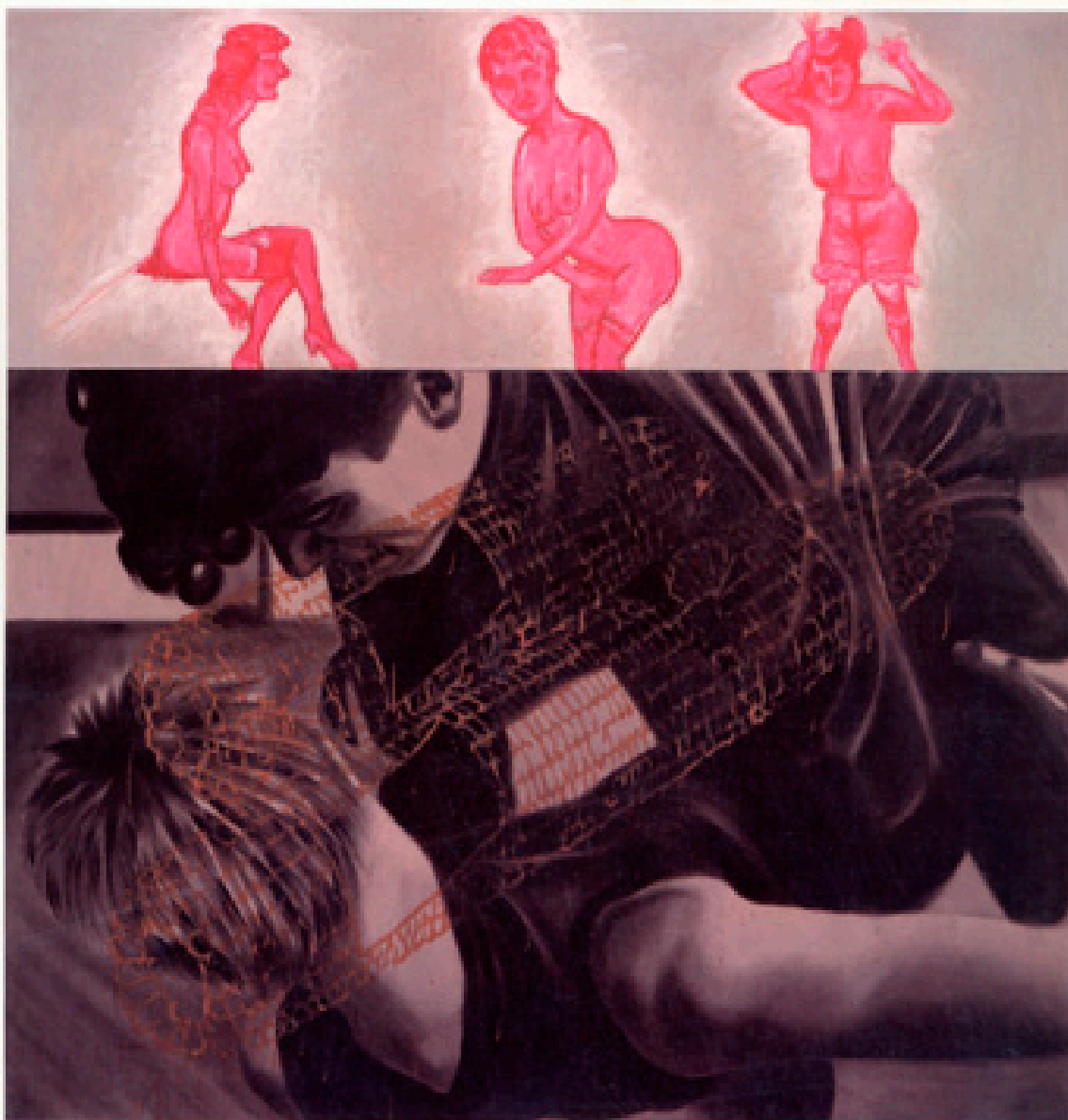


INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY ART, UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA

DAVID SALLE



DAVID SALLE

BY JANET KARDON

WITH AN ESSAY

BY LISA PHILLIPS

INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY ART, UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA



Unless otherwise indicated, works reproduced are by David Salle.
top: Untitled, 1973. Collection the artist.
middle: *One Year at 55 M.P.H.*, 1975. Collection the artist.
bottom: *The Old, the New, and the Different*, 1981. Collection Janet Green. The title of Janet Kardon's essay has been appropriated from the title of this painting.

JANET KARDON

THERE IS A growing consensus that David Salle has brilliantly negotiated the transition from the conceptual and narrative concerns of the 1970s to the resurgence of painting in the 1980s. Salle's accomplishment, however, is richer than this description implies. His work again makes available what art has not offered since the early paintings of Jasper Johns: a profound meditation on the nature and possibility of experience.

