

# Tablet



David Salle, 'New Pastoral Yellow Shorts,' 2024, Oil, acrylic, flashe and charcoal on archival UV print on linen, 78 x 120 inches  
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ARTS & LETTERS

## The Painter of No Context

The uniqueness of David Salle's genius has never seemed more grounded in reality

BY DAVID JAGER

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David Salle, 'Drink,' 1995 ALAMY

To have any knowledge of the contemporary art world of the last 40 years is to know David Salle. Part of a group of purely independent, boot-strapping New York painters that followed in the wake of pop art, minimalism, and post painterly abstraction, Salle seemingly sprung up out of nowhere, rapidly becoming one of the most successful contemporary painters of his generation. A mild-mannered kid from a cultured, middle-class Jewish family in Wichita, Kansas, ascended suddenly to the summit of the contemporary painting world. He has been an enigma ever since.

Part of it was fortuitous timing. Salle landed smack in the middle of New York's 1980s painting scene, after training under the watchful eye of gentle giant John Baldessari at Cal Arts. The decade had gotten off to a wild start with Keith Haring and Jean Michel Basquiat, the first bona fide "art stars" after Warhol, and it would soon be followed by Salle's generation: Julian Schnabel, Eric Fischl, Jeff Koons among them. All were brashly individualistic, all were carving out a new stylistic approach, and all were breaking sales records. Salle's rise as part of this brood of misfits was probably the most meteoric. Unlike his relentlessly extroverted peers, however, he was reserved, cryptic, as cool and undecipherable as his canvases.

Part of the rise of Salle was the way in which critics quickly linked him to postmodernism. Associated with French post structuralists—Foucault, Derrida, Beaudrillard, and Lacan—postmodernism billed itself as antipolemic, stressing ambiguity, complexity, and multiple readings, probing and “problematizing” the foundations of Western thought with dense thickets of abstruse theory. To many they were simply bewildering. Others accused them of intellectual hucksterism.

Salle’s gnomic compositions were read in a similar fashion, and the reactions were hot and cold. *New Yorker* critic Peter Schjeldahl saw him as a bold proponent for the “Pleasure Principle” in art, of “Art for Arts Sake.” Others saw his juxtaposition of figurative and abstract elements as ad hoc, meretricious. Others, objecting to his occasionally lurid use of the female figure, saw evil: “Paintings such as these are a way of giving permission for degrading actions,” wrote the art critic Elizabeth McBride in a seething response to a 1988 Salle show in Houston, “This work has all the cold beauty and the immorally functional power of a Nazi insignia.”

Salle was exciting and controversial, in other words. Disquieting energy saturated his early work, a subterranean pulse of film noir coupled with glossy, magazine catalog prettiness. The relations between objects in his paintings were often sinister in an unfathomable way, like crime scene snaps littered onto a detective’s desk. A single work could put together an underwear model, a package of blueberries, and slice of lemon meringue pie in ways that telegraphed danger. Salle’s paintings placed pop cultural, commercial, and art historical elements onto the same liminal plane, onto a space that seemed to have been opened for the first time. Critics dubbed that space postmodern. For Salle, it was a space that broadcast something both exquisitely polished and very dark about America.

Never wanting for money or fame since his first ascent, Salle has persisted along his singular track in what appears to be isolated splendor, unmoved by fleeting trends, pursuing his own painterly vision very much in the same way he began.

This does not mean that his style has remained consistent. Salle's early grids have given way to bolder and brighter interlacings of objects and patterns, with a visual relationality that has only increased in complexity. His visual style, unlike those of his contemporaries—Eric Fischl and Koons are the two that often come to mind—has shifted the most radically of three of them. Most recently, Salle became fascinated with the ink and brush cartoons of Peter Arno, noted satirist for *The New Yorker*, and incorporated them into a series of paintings. He was taken with their arch, Zen-like simplicity, and put them together with modernist and contemporary elements. Like the rest of his work, they were both confounding and compelling all at once.

