

ART HISTORY

# Between the shoulder blades

## On the tingle of art

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David Salle

**HOW TO SEE**

Looking, talking, and thinking about art  
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Two-and-a-half centuries ago, in his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, Edmund Burke described the difficulties confronting anyone who seeks to theorize aesthetic experience. Whereas logicians and epistemologists have done their damndest to work out how we come to know truth from falsehood, “taste has not been so happily cultivated”. Burke continues, “it was not that the subject was barren, but that the labourers were few or negligent; for, to say the truth, there are not the same interesting motives to impel us to fix the one, which urge us to ascertain the other”. Despite Burke’s best efforts, not to mention those of Kant and the countless subsequent labourers in the field of aesthetics, one still has the sense that in the end taste is taste, that there is something about aesthetic experience that resists systematization.

*How To See: Looking, talking, and thinking about art*, the programmatic title of the painter David Salle’s collection of reviews and occasional essays, suggests a full-on attempt to offer such a theory. Happily, however, Salle explicitly sets his project against both academic theory, which seeks to explain aesthetic experience according to ideological categories, and journalism, which focuses on the art market and the gossip surrounding the work

of art. “Both are macronarratives”, Salle remarks, “concerned with the big picture.” As such, theory and journalism miss out on the particular experiences offered up by successful works of art.

By contrast, Salle seeks to attend to the little picture, or rather, a plethora of pictures both little and big, all by way of accounting for and communicating his experiences in front of meaningful works of art. Like any true art lover, Salle knows that in the end, art expresses us, that we come to understand our being in the world through the works of art that light up our senses and appeal to our minds. “How to account for the feeling of art recognition we have with art”, Salle asks, “almost as if the work were waiting for us, anticipating our engagement with its deeper music?” Here as elsewhere, Salle echoes Emerson’s epochal insight that “In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts; they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty”. As Kant argues, in order for this to happen, the spectator must confront the work of art without the filter of concepts, allowing the experience of seeing to precede the words one eventually finds to describe it. Proper criticism, as Salle practises it, entails being open to the varieties of aesthetic surprise offered by contemporary art.

Reading this collection of essays is much like spending a day gallery-hopping in New York with an unusually erudite, engaging, energetic friend who engages you by combining high-energy riffing with deep knowledge and love of visual art, primarily painting, which, after all, is Salle’s primary métier. Above all, Salle is a remarkably enthusiastic guide who genuinely loves art, and it is bracing to be in the company of one who has main-



tained his capacity for wonder after more than four decades of activity in the art world. In a review of a show by his friend Alex Katz, Salle writes: “where the plane changes, so does the color, and where the planes meet, there is, naturally enough, an edge. How a painter treats this edge is the real subject of realist painting; how the brush behaves in the vicinity of an edge gives a painting its present-tenseness, the feeling of the eternal present”. Here Salle speaks as one who has spent countless hours wrestling with paint over the past half-century.