Work as complex and elusive as Salle's tends to set the conditions for writing. To a degree, this is true of all art, but in Salle's case the point must be emphasized. The art, of course, bears no more and no less relationship to everyday speech or common usage than does *Finnegans Wake*. The silences and pseudocontradictions, sudden vulgarities, and high-art quotations in Salle's work are related to the elisions and discontinuities of linguistic structures. We become aware of brilliantly devised inventions, tremendous emotional energy, impatience, even anger, all of which at times seem to desire a reformulation of the very nature of artmaking. Until now, criticism of his work has focused on its systems of cancellations of content; the emotional impact, elusive though it is, has been neglected. It is a characteristic of new art that we tend to puzzle over its processes before, with time, we begin to understand what those processes deliver. As we grow accustomed to its radical means, we can begin to react to its intrinsic concerns.

SALLE SPENT five years at the California Institute of the Arts, in Valencia, near Los Angeles. He completed the undergraduate program in 1974 and received his master of fine arts degree in 1975. His teachers included David Antin, John Baldessari, Alan Hacklin, and Max Kozloff; among his classmates were Ross Bleckner, Eric Fischl, Jack Goldstein, Matt Mullican, and James Welling. Salle also briefly studied theatre direction in a class for which the text was Michael Chekhov's book *To the Actor* (1953). Salle's art from this time shows evidence of

a distinctive mind at work. In a four-scene piece of four bathrobed women (1973), each is photographed in her own kitchen, holding a cup of coffee and staring out the window. A different coffee label is placed at the lower edge of each picture, an ironic comment on the way we become functions of commerce, consumed by what we consume, all drinking the same brew but accepting the manufacturers' claims that it is different.¹

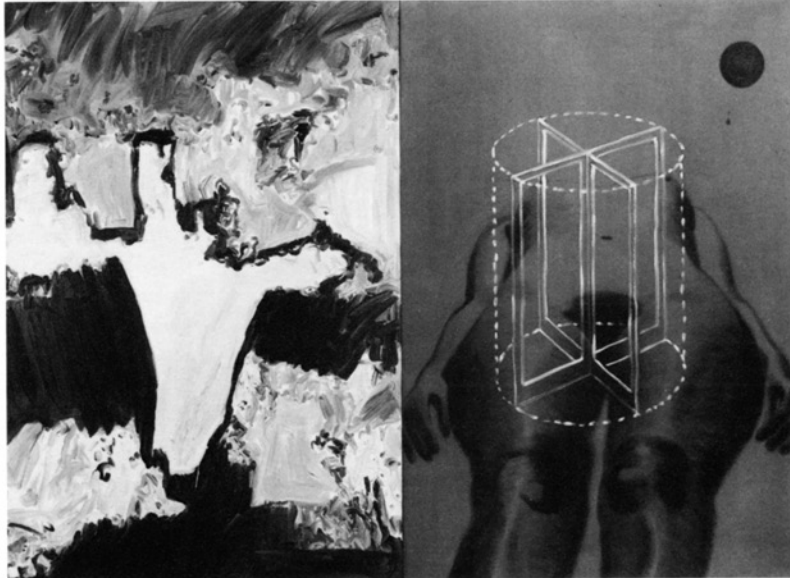
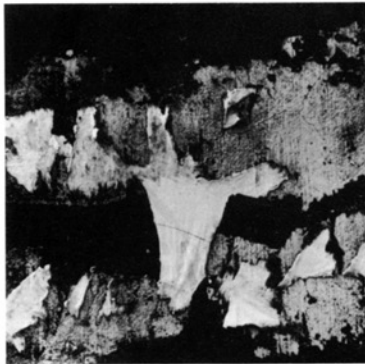
A photograph suggests several amusing meanings in *One Year at 55 MPH* (1975), another early work. Salle, wearing aviator sunglasses, sits in the driver's seat of a car, facing the passenger's seat (and the camera). The title, or legend, is placed on the right. Numerous signatures surround the two pieces of mounted information. Is the public pledging to ride the freeway in, what is, for California, slow motion? Are these the signatures of former passengers, witnesses to the truth of the legend, or has the driver been sentenced for past violations? The story, though, is quite different: Salle had gathered the signatures *before* he mounted the photograph and text. He had left a sheet of paper hanging on the school wall, and the public, always eager to sign anything, however unclear its purpose, had obliged and, retroactively, been had. It is, in its way, a metaphor for the artist and his audience, a witty placing of the cart before the horse.

What strikes one about these early works is the way Salle mobilizes images in order to liberate them from their banality. Repetition is enlisted to alter the perception of an image; slight inflections do not detach a pose from its stereotype but, like a sequence of stills in a filmstrip, trap the mind into equivocating between sameness and difference. The subjects are selected from a wide variety of

1. Kenneth Baker discussed this work when it was included in Salle's first group show, organized by Paul McMahon for Projects, Inc., Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1974. See Baker, "Art: It's the Thought That Counts," *The Boston Phoenix*, 24 September 1974, section 2, 8, 9. Salle underlined the following sentence in the review: "What makes the piece successful as art is the way it connects our inquiry into its meaning with our incessant inquiry into what's going on with other people."

left: Unidentified magazine illustration. Working image for *Archer's House*.

right: *Archer's House*, 1980. Collection Doris and Robert Hillman. Color p. 37.



left: Aaron Siskind photograph, *Coatzacoalcos 54*, 1973. Working image for *Smells Burns Is Vacant*.

