

DAVID SALLE

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NEW PASTORALS

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NANCY SPECTOR
FOREWORD

It should come as no surprise that David Salle would partner with AI to create a series of dynamically constructed paintings, the *New Pastorals* (2024–). These collaborative works mark a pivot in a career spent scanning the image banks of popular culture and art history for striking and resonant forms, which he amalgamates into searing, disjunctive compositions. Ever attuned to developments in digital art, Salle saw AI as a readymade tool for reaching beyond what he already knew about the process of painting from his vast experience as an image maker. He also knew, as an incisive critic of the medium, that AI was not equipped to generate meaningful marks as it did not understand emphasis, contours, or edges. So Salle set out, in partnership with engineer Grant Davis, to construct a neural network that would be nuanced enough to tangle with his prodigious formal skills and produce the kind of internal scaffolding that makes a great painting great. At first, he educated the AI—which is activated by visual, rather than textual, prompts—with masterworks by the pantheon of artists he admires (Giorgio de Chirico, Edward Hopper, et al.), enhancing the process with a dose of Arthur Dove, whose fluid passages of black pigment allowed the machine to dream with depth and dimensionality. Salle was less interested in the appropriation of past styles as a conceptual conceit than he was in a muscular interaction with algorithmic form-making. He thus developed a new training model, one focused exclusively on his own previous work, namely the series, *Pastorals*, from the late 1990s and early 2000s. These canvases, according to the artist, provided the perfect range of data to deconstruct and reassemble: their compositions are divided into discrete interlocking shapes; they feature several distinct color palettes operating simultaneously; and they are suffused with a myriad of detail. What resulted, when the machine was torqued by a lever that determines degrees of similarity and dissimilarity, were unreal mountain landscapes populated by fragmented bodies, vestiges of bathers, and shepherds succumbing to the determinant forces of code.

Struck by the vibratory energy of the digital crenelations and accordion folds rendered by the AI, Salle engaged with these scenes as printed backgrounds for paintings. Challenged by the pulverization and reconstitution of his own past production, which seemed to generate a potent, pastoral-like essence, he infused each scene with further compositional tension by enhancing their distortions and ellipses and adding new figurative fragments that disobey any sense of scale. Torsos, hands, bathing suits, cartoon suns, ladders,

wood statues, and swaths of fabric (among other sundry signs of life) enmesh with the Edenic landscapes in a kind of foreplay between background and surface that takes the form of centrifugal geometry. These elements—some newly added, others rendered as further complications of the AI-generated abstractions—spiral outward. Their kinetic formation recalls that of Matisse’s *The Dance* (1910), itself an ode to the bucolic pastoral tradition, but the effect is more dystopian, more sci-fi. Think of the Stargate sequence from Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), the swirling tunnel of color and light that engulfed the protagonist as he fled the murderous AI, HAL 9000. Salle’s *New Pastorals* are indeed “new,” meaning “of the moment,” intensely contemporary in their reflection and refraction of a lived reality increasingly entangled with the digital. While AI is Salle’s copilot in the creation of these enigmatic paintings, it is not the source or the final arbiter of their imagery. It is a lens, in some cases a mirror, that distorts reality in a carnivalesque misappropriation of the empirical world. Salle rides this wave of physical contortions, underscoring the slippages between the real and the imagined, echoing the twenty-first century’s assault on truth. Each canvas’s highly stylized matrix of imagery and vibrant color harmonies lure the viewer into a central compositional vortex, compelling them to see in circles. The effect is vertiginous, a kind of motile engagement with the painting that seems almost choreographed. The *New Pastorals* invite you to dance but like the bacchanals of old, they barely conceal the chaos at the heart of the universe.