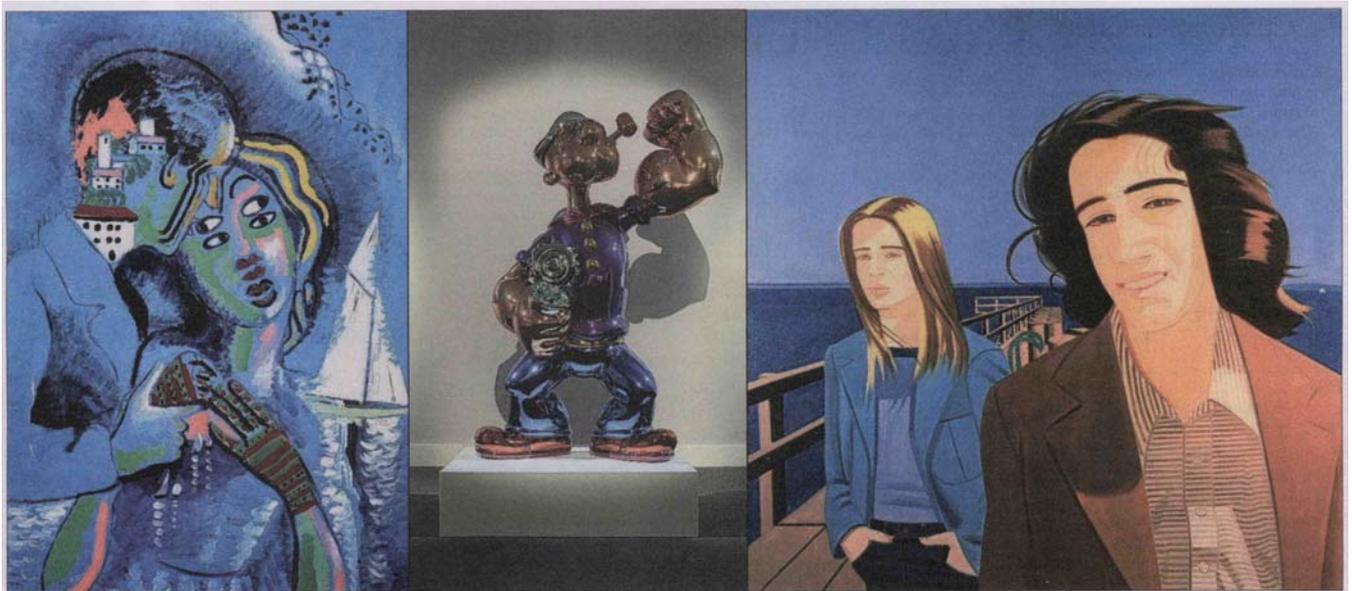
Salle is very good at rendering the experience of looking at art, since he has vast knowledge of art history, deep practical understanding of painting, and because he is a superb prose stylist. In a wonderful piece on the recent work of Christopher Wool, who has eschewed the text-based images that distinguished his early work, Salle writes of how Wool’s greys recall “the way Chinatown looks in the rain: the thin, chalky grays of faded signs for parking lots, yesterday’s newspaper blowing in the gutter, or the look of a car windshield that’s been wiped by a squeegee guy”. *How To See* is full of such poetic flights of fancy and witty aphorisms: “A group show is like any party – there are the people you want to spend time with and the bores you can’t wait to get away from”.

Salle spends little time on the bores, for his primary task is to evoke the work of the painters whose work he admires. Perhaps most interestingly for fans of Salle’s work, which has consistently pushed the boundaries of good taste, *How To See* offers a rich survey of painters who have provided the building blocks with which he has assembled his peculiar aesthetic. Take, for example, his comment

on the work of Francis Picabia, who was recently the subject of a large retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art: “I had never before seen painting so untethered to notions of taste or intention: There was no way of knowing how to take it, or whether even to take it seriously at all . . . this was painting made during a collapse of authority”. (At times he appears to be too generous in his praise, as in, for example, his review of Jeff Koons’s mid-

career retrospective at the Whitney Museum of Modern Art. “If abstract painting expresses the idea ‘You are what you do’, and pop art expresses ‘You are what you like’, then Koons’s art says ‘You are what other people like’”, which is a pretty empty message on which to base an artistic career.)

Salle rightly worries that contemporary art is too much “in thrall to the triumph of art direction, something which places art in the service of irony – or the ironic presentation of *forms*, the distance from art’s *message*”. In a funny, rueful riposte to the modernist fantasy of Clement Greenberg, he writes, “Why art had to be autonomous we as a culture can no longer remember, but trust me, it was important”. What remains is the persistent mystery and vitality of the work of art, the experience of which continues to be indispensable. Nabokov famously remarked that “the seat of artistic delight is between the shoulder blades. That little shiver behind is quite certainly the highest form of emotion that humanity has attained when evolving pure art and pure science. Let us worship the spine and its tingle”. In *How To See*, David Salle pays close attention to that tingle and renders it in consistently engaging essays that richly repay the reader’s scrutiny.



"Idylle" by Francis Picabia, 1927; "Popeye" by Jeff Koons 2009-11; "Islesboro Ferry Slip" by Alex Katz, 1975