



**DAVID**

**SALLE**

David Salle (essay by Vincent Katz) Seoul, Korea; Leeahn Gallery, 2013

## David Salle: It's Not Easy To Do This

by Vincent Katz

David Salle's new paintings represent three distinct bodies of work. One is of mid-sized diptychs, featuring reclining women on the bottom panels with complex abstractions on top. Another highlights what could be called simplified "camp imagery" with disparate floating images. And the third comprises small paintings with images of reclining women blended into images of lakes and boats. The first group reprises an early strategy of combining imagery of women, taken from Salle's own photographs, usually painted in grisaille, with words overlaid in block capitals, while the second brings in the new use of perspectival landscape imagery, painted in an intentionally cursory manner. The small works bring to mind the improvisatory bravura of a series of watercolors Salle made in the early 1980s.

One of the signal elements of Salle's paintings has been to present melding itself. It is possible to identify diverse cultural signs, drawn from an array of eras and locales, in Salle's work. More interesting from the point of view of pure painting may be to observe how succinctly and precisely Salle has been able to combine distinct subjects, techniques and styles in the same canvas. On a theoretical level, the combination of photographic with painterly imagery — often the same image is both photographic and painterly — is one of Salle's primary achievements. His use of actual objects, things, in his paintings brings to mind the interstitial work of such predecessors as Marcel Duchamp, Robert Rauschenberg, and Jim Dine. Rauschenberg famously stated he worked in the gap between art and life, but Salle's objects are seemingly used not as tokens of veracity but as yet another way of making an image.

An exhibition that recently opened at the New Museum in New York makes explicit reference to the 1993 Whitney Biennial, even including some of the same pieces. Much of that work had identity politics at its core and was bent on exposing destructive fallacies in existing power structures. In some of today's art, there is a similar emphasis on social, political, content. Over against that, there is today another trend, towards art that revels in its absolute denial of any political context beyond the urges and impulses of the work's creator.

David Salle's work lies somewhere in the middle. No one would claim it has the goal of encouraging social change. It does not offer a critique of depictions of women or attitudes to classical art; nor does it present a manifesto for the equivalency of high and low. It takes its standards for granted, as it takes for granted the fact that much of his own generation, and succeeding generations, shares a similarly distanced attitude toward the efficacy of art as a vehicle for social change. On the other hand, Salle's work is not a solipsistic reverie. Rather, it presents complex — literally layered — visual but also emotional valences, with reference to relational and cultural concerns.

Before turning to Salle's own work, it is useful to get a quick sense of the concerns of the generation of artists he grew up with. There many differences among the artists who came to the fore in the early 1980s. Barbara Kruger made work that, like Salle's, tapped into cultural stereotypes, but Kruger's acerbic phrases made clear her desire to use her art as a means to criticize, among other things, the moral void at the center of capitalist consumerism and hypocritical attitudes surrounding women's issues. Many others — Richard Prince and Cindy Sherman come to mind — worked with cultural stereotypes seemingly without any critical agenda. Their project was to display the emptiness of people's projections of themselves, projections usually encouraged by such corporate forms as Hollywood and advertising.

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These artists, along with others of their generation, were included in the exhibition, "The Pictures Generation: 1974-1984," which took place at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2009. The exhibition focused on artists whose use of appropriated images, often from the mass media, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, was central to their practice. In addition to those mentioned above, the show included Troy Brauntuch, Jack Goldstein, Sherrie Levine, Robert Longo, Paul McMahon, and Michael Zwack, among others. In a review of the exhibition published in *The New York Times*, Holland Cotter wrote about the artists in the show, "They were the first kids to be raised with television, fast food and disposable everything. As teenagers they were soaked in Pop Art, rock and rebel politics. As art students, even in traditionalist programs, they felt the effects of Conceptualism. Ideas replaced objects and images. Painting was pushed to the side. The movement questioned what art was for and redefined what could be art."<sup>(1)</sup> Salle's inclusion in the exhibition was provocative. He had two paintings, an early installation piece, plus two works that use photography. Salle was really the only painter in an otherwise photographic and conceptually based exhibition.

