

January 20, 1979

Visit to an old office building on Nassau Street now filled with artists living there on the sly—just part of the perpetual search for loft-like living space in New York. Among them, David Salle—out of Kansas City, to “Cal Arts” to New York. His “Cal Arts” photographic works such as *Cambodia Bloodbath* owe much to Baldessari. A dark 26 year old, impatient and perplexing, Salle’s work is typically late ’70s, a studious amalgam of Process, the Conceptual and the Painterly, but never quite settled into any one mode. He hovers at the edge of established critical options so that, in the end, the real content of Salle’s painting is irony, or paradox, or parody, or all three—all attributed contents. His current works are large stretched canvases stained in soft oddball colors. On these muted fields Salle draws (in conté crayon) purposefully awkward Expressionist renditions of Hollywood Beaver Shots, big V nudes, private aircraft, telephones, and easy chairs. All this Pop-derived imagery is just set down, seemingly without rhyme or reason; to be reasonable would be purposeful and, hence, the flavor of offbeat paradox would be lost. And to draw his pictures well would also mean that the pictures were really about skillful illustration.

Later, lunch with Gary Stephan. He is happy and his new watercolors depict “dream structures” related to a sense of erotic bliss. A kind of oblique figure invokes, for him, the spoon position; symmetrical figures conjure flat out, centered vertical or dorsal positions. This sounds awfully much like gossip but it also helps to explain certain kinds of abstract figures in a way far beyond the bounds of formal discourse. The link between private experience and subjective abstraction is always there. One plays hunches about them; but rarely does an artist actually perceive their source so exactly, let alone make note of it in conversation.

ENTRIES: BIG HISTORY, LITTLE HISTORY

ROBERT PINCUS-WITTEN

David Salle,
The Flesh into Word, 1979.
Acrylic on canvas, 56 x 80". Courtesy Mary Boone Gallery.

