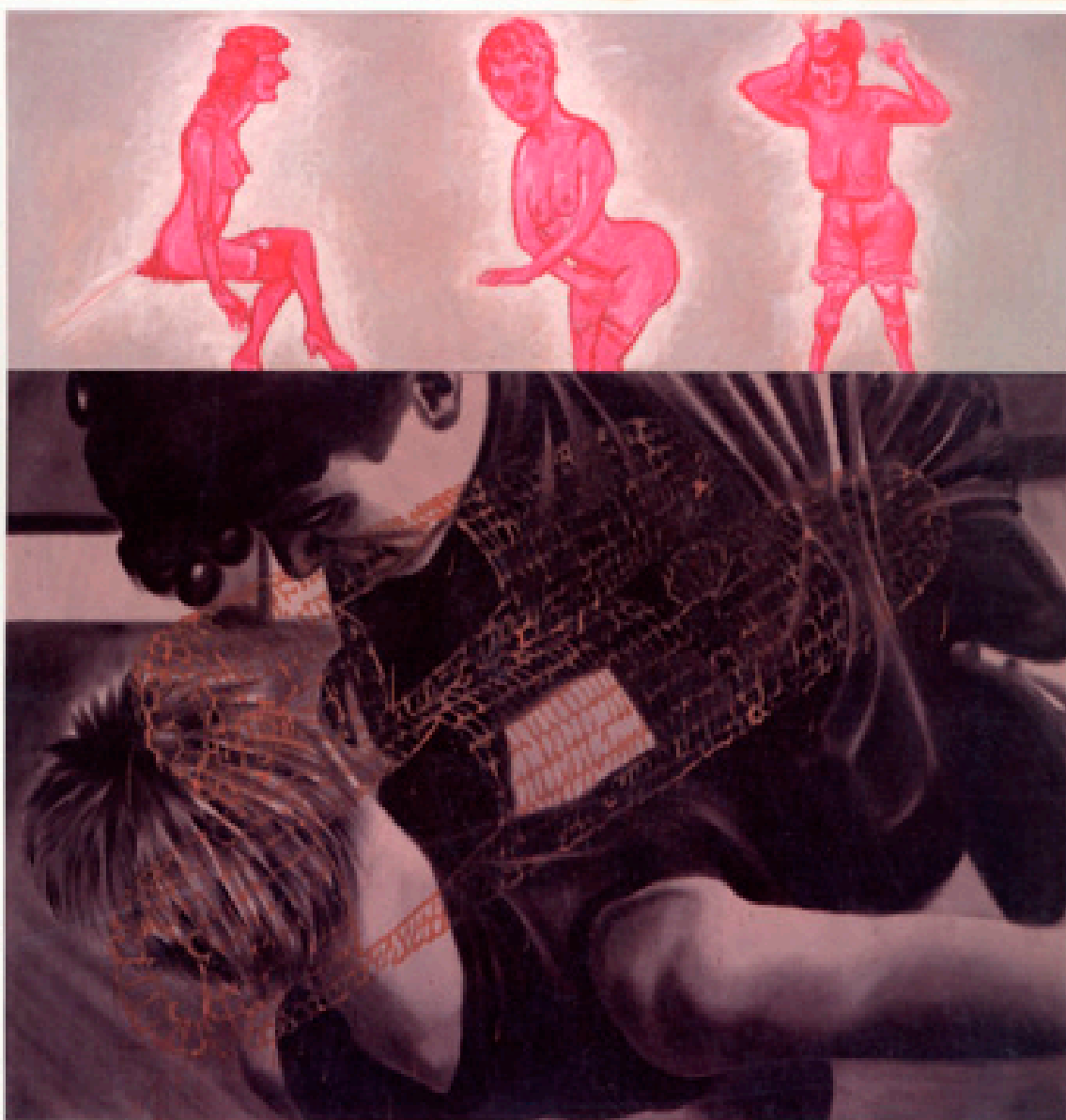


INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY ART, UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA

# DAVID SALLE



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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.

MORE THAN ANY other artist of his generation, David Salle is a painter of postmodern life. His works are the history paintings of our time, but not in the traditional sense of recounting anecdotes or recording events. Instead, he presents us with the paradoxical and equivocal nature of contemporary life—that the old reality of direct, firsthand experience is slipping away, increasingly supplanted by a vicarious reality of signifiers. We have, of necessity, become dependent upon representations and simulations—that is, on signs of reality—for information about our world.

