



The famed painter's brush with a bigger canvas—the movie

David Salle is one of the brightest and most talented of the artists to have emerged from the generation that came into prominence in the 1980s. In addition to his painting, Salle has always had a passion for dance—he's designed sets and costumes for the choreographer Karole Armitage, among others—and for film. Now Salle has directed his own feature film, *Search and Destroy*, joining a growing number of visual artists who have been drawn to

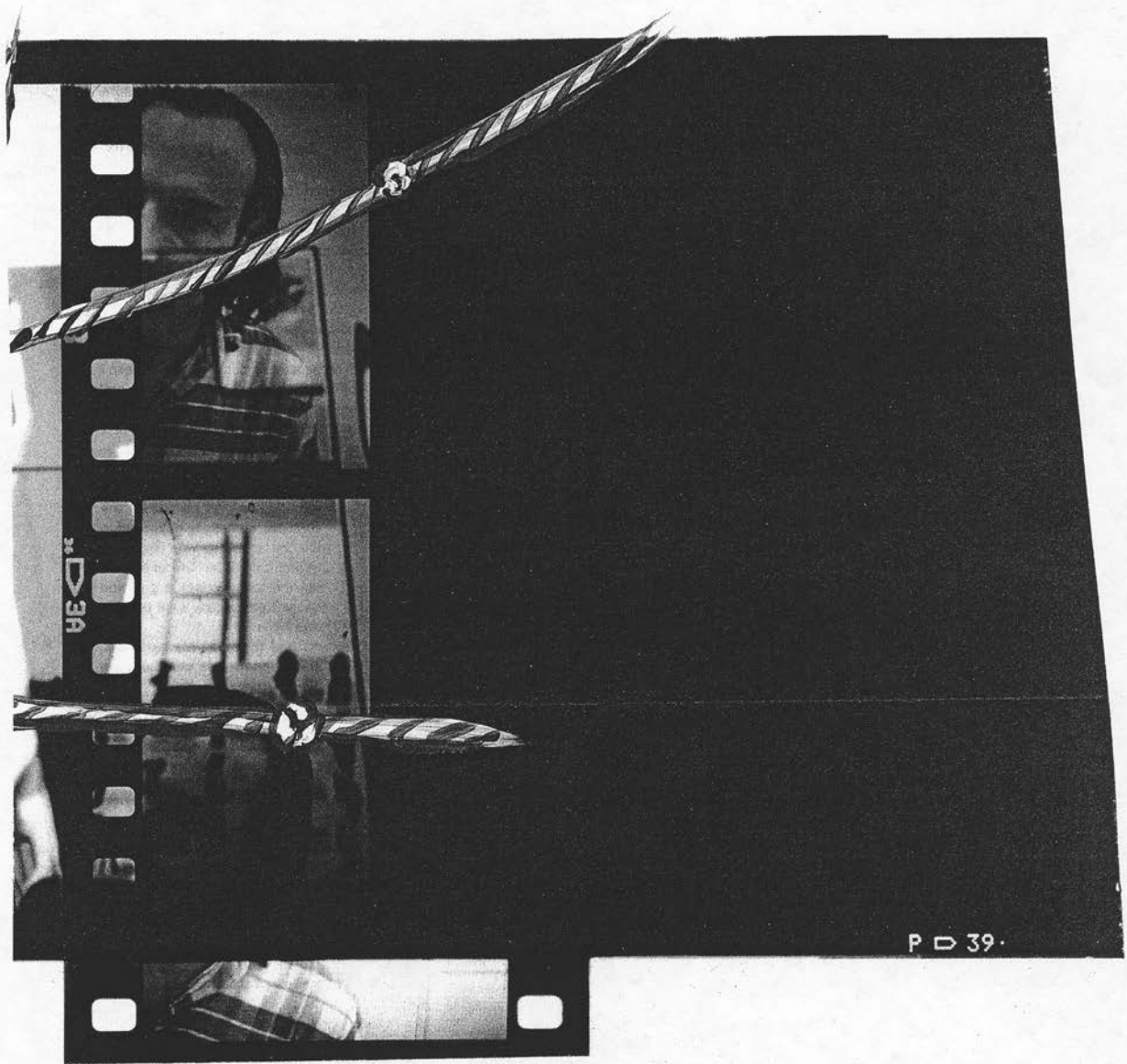
the silver screen, including Robert Longo, whose film *Johnny Mnemonic* will be released in June, and Julian Schnabel, who's working on a film about Jean-Michel Basquiat. *Search and Destroy*, which opens next month, stars Christopher Walken, Dennis Hopper, John Turturro, Ethan Hawke, Rosanna Arquette, and Griffin Dunne. F.T.

FREDERIC TUTEN: What drew you to *Search and Destroy*, and what made you decide to do it as a film?

