

VAN DOREN  
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# ARTFORUM

## HUMAN NATURE

DAN NADEL ON THE ART OF ELLEN BERKENBLIT, CARROLL DUNHAM, SARAH PETERS,  
AND KYLE STAVER

Dan Nadel | September 2018



Carroll Dunham, *Any Day*, 2017, urethane, acrylic, and pencil on linen, 78 × 100".

ATTEMPTING TO RENDER what it is to be human is an absurd task, which makes it all the more urgent. We are long past the postwar afterglow of the “Family of Man” and other ultimately exclusionary attempts at unity. To know that and yet to pursue unironic ideas about our collective condition—despite all current political, social, and theoretical factors—is a profound act of faith in art. The artists Ellen Berkenblit, Carroll Dunham, Sarah Peters, and Kyle Staver are creating internally consistent speculative spaces in which to explore and, possibly, recuperate the idea that art is capable of representing what it’s like to be human. These “worlds” are empyrean, prelapsarian, suspended in an archaic “time” that exists outside of time. Shaped and inflected by ancient myths, Biblical stories, and other deep strata of human culture, but also by twentieth-century popular illustration, these artists’ work suggests a simultaneous longing to return to Eden and an awareness that we cannot do so—and that even if we could, Eden itself likely wasn’t so Edenic.

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Animals are the emissaries of this sensibility, and they act as magnets for empathy in the work, eliciting feelings of identification in the viewer. They may also represent those parts of humanity that aren’t merely human—those aspects of our universal selves that we share with animals, that aren’t determined by language or other strictly human structures. While the four artists’ work is figurative, and narrative in a fragmented way, their projects are also grounded in the physical. They are invested in the objecthood of their art, and the things they depict within their fictional spaces tend to intersect or open into real space, as though lifting out of picture planes or off of pedestals to further propagate their makers’ worlds. Both at the level of representation and in their exploration of the vitality and sensuality of

making, Berkenblit, Dunham, Peters, and Staver investigate and foreground eros in the broadest sense—as life force, joy, and polymorphous perversity.



Sarah Peters, *Charioteer*, 2018, bronze, 11 × 9 × 12 1/2".

FOR THE PAST FIVE OR SIX YEARS, Staver has been making paintings that use mythological and Biblical stories as an armature for images of all-too-human emotions and foibles. Her sources are the urtexts of patriarchy, but Staver often flips the script both narratively and materially. *Adam and Eve and the Goats*, 2016, is not about the particulars of the Genesis story—there are no goats in any version of Eden, and Staver's Eve seems empowered as she reaches decisively for one of the glowing red orbs, while Adam stands nearby, looking irresolute. A luminous lime-green glow emanates from the background, as if through a backlit scrim. Staver's spirited and precise paint application, especially her almost flashy use of highlights and color flourishes to keep the viewer's eye moving, has an exuberance and finesse reminiscent of the Bay Area painter David Park. The light that shines on Adam and Eve produces deliberate outlines on Adam's cheek, Eve's calf, and a goat's ass. The goats stare out at us intelligently, beckoning us toward the incandescent hue, while their matter-of-factness invites us to look past ancient tropes and imagine the first humans leading their daily lives.



Ellen Berkenblit, *Lines Roar*, 2018, HD video, color, sound, 12 minutes 21 seconds.\*

In his 1975 study *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition*, art historian Robert Rosenblum, rehabilitating Romanticism, describes Franz Marc's mythological paintings in terms that seem applicable to Staver's work:

That Romantic empathy into the lives of dumb animals, which increasingly humanized them . . . found its most remarkable extreme in Marc's ambitions, which he clearly articulated: "Is there a more mysterious idea for an artist than the conception of how nature is mirrored in the eyes of an animal? How does a horse see the world, or an eagle or a doe, or a dog? How wretched and soulless is our convention of placing animals in a landscape which belongs to our eyes, instead of submerging ourselves in the soul of the animal in order to imagine how it sees.

That submergence happens again and again in Staver's paintings (as well as those of Berkenblit and Dunham). *Psyche's Watch*, 2018, a decidedly revisionist take on the story, prompts us to identify with the only creature in the picture who meets our gaze: a dog peering out from underneath a bed on which a nude Cupid slumbers. The god is attended by putti bearing candles, gently illuminating a composition that is a play of triangles, from pubis to wings to nose. A hovering Psyche bemusedly looks down on the sleeper, who appears limp, flaccid—not just his penis but his whole being. There is no strong man inside this form. One reading of the painting is that it's all in the pup's imagination, a thought experiment that asks us to look at the positions of these bodies, allow ourselves into the space, and wonder at humanity and the roles that have been doled out to, enacted by, or forced on unwitting characters everywhere.

