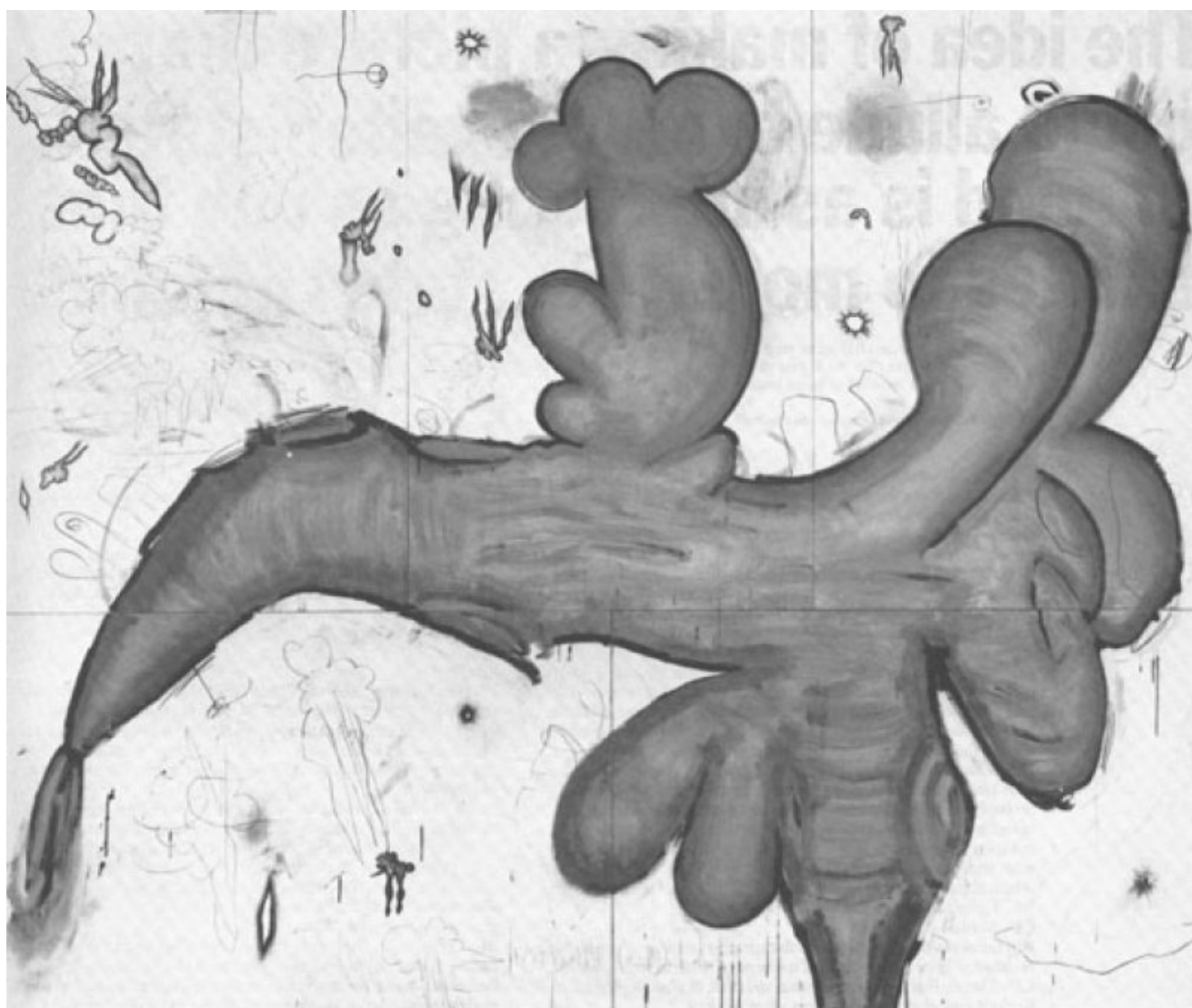
BS

Inside and outside. Order and disorder.