DAVID SALLE: It was an Off Broadway play that Griffin Dunne had been the lead in. I was approached by the producers to do it. The play was funny, and I felt like I could inject some of my own concerns into it without distorting it. It had wonderful dialogue, some great set pieces, great speeches, some comedic opportunities. The story was open enough that a lot of things could happen, and yet there was enough of a structure to work with.

FT: If someone asked me, "What is David's

Interview by Frederic Tuten Portrait by Mario Sorrenti hand-painted by David Salle



screen—that's attracting a number of ambitious artists these days

first film like?" I'd say, first of all, that it doesn't look like a first film. It looks like an accomplished film by someone who's made many films, and it's totally outside of the structure of theater.

ps: When people say, "We're opening up the play," all they really mean is they're photographing some scenery that they couldn't get onto a stage. We did just the opposite. What we did, essentially, was to make the play feel even more en-

closed. I took the abstract descriptions of settings and made them more fantasy-oriented, without any real concern for, quote unquote, opening it up. And I think the result was that it is opened up much more than it would have been if it had just been adapted in some traditional way.

fr: What thematic concerns attracted you? I find that the story has a very Scorsese element to it, let's say in *The King of Comedy* and other films, when people go outside the law and

find themselves rewarded by the society—in fact, are given credit for the very things that they were guilty of. In your film, this sort of dedicated and insane loser with the potential to become grandiose commits a crime, and yet at the very end of the film he becomes a successful movie producer.

ps: I initially saw it as an allegory of a society in which the most ordinary people think of themselves as put on the earth for some very special

purpose. I had been reading all these interviews with celebrities. There's a whole category of celebrityhood in America, where really bad actors, really bad writers, people who do something at a very low level, are supremely rewarded for it. All these people say they felt, at an early age, that they were destined for greatness. It is also about what happens when you discover that not everyone thinks as you do, when you encounter resistance to your idea of "greatness." It's a story about wanting to be taken seriously.

FT: Some people become directors because they're failed actors. But what makes you—an artist who's perfectly successful in your own métier, who loves to have the control over his own art—what makes you want to enter a world where you really are dependent on a thousand other factors for control over your vision?

DS: On a very basic level, I just need and embrace change. There's a line in the movie where Griffin says, "I'm about change." Everyone focuses on the loss of control in the filmmaking process. On a certain level, you can't control what watercolor does! I would say that the impression of absolute control in art is just one more myth to dismantle. And the point about making a film is not control or lack of control. The point of making a film is the form of film. I see the form of film-

significant challenge. When you look at a lot of films, you can see that the real artfulness in film is in a place that might be invisible to the casual viewer. It has to do with the stuff of acting—staging and shooting actors, working out the scene. That's the real heart and soul of filmmaking. The so-called artistic stuff, beautiful though it may be in a Léger film or a Dali film, is just decorative.

FT: So you plugged in to the cinema world rather than to, let's say, the coterie of art people. You've got an extraordinary range of actors giving extraordinary performances.

DS: I didn't really want to make a film with amateur actors or performance artists. I basically have no interest in that kind of approximation. I'm interested in what actors do in the traditional sense of making something out of language and time and space. I had to have actors who were, like a force of nature, the real thing. People who could take a text, take some lines, and make something out of it that is not just eccentric or ironic, but that

DS: Strikingly, they did. Even though I worked with actors who you'd think would see right through any pretend director and would respond accordingly, they all pretty much adhered to the convention that they're there for the director, come hell or high water. Which is a kind of beautiful, charming, and somewhat scary thing about actors. At least the ones I was working with.

FT: Did any of them make contributions to the film that you hadn't expected when the script was given to them?

DS: They made enormous contributions to it. What actors bring to something is a sense of absolute specificity, because they have to. For example, Turturo's character is a little sketchy in the script. It's written that he has a lot of clothes, but he doesn't think he looks good in any of them. So John had this idea that he's a guy who can't decide what kind of jacket to wear, so he wears several jackets at once. We had worked out with the costume designer the idea that John would wear two sport coats and a hooded sweatshirt and gloves and a wig. As soon as he put on the costume, something happened to the character that was completely unpredictable. The character started to be about a guy who doesn't particularly want to know who he is.

FT: And that was his part of it, so to speak—his collaboration



John Turturro in *Search and Destroy*.

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making in the same way that I see the form of painting or the form of stage production. Or the form of writing, for that matter. It's a way of making something. If the form fits my interests and concerns, then I feel like it's worth giving it the time. It's true that certainly as a first-time, low-budget filmmaker, there are many, many things out of your control. But the level on which one does have control—in my experience, it was the same as making art. It was just a different set of tools to make art with. It's part of my general attitude about art making, which is that I don't have to initiate or control every aspect of something for it to be mine. Sometimes total egomaniacal, obsessional control results in good work, and sometimes it results in terrible work.

