

Top of the Week

Newsweek

Art



GUNS N' NOSES:
Weird and wild
'Two Things
(Mound D),'
1992 (top);
calmed-down
'Invisible Killer,'
2000 (below)

The Blob Strikes Again

In a raucous retrospective, New York artist Carroll Dunham shows just how trippy painting can be

BY PETER PLAGENS

ACCORDING TO DAN CAMERON, curator at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York, no American artist of the past two decades "has treated the transformed cultural interaction of nature and humanity with anything approaching the intensity and depth of Carroll Dunham." Whoa, some statement! But Cameron isn't alone in his opinion. A lot of Manhattan art critics are wondering why it's taken so long for Dunham to get the art-star anointing given to such generational peers as Julian Schnabel, David Salle and Eric Fischl. As if to answer them, the NCM now has up a concise, 40-painting Dunham retrospective.

Dunham's wickedly cartoony semi-abstracts are tailor-made to let art writers strut their stuff. The New York Times's Hilarie Sheets, for example, says Dunham's figures come from "the sludge of the subconscious, feeling their way blind through the painterly terrain by means of phallic protuberances and bared teeth." In the show's catalog, novelist A. M. Holmes has contributed a short story inspired by

the wacky-haired, no-eyed gremlins that careen splatteringly around in Dunham's big, cheerfully raucous, pictures. See? Now I'm doing it.

Dunham, 52, made his debut in the mid-'80s with paintings on wood panels, which featured every kind of tube and nodule imaginable, plus psychedelic riffs on the wood grain itself. Dunham admits he took a lot of drugs while working on them. In the '90s, the precariously abstract plasmathings in Dunham's paintings began to sprout rogue mouths with big sausagey lips. Then the mouths morphed into those little creatures who rocket around in his recent pictures shooting guns and squirting ... well, bodily fluids.

But it's not just the figures that make his paintings so arresting; "underground" comic strips create similar worlds. It's the way Dunham paints that sets his work apart: the heavy outline that's never mechanical, the flax-careless smear that makes the figure adhere to the background and the faint ghosts of preliminary compositions that reveal the artist's struggle to get things right in his own weird way. And then there's Dunham's color—all



those blinding lines, outlaw pinks and compost browns that retain a right-out-of-the-tube power while also being subtly customized.

As if to prove that he's sobered up enough to paint some of his best work without over-relying on flashy color, Dunham has done his latest paintings in black and white—but not stark black and white. With his once tiny hat-wearing man now taking up a quarter of the canvas, Dunham shows what a deft painter can do with faint washes and "blank" white areas. Narratively, Dunham has settled down, too. Gone are the frantic creature wars, replaced by a kind of Everyman wanderer seeking solace in a bleak landscape. He looks mysterious enough to make us hyper-bolic art writers wonder if we'll be able to keep up with him.