Salle, who was born in Norman, Oklahoma, in 1952, grew up in Wichita, Kansas. "My father was a buyer for a women's clothing store," he recalls. "He also did the store windows and ads for the local paper. My mother sometimes worked in the store with him."<sup>(2)</sup> As a child, Salle took life-drawing classes with nude female models at the Wichita Art Association. While in high school, he took extra-curricular art classes three days a week. He attended a performance by the Paul Taylor Dance Company, with sets by Alex Katz. This was not a young man with a casual approach to art. After graduating, Salle moved to Los Angeles to study at California Institute of the Arts, where he earned a BFA in 1973 and an MFA in 1975. Salle had the good fortune to study with John Baldessari, a Conceptual painter who, as a teacher and fellow artist, influenced many artists of Salle's generation, including Barbara Bloom, Goldstein, Matt Mullican, and James Welling.

The thing that differentiated Salle from most of the artists in "The Pictures Generation" exhibition was his dedication to the craft of painting. He is fascinated by painting, studies it assiduously, and has long been concerned with creating large-scale paintings that provoke both on the surface and more subliminally. It was interesting that none of Salle's painting contemporaries — Eric Fischl, Francesco Clemente, Julian Schnabel, and others who rose to prominence in the late '70s and early '80s — was included in "The Pictures Generation." Salle straddles two worlds in a way that few of his contemporaries do. Not only is he closely linked to Conceptual frameworks, in particular in his citation of disparate cultural elements from the post-war period, but he is equally involved in the tradition of oil painting, whose revival, as a reaction to the anti-painting trends of the 1960s and '70s, marks another signal tendency during this period. In addition to painting, Salle has worked extensively in stage design, principally with choreographer Karole Armitage, and he directed a critically acclaimed film, *Search And Destroy* (1994), produced by Martin Scorsese and starring Griffin Dunne, Ethan Hawke, Dennis Hopper, John Turturro, and Christopher Walken.

In 1987, Salle had a mid-career retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Reviewing the exhibition in *The New York Times*, Roberta Smith referred to Salle's "paintings that mirror contemporary life in ways we cannot help but find poignant, jarring and sometimes offensive. In addition...they do this to great decorative effect." She referred to his use of various elements from recent art history, including Conceptual art's "abrasive emphasis on subject matter and disjunctive narrative."<sup>(3)</sup>

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Since that exhibition, Salle has devoted himself to painting series on themes, including Tapestry Paintings, Black Glass Paintings, Torn Poster Paintings, Silkscreen Paintings, Ghost Paintings, Ballet Paintings, Early Product Paintings, etc. He has made large diptychs and triptychs, varied his imagery, and introduced a vortex effect to further complicate the visual field. Currently, as mentioned at the beginning of this essay, Salle has returned to some motifs and ideas from earlier work, re-configuring them and layering new imagery into different formats.

It is instructive to compare how Salle uses photography in his earlier and more recent paintings. As in his early paintings, so in the new work, Salle's imagery of women, usually nude or semi-nude, is taken from his own studio photographs. Salle's photographic elements can bring to mind the work of Man Ray and Paul Outerbridge. With Ray, Salle shares an emphasis on combining objects and bodies, but it may be Outerbridge, whose nudes have a truncated, exposed, sexuality, whose rawness has more in common with Salle's naked bodies. Salle's photographs of women were the subject of an exhibition and catalogue with an essay by Henry Geldzahler.<sup>(4)</sup> In many of the early paintings, the nude played the role of being the figure — not so much in front of a background as embedded in a spatially non-specific flux. The nudes play dominant roles in the new compositions too (ironically dominant for they are by and large in submissive positions), but, due to the polyptych approach, they no longer dominate the entire field of vision.

