



Tuten, Frederic. "David Salle On Native Grounds." New York: Mary Boone/Michael Werner Gallery. 1988.

DAVID SALLE

RECENT PAINTINGS

5 MARCH TO 2 APRIL 1988

M A R Y B O O N E
M I C H A E L W E R N E R
GALLERY 417 WEST BROADWAY NEW YORK

DAVID SALLE ON NATIVE GROUNDS

Frederic Tuten

*Through me forbidden voices,
Voices of sexes and lust . . . voices veiled, and I remove the veil*
—Walt Whitman, “Song of Myself” (1855 edition)

We shall reach, however, more immediately a distinct conception of what true Poetry is, by mere reference to a few of the simple elements which induce in the Poet himself the true poetical effect. . . . He feels it in the beauty of women—in the grace of her step—in the lustre of her eye—in the harmony of her rustling robes.
—Edgar Allan Poe, “The Poetical Principle”

Robert Lowell once said that all American poetry is divided between the raw and the cooked, between, that is, Walt Whitman and his descendant line of rouhs such as Allen Ginsberg, serving up personal incantations with all the fluid rhetoric of the confessional “I,” and Edgar Allan Poe and his adoring staff of French chefs, Baudelaire, Mallarmé, and Valéry, who arrive as advisors chez Maison Wallace Stevens and help to fill the pristine American page with assorted ineffable resemblances, recondite, jarring, homey images that seize you unexpectedly, even while you casually scan them.

You don’t have to choose sides between the practitioners of either camp or dine in one or the other’s kitchen exclusively: sometimes you are up for the antelope tartar, horns, and hide, all served on the naked board, and at other times you want the *saumon poché* ringed with

sprigs of dill on the gleaming silver tray. Some artists mix cuisine. David Salle, for example, cooks to be raw.

It would be a mistake to take this analogy much further, to diminish Lowell's conceit into a simpleminded dichotomy between cool and hot art, romantic and classical, or the highly intuitive and spontaneous (feelings truth feelings) and the smartly engineered (mere sheen and no matter). All art is, after all, what Oscar Wilde says it is, artifice. And there is no such animal, even in the imaginary zoo, as pure form or pure content, although artists may tend to long after one or the other. David Salle's art reaches after the coherent and significant form, a structure that stands with and apart from its time; his paintings resonate with a particular (sometimes raw) personal vision but do not depend on that resonance for their aesthetic identity and autonomy. Salle's art arrests us simultaneously (and perhaps most effectively so in his latest pictures) on the level where the beauty of its formal unity fuses with its experiential or visionary pulse.

Salle has been graced with an intelligent recognition (as well as with some misreadings) early in his public presence; his influences have been duly and accurately noted: Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, Roy Lichtenstein, the inheritors of modernist traditions. His more specific debts to paintings by artists such as Edward Hopper, Yasuo Kuniyoshi, and Walt Kuhn (to cite the Americans only, for the inventory could well go on to include European artists of the seventeenth to the nineteenth century) also have been explored.

Salle's paintings have always had a retrospective quality, a looking backward to American paintings others respectfully tucked away in the corners of their historical but not aesthetic consciousness.¹ Salle gleaned from the better artists of the 1930s and 1940s the mood of post-Depression concupiscence, the tenor of the vaudeville and strip shows, and the pathos of men sitting, coats over laps, dreaming of sailing away with the spangled stripper who grinds and bumps the orchestra and the topmost bench of the balcony into a melancholy tizzy. American voyeurism, circa Reginald March and Edward Hopper.