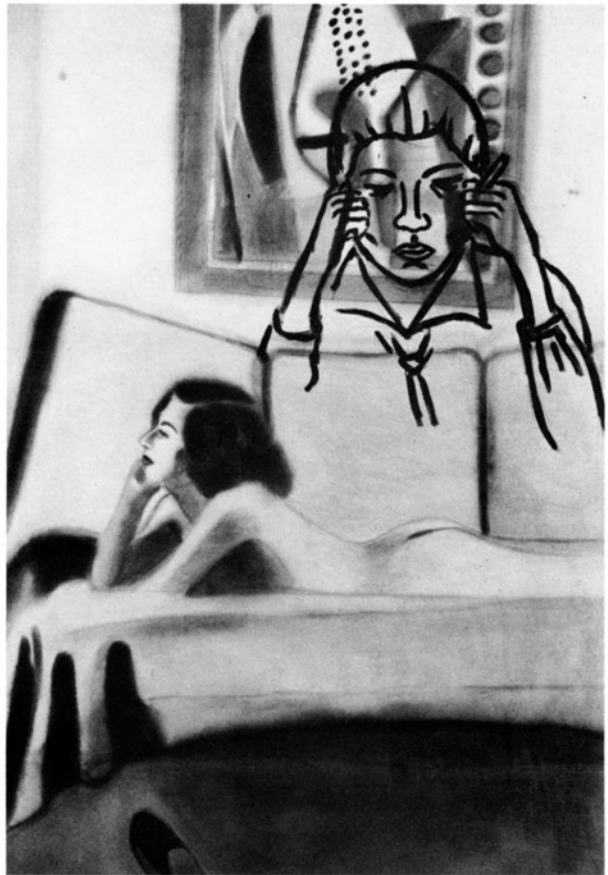
right: *Smells Burns Is Vacant*, 1982. Private collection, courtesy Mary Boone Gallery.

sources and media. Salle's attitude toward objects, styles, and media is highly sophisticated. We are aware of a mind that takes nothing for granted—that with considerable energy gives any positive statement an equal and opposing force. The aims are set high: A work of art is a group of representations, each separated and clarified and then brought together in a way that forces content to flicker on and off as perception generates friction among clusters of associations. Emotion is delivered, but it circulates through sets of images that traffic in ghosts.

IN 1979, SALLE painted *Rob Him of Pleasure* (p. 36), the first work in which the images are overlaid, a key strategy in virtually all his subsequent paintings. Salle's aesthetics of superimposition and transparency radically extended his expressive range. The picture plane is oddly reinforced, almost as if it were a pane of glass, behind which deep space extends in abrupt and unexpected vistas. On this hypothetical glass, line drawings inscribe figures and incidents in another order of depiction; thus, to lateral contiguities, frequently extended across diptych formats, is added another area of discourse. These two coordinates, along the surface and inward from it, describe a space that calls for immensely sophisticated handling. They also create the possibility of numerous readings: The images release their pulsations of period, style, and source in a variety of sequences. Narrative is encouraged and forestalled, or, put another way, the possibility of narrative is indicated but not fulfilled. It is this perception of a double movement, toward a resolution that can be identified by the spectator as "meaning," yet away from it as things fall apart, that mobilizes the image into the kind of temporal universe seen more usually in film and the avant-garde novel.

Intrinsic to the controversial presence of meaning in Salle's paintings is the nature of the images. In *Delicately Emblematic Subdivision* (1980), the paint-

Rob Him of Pleasure, 1979. Saatchi Collection, London. Color p. 36.



Delicately Emblematic Subdivision, 1980. Private collection, courtesy Mary Boone Gallery.