CD

I don't see them as pictures of anything specific. But they certainly are pictures of something. I don't think I would have said that so clearly a while back. Part of that central shape becoming dominant in the paintings had to do with accepting this. It's a picture of something that I have to draw somehow,

flush out and see. That's why, coming back to dreams, I know what people mean when they say that but dreams are not abstract. In my dreams I use images from the world to make stories. I don't think of my work in terms of storytelling. Perhaps as instantaneous potential for a story, you could look at one of my paintings and say, something's happening. But not in the sense of a plot line.



Carroll Dunham, *Purple Shade*, 1988, mixed media on ragboard on panel, 5 panels, 100 x 120 inches. Images courtesy of Sonnabend Gallery.

BS

James Hillman in *The Dream and the Underworld* posits an idea of the dream world as the place where the soul tries to get back to hell. That ultimately dreams are about coming to terms with the soul, and the soul with death. His ideas reminded me of your work, so I brought some notes. He describes the dream world similarly to you, "Dreamworld is an experience of limited space where the psyche is crowded, pushed to the wall. Chaff, lots of chaff, day residues, junk and garbage make our dreams. The fundamental image of the underworld is contained space." Contained space, as in painting. Have you ever looked at your earlier paintings and said this could have taken place in hell? I have.

CD

Yes, I have, actually. And I probably would have been resistant to discussing it in those terms when I was making them, because I would have been afraid that it would have trivialized them. I also thought they could have been taking place in heaven. I've had both thoughts. The idea of making a picture that could allude to more exalted states of mind is as interesting as one that alludes to more base states of mind.

BS

Well, this man's idea is that they're part of a whole. They can't be separated.

CD

Well, I suppose that I feel that. That seems true to me in terms of what life feels like.

BS

Did you know that "shading" and "scenes" came from the same word?

CD

Shading?

BS

Yeah, shading, like defining a shape, forming a scene.

CD

Is that a Greek word?

BS

Yes. Hillman refers to the dream as "... not a narrative so much as scenes that define the psychic position of all the events in the dream ... The dream has no end. It is not going any place else and it is always going on." Ancient dream interpreters always asked about the hour the dream took place. You usually incorporate the date into your paintings. Why do you do that?

CD

When I started doing a lot of drawings, I wanted to be able to track them, to order the chronology and also the space and time that separated one idea from the other. Things come about in time. Time is one of the materials. I don't plan things and then execute them. They come about by me doing them. And some notation of time seems important to their truth. It comes in and out, you know. In my new paintings, it's a fairly conventional dating and signing type of thing. There have been times when it became much more of a graphic element—an element of drawing. Time seems to be one of the really basic things we have to work with.

BS

You do drawings on file cards. It seemed that you separated one set into two categories: one about shape and the other line ...

CD

The ones you are referring to are half ink and half are pencil: an investigation of the new shapes I was drawing—half in terms of their volume, their shadedness, their sexiness—and the other half in terms of their structure, the mechanics of it. I don't know if you ever really know why you do some things but I had a story that I told myself when I started that had to do with being interested in the tabs on the edges of the file cards as a way to identify one side of a rectangle. I was in the process of trying to rotate my paintings. For years they had all been vertical and I wanted to make them horizontal. The change to these shapes becoming dominant in the paintings was simultaneous with the paintings' becoming horizontal. I did one group of drawings using a whole set of file cards and rotating their orientation. I was trying to see if the space changed, how the space changed. What was implied by focusing on up or down or right or left. Now I look back and that doesn't seem to be their most important characteristic. It just seems like it was

probably a way to get myself started on something. The file cards imply order.

BS

They order time.