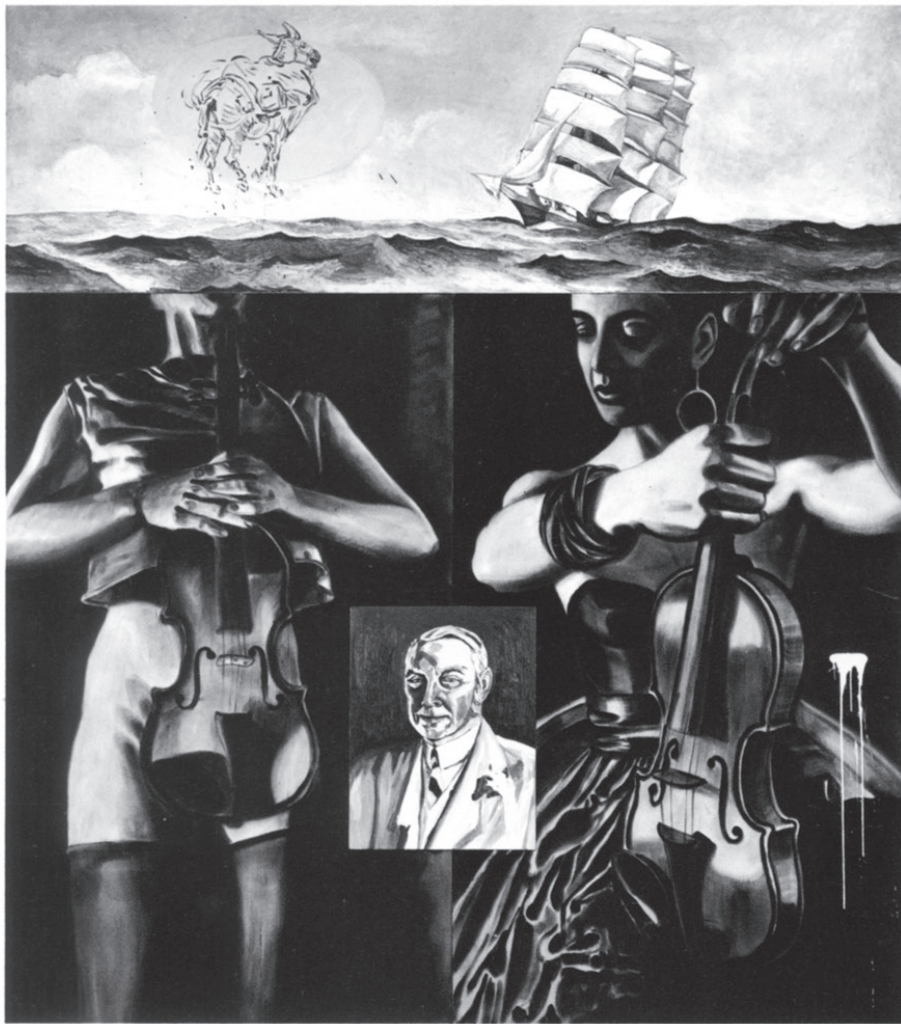
What is most apparent in this exhibition, however, are Salle's continued ruminations on themes found in the paintings of Walt Kuhn.² Whatever other qualities one may find in Kuhn's work, one must (Salle must) admire the innocence of those paintings of circus clowns and female tiger trainers, of carnival ladies and circus women, of semi-clothed women in theatrical costume, of dogs, and of loaves of knobby bread, but mostly of sad-faced, weary women. It is Kuhn's sentimental lingo that appeals here: a language without irony or ambiguity, a language that does not pivot on itself self-consciously; irony is turned on the examination of life but not on the artwork itself. It is a language surface without disjunctions or syntactical lapses or contradictions, and, above all, it is a language unself-consciously dedicated to telling a truth about life.

There is nothing parodistic in Salle's adapting that lingo, when on the occasion he does. His is more an homage to a language that once

had the power of innocence, a power that, along with its vocabulary, now lives only in a dictionary of displaced, outmoded terms. Salle's homage is the tribute the ironist (modernist) pays to a saint. To a painter who believes he can lay bare with his brush the heart of a steely chorus girl and uncover its lonely secrets.

There is innocence in Salle's art. Not ingenuous, not monosyllabic (which is to say, not sentimental), it does not swell or bluster or proclaim itself. Salle speaks so craftily and in so many disparate modes and voices that it takes some while to heed his essentially melancholic line. Its predication is paradox, contradiction, the subversion of the possibilities of being understood categorically. Salle's art is discontinuous, elliptical; he fractures and deliberately ruptures a thematic line that appears to read too smoothly, too lyrically. With a defacing brushstroke or a smearing of a too attractive, too informing passage in the picture, Salle is like a poet deliberately breaking a line whose meter is too consistent and predictable. Even his paint drippings on the canvas are contrived, cooked, showing his control over the accidental, and, as with Lichtenstein, his mockery of the idea of the accidental and the spontaneous. Salle cooks his paintings in the modernist fire (the only flames we today can believe in without condescension), whose flames he rekindled in the 1980s while many artists were still rubbing wet sticks together in the dark.

