

Excerpts from *Staying in the Moment with David Salle* (2003)

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1. Preface

From the very first moment I saw a David Salle painting – I believe that may have been sometime in the late 1970s – I remember thinking how much it wanted you to stay in the moment of it as a work of art. And yet, all the forces, the fragmentary images, seemed to drive you away from any center. The paintings, even then, were compelling, in that they virtually obliged you, the viewer, to reside, at least momentarily, in the singular experience of that perception; but, at the same time, the artist also seemed to be giving us the ingredients, just enough elements – lines, colors, forms, images – to go into exile, to travel nomadically in the cultural desert of our world that was glutted with images, and to return, not necessarily empty-handed, but feeling weirdly cleansed. As if the painting were doing all the thinking for us, in this media-circus of images, and then telling us, like a strange contemporary Buddha, that thinking was the last thing we needed to do to get through the experience.

If we think of ‘buddhas’ as robust and given over to self-contradictory pronouncements, then this is hardly an accurate description of the artist. Salle is in possession of extremely handsome features, with dark, wavy hair, and piercing eyes. He is darkly complected, with which the sun in his Sagaponack home does not have a little to do. If I have made darkness too much a motif here, perhaps it is because I cannot imagine the artist apart from the magazine women (and the actual models) he has rendered in various tones of gray (even where they are in color), on tables, in shadowy corners and indefinite expanses. Not that they were not often accompanied by various household appliances from the 1950s, flooded in a pseudo-optimistic electrical light that was uniquely America’s during the short-lived prosperity of the post-war period.

Salle was, in fact, born in quintessential America – in Norman, Oklahoma, in 1952. The naughtiness, the taste for transgression, that follows repression (imposed normalcy, the pun is intended) like a shadow, and the alienation that inheres in the most brightly lit object of mind-numbing accumulation, breed their own kind of surplus energy – a clever, ever-alert consciousness or suspicion (a distance, really, so self-objectified is this expression of mind) that accompanies every act of perception. Kant’s critical sublime enters the Pop, fast-food kitchen door of aesthetics or the abstract, half-opened, half-closed backdoor of disinterestedness. Salle must have intuited very early on that the sex of consumption has an extremely dark side, when it is not held up to the glaring light of the *agora*, and is bound to explode in the most perverse public acts in the history of that same marketplace.

In that glaring light, we see further he is lean, fit, even verging upon being deceptively slight in build. His voice is modulated and deeply resonant. He is extremely articulate – indeed, one of the most intelligent artists working today –, and his almost curt, but soft-spoken manner, does nothing to contradict a fierceness of intent that lies just beneath the surface. Salle is all about history – about the defiant way his paintings approach their own self-mortifying canons of timelessness. If there is something ‘momentary’ about his intelligence – quick, ever-shifting, dialectical –, there is nothing momentary about the role he has, is, and will play in the history of contemporary art.

About that ‘first’ moment, by the way, to which I alluded above: I think it was before Annina Nosei had begun her gallery collaboration with Larry Gagosian. At the time, I was working as a publisher and editorially with her on a book called *Discussion*, based on a symposium she had organized at New York University on art as a form of discussion. The book contained documents of ‘performances’ or discussions by Joseph Beuys, Lucio Pozzi, Sarah Charlesworth, Joseph Kosuth, Anthony McCall (before he became a well-known catalogue and book designer), Victor Burgin, David Antin, Carolee Schnelmann, Giuseppe Chiari, Ian Wilson, and Robert Ashley – the latter of whose work was titled, “Over the telephone: My brother called me and asked me to go to the cafe across the street from his apartment and call this number and describe everybody that went in and out. He sounded scared.” A title that might have also made a good caption for an early Salle painting. In terms of its conceptual orientation, this book was no accident: Out of London Press had already published the first monograph on Vito Acconci, by the critic and concrete poet, Mario Diacono (well before he became a dealer, and an early supporter of Salle’s work), Robert Pincus-Witten’s *Postminimalism*, and we were preparing to publish at the time a book on aesthetics, a volume of Vito Acconci’s poetry, a tome by the Renaissance philosopher Giordano Bruno, a long essay by Joseph Masheck called *The Carpet Paradigm: Prolegomena to a Theory of Flatness (From the*

Reform of Victorian Design to Modern Painting),¹ and a translation of *Pontormo's Diary*. Of the latter, only the diary came to fruition, but the context was clear.

At any rate, Annina took me aside one day to show me some images – in her Riverside apartment uptown, where her permanently installed Julian Schnabel was, by her own account, falling apart, plate by plate –; there I saw images by Richard Prince, Sherrie Levine, Cindy Sherman, and, among others, David Salle. I was amazed, and not sure what I was looking at. Except for a few undergraduate courses, I was basically self-educated in art; Annina, on the other hand, had done her doctorate at university on Marcel Duchamp. Only later would I overcome the differential, and realize, with the discovery and support of my own generation of artists, that those things, such as an “eye,” taste, intuition, and an inherent appreciation for quality, which had long ago fallen into disrepute in the art world, were the only things that really mattered. And I think this is what we had in common, more or less, and why we remained friends for over twenty-five years.

But as Nosei's generation of artists, as well as Metro Pictures and Mary Boone's, began to evolve culturally, in the late 1970s, and especially, in the early 1980s, they – Salle, Schnabel, Robert Longo, Eric Fischl, Barbara Kruger, among others, along with the three C's from Italy, Sandro Chia, Enzo Cucchi, Francesco Clemente, and the Germans, Georg Baselitz, Gerhard Richter, Anselm Kiefer, Sigmar Polke, among others – were cast as new image painters or Neo-Expressionists. Such labels were, in part, the media's summary way of dealing with an overwhelming generation of talented, new (and, in some cases, not so new or young) artists. *Flash Art*, still a fledgling magazine at the time, but also *Artforum*, had contributed to the media frenzy – and to the reductive categorization of this art.

By early 1982, when the Collins & Milazzo collaboration began, these Neo-Expressionists had become the towering, unthinking, over-heated, emotionally brutish generation of artists that had to be toppled. The barbarian splendor at the gate, as it were, or the Big Bad Wolf syndrome – and we ourselves, not much later, would be viewed as the even Bigger, Badder [sic] Wolf, but in sheep's clothing, as we pushed our Neo-Conceptual / Post-Appropriation context into being, through the magazine we published, *Effects: Magazine for New Art Theory*, the essays we wrote, the shows we curated, the gallery-bolstering we did in the East Village (and later, elsewhere), and, most importantly, the role we played behind the scenes. The East Village had become a seething cauldron of degraded forms of Neo-Expressionism. In

¹I would eventually start another publishing venture, Edgewise Press, with Howard B. Johnson and Joy L. Glass, and publish Masheck's book, *The Carpet Paradigm: Integral Flatness from Decorative to Fine Art* in 2010.

relation to the perceived emotional exaggeration and decadence of this kind of art (Neo-Expressionist), and in relation to the other strain of art that was also exacting its toll, in a minor key, at the time, the Picture Theory generation of artists, with its self-inhibited, critical theories of representation and repressive critique of culture, in general, and painting, in particular, our so-called Post-Appropriation generation looked downright revolutionary, especially from 1982 to 1985, when hardly anyone was really aware of what we were doing or what was really going on behind the scenes. Isn't it always that way?