CD

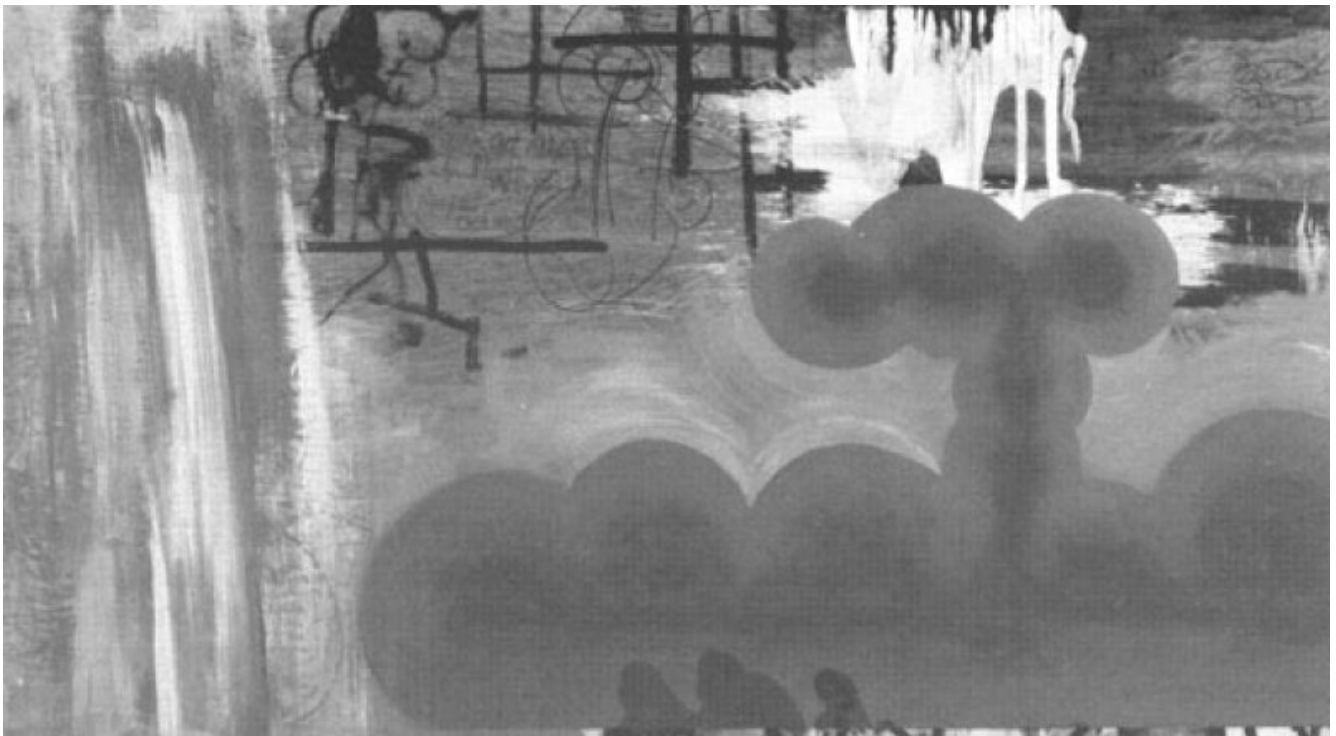
Yes, they order time and you are always going to look at them and saying, a is before b, is before c. When I'm drawing I do one drawing after another so the order in which I did them seems crucial.

BS

Why is that?

CD

This idea that we're working, living in time and that events unfold. Because of the limitations of what humans can see, it seems that time goes in one direction and my experience of my work unfolding as I do it is that it happens in one direction. It's much more complex than that, because things come back to you—there can be trains of thought you think you're done with that you're not done with at all, that crisscross in a very complicated way.





Carroll Dunham, *Island*, 1985–86, mixed media on assorted veneers, 60 x 34 inches.

BS

It's odd to hear you talk about ordering, I look at these paintings and see the most anarchistic characters I've ever seen. Implicit in their wild, unruly shape is the possibility that they might explode or implode at any moment. They know no bounds. In terms of the imagination, they leak all over the place.

CD

I feel a lot of the time as though my imagination is very limited. It's not okay for me to just do anything. It's not automatic in that way at all. It's a very clear family of shapes. They can evolve. Part of the function of drawing is to try and figure out new ways that I can push them or have them sit in their space, relate to the edges of the painting. But ... what am I trying to say? They aren't just anything. They're these things. I like your description. It appeals to me, but I feel in a way, that they don't deserve that description because there are such clear limits on what I can do.

BS

Let me put it this way. I'm calling them characters meaning that there are certain things they might do that would be out of character.

CD

Yes, that's true.

BS

They're defined but they can have great range within that definition.

CD

In my private lexicon I call them shapes. They probably have aspects of them that are like characters. They certainly have approached having some kind of personality at times. But they are first and foremost shapes in a figure ground relationship. That's the situation I have to work with. I like to avoid talking about them in a way that would push their meaning too far in one direction. "Shape" seems the most general term. But, again, they're specific types of shapes. There's a fairly limited set of approaches that will make me feel the things I want to feel when I'm drawing them.