In the present context of unprecedented, accelerated growth and change, our need to keep pace and keep “in touch” is satisfied by information and images preselected, predigested, and serialized by the media. Although we have the illusion of endless options and unlimited access, the unrelenting abundance of data and its transmission, in fact, make each image, word, or impulse signify less and less. With no overriding structure and an endless procession of undifferentiated fragments, we are left with a spectacle of absence carefully orchestrated to fascinate by converting alienation into a consumable image, an *image* of authority.

Words and images proliferate and overlap, the real and the imaginary coalescing on a single plane of equivalent, electronic flow. Alexis Colby and Princess Di inhabit the same space of the screen and tabloid, “the same grid of two hundred million viewers.”<sup>1</sup> But as one thing takes its place next to the other, the real becomes unreal, the unreal arrogates to itself something of the real: History, memory, and value are lost in a continuous circuit of simulated resemblance, the endless labyrinth of Plato’s Cave. Within this reordered and derealized state, art also takes its place.

The work of art has become primarily a trace of the absent subject/artist—a pure signification of value, endlessly producing proof of itself—as the

object of the subject.<sup>2</sup> As this simulated image of authority, where signature equals value, even vanguard art can be (and has been) officially embraced and institutionalized, its most radical ambitions converted into domesticated ornamentation. The inflationary and, in turn, devaluing effects of an institutionalized avant-garde are painfully pervasive: Widespread media attention has annihilated criticism, and the unparalleled hunger for art has been accompanied by a startlingly passive, non-judgmental response that amounts to little more than indifference. Most viewers scan with the quick gaze of the consumer, seeking only some superficial sign of recognition, a brand name.

How do artists position themselves against this chaotic and somewhat disheartening backdrop? How can one challenge expectations when transgression has become convention, when radicality is instantly recuperated? Only by understanding the source of these symptoms, by embracing the intensity of empty value at the core of mass-media representation and the fierce recycling of styles used to twist and pervert every intention—only then can the perennial challenge be met of finding and constructing significant meaning in the midst of declining values for images and words.

The lack of standards, of a unified theory of value, is Salle’s point of departure as he oscillates between the value-laden and the valueless, between stylishness and stylelessness. Salle understands representation, its dearth of meaning and its current status as the locus of the *real* (or “reality effect”). It is here that he must work, fully cognizant of his complicity with the culture and the necessity of operating within it.

It is precisely Salle’s utter conviction about his role—his lack of innocence in presenting the phantasm of emptiness and meaninglessness—that many viewers have resented. The words, patterns, materials, styles, objects, and images he

uses seem to be carefully selected for their provocative, associative qualities. They pique our interest, even titillate, but their subservience to formal arrangement and compositional devices obstructs any attempt to decipher or attribute specific meaning. What is that hideous, vicious-looking duck doing having a drink within the golden space of a woman's thigh (p. 58)? And what about that bizarre, dwarfed couple below, separated by a wedge of white paint that echoes a green object attached to the canvas, which on close inspection resembles a cast of a leg? Although each mark, each element is loaded with associations, it remains elusive, calculated in its imprecision.

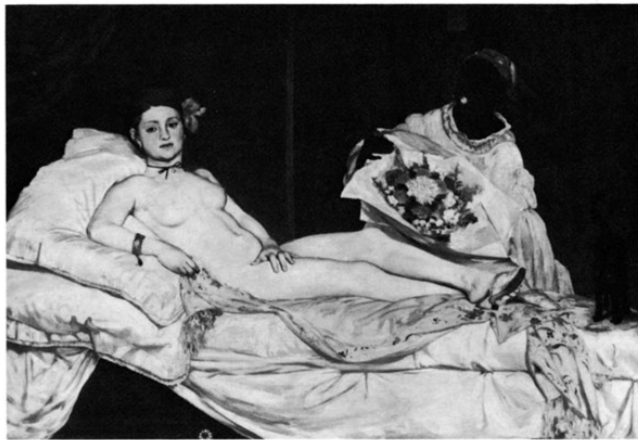
The absence of a clear narrative or hierarchical arrangement has provoked further suspicion and mistrust. Salle's paintings deliberately resist conventional readings, and any attempt to contrive a linear connection between the disparate elements inevitably results in frustration. He has been accused of insincerity, disingenuousness, and of making "facile conjunctions of abstraction and representation, a formula designed to satisfy every taste."<sup>3</sup> He has been branded a "plunderer of styles"<sup>4</sup> and charged with "taking appropriation too far."<sup>5</sup> He has also been criticized as ambivalent, "a simulator of schizophrenia as a form of fetishistic fascination."<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, his work is often trivialized as a demonstration of the myth of bourgeois success, with the emphasis on life-style, "designer loft," manner of dress, and other parabiographical details.