With no regard for age, or whether artists had been previously known or utterly unknown, whether they were painters, photographers, or sculptors, male or female, with or without galleries, or with galleries that didn't fit any longer, whether they had shown on 57th Street, SoHo, or the East Village, or whether they were Americans or Europeans, we selected and brought together what we thought were the most interesting artists of our times, but who were far from the beaten path – who had a thoughtful, conceptual component in their work, but who did not, as such, short-change or take for granted the visual dimension of art. Our specific formulation at the time was that this art was expressive, without being expressionistic, and oriented toward concepts or ideas; it was thoughtful, but without being conceptual *per se* or lifeless, gray, brained, as Classical Conceptual Art had been in the 1960s and 70s. And we didn't really care whether it was painting or photography, sculpture or whatever form it came in. And so was born a new generation of artists: Ross Bleckner, James Welling, Allan McCollum, Peter Nagy, Steven Parrino, Peter Nadin, Richard Prince, Sarah Charlesworth, Mark Innerst, Gretchen Bender, Peter Halley, Jonathan Lasker, Jeff Koons, Philip Taaffe, Haim Steinbach, Not Vital, Saint Clair Cemin, Annette Lemieux, Robert Gober, and still later, Meg Webster, Sal Scarpitta, and Vik Muniz, among so many others.

But it was a generation of artists who would eventually become subject to the same media pressures and distortions as the previous one. To the point where they almost became unrecognizable to us. Even as we continued to push them forward – well after it was necessary, and because of strong personal ties and friendships –, and the media worked its magic in a distorting mirror, I could see no matter how category-free and recalcitrant one made the 'language' used to support the work, the cultural reductions, categorizations, and mainstreaming effect became the overwhelming and deciding factors. And so, 'Neo Geo' and 'Simulationism' were born. Which terms make even more the fight you fight seem useless, and make you 'blind,' so that you do not see what is right in front of your eyes.

But it did not really take so long to see how easily 'us' becomes 'them' in that syndrome, and to see clearly, even early on, that artists like Salle, Clemente, and Richter, were hardly Expressionists – no more than Bleckner, Halley, Lasker, or Taaffe were purely conceptualist (or geometrical) in bent, especially since all four were 'painters.' And there was that extraordinarily intense moment

of realization when one understood and saw, perhaps more clearly than one wanted to, just how emphatically ‘conceptual’ the work of an artist like Salle truly was and is, and that his work, if the context of artists with whom he had come of age had been different, could just as easily have been viewed as ‘conceptual’ or post-conceptual. But early on, it is that way: you do whatever you think is necessary to gain momentum for the art you believe in, regardless of some or all of the other attendant realities. It is essentially an irrational period, in which the first things that go are the legitimate similarities and differences.

But then there occurs that other enlightening moment – the one in which you realize that an artist of Salle’s extraordinary talent and vision could have been contextualized not merely as a so-called ‘Neo-Conceptual’ artist but as an ‘abstract’ or Pop artist of the highest order, had it not been for the retarded anachronisms of time. Today, I can only say ‘ugh!’ and hope the artist will forgive me for ever having used the former term, both then and now, even if my own unique version of it at the time contradicted any and all Classical formulations of that species of (conceptual) art. And, not before too long, even if it does take several years, the other moment arrives, in which you realize that really great artists, like Salle, transcend all contexts and categories including the ones you yourself build, regardless of your motivations.

I bring up all these matters, especially the discourse about conceptuality, because I remember, very specifically, something else about the way Salle’s paintings compelled one to stay in the moment: it was as if the elements in any given composition always alluded to the past (our memories) and the future (our desires), but ultimately collapsed in the present all the boundaries dividing the one from the other. When you looked at his paintings, it was as if you were looking right into the way your own, very slight, day-to-day (‘Pop’) reality really worked. And when you try to generalize, to grasp the whole picture, the whole meaning, much in the same way as when you try to grasp the meaning of your life as a totality, it becomes totally ‘abstract,’ ungraspable, and, in the end, meaningless. If this moment was ‘conceptual’ in any way, it was so in the same way that a child asks ‘why is the sky blue?’ but also unexpectedly gets back several answers – some detailed and scientific, others more abstract or spiritual, and still others, which you may not like, that are simply humorous or absurd. If you want to know what color God’s eyes are, well, Salle might give you an answer, his answer (who else’s?), even as in the very next panel or section of the same painting a whole erotic scenario might be transpiring, but in ominous tones of gray.

But staying in the moment of a painting means precisely what? If the past and future collapse into or neutralize each other, or are made to collapse into the void of the present – Salle’s infamous ‘dead space’ –, doesn’t that mean the present itself hardly exists, except as the final exertion of the body (in the twentieth century) or the barest flutter of wings or as the most threadbare notion of timelessness – which is what we might see in a necklace or chain of DNA

cells or 'jewelry,' or simply an abstract pattern, in any of his paintings? History, but with no memories to convey, no story to tell – hence, perhaps the pale rendering of a generic, late 1930s or 40s Andre Derain still life being pecked at by a flock of doves in the abstract void of a blue sky; and the future, but with no desire, no idea or body to project, except as the vague memory of a bodily function and as an even vaguer form of ideation, respectively – hence, the human figure as a trope under erasure. Or rather, desire, but with no future – hence, the decorative flourish of a chain of dots that suggest infinity signs interrupted only by the edge of the canvas.

It is a tribute to Salle's genius that he has found in the form of such meager trinkets such an elegant and simple way to express Werner Heisenberg's uncertainty principle and the competing particle and wave theories of matter, even as they themselves go back to formulations of similar problems articulated by the pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus and Zeno's (tortoise and flying arrow) paradoxes of motion or stationary movement. But there are also the women who stare at us out of his pictures – their skin, tawny, verging upon the posthumous, their expressions, dispassionate, perhaps remorseful, if not overtly sad. In such pictures, we also have still lifes, which are hardly still, given that the surrounding motifs have actively infused it with the momentary life of a landscape; we might have the abstract image of a whirling chain of dots, orderly but verging nonetheless upon chaos; and a portrait, with exercising figures floating in the background but obfuscated by a variety of biomorphic shapes painted a see-through white. Do the additional elements in the latter represent recent memories of an exercise session, replete with painful muscular inflections, or more profound reflections, given the dark or morbid expression on the subject's face?

