

## Carroll Dunham

SKARSTEDT GALLERY

Carroll Dunham would have been accorded serious consideration for membership in the first Postminimalist generation on the basis of the remarkable paintings in this recent revisitation were it not for the fact of his youth—or his seeming youth—since, in 1982, when this body of work began, the artist, already in his thirties, looked to be scarcely out of his teens. Without apology or false shame, Dunham had, at the time, taken up an impenitent range of transgressive images—comedic hard-ons for example, transcribed as if outlined upon a table or desk and outrageously striped or colored. Add scrotal dependencies, testicular scums, turdlike masses, anal fissures, gingery tubers, and intestinal buntings, and you can easily see how repugnant all this could be.

To the contrary, however, the effect of these borborygmic paintings was and is blithely jocular. Dunham's untrammelled organicities share pride of place with polite niceties, the more familiar range of acceptable abstract motifs such as banglelike danglings, Pop-AbEx snarls and explosions, layers of parallel registers—all painted either in bright, candy colors or in moribund, mushroomy tones redolent of funk. And as virtually every painting in this body of work is a slam dunk, to choose favorites would be an egregious exercise.

The fact that the grounds of Dunham's paintings were of wood was crucial. At some point, unwieldy sheets of pine gave way to less commonplace veneers glued onto plastic honeycomb sheets. These grounds provided a natural obstacle course insofar as pictorial nudgings were occasioned by the knots and grain of the wood, solutions combining what was really there with Dunham's myriad riffs. Such fancies inevitably evoke Picasso's collages, the modern works that first employed wallpapers of illusionistic wood pattern. The disjunction between Dunham's sequences of registers, those broad horizontal bands in which his buffoon figuration is found, also owes much to the Exquisite Corpse, the Surrealist pastime par excellence. Not that one need pillage the history of modern art to grasp Dunham's works; the 1980s alone provide abundant points of reference: graffiti, Sherrie Levine's plywood paintings, and Keith Haring's annulated body paintings, for example.

The arresting interview that forms the catalogue text to this show is a transcription of a conversation held between the painter and the artist Laurie Simmons, who is his wife—a fact that should be noted since so much privileged information is disclosed in the exchange. Here Dunham acknowledges the psychological implications of his regressive, polymorphously perverse imagery. He recalls not only the effect of the knotty pine walls of his boyhood home but the psychic role of family names—that, say of a brother's curious middle name, Wood, or, more to the point, that his own name, Carroll, is one often mistaken for that of a girl. That Ms. Simmons daringly introduces the idiom "waiting for wood"—slang for penile erection—into the discussion also seems amazingly pertinent.

A quarter century later, Dunham's career has moved on to a larger, a more loosely painted, loonier-tuned figuration. This development is both logical and perhaps a bit glib when compared to these early paintings on wood, work so patently consequential to the history of contemporary art.

Carroll Dunham, *Oak Bottom*, 1984, casein, dry pigment, carbon, Flashe paint, pencil, and casein emulsion on mahogany, maple, and oak, 49 x 40".