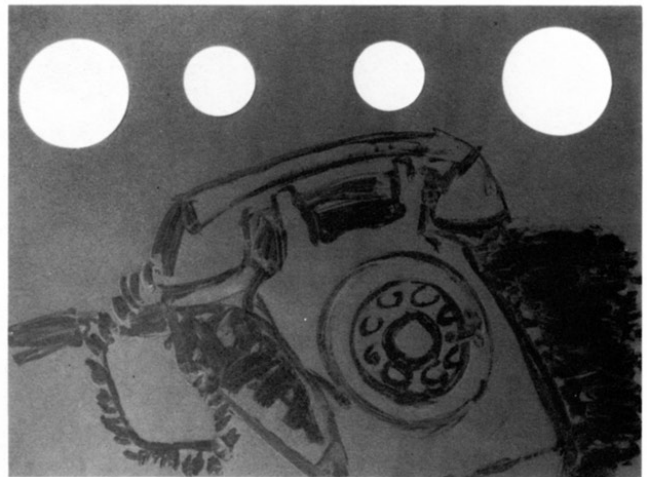
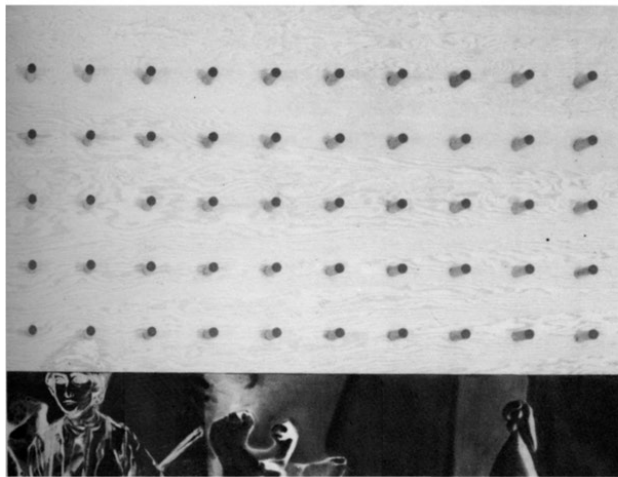
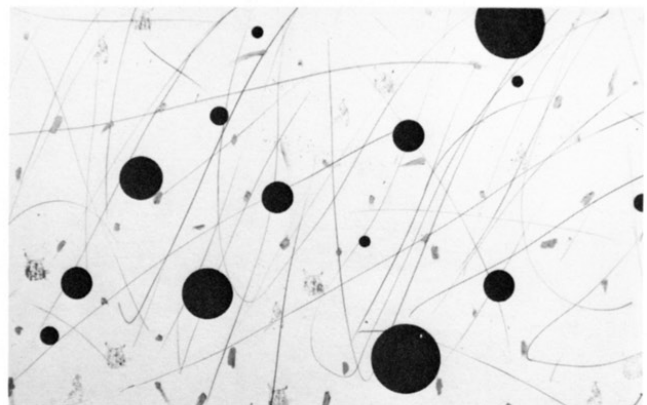
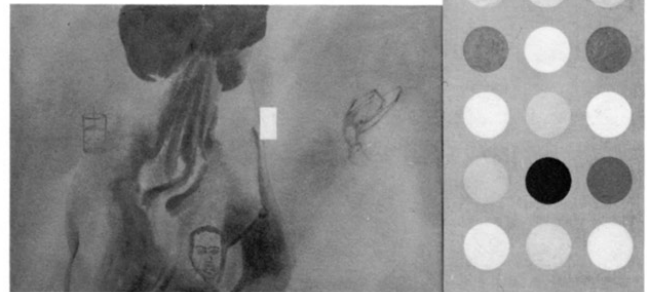
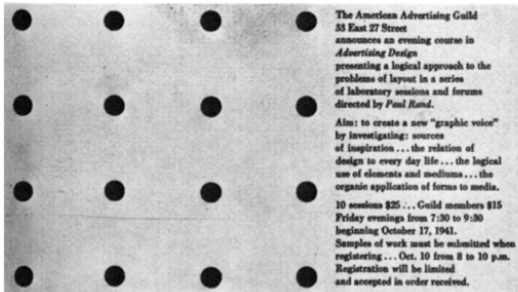


above: Chair designed by Donald Knorr, 1950.
below: *Free Land*, 1983. Collection Mr. and Mrs. Ronald K. Greenberg, courtesy Greenberg Gallery, St. Louis.



ing incorporates images taken from photographs (the grisaille nude on a couch), a Chinese book about children (the superimposed line drawing of a woman smoking), and art history (the cubist painting above the couch). Each image triggers a cluster of associations with our visual habits and history. Separated from its natural habitat (screen, magazine, book), an image is reissued in a context that preserves some aspect of its content. Comment is made on that *content* by the mode of depiction. It is characteristic of this process that the paintings bring together numerous styles and periods, eliminating time and style for the purpose of establishing new coefficients of association. The way Salle negotiates these images into an entirely new experience is remarkable. It is not so much that the mood itself is different but that each emotion tends to have a collective identity; anger, for example, may be the same emotion across cultures, but it can be expressed differently. It is the way in which an emotion is summoned, made new, and constructed by glancing ricochets through the paintings' images and spaces that makes this art a new experience.

Salle's images often seem directed away from us, as if we were not the right audience. His nudes present their backs to us so often, one sometimes feels the observer should be inside the picture to receive its messages. The picture plane, to which Salle has given an extraordinarily formal and metaphorical valence, can lock us out of the garden—or graveyard—of images. There is then a real sense of what can be called *indicated content*, content that might be revealed if the work were less sensitive to the contradictions inherent in artmaking as well as to the world it so problematically depicts. There is a lost paradise, a failed utopia implied in the paintings. This gives the work an emotional tone that may be familiar, but it is arrived at in ways that afford us the sense of a new experience. Regret, hope, pessimism indicate the *possibility* of experience rather than experience itself; they aspire to a closure, a completion, but are unwilling to settle for



top: Paul Rand, announcement card, 1941. Working image for *Vivid Cuban Words*.

middle: *Vivid Cuban Words*, 1980. Collection Bruno Bischofberger.

bottom: Detail of *My Head*, 1984. Saatchi Collection, London. *Color p. 65*.