Is Salle painting three-in-one still life / landscape / portrait works in order to merely prove to us his versatility as a painter – which is considerable – or has he provided us with multiple realities that philosophically, socially, and in the world of physics, appear on the surface to have very little to do with each other but which interrelate on some other level? Even as these realities or images transpire within proximity of each other, they are self-contained, disparate, if not absolutely unrelated to each other. And yet, they have been brought together by the artist – within the artist's mind, as it were – and objectified in paint. Is this what they have in common – the working consciousness of the artist?

So much so do they share something together, that they even appear to collude. Perhaps there is something in the tone, in the way they have been painted, that creates this illusion of a common formal reality. Or could it be the liquid or washy quality of all three segments of the painting's reality, and the fact that there is a portrait of a human being presiding in the picture, speak further to a momentary but binding consciousness – a framing device, a system of perception, an aesthetical sense, that can synthesize, or collapse into itself, all of

these diverse realities. So much so that now we are tempted oppositely to make up a narrative, a story, and even grant these widely differing, discordant images a teleology.

When we are looking at any picture of Salle's, we are looking at the consciousness of the artist, whether in the form of a woman or objectified as nature, whether in the form of a still life or a landscape; what is the case is always consciousness in its most abstract form, whether literally in the form of a necklace that depicts pure causality or non causal events – depending upon whether we see order or chaos in this minimal image. When speculating wildly in this manner, we must also not forget to take in, to enjoy even, the various aesthetical qualities of the work, i.e., the way it is painted, that may simply provide us with something like pure, guiltless pleasure – however little this attribute may be valued today in our culture.

But no matter which way we turn – whether we are looking at the pure, white, translucent portions of a picture, which reflect the light of the sun in its all-embracing, all-configuring wingspan –, we always seem to wind up talking about the purity of the enterprise, be it mental, formal, or aesthetical. Even where the details of the mechanism at work in the painting – those things that create the tension, the disruption, the contradiction, the apparent paradox in the configuration – work at cross purposes. Not the least of which is its heightened purity in relation to the dark, disparaging look on the face of the women invariably staring at us. Either not all is well in paradise, or there is some darkness at work in our purest systems, in our systems of purity.

Even within the purity of a formal realm, the realm of consciousness, as such, there operate by definition the barest inflections and reticulations of logic. This is true even if the dark side of consciousness amounts to little more than formal disturbances, the contradictions of the illogical, the tension of a logic that has fallen ill, so to speak, or that has simply 'slipped' while being exercised (like any other 'figure' exercising). Not to mention the shadows, the pall of darkness, that can fall on the visage, the face of consciousness, on the faces of the women in many of Salle's paintings, when it and they are faced with the grander paradoxes of life, such as those that inscribe death right into the midst of things, chaos into the middle of order, and a kind of formal ugliness – a disjunction in a logical form of any sort – into the most unsuspecting beauty. A tumor, a lesion, a polyp, when you least expect it. A sudden disorder in the most orderly (framework), the most pastoral, setting imaginable – a *Portrait with Doves* (1999). But let us not forget that it is these same doves that convert a dead still life into a living one.

2. *Cheesehead* (1999)

In scope, if not in size, *Cheesehead* (1999) (7.1), is a monumental, cinematic work – although the title, as well as certain of the details in the painting, betray other notes in the scale. For those who do not know, David Salle has not only been interested over the years in dance and music, ballet in particular, but he has also directed a major motion picture. In 1985, he did the scenery and costumes for Richard Foreman and the Ontological Hysteric Theatre's *The Birth of a Poet*, with a libretto by Kathy Acker and music by Peter Gordon, which premiered at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in New York. He went on to collaborate on three ballets with the avant-garde choreographer Karole Armitage – *The Elizabethan Phrasing of the Late Albert Ayler* in 1986, *Go-Go Ballerina* in 1988, and *Contempt* in 1989 – for which he did the scenery and costumes, some of these together with Jeff Koons. And in 1994, Salle directed the movie, *Search and Destroy*, which boldly utilized experimental narrative techniques in a film that had mainstream aspirations.

Cheesehead is a four-panel painting, in which the images seem to become more abstract as we move from left to right, although the figural specificity does not mitigate in the least the images' degree of intellectual and physical abstraction. It is really a painting that moves from moment to moment, with regard for neither our customary nor our Westernized reading habits and notions of specialization. Salle pulls from whatever resource or tradition he needs, with less than no regard for a stable aesthetic. And yet it feels like a story *is* being told, or, at least, that the style, sensibility, and consciousness of a very particular artist are transpiring before our very eyes. It is as if he has spliced together four separate reels of reality, which are in progress, and into which we are given momentary glimpses. But what we cannot deny is that the painting is august, emblematic in some way, even if it gives the sense we have dropped a coin into a slot machine in Reno, Nevada, or Las Vegas, and instead of coming up with four cherries, four disparate Pop icons have rolled up to the window, whose obvious meanings are utterly unavailable to us. It is not so much that we have lost but that we are seemingly at a loss to explain anything (about the painting).

It is not because Salle is intentionally trying to defy the non-narrative age we live in, or trying excessively to assert the defiant spirit of the picture we are looking at – although, in lesser hands, these principles have become schools, part of the academy of avant-garde art, by this time in history – even as we make some attempt to understand what we are looking at. And we can always turn to that banality of perception (another kind of evil): the closer we look at the trees, the less we see the forest as a whole. In any case, the images in this painting are too arresting for us not to address them. And since we are not trying to assign meanings or to impose any theories upon them, but simply trying to extrude a set of momentary valences, what harm can there be in such an effort? Even if they are self-reducing to a set of arbitrary effects in a dead space, they are, nonetheless, in their manner, in their *atteggiamento* (their attitude or

psychological disposition), in the very sensuous way they are painted, deferential but distinctive, indeed, attributable to a working consciousness, and, most importantly, subject to an irresistible factor – namely the seductive but resounding pleasure we derive from them. Death and desire, working hand in hand with each other. What better reason do we need to delve into them, or to allow them to seduce us, unless we are intimidated by their intelligence and beauty or by the skill with which they are rendered?

