

**DAVID
SALLE**

**FRANCIS
PICABIA**

GALERIE THADDAEUS ROPAC

David Salle / Francis Picaba (essay by Catherine Millet) Paris; Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac 2013

David Salle / Francis Picabia

BY CATHERINE MILLET

True, David Salle first mentioned his interest in Francis Picabia long ago. It began when he saw the artist's *Women with Bulldog* at the *Westkunst* exhibition 1981. However, he is also quite right, as he did recently,¹ to correct the generally held opinion as to the nature of the link between his boldly enigmatic work and the art of his indomitably Dadaist predecessor. It would, says Salle, be wrong to limit this to a comparison of his superposition of images – a process he in fact used much more in the 1980s and 90s than he does now – and Picabia's "Transparencies." What these artists really share is more the atmosphere in which their works immerse us, and the obscure, strange emotions they inspire. In my view this emotion is difficult to define because it is close to a kind of sexual arousal which, depending on the beholder's nature, may engender discomfort or even unease, or, on the contrary, produce an extremely subtle pleasure, that slight dizziness we feel when, in spite of ourselves, we are led to the limits of what we accept (or refuse), of what we love (or loathe). Looking at Picabia's squinting "Spanish Women" or his "Nudes," often thickly pasted with awkward colour, or at Salle's simultaneously child-like and obscene comics, and his seemingly inadvertently provocative nudes, the question we ask is: are they pandering to the bad taste that even the most refined art lover still harbours deep within, or does the transposition of all these elements within paintings whose relations of scale and colour and compositional balance (particularly rich and complex with Salle) are perfectly mastered elevate them to some paradoxical category of beauty? If I have mentioned an almost sexual arousal, that is because, for me, only art and sensual desire have this power to throw

us off balance, to take us by surprise. Just as Swann one day realises that he is in love with a woman who, to quote the famous expression, “is not my type” (and we infer that there is a hint of vulgarity about her), there are surely many of us who, priding ourselves on our connoisseurship, and with no great taste for kitsch, and perhaps even a real penchant for minimalist or conceptual art, have come to love those disreputable paintings by Picabia, and yielded to the equivocal charms of Salle’s. That is no doubt what the American means by “using the eye to liberate the mind.”

Loving the work of Picabia and David Salle engages our responsibility. It is easy to fall for works that abide by the canons of beauty – and do not compromise our morality – and to share that taste with others. It is more difficult to recognise the pleasure we take in seeing, to put it simply, a Madonna covered with stars like a Christmas tree, or a paradoxically uncomely figure of a young woman in her knickers, done in grisaille, and juxtaposed with an uncertain image of detritus. All the more so because the painters very cleverly leave the representations poised in an in-between state, verging on ugliness, repulsiveness and kitsch, but without ever toppling into them, and leave the viewer alone to embark – “to put it simply,” because sometimes we give only a quick look – on an interpretation which is sometimes over-egged in relation to the representation. Looking more closely, we must acknowledge that the poses taken by Salle’s models are not obscene, any more than those of the young woman in the saucy magazines of the 1940s used by Picabia. At the most, they are suggestive, and it is in our imagination that we might possibly make those suggestions explicit.

In a similar way, the two artists share a taste for the performing arts and costumes. We need only think of Picabia’s contribution to *Relâche*, to his paintings titled *Mardi-Gras* and *Mi-Carême*, to his enjoyment of costume balls, and of Salle’s collaboration with Karole Armitage and Richard Foreman, and his use of animal masks in his recent works and of puppets and ghosts in older ones. The attributes of theatre create a space for movement, a gap that the viewer is free to cross, or not: the mask’s grimace repels us or makes us smile, depending.



The Birth of a Poet, 1985
Director: Richard Foreman
Scenery and Costumes: David Salle



FRANCIS PICABIA
Apollo, 1930

But let us leave aside these common points. The main point of comparing works is to establish their differences. In the case of Picabia and Salle, these are sizeable, and size is one of them.

Picabia painted on canvas, wood and cardboard, but the nature of the support did not significantly affect the quality of the surface. After the collage and Ripolin house-paint phases, he never paid any special attention to materials. In Salle's case, however, this concern has grown. As he explains, "Juxtaposition, the yoking together of two or more dissimilar things [...] has always been at the heart of what I do. But the juxtapositions are not only imagistic; Increasingly over the last several years, the juxtapositions are also expressed through the elements of painting – there is a great specificity of materials – canvas next to metal, color next to color, variety in the paint handling, dry versus wet, printing vs. painting, etc."

In particular, the lower part of the current diptychs is painted in oil on canvas, whereas the upper part comprises a silkscreen on steel plate of a photo taken by the artist, on which he has intervened in acrylic paint. Observing that the metal part is full of diagonals (rods, panels from crates or broken gates) while the figures in the lower part appear on a unified, neutral ground, we note that the two spaces solicit our gaze in contradictory, indeed doubly contradictory ways. The eye cannot stably "inhabit" the whole space of the painting, still less overlook its materiality, as it would in a traditional painting.

To this must be added the fact that Salle always works from photographs made specially for his paintings, not with the kind of found images that inspired Picabia in magazines, for instance. The artist insists on the fact that the models posed or wore masks as he directed them to. These images were staged, the lights adjusted just so. The result is an effect of proximity, or even intimacy, that we obviously do not get in Picabia's much more stereotyped nudes. Salle's "nearly-nudes" are much more like snapshots, as if the shutter was released not during the pose but when the model was changing pose at the photographer's request. And the beholder seems placed just behind the photographer: the size of most of these paintings, between 1.8 and 2 metres high and 1.5 or 1.7 metres wide, is envel-

oping. We never experience this reality effect in Picabia's works. The "Transparencies" but also the "Nudes" have a much more dreamlike quality. The horrible head in his *Adoration of the Calf* is like the recollection of a nightmare, whereas the masks in Salle seem to be bearing down on us.

Many years ago now, in a long interview with Peter Schjeldahl, Salle said of painting, "I think that the first idea you have is that someone painted this, someone made it."² And Schjeldahl continued: "Somebody did it alone and in private. And it's unique, like a body." The unique thing about Salle's paintings is that, although made up of highly disparate elements, they have extraordinary presence.

Only a little later in the same interview, Salle mentions Watteau, "who for me is a divinity." I have checked: the dimensions of his current paintings are approximately those of Watteau's *Gilles*, this vertical painting occupied from top to bottom by a body, that of an actor dressed as a Pierrot. He seems lost in his dreams and we feel we could almost bump into him. There is a full-page reproduction of this work in a very original book about the artist published in 1994.³ *David Salle/Francis Picabia*: what is missing in this exhibition is a painting that would provide the transition from dream images to embodied images: the *Gilles* by Antoine Watteau.

1. Unless otherwise indicated, the quotations by David Salle are from a letter to Bénédicte Burrus which she kindly shared with me.
2. Elizabeth Avedon Editions, New York: Vintage Books, 1987.
3. *David Salle*, Rizzoli New York, 1994.