For the most part, these reactions form a social commentary that reflects a deep despair with aspects of contemporary life; specifically, its apparent emptiness, lack of humanity, authenticity,

sincerity, sense of history, and moral values. Salle submits to our present condition with grim sophistication, determined to make its tragic and comic aspects visible. He accepts the promiscuity of images, availing himself of many kinds of representations, sources, styles—mirroring the supposed limitless range of alternatives while reminding us that *he* has chosen *successfully*. His work compels conviction in painting and aspires to the quality of the old masters, even as he dispels the conventional idea that images reflect, mask, or pervert a basic reality. Images are not an order of appearance, his paintings insist; they are their own reality.

Salle's success unfolds in a play of opposites—a willful arrangement of the honored and debased, perverse and polite, sane and demented. Masterworks of the Grand Tradition coexist with crude vulgarities and unassuming relics of popular culture. Images of the leisure class dissolve into those of the working masses. Dissonant, discordant color breaks into sensuously saturated ground. Crude, primitive rendering yields to a high polished, finely tuned finish. Glamour can be extracted from the tawdriest subject, while a more noble one is degraded. Transvestism and polymorphism are operative terms as the expected sets of cues for consistency are replaced by indeterminate, duplicitous ones that require the viewer to assign a meaning. Figures, which at first sight appear to be experiencing pleasure, soon look as if they might be victimized or in pain. Dressing or undressing, laughing or screaming, rioting or celebrating, these equivocal images resonate within the structured confusion of the painting.

Salle's art is one of eruptive focus, where disparity, dissonance, and distance constitute significance. His deliberate breakup and isolation of forms focus our attention on what an image is, how it is made, and how it gets used—on the process of representation itself. There is no fixed center of meaning, only the discursive action of the painting. Centuries of images collide and short-circuit in Salle's work.



top: 1. Francisco Goya, *The Naked Maja*, c. 1804. Prado, Madrid.  
middle: 2. J. A. Dominique Ingres, *Grand Odalisque*, 1814. Louvre, Paris.  
bottom: 3. Edouard Manet, *Olympia*, 1863. Louvre, Paris.  
right above: 4. Pablo Picasso, *Demoiselles d'Avignon*, 1907. Museum of Modern Art, New York, acquired through the Lillie P. Bliss Bequest.  
right below: 5. Willem de Kooning, *Woman I*, 1950-52. Museum of Modern Art, New York.

7. See John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (New York: Penguin Books, 1972), 45-64.

8. See Walter Benjamin, "Paris: Capital of the Nineteenth Century." *Reflections*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 157.

We scan pseudohistorical references all fixed in the present: Lincoln's profile, primitive sculpture, Goya, Reginald Marsh, eighteenth-century cartoons, 1950s furniture—a process often compared to switching channels on a television set.

Nevertheless, Salle doesn't pilfer indiscriminately. Working like an art director, he selects, recombines, and composes images for presentation. But what is being selected and presented? Certain types of imagery consistently appear: vernacular objects and generic images (Eames chairs, targets, light-bulbs, shoes); vaguely sentimental subjects that suggest a clichéd idea of history; images and objects that are perceptual triggers (musical instruments, table implements); socially marginal types, like clowns, jesters, and fools. But one category of imagery recurs over and over as a paradigm of representation: the endless depiction of women—models, wives, lovers—posed and painted, sometimes quite aggressively, for a spectator's gaze. More often than not, they are nude or partially dressed and in sexually explicit positions—legs spread, bending over, on their knees.