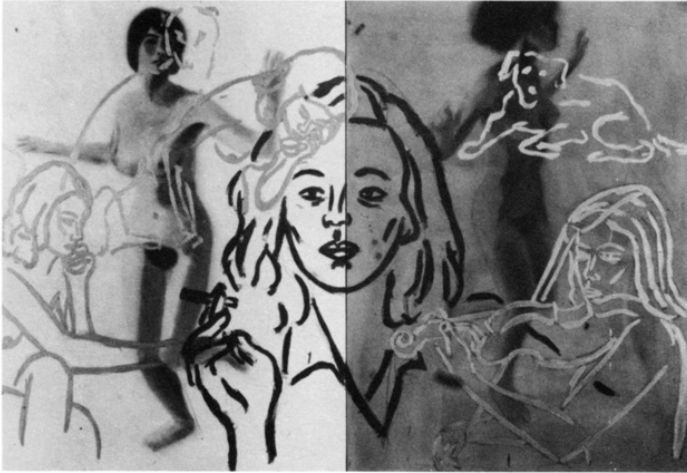
top: Untitled, 1981. Collection Emily and Jerry Spiegel.

middle: Untitled, 1976 (destroyed).

bottom: Untitled, 1977 (destroyed).

top: *Unexpectedly I Missed Cousin Jasper*, 1980. Collection Susan Heitler.

below: Photographs by the artist. Working images for *Unexpectedly I Missed Cousin Jasper*.



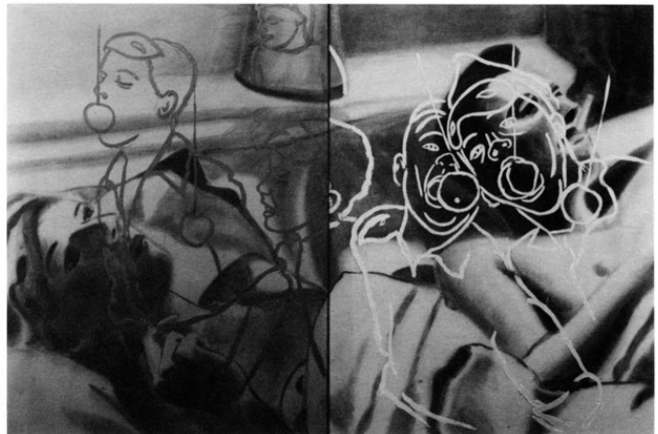
the necessary illusions to do so. In Salle's work, one is always aware of his seeing through systems of belief and conventions of expression.

One of Salle's main conventions—the diptych format—opens the possibility for maximum ambiguity, yet also allows for not one but several solutions. The classic Renaissance diptych depicted two or more episodes in a narrative shared with the audience. While maintaining a consistent style, the painter depended on myth or tradition to provide continuity for seemingly unrelated episodes; their contiguity, however, implied that they were contained in the same story, the same temporal arc. In modernism, from Jasper Johns to the World Trade Center towers, contiguity implies both similarity and difference. In such binary images, the dullness of repetition is partially avoided and abruptly closed. At the other extreme, the conjunction of two totally dissimilar images, the broken language of dislocation, becomes a way of blocking false assumptions and preserving the opaqueness of disposable clichés.

One can take several of Salle's works to illustrate these points. *Unexpectedly I Missed Cousin Jasper* (1980) is one of the first diptychs in Salle's mature style and the last of some dozen paintings using the smoking woman motif. The complexities of this work (a nod, perhaps, to Jasper Johns through a phrase from Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*) make one wary of explicating its content. Yet, of all Salle's paintings, it is one of the most elegiac and tender. The smoking woman is outlined in red, her eyes meditatively unfocused, her face split between two halves of the diptych. A woman smiling is a classic image of reflection—virtually a cultural icon. Smoke is also an analogue for reflection. Here, the smoke may represent the group of other images, which signifies a past more immediate to the red woman than her present. The temporal subtleties of the work begin to reverberate. The diptych format is essential to the divided content, psychologically, temporally, and formally (Salle's telescoping of these elements is always supple, even dazzling). At the

left, two blue women on a yellow ground (the same woman at different moments and poses) listen to the telephone and react. Their body language is astutely observed, and the drawing perfectly describes its implicit content.² The line drawings are activated by the telephone line (an absurd pun that need not be rejected); the woman is blue, as is her mood. To the right, the blue ground or atmosphere seems to indicate a later moment in time, at which a woman, probably the same one, plays a violin. Is this a memory of a particular woman, or does it augment the remembered mood with music, the sharpest stimulus to nostalgia? Both incident and its aftermath, shown in blue, underlie the present, with the face outlined in red; the temporal zones of memory and the present shift. The other images solicit our attention. Dogs, mute witnesses of our tribulations, echo this doubled memory—alert on the left, daffily patient on the right. The two grisaille women, dancing or running in the deepest space, may confirm what are now our expectations. The woman on the left runs toward us in anticipation; the woman on the right seems to flee. The poses, although similar enough, are seen from different angles. This seems to break the canvas in two, wedging it into our attention. But all this interpretation breaks down so easily that one retreats from overloading the data. Although the painting is one of Salle's most accessible works, it invites assumptions that begin to obtrude on the scenario on so many ambiguous levels—spatial, temporal, and conventional—that another scenario begins to offer itself. The work reconditions itself for rereading.