BEN LERNER
ON DAVID SALLE'S
NEW PASTORALS

I.
THE UNCANNY SALLE

The paintings immediately struck me as alive—vivid, beautiful, dynamic—so why was I a little unsettled? For all the light and delight, there was a mystery in the *background*—both in the sense of the origin of the paintings, their process of composition, and in the literal backgrounds, the images that were printed onto the canvases before Salle began to paint them. These printed backgrounds look a lot like David Salle paintings, the way my dad looked a lot like my dad when he unexpectedly shaved his mustache when I was a little kid (it took him hours to coax me out of the bushes where I hid). The closeness of the resemblance intensifies difference; intimacy amplifies the shock of the alien. I felt, in other words, that there was something uncanny about these *New Pastorals*.

On my first visit to the studio, before I knew anything about the project or how the paintings were made, I saw a few of the unpainted canvases—canvases that only displayed the preparatory printed backgrounds. Consider what would become the background of *New Pastoral #10*. (fig. 1) Three largely naked figures, or fragments of figures—limbs detach or stop short, legs multiply or elongate, bodies bleed into the surround—are set in a verdant world, some kind of alpine valley with blue mountains in the distance echoing the shape and palette of the garment (I think it's a garment) between the seated figure's impossible legs. The floating forearm and hand seem to belong to the figure looming above the woman but they also quote the arms of the three-thighed figure to the far left. Some passages are highly realistic, resolved—those two pines, certain areas of the mountains—and others are indistinct, morphing, melting. (A vertical line against which the seated woman almost leans, dividing the last seventh or of canvas to the right, didn't make it into the finished painting).

It's easy to relate the background image to other moments in Salle's work—think of it, for instance, as in conversation with (an old) *Pastoral* from 2001 (fig. 2) and a painting like *Ice Flow* (fig. 3) from the same year. But in comparison even to the most abstract or unstable passages in the older paintings, the shapes in the



Fig. 1. David Salle, Background of *New Pastoral 10*, 2024. Oil, acrylic, flashe and charcoal on archival UV print on linen. 54 x 74 inches (137.2 x 188 cm).



Fig. 2. David Salle, *Pastoral*, 2001. Oil on canvas, TK × TK in. (tk × tk cm).



Fig. 3. David Salle, *Ice Flow*, 2001. Oil on canvas, TK × TK in. (tk × tk cm).

new image are liquescent; they make me think of lava lamps. And they—I mean the printed backgrounds considered alone—are flatter than any of Salle’s other works, despite their depicted distances, and even accounting for the leveling effect of printing.

To be clear, the background image, which I’ve only begun to describe, isn’t uninteresting on its own. They put me in mind of Tiepolo’s *capricci*, in that I feel like I might have stumbled into a magic circle, disturbed a ritual. Roberto Calasso said of the *capricci* that they are “marked by the convergence of a superabundance of light and a kind of internal corrosion of the objects,” language we might repurpose for Salle’s very different kind of image.¹ But who made them exactly? Maybe Salle had been working with a new assistant, someone who was trying (but failing in fascinating ways) to replicate his style?

Not someone, but some *thing*. I had played around with DALL-E, the image generator, and I’d seen some of the distortions it produced, and now, as I looked more closely at Salle’s backgrounds, I had that distinct (if no doubt increasingly unreliable) sense that I was looking at the work of a gifted, if still naive, AI. The glitches are often painterly even when it’s mimicking photography. Consider what DALL-E 2 came up with when asked to generate an image of “seven engineers gathered around a white board,” (fig. 4) and then compare one of the engineer’s faces with with a self-portrait by Francis Bacon (figs. 6-7).

That subtle undertow of discomfiting mystery that I experienced when I first looked at the paintings was due to the AI who composed the background—an artificial intelligence trying to “paint” like Salle. This algorithmic doppelgänger—why not call it SALL-E—was fed, I would learn, exclusively on Salle’s work. SALL-E generated Salle-like images that the real Salle then painted on, with, over, around, to produce his *New Pastorals*. When Salle stood before the canvas, in other words, he was responding to an image that he both did and didn’t make; he was facing a background generated by a program trained on his background, a highly contemporary version of the uncanny. (I wonder if Salle felt like he was painting onto images he had dreamt?)



Fig 4. An image generated by DALL-E of seven engineers gathered around a whiteboard, 2024.