Throughout the history of painting, nudes appear as objects surveyed, on display for the privileged male gaze of the spectator-owner. As a category of representation, they very clearly emblemize conventional projections of male desire. Women are not presented as themselves but as objectifications of a presumed shared male subjectivity.<sup>7</sup>

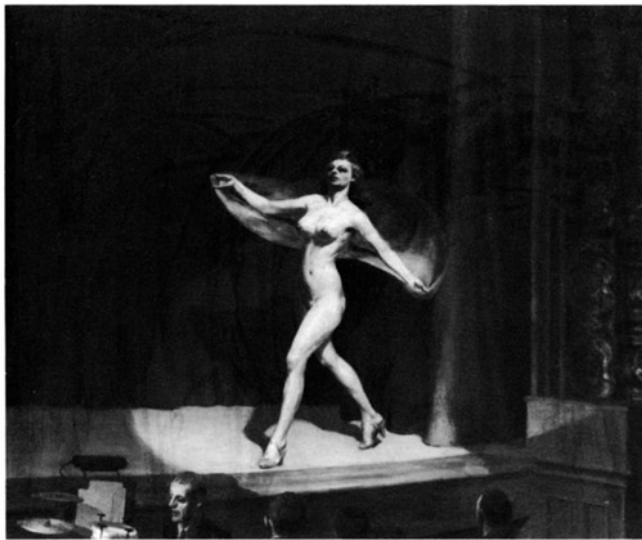
This objectification (and the opportunity to behold a beautiful woman in the bare flesh) has long been dignified by the elevation of the nude to the summit of the classical, academic hierarchy. Traditionally one of the supreme vehicles of artistic expression, the nude was bound to mythological, biblical, and historical themes that generated a wide range of dramatic effects. The genre existed in order to reconcile the conflict between propriety and sexual pleasure. By the middle of the nine-

teenth century, however, the genre began to disintegrate. In terms of artistic convention, it was no longer necessary to present the nude in a thematic context, with the result that the nude appeared for the first time in an unidealized manner. It is not surprising that given its lofty position in the classical canon, the nude would play a central role even within the iconoclastic climate of modernism—specifically, the nude that transgressed and inverted the erotic ideal (figs. 3–5).

Manet's *Olympia* (fig. 3), often cited as the first modern masterpiece, is a radical departure from previous approaches to the nude and, at the time, was considered a travesty (“Neither true, nor living, nor beautiful”). No longer a submissive and coyly seductive dreamy offering, *Olympia* is self-confident and confrontational. Fixing her eyes on the viewer in a matter-of-fact, defiant directness, she seems to say, “You want me, you buy me”; she seems to know, as a prostitute, her position as perfect, complete commodity—saleswoman and wares all in one.<sup>8</sup>

*Olympia*'s declaration of independence and self-awareness is the metaphorical correlative of modernism's formal position—its imperative tone and self-proclaimed autonomy. Modern painting asserted its autonomy, its “objectness,” by stressing the process of picture-making itself—its own internal language of color, line, shape, surface. Salle takes this modernist self-reflexivity a step further. The process of representation is understood to include not only the disposition of lines, colors, and shapes on a flat plane, but also the cultural forces that establish interactions between the artist, the viewer, and those forms. In contrast to the declarative mode of modernist works—“Look at me! I am a real thing!”—Salle's address is interrogative: “Are you looking at me? Why? What am I?”

The ubiquitous female is the principal agent of



above: 6. Edward Hopper, *Girlie Show*, 1941. Private collection.  
 below: 7. *Cut Out the Beggar*, 1981. Private collection, courtesy Mary Boone Gallery. Color p. 44.



Salle's address. Remote and self-involved, she is an object of voyeuristic fascination and a metaphor for the fascination of watching (scopophilia).<sup>9</sup> As such, Salle's women also function as surrogate self-portraits or alter egos. Like the contemporary artist, women are socially condemned to watch themselves continually as they watch themselves being looked at. They must consider the surveyor and the surveyed within as the two constituent yet distinct elements of their identity. Women, then, turn themselves into an object of vision—a sight. The contemporary artist makes objects of vision and shares the woman's duplicitous role of both active presence and passive witness to his/her own existence (figs. 6–7).