There is in the first or left panel of *Cheesehead* a man in a dark suit leaning into the picture plane. Although his head or face is obfuscated by a piece of Swiss cheese (hence the title), we see it, and part of his upper body, reflected in a thickly framed mirror mysteriously dangling below. We see him unobfuscated only in the mirror's reflection. Reality is unavailable to us except through a set of appearances. He appears to gaze intently, but at nothing in particular – or, at least, not at anything we can see. His expression is impassive, and yet the body language does betray, as we said, some intention.

In an inset, about the same size as the slice of cheese, there are a red and a white rose in a glass vase in the center of the panel. Its background is a blue sky, presumably, whereas the background of the whole picture is greenish, monochromatic and undefined. The background in the mirror is yellowish, and similarly blank.

Given my earlier remarks, is the figure a gambler of some kind, or a croupier – or a stand-in for the artist himself, overlooking, even if on an angle, the 'whole,' that is, the three panels just to his left (or on our right, as we look at him)? This seems too easy. In addition, while the slab of cheese covering his face does not evoke a respectful association, and while the square floating inset of roses, which appears to be in position to displace it, does simultaneously suggest a more flattering set of values, neither substitutions, in the end, really seem to impact or affect in any way our impassive subject. In fact, he seems impervious to any insult or flattery we might be inflicting (or literally, superimposing) on him.

In the next panel, we see a Classical rendering of a Bernini sculpture – based upon a small terra cotta in the Fogg Museum at Harvard University, which study the artist specifically had photographed to use in this painting. The angel, painted against a blue sky, reflects an intense golden hue, as if it had been baking in the Roman sun for centuries. As the image descends, it becomes less finished, and concludes at the bottom with a tray holding several slices of pizza and other half-eaten items. The face of the angel is turned away, and its right hand is missing. The gory Pop reality of the food is superimposed over the vague presence of a figure from antiquity. Both seem to subsist in a world in which all values have been neutralized or become ultimately equivalent. The compilation, along with the Bernini statue, is, if nothing else, Baroque.

For all their expressiveness – the folds of the angel's robes and the slices of pizza that pass for food and viscera beneath it –, the elements in the picture

remain paradoxically inexpressive. Statue and still life [sic] operate within a contemporary void: has Salle placed us in the position of a tourist, gazing at a Bernini in Rome – on the Ponte Sant’Angelo or in San Andrea delle Fratte or the Altieri Chapel in San Francesco a Ripa – on the one hand, while eating a slice of pizza on (or in) the other? The ugly American in Rome, who has just arrived from gambling at the Bellagio in Vegas, with its ‘Renaissance’ façade, visiting the Guggenheim (now closed) and taking a gondola ride in the ‘canal’ of the Venetian (one of the more outlandish casinos built in Vegas in the last decade)?

In the third panel of *Cheesehead*, we have a woman, painted in black, white, and grays, kneeling face down on a table. Her head lies across her right arm, her left dangles over the side of the table, as her hair swirls in a Medusa-like tumult in the foreground of the picture. There are also strong shadows that may or may not be cast by her own body, or by figures invisible but in attendance somewhere on the left, outside the edge of the picture. It is a powerful exercise in *chiaroscuro*, overlaid from top to bottom by the delicate, almost mournful, pink outlines of a flower. The background is gray, dusky, more like atmosphere than anything solid. The consciousness of Duchamp’s peeping tom in *Etant donné* seems everywhere in this picture, in the same way that Duchamp’s protagonist is both on display and seemingly incognizant of the viewer, and her head (or face) is not available to us.

I had assume Salle has appropriated the image from a magazine, but the artist quickly informed me that many of the images of women come from actual models with whom he works, often positioning them in strongly contrasting light and shadow scenarios. There is great drama in the position the artist has made her assume in this picture; it is even erotically suggestive, although in the end its significance is enigmatic. Is she mourning a great tragedy or depressed beyond all medicinal thresholds; has she adopted a strange position in the course of retrieving something that fell under the table or is she there simply to infuse the painting with a Baroque, flamboyant, contradictory sexual energy? ‘Contradictory,’ in the sense that the whole atmosphere of the image – its darkness, its involuted nature, its seemingly self-negating posture – speaks to something incipient and yet terribly mortal. Perhaps the ‘dying’ flower overlaying the image reinforces this philosophically post-coital moment. But there should be no great surprise to discover sex and death so inextricably intertwined – sleeping in the same bed, so to speak. Or is the ugly American (in the first panel) now visiting a massage parlor or strip joint in Vegas (in the third panel) after having done some sightseeing (in the second panel)? (If I am being facetious, then perhaps there is also something about a joke that goes on too long.)

In the fourth and last panel of this work, we see the same ornamental pattern as in previous paintings, except that it overlays still another abstract design: broad orange and white brushstrokes over a gray ground that look like a fireworks explosion. If the superimposed necklace pattern seems closed and

self-generating, then the pattern beneath looks open-ended, dispersive, and downright celebratory. The bright lights of Las Vegas shine on into the night.

I think, in the end, what we are seeing here is, to be grotesque about it, a phenomenology of consciousness: a non-sequential series of moments that confirm for the viewer not only the ever-shifting nature of perception but its inherent groundlessness. This phenomenology is like a piece of Swiss cheese – full of holes. A soap opera endowed with self-reflexive consciousness. It is not that images – our images, the pictures we construct – lack substance; it is that the only substance or fundament they have is temporal. Meaning that in principle there is very little about perception, human experience, mortality that transcends the temporal nature of these processes or things. We can talk about first principles all we want, but not before they too become subject to the momentary relativity of the image that grounds them (these self-same principles). For this reason, we make, from a critical point of view, no narrative, hermeneutic or interpretative guarantees, no more than the artist can extend a finite or stable content (or semantic contentment, beyond the aesthetical structure of the picture). Neither nature (human or inhuman), nor culture (a Bernini sculpture or a pizza pie), nor the adventure of sex (that so profoundly divides and connects the elements in the equation), nor the most abstract physical model of the universe can surmount or go outside the reflection given to it in the mirror-like consciousness of those very same things, be it the artist's (consciousness) or ours.

3. Misogyny and Duchamp

About the piece of cheese obfuscating the face of the male protagonist in *Cheesehead*, a further observation needs to be made. If the subject of the obfuscation had been a woman, much in the order of misogyny would have been made of this act – as was the press's habit in the 1980s. Not that we did not still see this tactic (the artist and the press) used in the 1990s – indeed, we can even see it here, in many of David Salle's paintings. In the women's heads turned away or cut off by the edges of the paintings; in a flower held by the subject herself or a funny face lollipop drawing superimposed by the artist, obfuscating the face of the woman almost in the same provocative way as other objects did in earlier paintings.