In the new diptychs, there is a format: an upper panel of abstraction above a lower panel containing a grisaille nude with a word superimposed on her. The abstractions seem harsh, impenetrable, until one figures out how they are made. This may be hard to do, as Salle does not leave many clues of his facture. In a complicated layering process, he first applies acrylic paint to steel panels; on top of that, he prints silkscreens of photographs he has taken of beach detritus on Long Island; finally, he applies scratches and streaks of brightly colored oil paint. Meanwhile, the nudes below lie in typically Salle-esque poses of ennui, exhaustion, enervation, vulnerability. They are usually semi-clothed, as opposed to literally nude, which heightens their identity as sexual beings. Across them, one can make out names that function here like slogans: CAMUS, PIERROT, POUSSIN. Salle claims to have no premeditated plan for which elements he will use when composing a painting, including when and why specific words are chosen.

When examined up close or in detail, the myriad painting decisions made by the artist become apparent, and questions begin to pose themselves. How can he get away with painting an upper lip almost pure white and a lower lip pure black? How does he get that to work? And one observes a white shape like a bleached bone in the desert forming part of the nose, and flashes, like tufts of grass, that become the eyebrows, and so on. And one notices how carefully the word CAMUS is painted through all this, in outline, so that one can see both the figure and the word simultaneously, neither detracting from the other but rather adding up to a picture that either element alone would be incapable of forming.

In the camp pictures, Salle is using perspective, taking a painting by George Caleb Bingham as his springboard. But as usual, when Salle borrows an image, he edits and ruthlessly re-constructs it to his own purposes. Salle himself has this to say about the work:

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"I took this thing that Bingham invented, the raft, and I left out all the stuff of his that I didn't need. He gave me a great piece of pictorial architecture, which has so much forward motion and velocity. It's the first time I allowed myself to use perspective in a painting. It was almost like cheating, because, even though I'm a figurative painter, I don't consider myself a scene painter."<sup>(5)</sup>

The camp paintings make clear Salle's editorial process, whereby images float unrealistically. The realism of the perspective is undercut by a "painted-in" quality and heavy black outlines that describe the landscape in the distance, while drastically different drawing styles co-exist in some non-existent space. Yet, again, when looked at carefully, each element is painted convincingly in the style it inhabits, and the whole is in delicate balance. As in most of the paintings here, a serious dialogue is going on between the capabilities of acrylic and oil paint. The backgrounds in these works are washily brushed in acrylic, while foreground elements are determined concretely in oil.

The small paintings are tours de force of direct composition. Here, on a strictly limited scale, Salle's ability to compose becomes clear. Here, there is no room for added elements. Like pushing hands in a martial arts contest, the elements are laid down as balancing counterparts. Female figures, ghostily colored in traces, push against surfaces, or against other figures. The colors are in the gaudy palette of the camp paintings. Once again, acrylic and oil are in counterpoint. These are mementoes sent home from holiday. They are the holiday of a working man.

One of the old battles Salle's paintings inevitably stir up is that between signs versus painting. Salle has clear thoughts on the subject:

"Art is more than just reading cultural signs. Some people seem to think that's all there is to it — like if you can identify the sources, you've got the key. As if making art is like a menu, and you just choose what you're going to have that day. In my experience it doesn't really work that way — I think art is bigger than that."<sup>(6)</sup>

Maybe it's too easy to choose now, he seems to be saying. Painting makes that apparent, because it is not easy to make a painting.

Vincent Katz is a poet, art critic and curator living in New York City.

(1) Holland Cotter, "At The Met, Baby Boomers Leap Onstage," *The New York Times*, April 23, 2009

(2) David Salle, e-mail to the author, February 17, 2013

(3) Roberta Smith, "How David Salle Mixes High Art And Trash," *The New York Times*, January 23, 1987

(4) *David Salle: Photographs 1980 to 1990*. Robert Miller, New York, 1991

(5) Interview with the author, New York, February 12, 2013

(6) Interview with the author, New York, February 12, 2013