Taking a more specific look at Salle's women, we find a number of different types presented: the catatonic or mute woman (p. 55); the burlesque dancer (p. 44); the wistful daydreamer (p. 38); the pale, dishwashing housewife (p. 37); the melancholic waif (p. 52); the self-possessed dancer (p. 77); and the variety of anatomical nudes in classic studio poses. The most memorable images, and those that have become something of a signature, are the pseudopornographic ones: women posed in a range of vulnerable, compromised positions (p. 56), or humiliated through caricature or bizarre costuming (p. 39, figs. 8–10). Usually seen from behind, or with clothes pulled up over the head, these women seem unaware of being looked at. Their faces and distinguishing features are often obscured, undifferentiated, or simply cropped out (p. 75, figs. 11–12). Like the inmates in Bentham's vision of the panopticon, Salle's women would seem to be seen but not to see, would seem to be the objects of information instead of the subjects of communication. Their permanent visibility seems to assure the automatic functioning of power, the dominance of the viewer. Then why do they fail to provoke arousal in the expected way?

Unlike classical nudes who seductively face the

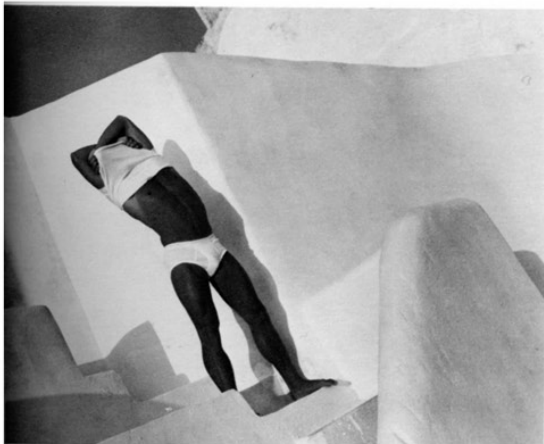
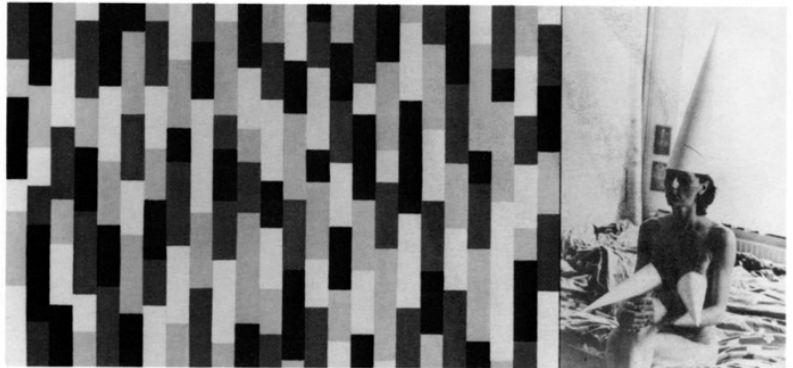
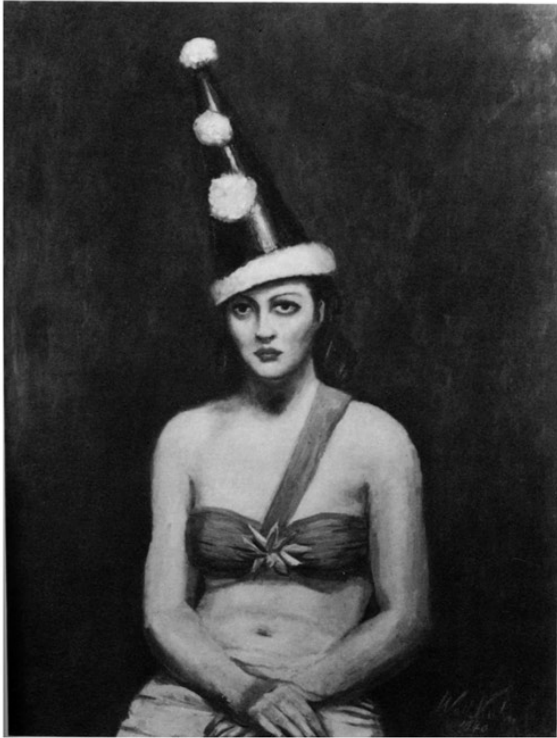
below: 8. Walt Kuhn, *Girl in Pierrot's Hat*, 1940. Kennedy Galleries, New York.

right: 9. Raoul Ubac, *Mannequin*, 1937. Galerie Adrien Maeght, Paris.