The issue here is whether the same questions about identity apply to males, and other self-objectifying 'objects,' as they do to females – and we must answer in the affirmative, much as Duchamp did so many years earlier. Clearly, the identities of human beings, and the objects of desire and perception they formulate, as extensions of themselves, are subject to the same negations as any other human or inhuman constructs. For there are no earthly posits, no logical or sexual (illogical) propositions, no soulful assertions propounded that are not

subject to exhaustion, decay, denial, and utter negation, momentary and ruthless. Just blink your eyes, and watch the persons next to you or closest to you disappear, as a result of a misunderstanding, cancer, disinterest, a futile act of terrorism, or NPD (normal perceptual distraction, which malady I just invented). Not to mention the cancellation of the Self, or the line dividing the self from the Other (self or selves), in the sexual act. Surely, at this stage in time, we do not still have to dress like a woman – here, again, I am alluding to Duchamp – in order to feel like a man.

On the contrary, it is the self – artistic, psychoanalytical, institutional, or otherwise – that would maintain a normative ‘signature,’ a static personality, the *status quo*, that would, in turn, perpetuate a changeless identity, that does not want to accept the dissolute, transformative nature of being, subject to the relentless, momentary reality of its becoming. A self, by definition, wants futilely to resist the threat of all negation – except the one (or ones) that are self-serving. Duchamp knew this better than anyone before in the history of art, but turned it into a (serious) game. The death of that self, of all selves, in the moment, immediate or seemingly deferred as such, is necessary to the transformations enacted by all animate (living) and (seemingly) inanimate things alike. If we need proof that so-called inanimate objects have ‘selves,’ lives, as it were – perhaps seemingly more stable or slower moving –, we need only look at the objects in any of these paintings to see how true this is. Given the opportunity, as the subject of perception, even the most inanimate object, let alone those manipulated by a skillful artist, such as Salle, in the most desolate of still lifes, will absorb the selves, the lives, of all the things around them, exchanging, transferring, and ultimately, transforming all the forces, forms, and values associated with them in the process.

Typically, we assign fetishistic values to these objects and subject/object values to the human element in the proposition. But these are arbitrary assignments, given to us by certain prejudices going back to ancient Greek philosophy (psychology in specific, and logic in general) and extending through the German, British, and French (European) humanist tradition, especially after the Renaissance, and later, after the full-blown scientific or technological takeover of human thought. We need only turn to other cultures, in the Middle East, Asia, Africa, the Pan-Pacific or Oceania, to see how provincial are our understandings of the body/mind, subject/object, culture/nature divides. Freud tried to do this, but the closest he came was to surround himself with exotic objects, which occasionally influenced, and even filtered through, the Graeco-Roman, Judaic-Christian screen that ultimately predetermined his ideas – which did not prevent them from being, in the end, very powerful, beautiful, and convincing stories about the human psyche. Duchamp did it, but by altogether giving up art for twenty-five years and playing chess.

And, after all, isn’t that what we all do – tell stories, even the most self-negating ones, about ourselves and others, about nature, and all that seems

to escape and transcend these things, and become, by virtue of their stubborn liveliness, ungraspable? Just how fragile and utterly accessible are these things, too, was shown to be the case by our last great controversial twentieth-century thinker, Ludwig Wittgenstein, who, at least very early on, tried to show us – and constructed a system to do so – how these problems didn't even really exist, or that they could be neatly swept away (under the rug) with a language-broom. In the end, he swept himself, and his sexuality, into a corner, or rather, into the closet, where thoughts of suicide repeatedly plagued him, and suicide itself became the overriding solution for many of his siblings. I don't know if there is such a thing as telling ourselves (and others) the wrong story – but some (like Duchamp's) do seem to sustain us better than others, at least for a while.

4. Warhol, Lichtenstein, Katz

Something further needs to be said about the reappearance of images and parts of images in different combinations in David Salle's work, sometimes in the very next painting or over the course of decades. In effect, they become part of the artist's repertory of images or the serial reality of that image.

We have seen the individual in the first panel of *Cheesehead* elsewhere, in paintings the artist did several years ago. We can find Bernini's angel right here, in the second panel, or a part of him, in *Interior with Angel* (2002). The woman kneeling on all fours, in the third panel, executed in shades of gray, can be found in *Black Jug* (2002) and *Maypole* (2002) and throughout paintings in the last twenty years. And the abstract pattern, or versions of it, in the fourth panel, can be found in *Portrait with Doves* and *Glass with Large Gourd* (2000). This goes for the figures and landscapes, as well as the still life elements – the cheese, pizza, flowers, gourds, glasses, ice floes, fruit, men rowing boats, hats, cartoon characters, Santa Claus, bras, and violins. And particularly the women in various sedate and provocative positions. It also goes for the formal division of the canvases, the insets (the casket forms, e.g.), the elliptical compartments, the superimpositions or overlays, the isolation and magnification of images, the abrupt, Degasesque edits, and the juxtapositions of images and the formal (and informal) non sequiturs.

And there is the formidable iconographical weight of certain images and references in Salle's work that further make the paintings resonate. We see images today in his work that go back to his earliest, as well as to some of his most important, paintings. Jasper Johns did this, but Salle does it in the most casual way, bringing a kind of Pop Art *sprezzatura* to the method. There is, of course, the reference to the black bra in *Maypole*, that goes all the way back to the infamous Black Bra painting by that name in 1983. There are the images of Santa Claus and the woman holding the violin in *Vertige Blue* (2003), and the cartoon figure in *Portrait of a Young Man* (2003), that retrieve elements of *Wild*

Locusts Ride (1985), *Jar of Spirits* (1987), and the spirit of the *B.A.M.F.V.* painting of 1983. And there is the slightest, transparent drawing of the woman looking off into the distance, smoking a cigarette, and holding a can of beer that reprises his earliest sketchy figures drawn on the monochromatic backgrounds of the late 1970s.

The recurring motif, which is also something we see in Johns, and even more subtly in Alex Katz, lends the painting a kind of working timelessness, a use-value to the present moment, that paradoxically reaches into the artist's 'past' and 'future' – the bank of his images –, but in such a way as to make the image seem more approachable or accessible and not so overly precious, self-indulgent, or subjective. Even if it does not always accumulate into a known 'entity' – that is, even if the images as variable signifiers do not always conjure a signified with a constant meaning. By replaying it in slightly skewed contexts, Salle allows the image to become familiar, almost like a Pop icon – a Warhol Campbell soup can or a Marilyn –, but without it totally losing its 'hand' or handmadeness (sic) technically speaking, or its mystery, in terms of its psychical power.

