

DOWNSTAIRS

## Carroll Dunham

NEW MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART

Through February 2

Carroll Dunham, at 53, is widely known for mixing artistic idioms—mainly those of minimalism and Abstract Expressionism—in a representational manner that would drive their original modernist practitioners mad. This, his much-deserved and first major museum show, co-organized by New Museum director Lisa Phillips and curator Dan Cameron, includes 33 paintings documenting the evolution of a subject matter and painting style that eventually (but did not initially) join in perfect union.

Dunham only started making his best work in the 1990s: enormous canvases at once geometrically designed and messy, with imagery humorously pertaining to the often violent humanity underlying the gridlock of urban living. *Passing Away (Dead Version III)* from 2000, for instance, shows a man with clenched teeth wearing a suit, rendered entirely with straight lines. His flat front side functions pictorially as a sidewalk, all of which speaks lightheartedly to the frustration of getting trampled and irked by buttoned-down city life.

While Dunham keeps the lines of his hard-edged paintings more or less clean, his mixed-media painting is decidedly not precious. Canvas shows through. Rampant squiggles lend a distressed look. Orbs and rectangles dominate several paintings and function as planets and buildings. Queues of little cartoon people with odd appendages that are at once nasal and phallic sprout from the outsides of these simple geometric forms. Some yank on one another's proboscises, while others brandish cute, triangular knives at one another. Others piss on each other in optically pleasing arcs. The "people" have eyes that hover in the sky, like little fried eggs, off the top of their heads. The insanity is obvious, recognizable, and somehow normal.

One of the nicest aspects of the exhibition is that it is hung chronologically. Downstairs, where viewers are most likely to go first, there are works from the 1980s, when Dunham had not yet fully become Dunham. Lackluster, but nonetheless big and colorful, are several paintings of biomorphic forms vaguely resembling genitalia. By the time viewers make their way to Dunham's later work, the epiphany of his mature voice is all the more striking.

—Sarah Valdez



Carroll Dunham,  
*The Sun, 1999*,  
mixed media on  
linen, 100" x 80 1/2".  
New Museum of  
Contemporary Art.

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