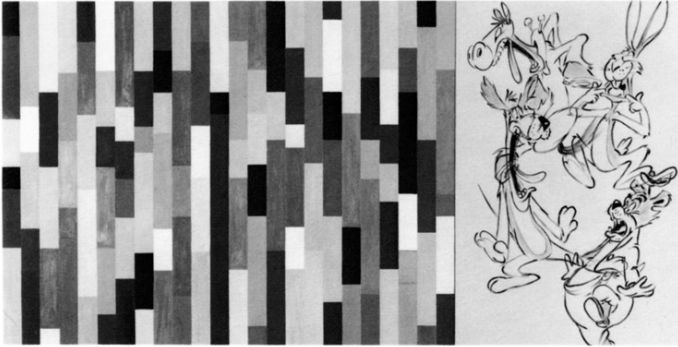
2. Drawing is indispensable to Salle's style: His painted line drawings have a kind of perverse wit—as if the drawings have drawn themselves, and he is being rather unkindly critical of the process. Salle's drawing refers to the standards or conventions of draftsmanship in a way that is ironic and casual but very intense. A book that Salle saw as a boy in Kansas, *The Natural Way to Draw*, by Kimon Nicolaides, contrasts "contour" and "gesture" drawing, the former done without looking at the paper, the latter without lifting pen from paper ([Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1941], 9, 14). While it is easy to make too much of his interest in Nicolaides, these two modes of drawing often appear in Salle's paintings in a manner resembling the book's illustrations.



top: Unidentified movie still. Working image for *We'll Shake the Bag*.

middle: Olive Fife photograph, *Hallowe'en Contest*. Working image for *We'll Shake the Bag*.

bottom: *We'll Shake the Bag*, 1980. Collection Ellis and Ellen Kern. Color p. 38.



The Happy Writers, 1981. Private collection, courtesy Mary Boone Gallery.



What Is the Reason for Your Visit to Germany, 1984. Collection Neue Galerie—Sammlung Ludwig. Color p. 60.

SUCH A SCENARIO can be offered for almost any Salle painting, and there may be some usefulness in that exercise. Whatever model one chooses for reading his work—whether performance, the diminishing half-life of replication, or the masterful perceptual switches that superimpose not just images but our discordant responses—one is always aware of being in a powerful emotional and intellectual climate. This is consistently true, whether the work is playful, as in *The Happy Writers* (1981), or savage, *What Is the Reason for Your Visit to Germany* (1984). The climate manifests itself in extreme diversities of appropriated subject, modes of attack, and, for want of a better word, anticomposition. Indeed, Salle's work seems left-handed in a right-handed universe; it functions like antimatter, in that it disposes of a great deal of what passes for art.

That climate has literary analogues, and significant among them are the novels of John Hawkes, whom Salle admires. About Hawkes, Robert Scholes wrote: "Because he starts with images rather than a story, his work is different from conventionally plotted fiction. His method has always been to work with strong images that can be developed into scenes of nightmarish power and vividness, and then to seek some means of connecting these scenes in a coherent and developmental way."³

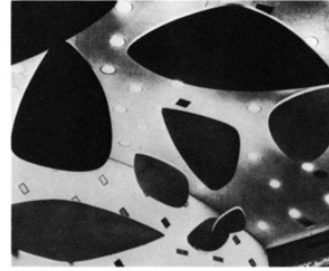
Salle's images, even at their most surprising, are always decipherable, whatever the spatial context. It is their temporal coefficients that detain us; it takes time to separate, to follow a line, to uncover or lift off an image. This means that the images often are seen in random sequences after the first perceptual rush in which the total picture is delivered. We move from image to image across a real or implied space that is filled with "something," whether paint or fabric or canvas. But such spatial journeys are the medium of a narrative subtext, in which these temporal delays and spatial lurches are

brought into the orbit of various meanings and pseudomeanings. In a Salle painting, there is always this pulsation of images: they expand and fall apart, forcing one to abandon a failed premise; or, our verbal habits being what they are, they may offer our consciousness a half-formed phrase that rises, like the titles of Salle's paintings, out of a "clouded pool of personal symbols."⁴

Salle's use of appropriated images has evoked extensive commentary. Many writers, this one included, have puzzled over the frustrating stasis created by the preemptive mode. Several have emphasized what might be called this first stage of Salle's method: the way in which his images are distanced from their origins. The second step—how these images are coached into postures where very different readings become possible—has not received sufficient attention. The idea of Salle as a prestidigitator, conducting strategies of planned frustration for the spectator, must, once and for all, be abandoned. To persist in this kind of commentary is akin to reducing T. S. Eliot's *Waste Land* to found poetry.

