

Two Art World Heavyweights Discuss Paintings and Parenting

The artists Michael Williams and Carroll Dunham meet up in the Connecticut countryside to continue a conversation that's been years in the making.

By Kat Herriman | September 7, 2018



Carroll Dunham (left) and Michael Williams catch up in Cornwall, Conn. Credit John Gruen

Friends for the better part of a decade, the artists Michael Williams and Carroll Dunham refer to their relationship as a "dialogue." They might be separated by 28 years (Williams is 40, Dunham is 68) and the width of America, but they manage to stay in touch through regular studio visits, and bond over their common ground as fathers and painters — the latter a role that both describe as inherently isolating.

Toiling in near solitude, each artist has come upon his own distinctive visual language — making their pieces easy to spot in a crowd and sought-after. The beginnings of these personal styles can be traced back to their earliest works. The hairy backsides and gaping genitalia for which Dunham is now known evolved out of innuendo-laden abstracts he created in the 1970s. For his part, Williams has always embraced both the representational and incomprehensible — imagine a nude figure with a psychedelic cloud floating over its private parts. Since 2012, Williams has been experimenting with inkjet printouts of his digital drawings made in Photoshop, which have often served as fodder for his paintings. "I like to challenge my own biases," Williams says. "I've been wondering if that's abandoning the studio entirely and becoming an en plein-air painter."



Carroll Dunham, "Left for Dead (2)," 2017. © Carroll Dunham. Courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels.

In 2015, after a decade living in Brooklyn, Williams abandoned New York for Los Angeles, where he is having his first show in his new city at David Kordansky Gallery. While visiting the West Coast in the spring, Dunham saw some of Williams's then-half-finished works — including the artist's new HBO paintings, emblazoned with the logo of the television network that happens to air the television shows made by Dunham's daughter, Lena. More recently, when the pair met up in the pastoral hills of Cornwall, Conn. — where Dunham shares a home with his wife, the artist Laurie Simmons — they huddled on the covered porch and watched an epic summer rainstorm play out while reminiscing about the origins of their yearslong conversation.

How did you meet?

Carroll Dunham: We met through the folks at *The Journal* magazine. We were both involved with articles or interviews or something that brought us together for dinner one night in Williamsburg. We were sitting near the magician David Blaine. He was at the dinner showing off. I didn't know Michael but I did know his work a little bit. We had a fun conversation and after that I remember I went over to Canada gallery, where he was showing, to try to do a little research. And then I think I came to his studio.

Michael Williams: Yeah, you did. I was still living in Greenpoint, in Brooklyn. I don't remember what our third date was but we started having some sort of whatever you call it ...

Dunham: A dialogue. I mean we were at different points on our life path, but we shared a taste in art, a lot of similarities about the way we work. We are both WASPs with Jewish wives and two children.

Were you sad when Michael left for Los Angeles?

Dunham: I mean I was sorry to hear that was happening, but I completely understood it. I've also lost one of my children to L.A.

Williams: My children brought me to L.A. New York is hard, and it's really hard with kids.

Dunham: When Laurie and I had kids starting in the mid-80s, the New York art scene was such a different thing. I can't even imagine starting to raise a family now. In reality, I used to think about splitting all the time to Los Angeles, but I didn't. I didn't see any other city as a real option at that time. I think L.A. is a great place to be an artist now.

Williams: To me, it is like living in the countryside. Most days I'm at home or at my studio or my car. There's not really any interacting, which if you live in the country it is the same setup, but then there's all these amenities available when you want them. There's a quote-unquote "art world" to make you feel like you have people to talk to when you want to.

How does drawing fit into your painting practice?

Dunham: It's one of the ways that Michael and I overlap. We both do a lot of drawing, and it might not be in exactly the same relationship to other parts of the work for each of us, but we share this kind of manic practice.

Williams: I would definitely describe my drawing as manic. I make so many different types. I make drawings when I'm trying to think of ideas for paintings and then other drawings that are sort of outside of all of that and are just experiments. I'll try to find a new way to make a drawing and then sometimes later I'll say, "I can actually make a painting out of this."

Dunham: One of the things that I found when I was first getting to know Michael's work was this acknowledgment of digital technology, but not in a way that it subverted his interest in actually picking up a pencil.

Williams: I always need to draw. It is like thinking out loud. Things come up that you didn't expect. It takes longer to learn when you approach that process passively. If you're just Googling, it takes, like, two hours to learn something about yourself.