When I visited Salle recently at his atelier in East Hampton, however, he was done with Arno. Something entirely new was in the works. The airy workspace, designed by his friend Joe D'Urso, is a modernist dream. A floor to ceiling window in one corner allows the clean East Hampton light to flow in, and it looks out onto a flourishing tree. His broad, littered drawing desk sits in front of it. At least eight large canvases occupied the long rectangular walls, three or four to a wall, an entire show's worth of painting. You can imagine Salle travelling with intense focus from painting to painting over an afternoon and evening, which is his favorite time to work.

Salle is a painter hugely informed by cinema and theater, so it's no surprise that a filmlike sensibility infuses everything around him. His obsession with Douglas Sirk is well documented. Walking in you almost have the feeling of visiting an updated character from Dashiell Hammett. He sits at long table in the center of his studio during our talk, composed, shrewd, inscrutable. He speaks in low, measured tones, behind which you can sense the workings of a very precise mind.

Salle has been playing the art world game for a very long time. Overall, however, he is easy-going, personable, and ultimately kind.

The new paintings for his upcoming show at the Gladstone Gallery, opening on Sept. 26, are currently hanging in his studio. He tells me they are nearly finished,



but winces slightly when he says that. You get the feeling that for all the poise, creation is no breezy undertaking for him. The new works are bright and unfathomably dense, part of an entirely new process he has recently devised.

Salle has taken a series of paintings he completed nearly 20 years ago, a series called “Pastorals” and fed them into an artificial intelligence with engineer Grant Davis. The software dutifully churned up his old paintings and came up with new paintings, or rather undulating digital topographies in which bits of the old paintings resurfaced like detritus breaking the surface of a swamp: a hand here, a pattern, a fragment of figure, forest or mountain range there. Salle was looking for a new ground over which to paint, in other words. He calls the series “New Pastorals.”



David Salle, 'New Pastoral, Double Breasted,' 2024, Oil, acrylic, flashe and charcoal on archival UV print on linen, 60 x 92 inches  
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The backgrounds are only a start of the process. This is not “AI” art in the contemporary sense, where the machine churns out the finished image. The backgrounds are an artificial launch pad to an analog endeavor, a way in which Salle can challenge his own well-honed painterly reflexes. He has simply found another method to engage in what he does best, which is to paint by hand.

While many painters can be quite solipsistic about their process and are at a loss to put what they do into words, Salle both speaks and writes eloquently about his own art. Over a long and discursive afternoon that stretched toward evening and a correspondence that followed, Salle had quite a few pointed things to say. He seems insistent, most of all, about the concreteness of painting, about its rootedness in the sensational world.

“A painting is a thing, something that is made,” he insists. “It has certain attributes, it looks a certain way, and is the sum total of myriad decisions ... it’s all these decisions as they are made at the end of a brush—because otherwise it’s just generalities. Just conversation. You don’t talk about music, or think your way into music, you *play* music. You make music by doing it, not by thinking it.”

Elsewhere, however, he is also quick to say “Painting, like theater, is an illusion”.

This isn’t surprising, given Salle’s early involvement in painting sets for theater. Painting is both concrete and illusory, ephemeral. It is the concrete production of artifice. Salle’s career seems devoted to this moment of decision in painting when the hand and brush meet the surface, the paradoxical gesture that makes the illusory become actual. The process is rooted in the physical world, but the associations and ideas they generate afterward are fluid, slippery. There is no one to one correspondence between things painted and the things they represent. Painting is action producing artifice, and this is the paradoxical source of its magic. Artifice is an essential part of it, but the artifice is *real*.

In Janet Malcolm's landmark *New Yorker* essay about Salle, "41 False Starts," she addresses this crucial point in Salle's painting, suggesting that he doesn't ever revise them. Readers were left with the impression that he approached each canvas like a bull fighter or tight-rope walker, playing some incredible form of 6D chess in his mind where the slightest added element could ruin the composition.

"This might have been a bit of a misunderstanding," Salle clarifies. "In a way, the paintings are being constantly revised until they're done, fixed ... It's only additive, additive play. Sometimes the impetus is a kind of "what if" question: *What if I put this thing there?* ... Everything mediates everything else. It's not so much a strategy, it's improvisational ... Think of it like a drama—what happens if I introduce this new character?"