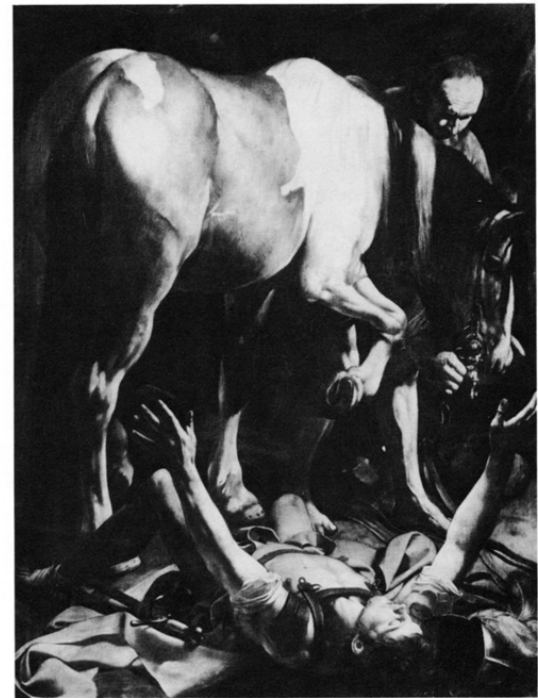
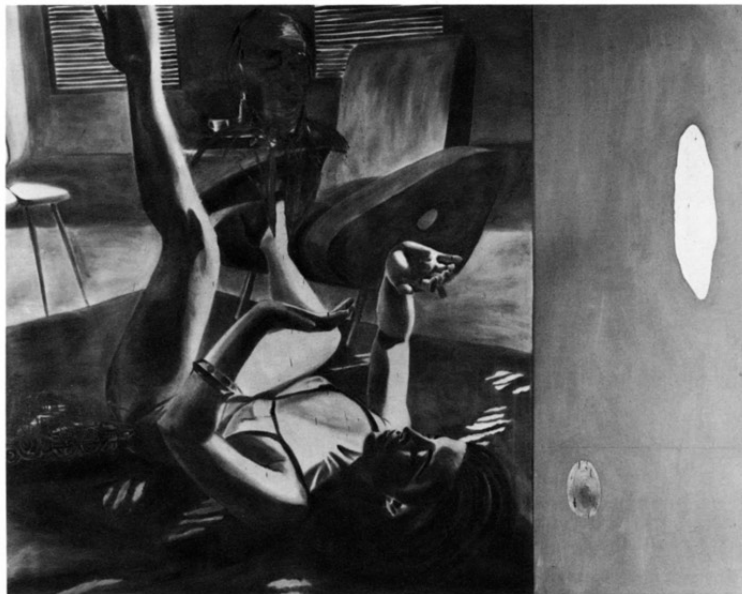
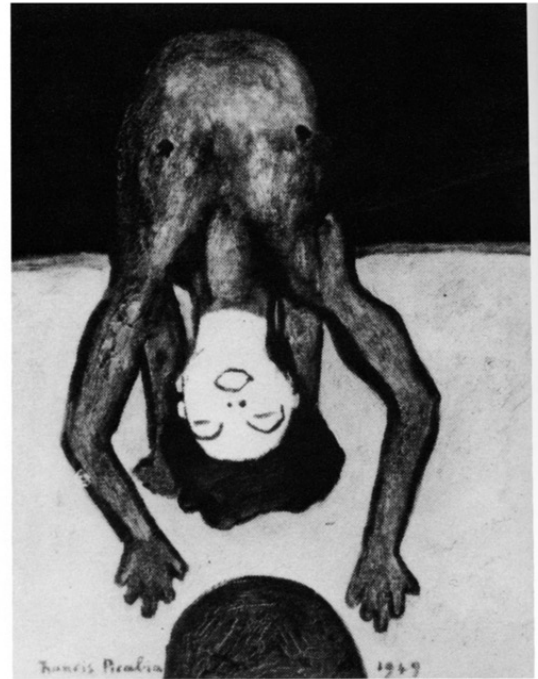
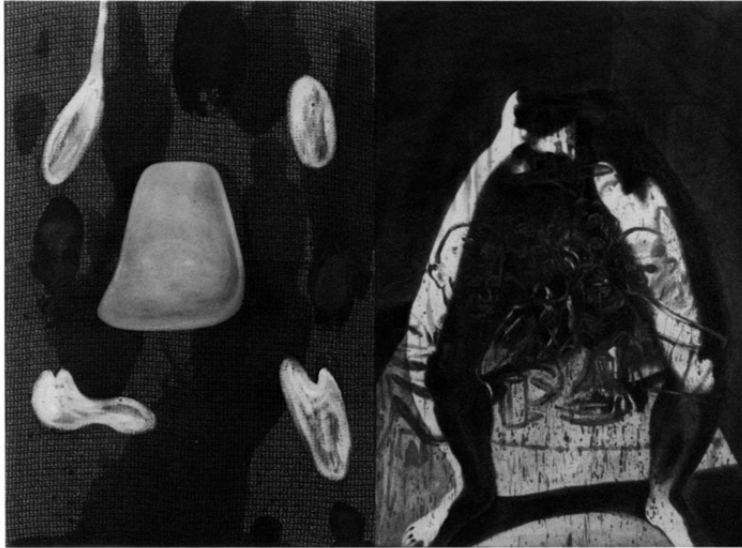
middle right: 10. *Autopsy*, 1981. Collection the artist. *Color p. 39*.