DUNHAM'S RECENT PAINTINGS, like Staver's, make central the theatrics of gender. Dunham's pictures of ageless and age-old wrestlers, begun in 2015 and recently on view at Gladstone Gallery in New York, are among the artist's most searingly emotive works. They explore and enact a mode of masculinity that is familiar to contemporary politics and everyday life, and seemingly an eternal driving force in history—although for Dunham, prehistory itself was the beginning of these paintings, if not their final subject. As a boy, he was obsessed with a 1961 picture book about the origins and development of civilizations, *The Epic of Man*, which contained pulpy illustrations of cavemen and dinosaurs. These would be at home (though they're not included) in a 2017 volume by Zoë Lescaze called *Paleoart*, a deep dive into depictions of prehistoric life. *Paleoart* does reproduce Rudolph Zallinger's *The Age of Reptiles*, 1947, a 110-foot-wide fresco, still on view at Yale's Peabody Museum of Natural History, that enraptured Dunham as a boy and chronicles more than three hundred million years of dinosaur life: brontosaurus, Tyrannosaurus rex, Edaphosaurus, and innumerable others line up in a grand procession across eons. In Dunham's paintings, there are no reptilian megafauna, but you can feel them lurking just out of sight. And then there is the modern antiquity, as it were, of postwar, predigital childhoods—the aftereffects of which have permeated popular cultural forms for decades. We seem to be in the Jurassic period, the Bronze Age, the 1960s, and an extradimensional future all at once.

The men who inhabit this layered painting space are bumbling, ill-assembled creatures, good for fighting, fucking, camaraderie, and little else. They are the antithesis of the "sensitive" man as embodied by the "enlightened" generation of the 1970s or by the proudly (if not necessarily consistently) feminist progressive men of today. Precisely because the wrestlers are so ludicrous in their monolithic and uniform hyper-machismo, the paintings suggest that there's no single answer to what masculinity consists of, while not ruling out the possibility that the tendency toward violence might be hardwired. Yet Dunham's figuration is somehow tender, accepting of confusion, touchingly nonjudgmental.

The paintings *Green Hills of Earth (1), (2), and (3)*, 2017, depict two men in combat, each with a club, against a curved horizon dotted with several trees, in a green color space with birds (each a precise *M*) and a perfectly circular yellow sun. The bodies are in dynamic action—horizontals, diagonals, and spirals of limbs—but the space is utterly still, and the light is even. In Dunham's world, all things are equal; everything is rendered with the same carefully considered attention. Dunham uses a counting system to determine how many of each pictorial element to use in each group of works (in the case of *Green Hills*, three trees, four birds, eight limbs), which ensures that there is an ordered framework for the artist's experiments in paint handling and a range of emotional entry points for the viewer. The mournful, meditative *Left for Dead (1), (2), (3), and (4)*, 2017–18, offer dramatically foreshortened views of a fallen male, two from the head down, two from the feet up. In each, a bird with folded origami wings hovers above, looking curious, as if less interested in carrion than in asking a question. One tree, one body, one bird. In *Dusk (A Wrestling Place 6)*, 2017, an oval-eyed gray dog observes the foolish men in a wet, muddy brown landscape against a starry purple sky. And in *Any Day*, 2017, Dunham offers his most expansive version of this ordered universe. The painting brings together a bather, a dog, four birds, the wrestlers, and Dunham's uniform mounds, stumps, flowers, and trees, arrayed on a swooping French curve of a cliff. Here, as in all of the artist's figurative paintings, only the animals have visible eyes. Oval and out of scale, perhaps occupying different dimensional and/or planar spaces than the wrestlers, these eyes are alternately quizzical, emboldened, and innocent. It's as if they're channeling the unknowable inner lives of Dunham's humanoids, bearing witness to his creation.





Carroll Dunham, *Dusk (A Wrestling Place 6)*, 2017, urethane, acrylic, and pencil on linen, 61 × 78".