Improvisational and performative are strong ways of describing the new work. So is drama. There is a definite ongoing relationality between the figures and elements he paints, as unreadable as they may appear at first. The palette is vibrant, rich with contrasting hues, vermillion and ochre, aquamarine and navy, forest greens and pinks. The contrast of figuration and pattern is undulating, bold. The eye doesn't enter the picture plane so much as slip into its many curved and folding surfaces. There is no up or down in these paintings. They have the unmoored quality of Italian ceiling frescoes. The sinister or desolate space of postmodernism, so palpable in his earlier paintings, now appears to be a space of possibility, freedom.

The figures also revolve around pivotal points. A cartoonish sun emitting rays that very much resemble french fries, makes a repeat appearance. There are also stands of trees surrounding a lake. The figures, fully rendered but often headless, hover somewhere between fashion illustration and full-blown Renaissance painting. In several works a single gestural feminine hand, worthy of Bernini, emerges into the foreground. In one it reaches for something in forced perspective beyond the canvas, toward the viewer. Above it is a full-figured woman in a red mini dress, floating sideways. Her head is missing.

The work is dazzling, inventive, deeply pleasing on a purely aesthetic level. It is painting for pleasure, as Schjeldhal once pointed out. But a question remains: Is there a deeper philosophical impulse that drives his virtuosic but seemingly undecipherable paintings? Salle is forever attempting to relate things to other things, bringing ad hoc elements into relationship through a very embodied and improvisatory process. But do these arcane relationships have a grammar?

I believe they do. As much as there is an objection to reading the ethical or programmatic into art, especially contemporary art, there is an aspect to Salle's painting that speaks directly to a feeling tone, to a sensibility that very much pervades contemporary culture of the last 40 years. Part of it could be his adoption of both surrealist and film noir tropes as a stand in for America in the late 20th century, a combination that was brought together in David Lynch's cinematic masterpiece *Blue Velvet*. But it also goes deeper.



The hidden something in the sensibility of a Salle painting that seems to be making a statement about our time, about America, is transmitted in the way that his figures and objects float in space, how they relate to each other in all manner of odd figure-ground relationships. To understand these mysteries of Salle's visual syntax, we must go back to a now little-known but intensely followed cultural writer of the 1980s: George W.S. Trow.

An essayist and cultural critic for *The New Yorker* back in its 1970s heyday, Trow was a personal friend of Salle's whose acerbic and often aphoristic writing style mimics Salle's painting. He takes little kernels of ideas and repeats them, sometimes in incantatory fashion, or he takes seemingly disjointed ideas and ingeniously links them. A gesture or character from a TV show can become the lynchpin of philosophical argument. It is poetic cultural criticism, relying on allegory and metaphor as much as anything else.

Trow was known among a small but devoted following for his telegraphic utterances about American life and its discontents. His most famous essay, "Within the Context of No Context," spoke of a sudden vacancy at the center of postwar America that lurked beneath all its endlessly proliferating images of comfort, sexiness and prosperity. It was also, ultimately, a book about the death of wonder. As Salle wrote in his own essay about Trow's essay: "It's the story of America's transition from a culture of doers—a place where character was linked to action and where individuals knew things—to a place where no one knows anything, except for the things that everyone else knows."

In other words, Americans had lost the will to govern themselves as individuals, and preferred adolescent, nonhegemonic enclaves governed by consumerist preference. These preferences were not based on genuine personal choice, but on images and media supplied by industries whose main interest was in selling them things. To know something is to know what is a “hit,” to love what is loved by everyone else. This odd takeover of the American psyche by mass media had led, in Trow’s reasoning, to a collapse of American adulthood. Autonomy and self-reliance, the traditional virtues of a fully grown individual, had somehow been supplanted by a learned helplessness.

Salle happened upon Trow when his painting style was well underway. Even so, he expressed his discovery of Trow’s writing as having the force of a revelation. Here was the fundamental reason Salle couldn’t anchor or orient his images in normal figure-ground relationships. Salle’s figures often float in space because the shared collective cultural space that anchors them had gone missing. He was painting them this way because he had already discovered, intuitively, that there is no genuine center to contemporary American life.