Our temptation is to try to wrench meaning from the work, to make the paintings reveal their innocence and tell their mystery. Per-



Symphony Concertante I,
1987. Oil, Acrylic/Canvas, Linen,
110" by 96"

haps we can sort out two kinds of mystery in Salle's work: the mystery that forms the puzzle, if you will, made up of the pieces, or image-units, that refer to themselves and to their place in the whole painting, and the mystery of the latent emotion or feeling in us that the painting triggers.

These are shriveled times. The decade is almost gone and it is hard to grasp what ever has happened to it or what of significance has emerged from it. Mostly, we're exhausted, passing through the moods of the fin de siècle prematurely. We're tired, and not from our having gone wild. Rather, we've spent ourselves in tameness. In conventional daring. Cynicism has trimmed our wick and our lamp burns steadily and evenly—no mad fire to cast our ecstatic shadows on the indifferent wall. Excepting greed, we've scissored our instincts, too. The erotic flame is tapered to suit the new moralities; the politicalization of our sexual imagination and desires censors them more effectively than can any machine of state, for there can be no more powerful censorship than the one we impose on ourselves in the name of a supposed moral or ethical goodness. We glow, then, at an instance of a consciously unmediated, authentic, passionate expression. David Salle is our instance here.

Victorian pieties did not die; they went underground for a while and resurfaced in the eighties in both religious and secular guises. One guise proposes the weight of the deity revealed through His word for its injunctions and punishments; the other carries the appeal of the

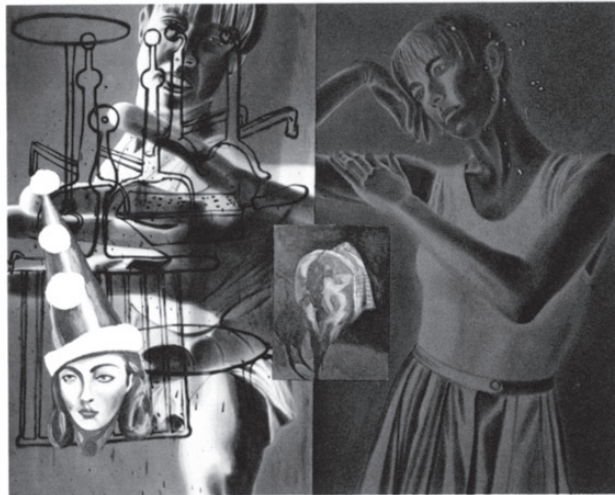
cultural, humanist superego for its moral heft and sanctions. Both forms of censorship would put certain artists beyond the pale of the respectable community. D.H. Lawrence's depiction of the crucified Christ minus loincloth assured his paintings' removal from the gallery walls and their confiscation by the London police. Lawrence argued that as Christ took the form of a human male it would be neither unreasonable nor unnatural to depict him in his full maleness. Contemporary moralists had other ideas, and Lawrence's paintings remained unhung. Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*—those indelicate anatomical inventories, those confessions of sexual longings—cast him, even for his intelligent admirer Henry Thoreau, among the beasts. "He does not celebrate love at all. It is as if the beasts spoke," Thoreau (who claimed he sometimes felt wild enough to eat a woodchuck raw) wrote of Whitman in a letter. The problem is, of course, that if the beast speaks it may also move, and move into the precincts where art has raised its reserved gates. Worse, that beast may pronounce, as Salle essentially does, the disparity between what we wish humans to be and what humans actually are.