FT: I was thinking of all the artists who have made films. There is a long tradition, a long and beautiful history: Cocteau and Calder and the surrealist filmmakers, Hans Richter and others. But when you look at their films, you think, These are artists making an art film. And the films are clearly reflective of visual concerns in their own work. But *Search and Destroy* really seems to me not to fit that category. It's an artful film, and it's a beautiful film, but I wouldn't say it's a film by an artist making a film that is an extension of the immediate preoccupations of his art.

DS: It's not that making an art film wouldn't be interesting to do or worth doing. It sounds a little arrogant, but I didn't feel like that would be a very

is eccentric, ironic, flabbergasting, and at the same time real and moving. And that's a tall order. With Chris Walken combined with John Turturro and Griffin Dunne—I've already got on my palette, so to speak, a certain kind of collage of acting styles and ways of making meaning.

FT: So how does one become a director of a feature film without having film credits or a film background or anything like that?

DS: Well, one of the ongoing ironies of this film is it's a story about a guy who basically becomes something simply by declaring that it's so. We all had a lot of laughs on the set; the film so much mirrored the reality of the making of the film that it became hilarious. I was able to make the film by declaring that I was making a film. And on a certain level, I'm sure people were deeply skeptical, but on another level the whole film business operates by intersections of improbabilities that become certainties. Since everything in the film business is total fantasy, what's one more fantasy?

FT: [laughs] Having declared yourself a director, did the actors behave toward you as if you were the director?

with you.

DS: That's just the surface—the design aspect. The kinetic starting point of defining the character was an impersonation of a famous director who has very specific mannerisms, eccentric mannerisms. We did this consciously. Of course, it transformed itself into something much more organic. But a lot of initial rehearsals were lost in utter, abject, helpless laughter at the aptness of this impersonation.

FT: I didn't know you had those comic possibilities in you, David.

DS: I've always said, in talking about art, that the only thing I was really interested in was comedy. We knew the script was funny, that the play had been funny. The audience laughed a lot. But there was this notion that an artist's first film would be something ponderous and obscure.

FT: Or autobiographical.

DS: Or autobiographical.

FT: Which is ponderous and obscure. [both laugh]

DS: Actually, I tried to be ponderous and obscure, but I ended up with this efficient and fairly straightforward little comedy. I like the fact that it doesn't have anything directly to do with me.

FT: Yet it reminds me of your art, your paintings in particular, in that they're always objectified, outside of you. I think in choosing the subject for this film—the fact that it's something already made—it's almost an appropriation, if you think of it that way. Having a play, something ex-

tant, come into your territory, and reworking it into the shape of a David Salle film. You're there, but you're concealed very deeply in it and manipulate it all.

ds: On a certain level, it's a film about artists and critics. Every character in the film is in some way either a failed or a striving artist, or a critic-destroyer. But that's very private. No one in the general audience will see that, nor should they. It's something that informs how the characters are played. A lot of personal stuff is there, but it's submerged, lodged in the very taut surface of the film as a film, as entertainment. And it is, hopefully, entertainment.

fr: **The truth of the matter is it's really a profound entertainment. Above all, it's compelling. Tell me, who are the filmmakers who have really mattered to you?**

ds: For this project, Godard up to about '67, the color films of Antonioni, the first ten years of Mike Nichols, all of Kubrick. In short, the '60s. The movie that most informed *Search and Destroy* was Kubrick's *Lolita*. My friend Larry Gross observed the connection between Humbert Humbert and my protagonist, Martin Mirkheim: "He's both smarter than everyone else in the story and dumber than everyone." It's the capacity for self-delusion that is so touching and comedic. But my film is

idea that we were basically making Napoleon's tent, a kind of campaign tent from some far-flung nineteenth-century war. And that this guy was a kind of general in his tent. And it doesn't make any sense. It has nothing to do with the story or anything, but it's an image that was useful. On top of that—and this is the way I work that is probably different from the way other people work—I decided to graft onto it a kind of musical homage to, of all people, Vincente Minnelli. And I didn't tell the actors what I was going to be doing. I just said that we were going to start and stop the scene several times. I thought it was funny because of the way the dialogue was structured in terms of a staccato question-and-answer. The producers complained that the tailor's shop didn't have any windows in it. These people are very literal-minded. "This is a tailor's shop? Where are the clothes? Where are the suits? Where are the windows? It looks like a tent in here!" [both laugh]

fr: **That's wonderful.**

there was no place for it in the story! [laughs] So Michael fused two scenes together that became the "karaoke bar scene," in which Chris Walken, the slick businessman, takes Griffin Dunne to a Japanese nightclub. Because Chris's character is so adept in the Japanese social world, they play special music for him and he does a karaoke singing performance, and of course he dances. Having unleashed this aspect of the film, basically we couldn't get Chris to stop singing and dancing in the whole film. And it really created a problem for the producers afterward, because we ended up having to buy music rights to a lot of the stuff Chris sings! [laughs] So it became a kind of impromptu musical.