Fig 5. David Salle, Background of *New Pastoral #10* (detail), 2024.
Oil on canvas, TK x TK in. (TK x TK cm).



Fig 6. Detail of the image generated by DALL-E (fig. 4).



Fig 7 Francis Bacon, *Self-Portrait (detail)*, 1969.
Oil on canvas, 14 x 12 in. (35.5 x 30.5 cm).

Highly contemporary, but involved with very old concerns. An art historian might situate SALL-E and its work in the long history of experiments in—and anxieties about—automation in the arts, relating it to Henri-Louis Jacquet-Droz’s “Draughtsman,” for instance, or to Henri Maillardet’s cute and creepy automaton at the Franklin Institute in Philadelphia (fig. 8-9); or one might swerve into the history of the player piano, where music and early computing meet, where expression is mechanized. Or one might relate whatever prompts generate SALL-E images to John Baldessari-like lists of ideas, or instructions like those of Sol Lewitt and Yoko Ono, or the “programming” of many other conceptual artists, although here the concepts rematerialize as the literal ground of a painting. Another essay might explore SALL-E’s relation to the history of the artist’s assistant, whether in contemporary studios, the Factory, or the Renaissance workshop, where style was also exported and replicated, raising abiding questions about originality, authorship, and attribution.

But for all the profound philosophical and technological questions raised by SALL-E, I’m struck by the fact that these backgrounds make visible a dynamic that is always there when one confronts a blank canvas (or a blank page). The blank canvas isn’t really ever blank; it’s full of the painter’s history, preoccupations, previous work. Deleuze:

It is a mistake to think that the painter works on a white surface...The painter has many things in his head, or around him, in his studio. Now everything he has in his head or around him is already in the canvas, more or less virtually, more or less actually, before he begins his work. They are all present in the canvas as so many images, actual or virtual, so that the painter does not have to cover a blank surface but rather would have to empty it out, clear it, clean it.²

As though some magic wash has revealed the presence of invisible ink, the SALL-E backgrounds are a peculiar, powerful way to make manifest what’s “already in the canvas”—the already seen, the already painted, the considerable number of things in Salle’s head. And so, for all of the questions about machine