Salle, indeed, in the density of his images, in their complex relationship to cultural artifacts, and in his reconditioning of them for discourse, has taken on what used to be described as poetry's fundamental problem: How does one use a language that has reached such a level of banality, nothing apparently can rescue it? Language is, after all, our most used cultural artifact, and reconditioning it for poetic diction is a task that writers from Eliot to Samuel Beckett have seen as one of their major responsibilities.

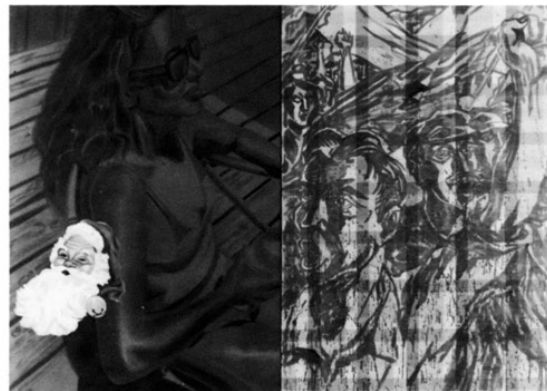
The artist's often bizarre conjunction of images, such as placing the brashly painted Santa Claus over the sunbathing woman in *Wild Locusts Ride* (1985) (p. 62), prohibits deep involvement in any single image. The vulgar and synthetic joviality of



top: Oscar Niemeyer, auditorium for the Modern Art Museum, Caracas, 1955. Working image for *Pure Difference*.

above: *Pure Difference*, 1982. Collection Janet Green. Color p. 47.

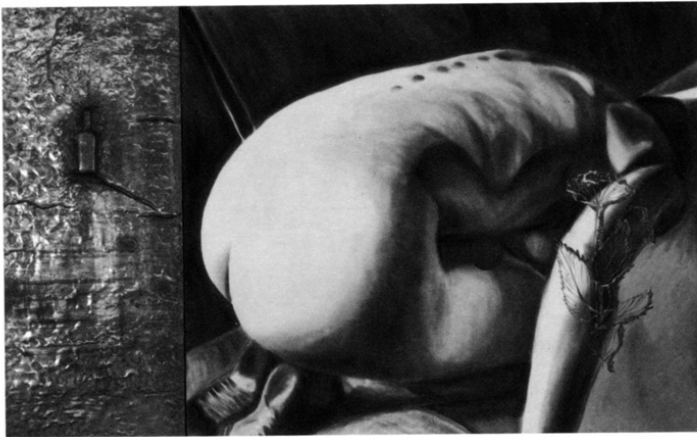
Wild Locusts Ride, 1985. Collection the artist. Color p. 62.





above: Contact sheet by the artist with working image for *The Miller's Tale*.

below: *The Miller's Tale*, 1984. Collection Adrian and Robert Mnuchin.



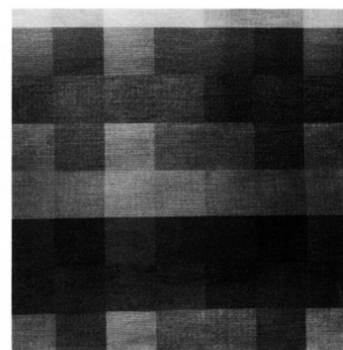
the Santa cancels the easy summer drift of the figure sitting in the sun. The crashing fact of the Santa rests on the surface, like dirt marks on a window-pane. It says, through the unlikely medium of vulgarity incarnate, that the picture plane is the painting's ultimate reality. Brought up sharply against it, we are forced to concede the fictional nature of the woman on the porch. The dialectic between the painted and the replicated, between the grisaille and the colorful banality, between social privilege and cheap emblem is all counterposed to the panel on the right. There, the clamor and rush of a political meeting are gridded in and out of a fabric that both conceals and augments its effect. Together, the panels of the diptych make a quasi-political statement (the meeting scene originally appeared in a political poster). One should note that when Salle employs other artists' work, whether it be Reginald Marsh's or Yasuo Kuniyoshi's, he does not intentionally degrade it but uses it for specific purposes, like the ventriloquist manipulating his voice, to make a historical dialogue immediate and present.