In any era the terrain of what is held forbidden and indecent may shift, but the erotic and libidinal imagination, or image-nation, is constantly being ordered, at the cost of sanction or invasion, to keep the beast in the cellar or to shut down its frontiers: the beast must be contained and railed from civilized pastures. Sometimes, injunction or no, this crazy animal gets loose, bolts the border, and, voilà, appears in the most respectable of places, in a painting hanging in a gallery or museum. We're too enlightened to rip the stuff off the walls, though

that would be the most visceral expedient. There are, fortunately, several less violent, more sophisticated ways to explain away or to dismiss the beast when it appears. One is to point out that it speaks in a foreign tongue and has strayed from some exotic place; another is to shrink the beast's head in order to determine if what pops out is an instance of malady, the beast's aberration, and thus not part of the normative flow of even a beast's experience. We reserve, barely, the right of psychological transgression, of the legitimacy of the irrational, to movements of the past, to Dada and to Surrealism, historical and thus just relic beasts.

Yet another and very compelling way to expunge the beast is to make it vanish before our eyes even while we are looking at it. You might say that a painting's subject matter is merely the provocation, the come-on for the ultimate matter of the painting itself, that icons, images, figurations, are merely codes and signs shared by a particular community. All representations of real life are conventions; only the forms and colors of these representations have final authority. Jasper Johns's flags, Roy Lichtenstein's comic strips, Salle's figures of women, are just so much neutral matter.

To consider paintings in this way at least rectifies the abuse done to art by countless well-intentioned critics who have described the information to be drawn from a picture.³ For both good and bad we have been spared much of this in recent times, but to treat art thus is to diminish its potency and actual allure and to rob us of the full measure of our experience—the full measure, or pleasure, say, of the (calculated)



Pandemonic Junk Shop,
1987. Acrylic, Oil/Canvas,
78" by 96"

The Marionette Theatre,
1987. Acrylic, Oil/Canvas,
78" by 96"

eroticism of many orientalist paintings of the nineteenth century. (The historical beast once again, and one we can deride as the supreme offspring of Victorian hypocrisy and sexual schizophrenia). Though we are inured to or even repelled by the Edwardian tantalizations of the kind found in Ernest Normand's *In Bondage*—nubile slave beauty undraped by flesh merchant before the eyes of an ancient Middle Eastern court—may we nonetheless dare to admit a quickening, an arousal, at the sight of a Boucher or Courbet woman or of Brigitte Bardot, nude, as the camera ranges over her in the opening moments of Jean-Luc Godard's *Contempt (Le Mépris)*. Boycotting our sensibilities is a mode of the eighties. Salle has not, and there is the root of his innocence and his authenticity.

Nowhere is this more manifest than in his recent paintings, the most economical and precise, the most dynamically focused of his work of the past several years. The pictures bear images similar to those in the paintings he has done since the early 1980s: animals (freighted donkeys, dogs), ships in full sail in plunging and romantic seas, and heads and torsos found in what one supposes is an imaginary ethnographical museum. Most significantly, Salle has carried over to his present paintings the figures of women, though to isolate these images would be to wrench them from their vital context or to dislocate them arbitrarily from their total discourse within the painting. The mystery of the eroticism—and the yet more difficult subtext of feeling—would not exist without the attendant (but not necessarily secondary or subsidiary) images, nor would the attendant images (with their

various styles) live with much power or autonomy isolated from the figures of women. Unlike any other artist of his generation, Salle has fused the concerns for painting and for continuing the modernist strategies (irony, appropriation, subversions of sentiment) with a fascination for female beauty tantamount to an enchantment, and one that, precisely because of his aesthetic strategy, invites no irony, as enchantments frequently do.

It is not Whitman's idea of the divine found in the human form (a kind of spiritual athleticism), but a vision of the materiality of longing, a kind of permanent hunger for beauty inflicted on the living, that these paintings speak.

For Salle this is a beauty filtered through a screen of intense longing, the woman as the other, the most beautiful of all things that are the other. Artists of the past may have hinted at or illustrated this longing, but Salle creates the equivalent of it itself, what T. S. Eliot terms the emotion's objective correlative, or, for Salle, the visual formula for longing.