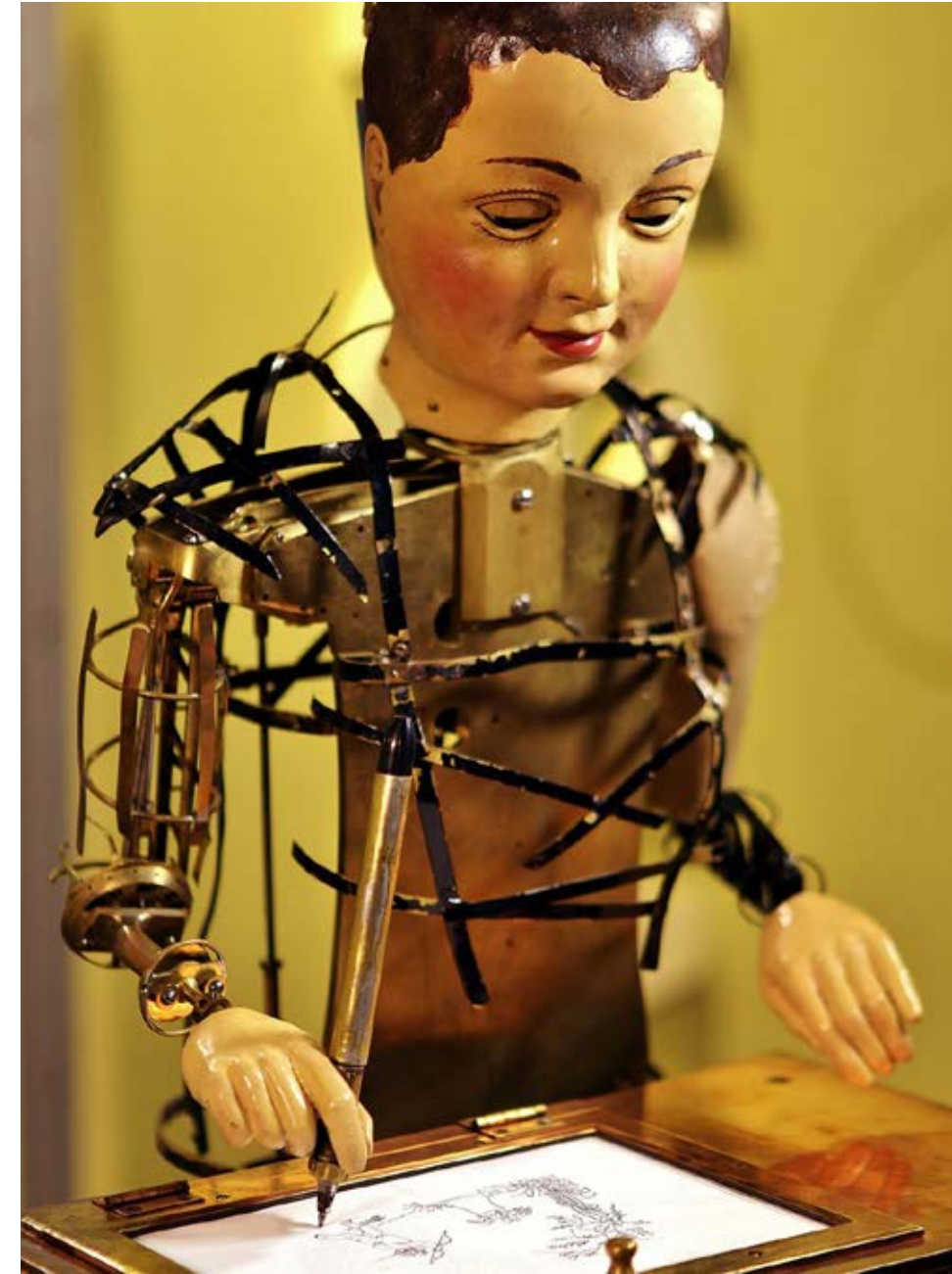


Fig. 8. Henri Maillardet, Draughtsman-Writer Automaton, c. 1805.



Fig. 9. Drawing of Cupid by an automaton believed to have been made by Henri Maillardet, April 29, 1835.

learning and art making raised by SALL-E, these backgrounds, as materializations of a kind of painterly unconscious, also raise a set of very human questions: how does one relate to one's personal history, one's style, one's prior output, and how might one develop a later style that acknowledges the weight of the already painted while remaining alert to new compositional possibilities?

II. THIS LIVING HAND

I described the printed backgrounds as a little flat—they are flat, that is, until Salle's actual painting articulates the space. Then everything comes alive. Salle doesn't empty, clear, or clean; he activates, animates. To stay with *New Pastoral #10* (fig. 10): the two painted hands (helped by the right knee of the new legs to the left) incorporate the detached yellow AI arm into a diamond shape that both advances toward the viewer (especially that large right hand at the bottom, with its gathering gesture) and intensifies the distance that it frames. You can see those two hands as belonging to the man kissing the woman in the upper right corner so that the detached yellow AI arm basically describes the shape of his shoulder; when I look at it that way the distance suddenly flattens into the kisser's implied body before receding again.

The different angles of rotation of the painted figures give a complex dimensionality and dynamism to the AI generated environment. This is true of each painting in the series. Look at how, for instance, in *New Pastoral #12* (fig. 12), the blonde woman in the foreground forms a three dimensional diamond with the abstract SALL-E figure/sculpture at which she is looking, the male torso, and the woman holding the fabric; the experience is of a potential 360 degree clockwise rotation, that you could move the figures through each of the diamond's vertices.