DURING THE avant-garde era, the future was benign; the unworthy present was rejected. Art could safely be consigned to a future when enlightened understanding would welcome it. Postmodernism, for all its peculiar relationships to history and the past, is on a different schedule. It values the present most of all; the future, given our cultural tribulations, has become problematic. The best postmodern art has within it an impatience with the future, a suspicion of deferred understanding. It sees modernism's trust in the future as misplaced. Postmodernism devalues the future and forces us to deal with the present; it asserts a position *inside* the culture, not at its margin. In the best contemporary work, this position is implicitly critical. To that extent, such work is paradoxical. While it subscribes to art's ancient role of liberating consciousness, the fate of art is absorption into that very system the art's content may question. This is

a political as well as aesthetic matter, and although it is difficult to read the politics of Salle's work, it seems he is aware of these issues. Salle's electric and willful strategies (the suddenness and *speed* of his paintings have not been sufficiently noted) have staked out a position that establishes an island of consciousness in the everyday world of bland confusion and slick emotion. He brings sensation to material that has at least numbed, if not suppressed, emotion. The modalities of alienated experience are reconditioned for feeling, for generating emotions that are not compromised by their spurious duplicates.

This reexperiencing involves control, distance, anxiety, sadness, loss. This run of feelings is the deep emotional undertow in all Salle's linkages, breakdowns, separations, and reconstitutions of images and objects, including the painting itself as a total image. One begins to realize that the choice of images is related not so much to the resolution of a visual enigma or puzzle but rather to the presentation of something that already has been diminished by several half-lives, already has assumed the condition of memory. As dropouts fracture continuities, memory, attempting to clarify itself, grows more dreamlike and begins to fabricate connections. The real and the spurious imitate each other, becoming confused in the effort to recall. The images do not work as we expect images to. They are not merely formal; they do not narrate according to their origin or relocation. Their discourse with one another across the great dividing lines of diptych or triptych is never headed toward resolution, because it cannot be resolved. They become, like the surface of memory itself, present to us in a way that puts us *inside* the picture looking out through its landscape, which now takes on the appearance of reality. Enacted before us are things to which we have lost firm access.

The two left segments of *Muscular Paper* (1985) (p. 70), a majestic triptych, seem to be about the genus woman. On the left is a Picasso sculpture of



top left: After Jusepa de Ribera's *Clubfooted Boy*, 1652. Working image for *Muscular Paper*.

top right: Plaid fabric used in *Muscular Paper*.

above: *Muscular Paper*, 1985. Collection Douglas S. Cramer. *Color* p. 70.

a woman (taken from a Brassai photograph), which also looks like a fossil or bone; huddled against it is a barebottomed woman outlined in red. Eight blue pegs look into or out of this dark segment, like eyes or images of consciousness. In the center panel, two naked women skip rope. Covering their bottoms are two painted heads—blue heads of devilish cheapness, taken from a reproduction of a de Ribera painting. Between the women and the heads is a complex, sketchy structure—to be read as phallus, cervix, or fountain—from which a head may or may not be rising. A brushstroke undulates briefly to the left—to indicate that art is here? If these two panels were a diptych, they could be read in innumerable ways. The mood of somber imprisonment into which the sculpture's conventions have locked it, the woman huddled below in a posture of clinging despair, and the brisk images of the twin runners to the right are brutally canceled by the two blue heads that, in their positioning, may be a grotesque parody of the birth of an image, or perhaps a scatological joke. One begins to sense Salle's abrupt and rather savage invigoration of images, disturbing a habit of mind in which dead themes drag through one's consciousness—incompletely, without full attention, missing half of what is said, making up the rest, half in and half out of oneself in a world where images such as these normally provoke nothing but an inattentive scan. Just as they become unsettling, in a strategy that Salle uses frequently, any decipherable consistency is broken by the right-hand panel, which offers, in this case, a bridge. And it is not just any bridge, but a Max Beckmann-derived structure in what looks like a German town; below are tugboats and an odd form that unsatisfactorily refers back to the quasi-phallic shape between the women. The mind-set is thrown off into feeble literalisms (a bridge between the segments, between the doubled images?) that imitate the idea of interpretation or

the way the mind supervises its own inefficient way of working.

These tough gymnastics—involving period, art, content, and style—have a dreadfully leveling effect on the viewer; to promote any component to a key position is to make a false move. The image exists there, full of temporal and spatial slippages, its lapsed memories and lost connections circulating in an image of the mind that looks at all the equivalents in the world and finds them tolerable. Illusions are being removed, and not gently. The work subverts the viewer's desire to look away; it returns one constantly to the harsh task of looking and feeling.

A perception of the viewer is more or less implicit in every artist's work. Catherine Millet has called Salle's "a fallen viewer," and I agree.⁵ To the idea of art making one feel better—one of the most offensive of art education's constructs—is counterposed a set of images that almost can be interpreted as a string of curses. The modernist idealization of the viewer as one on trial for entry into utopia, a future where the unworthy present is redeemed, is seen in this art as a bad joke. Salle's viewer, though cycled through temporal twitches and spatial wrangles, lives in the present, fixed there amid images that Salle has appropriated and *not* redeemed. The viewer is in the world, unredeemed and fallen. It is one of Salle's major achievements that he has conceived an art that is not prospective or retrospective in the modes sanctioned by modernism, but that restores to us the presentness of our experience.