There is also a great deal of stylization in Salle, that speaks not only to the phantom limb of timelessness – who could ever forget that greenish, gangrenous prosthetic 'leg' of an abstract form in *B.A.M.F.V.*? – but to style as a way to find a common denominator among an infinite possibility of images in the contemporary world. Not to mention those from the history of art and culture, and those proffered to us impulsively by the monster (the perversion) of desire that lurks in the shadows of the most gentle and debonair soul. On the more practical side of things, there is just the way Salle stylizes, à la Katz, his figures and objects, making them seem simultaneously, and paradoxically, ephemeral, cold,² and all used up, on the one hand – as if we encountered them everyday in the media, in our news programs, magazines, and newspapers (including the comics section) –, and yet, on the other, utterly impulsive, recalcitrant, irretrievable, in terms of any final meaning – and sometimes, any meaning or story at all. In the end, Salle is probably closer to Katz than to Lichtenstein, at least in terms of sensibility.

Or, let us say, Salle builds up the architectonics of his image or set of images in the same cool and calculated way as Lichtenstein, but follows it up with a style of rendering that lends the image just enough personality to make it

²References to the 'cold' in this essay ultimately refer to the "cold child," a figure of speech derived from George W.S. Trow's book, *Within the Context of No Context* (1980), a book passed along to me by David Salle, who named a painting *Cold Child* in 1986. These are children who were brought up on T.V. in the 1950s in the U.S. Parents often used television-watching as a form of babysitting. The child might remain mesmerized for hours by the goings-on in the endless programs televised in black and white, not unlike the present generation who are wired 24/7 to social media and their devices.

seem closer to Katz's way of working. And the psychology of the images – which Katz denies – is closer to Katz than to Lichtenstein, except that Salle is relying on a more implosive or interactive exchange of psychological energy among the images, in some ways more explicit than (the energy) even in Katz. To contend that something so unmeasurable (as this energy) is more or less implicit in the one figure as opposed to the other is patently suicidal (on my part). I am bound to offend one or the other artist – who are good friends. But in so far as Katz plays at painting fully depsychologized (or stylized) images, and if any psychology, narrative, or story does, in fact, seep in, I must consider that dimension of things implicit; whereas in so far as Salle would intentionally defuse his images, render them neutral, so that they might become psychological carriers of meaning in a scheme larger than any one psyche (or receivership), including his own, I can only conclude there is a more explicit scenario at work in Salle's compositions. Which does not make Salle a Pop Surrealist relative to the sublime realism operative in Katz's work, but he comes pretty darn close. Perhaps I am splitting hairs on this point. But I think it is a difference with substance.

So, where we might find certain images repeated minimally and quantitatively in any one period of Warhol's oeuvre, we find them spread out over time and among periods in Salle. And because the images are painted manually for the most part, in Salle, even where he may use assistants to render them on occasion, rather than exclusively silk-screened, as in Warhol, we get the luxury and nuance of facture, the 'heat' of images rendered personally and psychologically, in the case of the former, rather than mechanically and categorically – although Salle never loses sight of a broad stylization of images that he could only have derived from Pop Art, from Lichtenstein and Warhol, and from the figure who has always eluded categorization as an abstract, Pop, or Minimal artist, namely Alex Katz. But unlike them, and even Johns, Salle's work points to a psychological moment, even if the pointing transpires in several different directions at the same time. Because his paintings defy story and meaning, or any semantic calibration, it does not mean they do not have a relation to history and have meanings (sic), no matter how off-centered and self-dispersing. Self-effacing, they are not; momentous, momentary, and 'Mannered' or stylized – in the sense that Bronzino's art is –, they are.

5. Vertige Blue

Vertige Blue (2003), an exquisite painting, is comprised of three panels. In the bottom left, painted in blue hues, we see a woman holding a violin against the length of her torso and sex. Her shoulders, head, and legs, from above the knees downward, are edited off by the edges of the canvas. We see her as if we were looking up from an orchestra pit. Superimposed on this image are the very

large, dark blue contours of flowers, what looks like a very small, colorful, free-standing dress with no one in it, and the archetype for the jolly head of a Santa Claus, also in color.

Closely cropped into the right panel, against a gray ground, we see the shoulders, head, and arms of a handsome woman with blond hair in a black evening gown holding a paintbrush. She is, as it were, painting (sic) directly at us, her left arm above her head, and the tip of her brush in the right hand dipped in the same blue as her eyes. Harsh light and sharp shadows throw a mysterious *chiaroscuro* pattern across her face, arms, and shoulders. Superimposed on her painting hand, and on part of her shoulder, face, and left hand is the vaguely fleshed out contours of a seated woman leaning forward, with her legs crossed and looking off to her right.

Across the single top panel, we get a beautiful, large, and abstract yellow, green, pink, and orange wave pattern. Superimposed on it are what looks like a Derain still life element – a bunched mass of white fabric supporting a blue pan of some sort, painted the same blue as the bottom left panel, and tilted toward us. There are also a disproportionately large red tulip and yellow flower in the right corner of the panel.

Overall, *Vertige Blue* has a musical quality – the wavy lines in the top panel, the woman holding the violin in the bottom left, and the balletic way the woman distributes her body in the right panel, contribute to this sensation. The colors and flowing forms are also extremely harmonized, even where the passages from one image to another are typically abrupt. But it is clear Salle's painting is not just about music, or even about painting – remember, the woman is holding a paintbrush and not a baton in her hand, although it feels that way a little. What the painting does more acutely is to make a rather poetic statement about the relation between sex and creativity, in general, and art and the arts, in particular – music, painting, dance, all forms of beauty –, given to us not only by humanity (itself a creation or invention) but by nature. Hence, the presence of the greatest gift-giver of all in the picture, Santa Claus. Salle is nothing if he is not ironic, or, at least, playful, especially in the way he interweaves irony and *eros*.

If Salle is linking, in this picture, creative energy to sex, it is perhaps because he sees the way culture is connected at the root to nature. It is no accident the woman holds the neck of the violin between her breasts and the body of the violin over her sex. Nor that he has a woman painting in place of a woman as the subject of a painting and subject to our gaze. Not that she does not, as such, become, again, the subject of *our* painting (sic), and therefore, the meta-object of our gaze.

That Salle has painted himself as a woman, as his model, painting a picture, speaks to the meta-reality of a work of art, or to consciousness, in general. Although not quite so literal as Duchamp's *Rose Sélavy*, he is nonetheless banking on the larger metaphoric value of perception to establish the

identity of any object, especially when it comes to the ‘mirror’ of art, as well as that of nature. That she is also, in effect, literally painting us, or at us, given the way she confronts us in the picture, and that her eyes are the same color as the paint on the tip of the brush, relates directly to the argument of perception as the substance of this consciousness. It is what fundamentally links all creativity to nature, all mind to matter, and all sexuality to the energy of the exchange.