Crucially, this sense of dynamism and motion and rotation also happens *across* the series of paintings, especially as certain figures recur, with small variations, such as the right hand in *New Pastoral #10* that also appears, with shifting orientations, in *New Pastoral Yellow Shorts* and several other paintings. The profound



Fig. 10, David Salle, *New Pastoral 10*, 2024. Oil, acrylic, flashe and charcoal on archival UV print on linen. 54 x 74 inches (137.2 x 188 cm).



Fig. 11. David Salle, *New Pastoral 12*, 2024. Oil, acrylic, flashe and charcoal on archival UV print on linen, 60 x 92 inches (152.4 x 233.7 cm).

and invigorating effect is of painted figures moving in a circular dance from one canvas to another, making the space real as they go, making the backgrounds into a single, shared world. Each individual painting involves a deft internal orchestration of painted and given components, but each discrete painting then becomes a component in the larger syntax of the series; the energy intensifies as the architecture scales.

But back to *New Pastoral #10*: On the left side of the canvas where SALL-E placed a blobby but hieratic figure facing right, we now have the distinct orientations of a woman's torso and another woman's legs (which make contact with, and dissolve into, the impossible legs of the AI figure seated in the lower right). The skirt, a little reminiscent of a stained glass window, is see-through in places; the hair of the kissing figures in the upper right is only outlined; the green grass is visible through the large hand (although you can also see the green as atop it) swimming toward us, and so on—the way we both look at and through Salle's figures at once heightens and makes changeable our sense of foreground and background, makes that relation open, dancelike. And that relation, I've tried to indicate, isn't just a relation of figures in space; it's now also a relation between automaton and human, automation and expression, pixel and paint, Salle's past and present.

Salle's painted figures seem to be dreaming or haunted by the SALL-E figures with whom they interact, whom they obscure or assimilate. That frightening AI face is behind the ear of the man kissing the woman, a demon or demonic thought or premonition of death, and the man's left arm is not only embracing the woman, but—perhaps unbeknownst to him—also the twisted torso of the distorted yellow man. Or maybe the AI woman in the lower right is dreaming up the conventionally attractive kissers in an attempt to deny the digital revenant looming over her? You can make your own story, both within any particular painting and across the series; I'm simply gesturing toward how the spatial relations and layering now also accrue narrative possibilities, how the uncanniness I've been describing begins to show up as theme.

Salle's painted figures (or fragments of figures) are found—that is, they are based on images from magazines and other sources. Many of them repeat.⁴ This has always been true in various ways of his paintings,

but this species of foundness—painting a woman from a fashion photo, a kissing couple from an advertisement—has a different resonance against the AI backdrop. Salle’s found figures are his data set, part of the corpus of images on which his sensibility has been trained (in addition to the history of painting), and they are there somewhere in SALL-E’s dataset, too, since the latter has been feeding on the paintings of the former. Of course every painter—every person—has been “trained” on images, but Salle’s art is particularly dedicated to testing out formal relations among found (but repainted) imagery, so there is a kind of rhyme (or off-rhyme) between SALL-E and Salle’s methods. This adds to the sense that each one might be dreaming up the other.

But Salle’s found images are reproduced in real paint by a living hand, a lively wrist. I began with what unsettled me about the *New Pastorals* because the way they *come* to life, the way the printed backgrounds are vitalized by Salle’s painting, is what makes looking at them so exhilarating. I’ve focused on one background, one finished painting, but everywhere in the *New Pastorals* I feel the difference between Salle’s actual painted forms—the record of real time embodied decisions in the act of composition—and the synthetic digital images produced by SALL-E’s diffusion models which do not contain or communicate the little microhistory of an actual painterly gesture. Perhaps this is why Salle has painted so many hands onto the SALL-E backgrounds (figs. 12-13)?

When I’m confronted with the latest only recently inconceivable triumph of AI in the domains of literature and art, I frequently have a feeling of depressive wonder. Yes, it is amazing, for instance, how ChatGPT can instantly generate a plausible seminar paper about *anything*, or DALL-E can “paint” you Picasso-ish portraits of Elon Musk, or your cat, or a Musk-cat, but it often feels like we’re on the verge of the singularity of mediocrity. In the arts, AI often produces deadening miracles, but Salle’s dance with SALL-E is on the side of life. Painterly canniness—in the old sense of knowledge and opportune timing—defeats uncanniness. Life emerges from the lifelike.