These are paintings as windows, not only as objects, and they are not a story, though they do open onto a series of events in and out of order. Seen together, the colors rhyme and the tubular bodies cartwheel across the gallery spaces. That is, the ideas embodied in these concoctions of ivory, brown, pink, green, yellow, blue, and black spill out into the physical space between the canvases and make us reckon with them in a nonnarrative fashion. Altogether, they capture the arc of a worldview—from despair to indecisiveness to hope. This arc is encapsulated by *Mud Men*, 2017, which depicts the two men facing away from the viewer in murky water, one with his hand on the other's shoulder—a moment that is especially poignant in its emotional ambiguity. The gesture is conciliatory, but the water could have been clear and blue, and so Dunham signals that hope is never unalloyed by doubt. Rosenblum, again:

The mood of intense communion with the most impalpable of nature's phenomena—light, color, atmosphere—is made even more explicit in some of [Caspar David] Friedrich's early paintings where figures . . . contemplate in quasi-religious stillness the mysteries of nature's most commonplace daily drama. [In] these works, the presence of static figures, seen from behind and frozen into place by the starkly simple symmetries of the compositions, permits the spectator a maximum of empathy, for he can easily take his place beside or within these faceless beings.



Sarah Peters, *Figurehead*, 2018, bronze, 30 × 21 × 16".

Opening into the gallery, the paintings ultimately invite us back into their space via this classic trope of Romantic painting, suggesting we can take our place beside the wrestlers. The empathy engendered is with their struggle to simply be in the world—and that, surely, *is* universal. More specifically, Dunham has subverted the gendered

expectations of hulking men and given us figures that, like Cupid and Psyche, seem embroiled in social and physical forces beyond their control.

**If Dunham engages heteronormativity with his vulnerable macho men, Peters seems to show us the idols of a nonbinary world**

“WHEN I WAS A KID,” Dunham recently told me, “I wanted to live either thirty-five thousand years ago or in the future.” Such a paradoxical temporality also suffused Peters’s recent exhibition, “Figureheads,” at Van Doren Waxter in New York. For the past few years, Peters has been distilling human experience into bronze busts that radiate mysterious presence and that exist on an art-historical continuum stretching from Assyrian objects to modernist futurism. These bronzes have weight and lightness at once. They are highly ordered things, each plane flowing to the next in keeping with classical norms of proportion and scale. Their facial features are just specific enough to read as individualized, and just general enough to invite projection. If Dunham engages heteronormativity with his vulnerable macho men, Peters seems to show us the idols of a nonbinary world—her figures read as female or as indeterminately gendered, but almost never as male. For instance, there is *Charioteer*, 2018, whose hair grows in spinning psychedelic wheels that allude to trance states and enlightenment and terminate in a vaginal form on the back of her head. Her absence of a body serves only to emphasize that her control and her power do not emanate from her sexualized form.

Peters’s *Untitled (Herma 2)*, 2018, literally inverts the power of the Greco-Roman effigies known as herms—plinths or pillars surmounted by gods’ heads, often with penises carved at the anatomically “correct” height. In her take on the genre, an anonymous, blank-looking head emerges from a skyscraper beard. Where a penis would typically protrude, an upside-down Tshape is slotted in. The phallus, and all the masculine power it once entailed, has disappeared. Perhaps the most imposing of all of these icons is *Figurehead*, 2018. It is derived from a ship’s figurehead: She is leading us, fiercely. The mouth is sensually open, the eyes wide, and the eyebrows raised, the seemingly endless hair revealing an inverted obelisk of a torso terminating in the pubis. Dramatically, the head is flat in the back.



Sarah Peters, *Untitled (Herma 2)*, 2018, bronze, 30 × 8 × 8”.

As suggested by *Figurehead*'s morphology, Peters is not an illusionist. She telegraphs her awareness of the work as an object that the viewer needs to approach from one direction and experience frontally before moving around it. There’s no need for an entrance point, or an animal guide, since these objects exist with you in real space. Peters subtly reminds the viewer that this space is political. *Figurehead* is a loaded object, and although it doesn’t tell you what to think, it does remind you who, historically, has gotten to paint and sculpt what and what the implications of those restrictions have been. At the same time, Peters proposes a female-centric, sex-positive vision of power. *Figurehead* and *Charioteer* could be in the grip of orgasmic ecstasy, but their abandon is not in tension with their self-possession—quite the contrary, their uninhibited sexuality is inextricable from their strength. The artist’s uncompromising treatment of hair, which functions as both character trait and support, amplifies this sense of empowered sexuality; the hair becomes the site of a kind of controlled chaos, and is the only element of the work where the artist’s hand makes itself apparent. The wavy lines, which are created by drawing in clay and refined further in the mold and casting process, could be brain waves, thought itself captured as restless movement.