bottom: 11. Bruce Weber, *Tom, Santorini*, 1982.

bottom right: 12. Francis Picabia, *Nude*, 1942.



left: 13. *The Cold Child (for George Trow)*, 1985. Saatchi Collection, London. Color p. 64.  
right: 14. Francis Picabia, *The Acrobat*, 1949.



left: 15. *Midday*, 1984. Saatchi Collection, London.  
right: 16. Michelangelo da Caravaggio, *Conversion of St. Paul*, 1600–1601, S. Maria del Popolo, Rome.

viewer or coyly beckon with come-hither looks as they languish on a bed or at the bath, Salle's women are clearly workers who are directed. They assume positions evidently quite difficult to hold—unnatural, arduous, even acrobatic positions—staged for their formal value and for calculated shock effect (p. 64; figs. 13, 15). These “revealing” quasi-pornographic setups are a surefire affront to propriety: the last form of nude representation that hasn't been reduced to camp nostalgia or archaic relic. Salle's blatant adaptation of an illicit nonart source has precedents in Manet's use of erotic photographs and de Kooning's use of the pinup. Like his predecessors, Salle reveals the social hypocrisies inscribed in such forms. Like Manet's and de Kooning's women, Salle's are deemed ugly. They touch a nerve because they are the first of their kind.

Salle's women elude our normal frame of reference. The chilling banality of pornography is preserved through Salle's repertoire of gesture and pose, but he has abandoned pornography's descriptive detail of genitalia, its displacement to secondary sex characteristics (skin, hair, etc.). While sending up signals of frank vulgarity and overt sexuality, Salle's nudes are rendered in the manner of generalized classical abstraction—ranging from a quick sketch or grisaille wash to the smooth, clean-contoured, colossal figures recalling the supercool impersonality and billboard scale of such American Pop-era masters as Rosenquist and Katz (fig. 19). Furthermore, in Salle's paintings the face is obscured. In pornography, the woman's sensation of being scrutinized, showing herself, or of committing a possible indiscretion often culminates in her facial expression. Here, we are denied access to the woman's sensation of her own nudity. Buried behind bits of material, overlaid with other images, or floating vaguely on the surface, we are never fully permitted to enter the model's space.