BS

What do you want to feel when you're drawing them?

CD

Well, it's some feeling of familiarity and rightness to the whole thing. I want to be excited by them.

BS

Do you think of them as being alive? You do, don't you?

CD

Yes. Honestly (*laughter*), I suppose I do even though I know they're not.

BS

I think of them as being alive.

CD

Even though I know they're not, I do. I imbue them with all sorts of traits of living things. But I project all this on to them. There's one way to look at how I work where none of this has any bearing.

BS

How's that?

CD

It's about deciding on procedures and then following them out.

BS

Structure.

CD

Procedures and drawing structure. I seem to begin a painting by following my nose. I always begin by drawing a shape and I usually change the shape while I'm painting it. I have an idea about how I want to paint the shape and there may be a general direction about the color that I want to use. Then I try to go into it and let the painting be around me over a period of time so that I can get to know it and how it feels. And nudge it in one direction or another. But when it clicks in, when the painting seems to be done, is when it becomes itself. It's character is established. I don't mean it's character in terms of a character in a story. I mean it's nature. The emotional tone is clear

and not garbled. It must have to do with something I want to feel when I look at them. Obviously the thing becoming finished has something to do with the thing coming alive for me and not just being a mess of stuff on a surface. And when this happens, I think I have completed a painting and then I spend a long period of time looking at the painting and trying to hear what it's telling me. There's an idea I have that I'm receiving this rather than creating it. I'm allowed access to these paintings.

BS

Any writer will tell you that at a certain point the characters they've created will lead them. You watch it. The character lives and it starts telling you.

CD

That's certainly my experience making art work. I'm very interested in a certain area of imagery and I try to work with that but the imagery runs me more than me running the imagery.

BS

It's hard not to think of the word chaos when one looks at your paintings. That's not because they're structurally unsound, they're very well formed. But it feels as though these could, at any moment, explode and become chaotic again. There's a violence to them. You must have heard this before.

CD

Yes, I have and I can see it myself sometimes.

BS

But you don't feel that way about them?

CD

No, I think I probably do. I feel everything at one time or another. What I'm amazed by is how little what I feel seems to have to do with what I do.

BS

For instance?

CD

It's not like, Dunham is happy today so he makes a happy painting. There's no correlation. There's some deeper level—whatever force one has that gets

one to work, that gets one to just keep doing this. It goes through permutations and take years to gestate. There was a long period of transitions to move from the paintings on wood and the more complex space that those entailed ... In a way, it seems like somebody else did those paintings, even though I also see, the more I work, that these paintings clarify earlier paintings.

BS

In what way?

CD

When the paintings became horizontal, the central shape became the dominant motif. Those are things I was working with before. I just wasn't as developed in what I was doing. They look different but there are a lot of shared aspects.

BS

The shapes were certainly the dominant force in the wooden pieces. Did you paint by working out of the whorls of the wood, like rorschach tests?

CD

I worked in different ways at different times within each painting. One level was to use the wooden surfaces as points of departure for compositional or spatial developments. Another level was to draw shapes and let their nature and placement effect the space and atmosphere of the painting. I've always been drawing shapes and filling my paintings up with shapes. But I began to see that the shape and its surrounding and the relationship between the shape and its surrounding could be the painting. That seemed like a beautiful idea to me because it was so clear. One to one between me and the painting, between me and the shape.

BS

What would you say the primary event is?

CD

Well, in terms of making the painting, the primary event is probably the first thing I do, drawing the shape with lines. In terms of looking at them, you see a shape and you can get it pretty quickly but then you can begin to feel things

about it and view it in different ways and it slows down. It becomes more engaging. I don't think in terms of the primary event because I look at things for a long time.

Carroll Dunham, "D" from *Index* (10 drawings), 1988, pencil on file card, 5¼ x 7 inches.

BS

There's a lot of smoke in the wood paintings.

CD

Smoke?

BS

Smoke is the intermediary substance between spirit and body in alchemy. How did you think of it when you were using it?