Perhaps it becomes clearer now why there are so many women in Salle’s paintings. They are not merely the subject of a work of art; they actively signify the mental and physical energy underlying not only sexuality but creativity, in general – regardless of the forms it generates (men, women, an evening dress or house frock, a tulip or a tin pan) and the forms of expression it configures (painting, sculpture, music, dance, ballet). This is why *Vertige Blue* relates as much to music as to painting, and to the erotic conflation of the two. And this is why Salle understands not only the arbitrary nature of the relation between the signifier and the signified, but the infinite possibilities generated by each when they are separated from each other and the enormous energy released when they are allowed to circulate freely in a state of consciousness which is bound by nothing other than its own limits, allowing them to become reattached to a new set of values or meanings. And why he can afford to link a domestic house dress, altogether devoid of any person, to the reflective intelligence of the woman who has virtually faded into (her) thought. And further, why he unhesitatingly slips, in the title, from the signifier in one language (French, for *vertigo*) to a signified in another (the description of a color [blue] in another ‘language,’ that of painting).

The intense blue hues of the woman grasping the violin, the sudden intrusion of Santa Claus, the dazzling blue eyes of the female artist who is the subject of her own painting – and therefore commands her own perceptions, as well as she might ours –, the dash of blue paint at the tip of the brush, the woman reflecting that embodies pure reflection, the blue tin pan about to tip over, the enormous, bulging, red tulip almost breaking through the picture plane, and, last but not least, the giant waves of pure color sweeping through the top panel, speak to nothing other than a massive, vertiginous derangement of the senses. If it is painting that comes out on top, as the consummate form of creativity in this instance, it is only because Salle is the painter. The painter of the moment, of moments fleeting and eternal, staying the moment and staying in the moment.

6. *The Seasons*

Over eight feet high and over sixteen feet long and comprising seven panels, *The Seasons* (2003) was the largest work in the exhibition. It is in the grand tradition of other large, multi-panel paintings Salle has made over the years – paintings

such as *My Head* (1984), *Fooling with Your Hair* (1985), *Jar of Spirits* (1987), *Marking through Webern* (1987), *Sextant in Dogtown* (1987), *Satori Three Inches Within Your Heart* (1988), and *Pressed-in Sturges* (1988). It is cinematic in scope and symphonic in effect. Even where the parts are definitive, and the whole is vast and powerful, it rushes to elude our every effort to absorb it in a single perception.

On the bottom, we see four panels, in black, white and grays, each containing a woman in various stages of dress or nudity. The strong *chiaroscuro* serves both the interests of mystery and definition. The body of the first woman is facing us, appears to have a bathing suit on or just a top, and is gesturing with her right hand. The second has her back toward us, with her hands behind her, and she is staring off to the right. The shadow of a fig tree falls on the length of her back, virtually reiterating her spinal column. The third is facing us and is either slipping into a garment or out of one, while the standing fourth maintains a profile as she turns toward us, with her arms oddly clasped and poised on her right hip.

In all four instances, their hands and legs are edited away, either in part or entirely, by the edges of the canvas. The figures are painted tightly into their spaces, which emphasizes their gestures all the more. The backgrounds are not just black; they are filled with a sensuous darkness that somehow also feels animate. The women are bathed in a very strong light, which, in turn, creates equally strong shadows. Superimposed over each figure is the transparent, outer contour of a yellow pencil, sharpened at both ends and bent dramatically like a banana.

Dividing the four canvases, two on one side and two on the other, is a panel that extends from the bottom to the top of the painting. It is the image of a fig tree functioning like a fulcrum or a balancing agent. This time its broad, sensuous leaves are painted a deep green against a dusky pink background, and superimposed on it, in white, are the contours of two sailboats. Like the bodies of the women, the figure of the tree is flooded by a very bright light, emanating seemingly from the washy pink background and creating a *chiaroscuro* interplay of dark and lighter greens among the leaves.

Above the two left panels of the women, and to the left of the fig tree, is a horizontal panel, painted a deep blue, with a very large orange flower and a very large yellow tulip, in full bloom and slightly overlapping each other, filling this panel with color and light. To the right of the fig tree, and also above the vertical panels of the two women, is another horizontal panel, this one painted in a deep red, on which there are painted a vase or porcelain container of some kind and a silver plate. They do not overlap, but like their flower counterparts, they are positioned exactly above the figures below, almost where their heads ought to be. Although inanimate, the two objects glisten with light, as if from within. In the case of the flowers, two green stems further connect them to the bodies below.

Cast in shadows as they are, and enclosed in their darkened spaces, the women in this painting stimulate our imagination, but to no specific erotic end. They do not so much taunt us as control our perceptions of them, even as their own eyes and heads are partly or entirely edited away by the edges of the panel (as in *Blue Chrome* [2003]). The colorful canvases above, with their animate and inanimate flowers, stone and plateware, turn the heat up with their suggestively splayed petals, round and oval-shaped openings. The intensity of the colors, as well as the smaller forms above, further fuel the fire, as do the vivid, green, biomorphic shapes of the fig tree against a dazzling, light-saturated pink background.

Everything in Salle's *The Seasons* speaks to eroticism, and yet we also get the feeling it does so in the most restrained and controlled way. Excepting the edges of the panels, there are no straight lines in this very Caravaggesque picture. It is filled with Baroque, feminine, curvaceous energy that defies borders, despite the compartmentalization of the subjects and forms, despite the compartments that do, in fact, dictate boundaries. Even the pencils, which promote a male association, are two-ended, bent to an extreme, and painted as voids or mere contours. And yet these edges, compartments or formal compartmentalizations of energy, and the superimposition of the linear forms of the pencils over each of the women's bodies, do contribute a sense of Classical restraint to the picture.