Through representation, the fragility of obscenity is revealed. Obscenity is a planned assault on an audience that measures danger against safety in

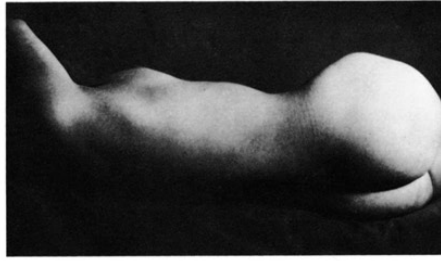
top left: 17. Gustave Courbet, *Origins of the Universe*. Lost painting.

top right: 18. Gerhard Richter, *Studentin*, 1967.

middle: 19. James Rosenquist, *Playgirl*, 1966. Leo Castelli Gallery, New York.

bottom: 20. René Magritte, *The Rape*, 1934. De Menil Collection.





top: 21. Brassai, *Untitled*, 1933. Collection Rosabianca Skira.  
 above: 22. *The Tulip Mania of Holland*, 1985. Museum of Art, Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh.  
 below: 23. Pablo Picasso, *Nude in a Garden*, 1934. Collection Musée Picasso, Paris.



the social arena. For even in being caught, one has won—has forced the authorities to confirm that one really exists. Salle's obscenity is disrupted by too much insight, and infected by the anger, despair, and boredom that results. He reveals obscenity as a fantasy of revenge, as a sign of hostility, significant for those who need hate to justify themselves. Depending on your disposition, you may attack those you experience as obscene and obscure your own obscenities, or be obscene and provoke the punishment you seek. Once again, Salle plays the double agent.

The persistent presence of women in Salle's paintings also suggests the repetition compulsion associated with castration anxiety. These disembodied mirages of pseudointimacy recall the current psychoanalytic theory that pornography is created in an effort to master the primal fear of castration through repetitive engagement. In pornography, one phallus after another arrives, performs, and disappears—each one expendable and interchangeable. The woman, never showing a visible sign of satisfaction, remains insatiable, the ultimate consumer. The scenario is replayed to infinity, with no beginning or end, no past or future—only the perpetual continuum of the present. Salle's women are ubiquitous and insinuate themselves into the paintings as insistent, blunt reminders of their durability. They are often deployed multiply within a single work (fig. 22) or appear as afterimages, obscured by more dominant, aggressively modeled forms (p. 65). By design—through distance and repetition—they are permanently consigned to the realm of the artificial, representations that can be manipulated and controlled.

Within the structure of low-budget pornography (which dominates the genre), one is always aware of the artifice of actors playing out a staged event, of the barely concealed splicing of the celluloid. There is little attempt to simulate a naturalistic situation. Pornography's fetish of foregrounding—making visible the signs of its production, of the

enactment for a viewing audience—corresponds in its own mechanistic way to Salle's technique, and the result in both is the psychic distancing of the viewer from the thing viewed.

If there is an erotic charge in Salle's paintings, it is often felt in this distance. Distance is achieved by severing the image from its referent through such cinematic devices as the splice, jump cut, dissolve, wipe, zoom, split frame, and soft focus. The diptych format, long favored by Salle, corresponds to the splice; dislocations in scale and subjects to the jump cut and lap dissolve; the multiple overlays and expressionist washes mirror the montage technique of television and film, or the photographic double exposure. In film, these techniques often are used to create naturalistic effects, but for Salle they are a way of rupturing naturalism, of severing images from their referents.

When something has no set meaning, it can be used more freely to reach the unconscious. The destructuring and unnamings that underlies Salle's art allows for the restitution of meaning through the return of the repressed. In modern psychoanalytic terms, the unconscious is born at the moment we enter into the symbolic order of language—the structuring of thought. We are produced as conscious subjects through language, and the unconscious is formed by all that language limits, excludes, or cannot accommodate. By isolating signifiers through semantic disjunction, they become empty vessels by which the repressed can reemerge. A decade ago, Paul de Man observed: "The possibility now arises that the entire construction of drives, substitutions, repressions, and representations is the aberrant metaphorical correlative of the absolute randomness of language, prior to any figuration or meaning."<sup>10</sup>

This is the liberating force in Salle's work: His paintings breathe life even as they speak of a loss of it. The pure, untranslatable sensuous immediacy of the images refuses to be violated by interpretation. The paintings are ineluctable presences even as they expose us to the experience of absence. Salle lavishes attention on the canvas, using every available technique to create the rich visual and sensory experience that is so rapidly diminishing in our society. As William Gass described the representation of sexuality in literature, "True sexuality in literature—sex as a positive aesthetic quality—lies not in any scene and subject, nor in the mere appearance of a vulgar word, but in the consequences on the page of love well made—made to the medium which is the writer's own."<sup>11</sup> Salle has largely displaced the eroticism of his subject matter into the act of painting itself, demanding an erotics of art as a way of encountering the world.