fr: **How were the producers?**

ds: Well, the producers were basically scrambling to keep the movie on budget because we started with just a preposterously low budget.

fr: **Can you say what the budget was?**

ds: I think we ended up spending a little over two million dollars altogether, which is a minuscule amount of money. It's not a minuscule amount of money for a first film or for an independent, small-scale, offbeat movie, but it's a painfully low budget for a movie with major actors. Not just major actors but many sets, many different locations and characters, and a relatively com-

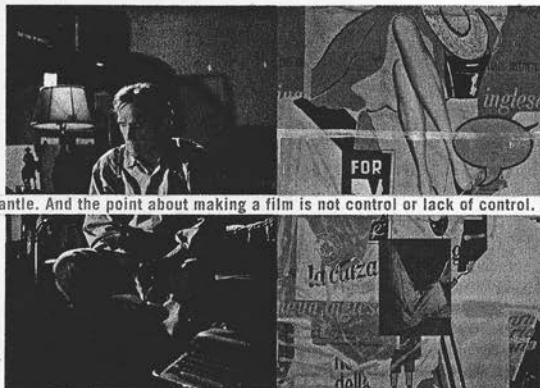
control in art is just one more myth to dismantle. And the point about making a film is not control or lack of control. The point of making a film is the form of film."

not an homage to any director.
fr: **Yes. There's no appropriation in that sense.**

ds: But there are pieces of influence in different scenes—very specific stylistic influences. To give you one example, in the play John Turturro's monologue about *Bat Night* at Shea Stadium—which is a sort of central, memorable set piece in the film—is set in a restaurant, which is the way it probably would be staged in most films as well. It's a convention that everybody understands. That's a scene in thousands of movies. Which is why I was determined not to set the scene in a restaurant. So where else could such a scene be set? As I said, these guys are kind of clotheshorses, but probably unsuccessfully so. So the writer, Michael Almerveyda, and I decided to set that scene in a tailor's shop. Which, in and of itself, is not unusual. There is already a tradition of tailor-shop scenes in movies.

fr: **Gentlemen at their tailor's.**

ds: Someone being measured for a suit while they're having a gangsterish business conversation is in itself a kind of set piece. But we couldn't even afford to rent a proper tailor's shop to shoot in. All we had was a funky imitation soundstage, basically a loft. And we had a few dollars to buy bolts of fabric. So I said, "Well, let's just go one step further. Let's just drape fabric on the walls." And then, in this idea of draping fabric on the walls—and this is kind of the way the images are arrived at in my paintings—I was struck with the



Left: Dennis Hopper in *Search and Destroy*. Right: Salle's *Sallors Set on Shore*, 1991.

ds: When it was all cut together, with the right music, people could see what I was going for. We transformed a banal, stationary, three-guys-in-an-Italian-restaurant gangster scene into a kind of Vincente Minnelli centerpiece for the film. It's an aspect of the film that I'm proud of, though there are aspects of the film I'm not happy with at all.

fr: **There are many high moments in this film. I'm thinking of Christopher Walken in the nightclub. Did that really happen, or was it a hallucination of mine?**

ds: Chris has definitely created a new kind of movie acting. He trained as a dancer, and the question was: Would we be able to get Chris to dance a little bit in the movie? It was sort of a bet or a dare. You know, "He doesn't do that anymore, he hasn't done it since *Pennies from Heaven*, he doesn't like to do it, it's not serious, it's not part of the character"—all that. I told Michael I wanted a scene set in a Japanese restaurant so that I could use this really crazy Japanese pop music that I found in Japan and just couldn't get out of my head. I would not make the movie without using this piece of Japanese music, even though

plicated story to tell that has some violence in it. So we were always scrambling to somehow make it work.

fr: **On the other hand, if you had a bigger budget, you may not have had the tailor scene the way you made it.**

ds: Well, of course, that's the cliché about low-budget film-

making—that the lack of money forces you to be more creative. Sometimes I think it does, and sometimes it's just a hindrance. There are so many things in the movie that are severely compromised because we didn't have the right budget.

fr: **What advice do you have for young filmmakers?**

ds: No advice. I think everyone has to make their own mistakes. The fact is that a first-time director, unless they raise the money and/or they write the script, neither of which I did, only has control to a certain point. I was a director for hire on a project that was owned by the producers and financed by the producers. Certain decisions were mine and certain decisions were not mine. I definitely did not have the power to do everything I wanted to do, which maybe turned out to be good, I don't know.

fr: **Some French director friends of mine talk about going to make a film as if they're going to war. They actually say that: "Tomorrow, we start the war!" Did you come out of it wanting to make more films?**

ds: I love the smell of napalm in the morning. ■