In his essay, Trow speaks of this erosion and how it is brought about through the odd phenomena of media and television. He proposes that mass media is essentially rootless and cold, something that wears the veneer of human warmth to lure us into consuming the advertising that goes with it. We grow up caring about Bobby Brady coming home discouraged from school and we cheer for Lassie, but this is nothing more than a simulacrum of human intimacy, of real human interaction. For this reason, he finds the whole enterprise hateful.

“Why hateful?” He writes, “Because it hasn’t anything to do with a human being as a human being is strong. It has to do with a human being as a human being is weak and willing to be fooled: the human being’s eagerness to perceive as warm something that is cold, for instance; his eagerness to be a part of what one cannot be a part of, to love what cannot be loved.”

The source of Trow’s anguish and fury was the continuous seduction of audiences by false melodrama, by a commercial media that purports to inform and entertain but really is only selling a false sense of ease. We are told by actors and experts and news anchors that there is a context, a terribly important one, that we must care about. But the truth is there is no context larger than that of the sale. The real context is always much more complex, dubious, hard to fathom, full of contradiction. Yet we cleave religiously and impartially to the contexts that are broadcast to us. We have found ourselves within the context of no context.

Those boomer generations, of which Salle was a member, probably know all too well the lure of television, the box sitting in the empty after-school living room promising endless warmth and entertainment. In the depth of our weakness, deprived of real contact or genuine humanization, we reach out for the next best thing, television. This is the way Trow believed we had become emotionally infantilized. Adults engage in bold and actualized adult dramas with other adults. They have the strength to forgo the hamster wheel of fantasy and step into the imperfect, complex present.

David Salle’s paintings echo this preoccupation of Trow’s. References to media, cinema, advertising, and consumerism permeate the whole of his work. The surfaces of his paintings are often impossibly crowded with possibility, with beautiful objects, with the figures of alluring women. But beneath many of them you can feel the coldness.



David Salle poses in front of two works at Thaddaeus Ropac Gallery in Paris, 2020, both containing elements of Peter Arno's ink and brush cartoons  
BERTRAND RINDOFF PETROFF/GETTY IMAGES

I would like to suggest a designation for Salle that is more precise than the casual label of “postmodern.” It is better to call him the painter of the “context of no context.” Trow and Salle are aligned in that they attempt to situate and portray the strange contextual disintegration of our time, the dysphoria engendered by the collective fantasy that has replaced face-to-face encounter. If you are reading this in public, just look up from your screen and see all the other faces buried in their phones.

Trow battled this creeping emptiness at the heart of American life with his essays, and Salle continues to do so with painting. To really paint, Salle seems to be showing us, is to confront the complexities of this contemporary life through creation. He confronts the illusions at the heart of contemporary culture by doing something actual. Painting has never served as the babysitting handmaiden to advertising. Salle’s paintings are real, because painting is a real endeavor.

David Salle says his “betes noires” are literal mindedness and banality. Like all of us he has battled both the seductiveness and poisonous coldness of our largely simulated reality. Salle takes these elements and attempts, through the serious endeavor of painting, to make them real again. Or it least give our dysphoric cultural landscape a different sort of life. An adult one.

If it sounds like I’m wanting to attribute something didactic to Salle’s painting, that isn’t the case. Salle is in fact careful to refute any finger wagging in his art, which is, ultimately, devoted to the freedom that interpretation offers us. “I don’t think that art makes arguments necessarily,” he writes to me later. “A painting is not a position paper. But if it did, I would say that my work generally is an argument against literal-mindedness, against the automatic, knee-jerk response, to the over-determined connection between this thing and that. It’s an argument against fore-gone conclusions, especially those based on old assumptions.”

All this being said, Salle would resist making any concrete parallels between his work and the zeitgeist of the moment, as that would, again, be too simplistic. His painting has been more melancholic in the past, and now, cresting his seventh decade, seems much more engaged in the concrete pleasures of painting itself.

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#DAVID JAGER   #DAVID SALLE   #NEW PASTORALS   #GEORGE W.S. TROW   #PAINTING  
#POSTMODERNISM