CD

There's this gap between what you think of while you're working and what you think about when you look.

BS

Right. So, smoke.

CD

I never thought of it as smoke, exactly. It's not so different but I always thought of it as—what did I think of it as?—this very thin stuff spread out over a painting.

BS

Yes, vaporous.

CD

Well, it's about smearing and throwing liquid around and thinness, veils. Veils of paint as opposed to opaque, really applied paint. It always seemed to have a use—deepening the space in the painting, creating spatial

relationships between different events in the painting. It seemed to fit in the atmosphere that I was trying to make.

BS

What atmosphere?

CD

This atmosphere of possibility, of movement, where things seem to be in a kind of motion. They seem to imply movement. The movement could be going forward. The movement could be going backwards. You're only seeing a second of it. Part of the problem I have responding to this is that I don't think symbolically. I never thought about the veils of paint in my paintings as having symbolic reference. They seem to feel true to me and they feel like something that I have experienced. You are in an area of association that I feel comfortable with. The area in which I tend to wander when I'm thinking about my own work, is the area of how the mind works. How the personality is constructed. What parts of me can be allowed freedom and what parts can't, all of which in the end come down to questions of the soul and what the soul is. But I would be horrified to go through—like Flemish painting where you can go through and attach symbolic meaning to everything. That was a very important, different way to read pictures. It gave rise to incredible pictures. I love Bosch, but the way that you need to understand Bosch is completely different than the way I think about my own paintings. I'm not thinking symbolically or in literary terms. The things that come up in my paintings tend to be much more an expression of an attitude about process than they do the expression of an attitude about subject matter.

BS

Why use sexual organs?

CD

Well, that's something I feel like I have the right to draw and paint.

BS

A man's sexual organs?

CD

Well that's something that I have. I'm creating things and there's some sort of

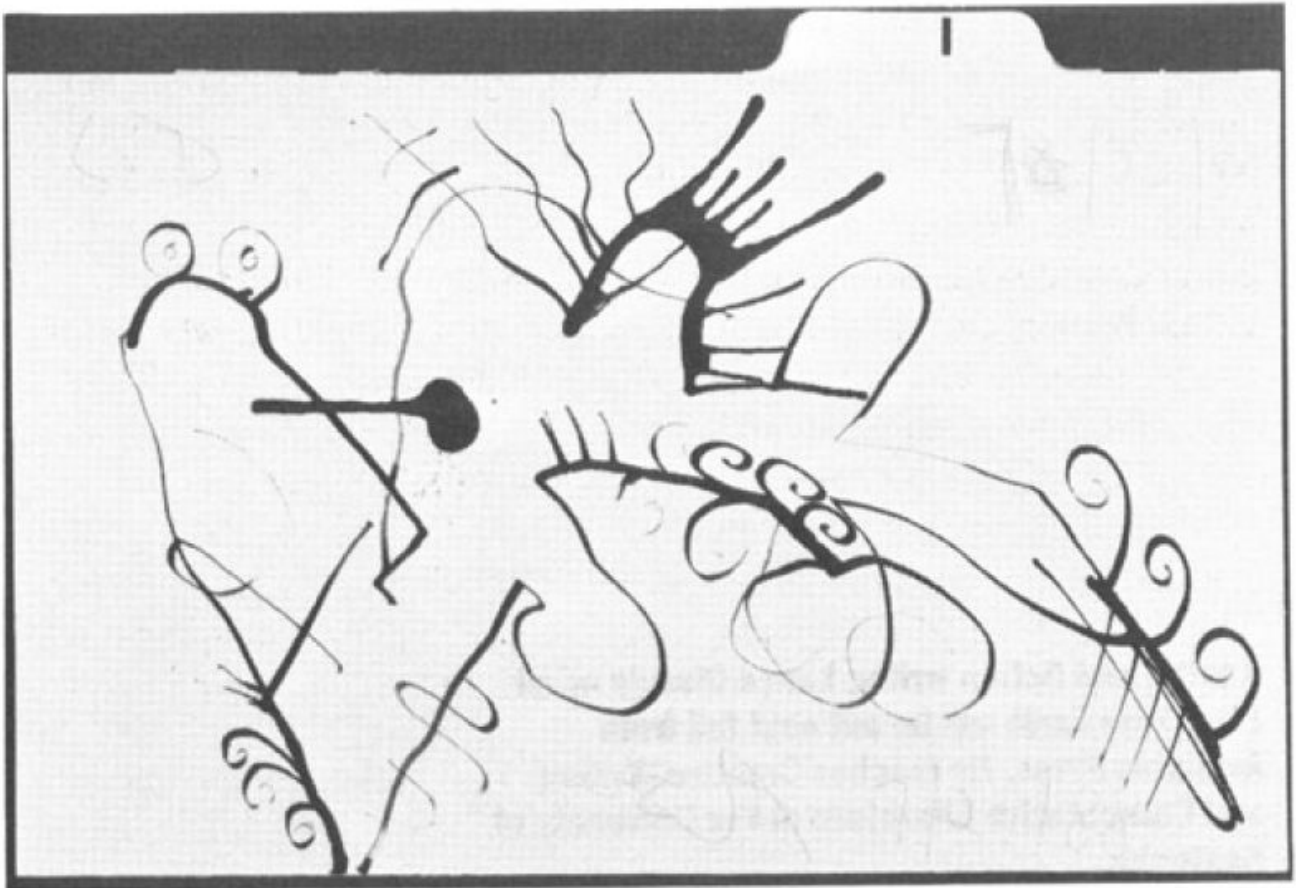
a drive to do that. I don't know what it is. Something gets me out of bed in the morning to do this and not something else. It's one area where I'm willing to be explicit and it would be coy of me to say, "That's not a penis." It would be ridiculous.