**All four artists pursue humanist projects even as they problematize humanism and carefully navigate its original sins.**

BERKENBLIT, whose film *Lines Roar*, 2018, was on view this past spring and summer at the Drawing Center in New York, is a master of swooping tresses and dramatic manes; her figures exude the same elegance and regal humor as Peters's while also recalling Staver's playful sensuality. She has been painting strong, willful women and animals since the '80s. Berkenblit's pictures were once populated mainly by misbegotten maidens who seemed to have wandered out of a fairy tale; now they are visions of witches and demigoddesses interlocking within a painterly space articulated by sudden flashes of color-drenched light, graphic symbols, and unashamed handwork. Berkenblit's bodies in motion dominate a tightly controlled pictorial world. Uniformly costumed, her protagonists are visual and spiritual counterparts of Dunham's wrestlers, performing the "feminine" with a verve more than equal to his theatrics of masculinity, albeit to different ends.

In paintings like *Mrs. R.*, 2018, and *Earth Flowers*, 2018, her women, witches, and animals (and trucks) move across the picture plane—and through time—with the relentless audacity of Peters's *Figurehead*. "The female form feels inevitable for me to make my work though," Berkenblit recently wrote. "I don't think of it as a power symbol. I'm not sure I think of it as a symbol at all—but, if I do, I think of it as 'my symbol.'" Her pictures' ordered space is open and permissive, replete with other—happy or anxiety-producing—symbols: flowers, clocks, machines. If Dunham's wrestlers are exteriorized aggression, a meditation on manhood writ large in a primal land, Berkenblit's women display their brio by navigating, and surviving within, a contemporary space of pleasures and hazards. Her tigers and cats, meanwhile, seem at once totems and companions.



Ellen Berkenblit, *Mrs. R.*, 2018, oil, paint stick, and charcoal on calico, 61 × 45".

*Lines Roar* demonstrates how these pictures are built. It is a meditative collage of footage of Berkenblit painting and drawing—sometimes on Plexiglas, so that the image appears as though brought to life by invisible hands. As we watch each stroke, as forms and textures emerge, what comes through—as in the carving of hair in Peters's sculptures, Dunham's knotted, matted manes, and Staver's highlights on flesh—is a sense of minutely concentrated focus on small motions to create maximum impact. With Berkenblit, we are never far from a gestural, almost balletic approach to mark-making. It's *this* close to expressionism. It doesn't quite get there, but Berkenblit's paintings are still as much a record of their own physical creation as they are representations of an alternative reality.



Ellen Berkenblit, *Earth Flowers*, 2018, oil, paint stick, and charcoal on linen, 63 × 45".

The works of Berkenblit—and Peters, Dunham, and Staver—seem, ultimately, to emerge from an unabashed effort to convey something nonverbal, an impulse to activate feelings that must be shouted, wrestled, danced, and levitated. They urge us to locate our own generosity of spirit and to share intense emotions not usually sanctioned in daily life. Which is to say, these artists offer a way to expand our affective worlds. They pursue humanist projects even as they problematize humanism and carefully navigate its original sins. The patriarch is made a figure of fun or banished entirely, and his structure of unjust, violently enforced binaries and hierarchies goes with him. The subjectivity of nonhuman beings is brought into the fold of the human. With formal generosity and figural drama, these artists offer us sublime visions in which the proposition that we can reimagine and rehabilitate this tormented tradition is the most transgressive idea of all.

DAN NADEL'S BOOKS INCLUDE *THE COLLECTED HAIRY WHO PUBLICATIONS 1966–1969* (MATTHEW MARKS, 2015) AND *CHRIS MARTIN: PAINTINGS* (SKIRA, 2018). HE IS THE CURATOR OF "IMAGINED, OBSERVED, REMEMBERED: LANDSCAPES FROM THE JAN SHREM AND MARIA MANETTI SHREM MUSEUM," WHICH WILL OPEN at The Jan Shrem and Maria Manetti Shrem Museum of Art IN JANUARY 2019.

— *Dan Nadel*