In creating this formula Salle has extrapolated from Walt Kuhn's paintings two specific matters: from such paintings as *Lancer* (1939), *Grenadier* (1938), and especially *Tiger Trainer* (1932) he has taken images of women wearing costume jackets with epaulettes,⁴ and from *Clown with Mandolin* and *Musical Clown* comes the idea (although Kuhn's clowns are male) for paintings like *Symphony Concertante I, Jar*

of Spirits, and *Symphony Concertante II*, in which women, some dressed, some partially so, hold or carry wind or string instruments. The Kuhn paintings belong to a convention of depicting humans and musical instruments that encompasses Terbrugghen's flute, Watteau's mandolin, and Picasso's guitar players. Kuhn was just bringing the convention home to native soil and investing it with local sentimentality and pathos. The same pathos is found in the expressions and demeanor of his many paintings of women, however exotic their costumes or the glamorous professions the costumes designate. Kuhn's women look out at us or are at least aware of our looking at them; they are posing. Even in their posing their pathos shines through. That is what Kuhn wanted, that is what he understood and wished to convey. His women live under the jar of reality: they work, they are tired, they are sad, and even when they are young they see time circling them ungraciously. We see it too, it's in their eyes and slack posture, in the slackening of the flesh. They are taxi dancers of desire, time measuring in diminishing bursts their erotic charge. They are, finally, instances of the human.

The women in these new paintings of Salle's are not posing, not aware of an eyeing presence. They are, rather, caught unawares, in postures remarkably stylized, improbable, like mannequins left in mid-decoration. Some have their heads blocked from our view; one figure has a cloth draped over its face. They are leanly voluptuous; their flesh proposes no decay. If one holds a violin behind her back, or another holds one before her, or yet another, knees bent, buttocks thrust out,

arms behind her, holds the instrument precariously on her back, it is not to signify her interest in the violin professionally or in its value for amusement, or to suggest any other relationship to it but that of a form or shape against which her body plays. These women belong to no world of work or play but to the world imprinted solely on the imagination of canvas. Salle's women are the enrapturing forms outside of time, beyond the blandishments of daily life. They are instances of the archetype of beauty and desire, the unbreachable other.

It would be so simple, as some have done, to locate and to indict his vision as pornographic—woman as object, woman as fetish. To cite his women's extravagant positioning and their figurative decapitation (and thus their depersonalization) as instances of Salle's sexism is to see and think in rote. To cite Salle, even appreciatively, as a case infected by a European strain (the foreign beast) of sexuality and eroticism is to miss the mark. To argue that "the persistent presence of women in Salle's paintings also suggests the repetition compulsion associated with castration anxiety"⁵ is to shrink the beast's head beyond individuation and to divulge nothing about what feelings his paintings elicit. It is not the beast of pornography Salle has unloosed but a yet more vexing one.

His is the confession of a vision considered the most taboo in polite contemporary American culture: that we are, finally, to each other, the other, that this vision comes always as a shock and always—no matter how physically proximate—strips away from ourselves the

illusions of human comfort. So close to us in the foreground of Salle's paintings are these women, or forms of women, yet a veil separates us from them, a dark veil that keeps us forever on the outside and withdrawn in the shadows. Seconds away, millimeters away, is the revealed edge of our longing, a transcendental threshold between desire and closure, and we are fixed there in time, like some Keatsian figure on a Grecian urn, forever ravished, forever unsated. In Salle's art we witness a testament to a ravishment, Salle's, and if we have grace enough to allow it, ours.

New York, 1988

**Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Salle, David, 1952 --
David Salle:
5 March to 2 April 1988,
Mary Boone Gallery.

"David Salle:
On Native Grounds"
by Frederick Tuten

Bibliography: p.

1. Salle, David, 1952 --
-- Exhibitions.
2. Painting, American
-- Exhibitions.
3. Painting, Modern
-- 20th Century.
-- United States.
-- Exhibitions.

I. Mary Boone Gallery
(New York, N.Y.)

II. Tuten, Frederick.

III. Title.

ND237.S258A4 1988

709.24 88-5167

ISBN 0-941863-05-0

Catalog © 1988
Mary Boone and Michael Werner

"David Salle: On Native Grounds"
© 1988 Frederick Tuten

Catalog Design:
Anthony McCall Associates, New York
Photography:
Zindman/Fremont, New York
Printing:
Rapoport Printing Corporation, New York