BS

I agree.

CD

But it seems important. I'm trying to think what I would really want to say about it. They come and go in the paintings. Just in formal terms, certainly it and other parts of the body inform a lot of what I draw. But it's the only one that I'm willing to really draw explicitly. I just don't want to be repressed about it. I want to do it. I want to draw it and I want to look at it when I draw it. I want to attach it to other things that I draw. Like sticking it on top of one of these shapes. These things feel true when I look at them. In order for them to seem plausible, they must reflect something back to me that I feel. Because they aren't about ideas. They aren't about having a good idea and then painting the idea. Something feels right to me about seeing them, having some of them with penises attached to them.



Carroll Dunham, "I" from *Index* (10 drawings), 1988, ink and pencil on file card, 5¼ x 7 inches.

BS

There's something very innocent about wanting to keep looking at one's sexual organs. Going back to *The Trickster*, Paul Radin says, "His mythology of the tales told about him, is to add disorder to order and so make a whole, to render possible, within the fixed bounds of what is permitted, an experience of what is not permitted." Your shapes used to be much more transsexual—almost hermaphroditic. Am I just imagining that?

CD

No, I think that's right.

BS

And then they became more and more male. I'm talking about them as if they're portraits and they're not.

CD

No, no. They're very schematized. It's not drawing the figure. It's much more schematic than that and I'm only interested in it as a kind of schematic, as another thing to think about when looking at them.

BS

Sometimes they look like organs and other times they feel like mammals. There's always a transformation going on, as if you are looking at the outside and the inside at the same time.

CD

There's an issue of inside and outside in terms of the shape in the field and how they interact. That's something I'm trying to make more complicated in these new things. I think inside and outside, my inside and my outside, all that preoccupies me.

BS

Let's go back. The inside and outside, the shape and the field—you mean the place, the site itself?

CD

I think the shapes have to have a place to be. If they don't have a pictorial place to be then they would be silhouettes, shapes cut out of something. And that's not interesting to me to do. They come about inside a rectangular picture space and something has to happen between the shape and the rectangle. That can be all different kinds of things. It needs to be a place that's just about absence or it can be something more physical, more up front with the shape.

BS

For instance? They're not landscapes.

CD

No, no, no. I don't mean it in that sense. It's a psychological place, a psychic place. It's not a place in the world. It's pictorial. Part of what gives them their feeling is the nature of the place that they are allowed to be. I'm trying now to put them somewhere, to make the painting cover the whole painting. You can see these new ones have paint all around the shapes. I don't know what that means. I know that it's what I'm trying to do. It's one of these procedural ideas.