The artists Michael Williams (left) and Carroll Dunham have been friends for the better part of a decade. Credit John Gruen

Dunham: (laughs) And it's not even clear to me at that point that you've learned much about yourself. You've learned something about something. I mean there's an awful lot of sort of offloading of agency onto search engines. Who knows what it all means. But, you know, Michael said something earlier today and I'm not going to say it the way he said it, but the way I would say it is that I don't really know what I'm thinking about until I make stuff. I don't have ideas or stories or anything that I want to illustrate with my work. It's more that I understand what is preoccupying my mind by what I make. I personally have a huge resistance to working on paintings. I have to really set my life up in a way that encourages me to do it or I just never would. Whereas drawing comes much more easily. You're not just starting with that horrible feeling of being alone in a big room.

Speaking of... Michael's upcoming show at Kordansky. Have you seen the work?

Dunham: I've seen some of it. I actually was in Los Angeles last month. How's it moving along?

Williams: It's mostly done. The show has two hemispheres: There are oil paintings as well as this set of strictly printed paintings. I kind of get a charge out of those. There's something nice about it just coming out of the printer and being fresh and ready. Usually I've interfered in some way, but with this show I set it as a goal. They're really actually hard to make because it has to come out the first time. Before if there was something I didn't like about a print, I could paint on top of it. And now when I find something I don't like and I have to reprint it again and again.

Dunham: So are you keeping any of the so-called mistakes?

Williams: No, just I'm sort of going through canvas. Hopefully it all works out. There's an element of skepticism embedded in this work. I think there's always been a lot of skepticism. It feels really on the surface this time. It's about that and HBO.

Dunham: Those HBO paintings were... the more I thought about them, the more interested I got.

Williams: You're feeling the feelings!

Care to explain?

Williams: Basically I have convinced myself into making a Jackson Pollock splatter painting, which is really embarrassing especially when people come by. And then I put the HBO logo on the top of the canvas like the opening sequence of a television show. They came out of nowhere. I just wanted to do it and I wasn't sure why. One of the things about living in L.A. is that I feel less self-conscious. Maybe it's just because I don't know as many people or have as many things to be at.

Dunham: You're entertaining yourself.

Williams: In a way, I was thinking about the entertainment and its absence, but I was also thinking about how Pollock supposedly discovered something really great, but then no one else is ever allowed to do it again. There's some weird rule about painting and art in general that if there's some massive discovery then it's suddenly off-limits. It's the opposite of how it works in science.

Dunham: There's a term that's too common in art writing now, Ab-Ex, which is short for abstract expressionism, and is completely inadequate. There's nothing more irritating than when people use it when what they want to say is something about large-scale gestural painting, but it also reveals a real truth about the way our minds work. In the history of painting, there is an erosion of nuance. Things just get dumbed down to these buzz terms and I actually think Michael's dribbling paint around has virtually nothing to do with Pollock in any real way. I'm not saying that as a criticism — quite the opposite.

Thinking about the canon, has the recent surge of interest in expanding art away from the strictly white, heterosexual and male changed the way you think about your work or how you work?

Williams: I think not that long ago in my life I was probably able to tell myself... well, I don't know what I told myself. I certainly didn't tell myself that I was part of some very specific socioeconomic or ethnic category. I



Michael Williams, "Plein Air Painting Under Fire," 2018. Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles. Photo: Lee Thompson.

thought of my condition as much more general. Now, it's not possible to think that way anymore. There's a big reset going on, all extremely necessary and appropriate. Discomfort in self-recognition is a part of that process.

Dunham: I think part of the privilege of being white is this idea that we saw our perspective as whole. You're thinking that you're making art about universal truths about being a human being or something, but we're learning that it is not true or at least not true in the way we told ourselves. For example, I don't think I've ever read anything about Michael's work that framed it as being about a white guy who grew up in Rhode Island. Even though of course it is about that just as much as anyone else's work is about their life. But sometimes it's more obviously like that painting I've always liked so much, the one with the bald artist from the back.

Williams: Yeah, "Morning Zoo."

Dunham: It shows the artist with his ass crack out looking into a studio. It is all right there. Here is this vaguely absurd looking white person alone doing this quote unquote "important stuff" and maybe there is a humor and a truth to that image.

Williams: The content of my paintings is dictated by the content of my own psyche, so I wonder if I would still have the impulse to decorate and to make things if I felt settled. I like having things around that disturb or disrupt my normal state of my mind. Things that trigger me to think in a different way make a space active. In the end, I'm trying to make objects like this. I'm creating the things I want to see.

Dunham: I agree. I don't want to make things that I don't want to look at. I don't like looking at people with gunshot wounds or their heads chopped off or lots of things that one sees on television or in films. In this day and age, I find the idea that a painting could actually be shocking absurd given what we're dealing with on a daily basis. Paintings are provocative to think about in the same way that certain philosophical or scientific ideas are. They provide us the lens for looking at what is really happening.