It might well be argued there is no part of this painting that speaks to nature, *eros*, the Dionysian, or the momentary, that does not also speak to culture, the rational, the Apollonian – to consciousness or mind that enables us to endure, to perpetuate, to stay in the moment, in the throes of perception. Perhaps this is why the pencils is sharpened to two points. And perhaps they are curved in the way that they are because there can be no creativity of any kind – writerly, painterly – which does not somehow balance the forces of mind with those of nature. Even those forces which are purely physical, purely sexual or procreative, are predicated upon perception – no matter how primitive or base –, and therefore, entail consciousness of some sort, or even an inverted, raw form of it, which we categorize as the unconscious, the irrational, or the absurd. Hence, the Surrealistic pencils – or hard 'pillows' – which hover and bend their way past the joke about how the mind in possession of psychic powers can enable it to lift, transport and even reshape objects in space, and move toward the acknowledgement of a condition that is as common as night and day. And embody the synthesis of them (night and day) and the larger spectacle of the seasons themselves. And if Salle finds a harmony between darkness and light, shadow and color, severe compartmentalization and a Baroque defiance of space, it is only because he understands the larger forces of destruction and creativity at work in sex and nature, in perception and consciousness. We cannot blink our eyes without eradicating the world and reconstructing it from moment to moment.

But the world, like a painting, is not mere construction. It is an ever-changing, synthetic whole, sensate and momentary, subject to intuition, even where the signs it generates may seem arbitrary. If the fig tree, right at the center of the painting, speaks to nature and sexual impulse, then perhaps the sailboats superimposed on it signify a deliberate, fluid, attendant consciousness – a kind of mediating force that negates or disappears into itself, even before it can determine or assert any absolute meaning, values, or presence. If any of Salle’s images or pictures stay the moment, it is only because they are of that moment. If they stay the season, it is only because they and we and the world, as it is presently constructed, have found a way to stay in their moment.

7. Epilogue: A Conversation and a Confession; Sensation and Intuition

During the course of time it took to prepare this essay (and the exhibition), I had, as one might suppose, several conversations with David Salle, the more interesting ones dealing explicitly with ideas about his art. On one such occasion, I expressed my concern about interpreting the work – wondering if it was possible or even advisable. He reassured me I shouldn’t worry about tracking down all the references and sources in them; in fact, this was the last thing he wanted: an inventory. Needless to say, I have failed in that respect, although I believe certain descriptive acts are, or can be, implicitly analytical in nature. This comes from an abiding commitment to facts, reality, objectivity, and subjectivity defined as the objective reality of the imagination.³

Salle also suggested I not write about the paintings in a literal way. That there was in them perhaps more ‘music’ and ‘poetry’ than met the (overanalytical) eye. I think he was trying to get me not to read too much into them – meaning, on the one hand, I should trust my feelings when looking at them, and, on the other, rely more on the overall aesthetic effect they produce rather than on decoding any hidden meanings. He certainly did not want me to bring a narrative or ‘story’ to them that would ultimately reduce them and their significance to a quantitative matter. In this respect, too, I may have inadvertently subjected the paintings to a synchronic form of scrutiny that doubles back on their diachronic values, even if it was only my intention to reflect a qualitative dimension in the work that was not wholly disconnected from its meaning. There is no use denying any of this.

But Salle also followed up this remark – the one about the imposition of too much meaning – with the interesting observation that the images in his

³It must be said my understanding of mind and consciousness is predicated upon an appreciation of Wittgenstein and the British analytical school of language philosophy (Quine and others), but moved by the phenomenological approaches of Hegel and Husserl.

paintings do not simply cancel each other out. That, contrary to certain opinions previously expressed about his work, they are not about meaninglessness or this condition, as such. This both helped and further aggravated my own condition, because I myself was, on this particular occasion, torn between two conflicting opinions: that his art was either over-replete with meaning – or, at least, overflowing with sources and references – or, curiously, and simultaneously, empty. ‘Empty,’ in that when the many meanings converge in his paintings, they do, indeed, seem to neutralize each other, or create the feeling they are arbitrary in value, and even passive in their effect.

But, it was not before too long I realized this impression had a lot to do with the role temporality played in the work. It was impossible for Salle to lie about the way images come and go in our culture – with a great deal of speed and leaving almost no conscious trace behind –, and no matter how much the images themselves prevaricate. Given that they are as enduring as our sense of history and as elusive as passion itself, there seems no way to track these images. I think it is for this reason everything in Salle’s work seems to transpire fundamentally in the present – not just in the physical here and now, but in the present as a psychical reality, whose substance is even less enduring and more elusive than the incoming and outgoing vectors of perception, violently impinging upon this inviolable moment of consciousness. The onslaught of perceptions grounds our consciousness, even as it reinforces its groundlessness. What we are left with is the objective reality of the imagination. But the paintings congruence with this reality does not guarantee the image (or collocation of images) or the reality a stable function. On the contrary, in the light of such contradictions or paradoxes, and in the context of the phenomenology of the images Salle assembles for us, the construction of meaning seems utterly unreliable, highly unlikely, if not categorically impossible, and even downright futile. But I don’t think this means he leaves us with no parameters at all to experience the paintings.

Despite my own missteps and miscues here, I believe that Salle does provide us with some concrete hints about how to approach his work. And they are implicit in everything he says, and, more importantly, in everything he paints. I have made much of the role that consciousness and perception play in his work. But, in retrospect, I think we would be much better served to experience the paintings in terms of pure sensation and intuition – more humane forms of understanding. Of course, no one would deny they are the fundament of, indeed, divinely related to, perception and consciousness. They are what the paintings both generate and reflect in their own right. And they are the source and substance of how we mediate the world.

And if we come to them, meet them half way, as it were, in a fully intuitive and sensate state, we cannot help but experience the paintings, not merely as human documents, but as an extension of what it means to be human – even during these most inhuman of times. Then it would no longer be a question

of experiencing the paintings either literally or figuratively, abstractly or metaphorically, analytically or synthetically. Nor would we have to approach them exclusively in the guise of culture or antithetically in relation to nature. There is no mask that is not an extension of the face that wears it.

So, perhaps, it is simply a matter of staying sensately and intuitively in the moment of the paintings. Or, of being courageous enough to stand naively there, before them, fully capable but doing nothing, and letting the paintings approach us on their own terms. Which is what I have tried to do. “What if we only find out what they feel like?” the artist asks. This, in itself, is no small matter. Even on the chance the paintings are empty – in the same way that Warhol, Lichtenstein, and Katz’s sometimes appear to be –, their emptiness may prove to be full of meaning. Perhaps it is the very complex way they (Salle’s paintings) appeal to the image that permits us to remain perfectly sensate and intuitive within them. If at the root of every simplicity there is a thriving complexity, perhaps the converse also follows: at the bottom of each complex (world) there is some simple desire or impulse – a *Citizen-Kane*-like rosebud – that would flourish were it not for the powers wrongly chosen to mediate it. Even to allow ourselves to be intimidated by Salle’s paintings, as I myself have been on more than one occasion, is not unlike leaving ourselves open to experiencing something (again) for the first time. Regardless of what that thing may turn out to be. We only need to stay in the moment to find out.

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