Fig. 12. David Salle, *New Pastoral with Red Tights (detail)*, 2024.

Oil, acrylic, flashe and charcoal on archival UV print on linen. 72 x 98 inches (182.9 x 248.9 cm).



Fig. 13. David Salle, *New Pastoral, Enchanted Forest (detail)*, 2024.

Oil, acrylic, flashe and charcoal on archival UV print on linen. 72 x 108 inches (182.9 x 274.3 cm)

III.

A MEADOW HIDDEN BY THE TREES

In what sense are these pastorals? The phrase “New Pastoral” makes me hear the past in pastoral; the conjunction of the new and old is built into the title of these paintings. The scholar Elisa Tamarkin reminds us that “relevance”—a word that etymologically means “to raise or lift up again”—is always a relation of the new and old; the relevant artwork is the one that allows us to attend in fresh ways to something that was already there, lifting it out of the background.

The uncanny is also fundamentally a new-old relation, an oscillation between them. For Freud, the uncanny was produced by the persistence of the past in the present, whether on the individual level, as a reencounter with a previous psychic state (the primary narcissism of the child), or on the level of civilization, as a reencounter with the remnants of a premodern worldview (animism).

At the same time, the uncanny is often produced by simulation, is catalyzed by our inability to tell a double from its original or—Freud quotes E. Jentsch—“whether a particular figure...is a human being or an automaton.” It is “the feeling,” Freud says, “that automatic, mechanical processes are at work, concealed beneath the ordinary appearance of animation.”³ Jentsch was thinking about wax figures, dolls, automata. Masahiro Mori (whose name I recently heard a lecturer confuse with Memento Mori) famously suggested that there is an “uncanny valley”—that place where attraction to a realistic robot turns into revulsion when it becomes too lifelike. Of course we don’t confront an embodied double with SALL-E, but the encounter with an attempted doubling of an expressed sensibility, a style, by a machine, stirs these old anxieties in new ways.

The uncanny and the pastoral, these paintings make me feel, are not so distant from each other. For one thing, we can think of the green world of the pastoral as a kind of idealized civilizational childhood. Moreover, the pastoral scene is often something we weren’t quite supposed to see. In Wordsworth’s “Michael: A

Pastoral Poem,” the pastoral scene is a “hidden valley”: “The mountains have all opened out themselves, / And made a hidden valley of their own.” In his review of the history of how the meaning of “heimlich” passed in to “unheimlich,” Freud quotes Schiller’s *Wilhelm Tell* as capturing the sense that the uncanny is something concealed that is then exposed to view: “To the left by the lake / lies a meadow hidden by the trees.” Where are Salle’s/SALL-E’s *New Pastorals* set? To me the AI backgrounds all seem to be in one mysterious valley, sometimes hidden by trees, where the mountains have opened out. And I feel I’m seeing something—earlier I mentioned that sense of stumbling on a magic ritual—not quite meant for me, which involves both eeriness and pleasure.

William Empson famously said, in *Some Versions of Pastoral*, that a pastoral was “about the people but not by or for” them. Empson was talking, of course, about class—he was linking so-called “proletarian literature” to the idealizing tendencies of the pastoral tradition.⁴ Salle’s *New Pastorals* give Empson’s quip an entirely new and literal sense: these pastoral settings are not made by The People; they’re not even made by a person, but by a computer network: neural, learned.

The modern pastoral is often an ecological fantasy, a longing for a lost world ruined by enclosure and industry. It hardly needs saying that our actual lakes are poisoned, that the snowpack depicted on those blue mountains is disappearing; it’s not just that these pastoral settings are generated by a futuristic non-person, but that much of our natural world might be “preserved” primarily as digital simulation. (Many people are hoping machine learning can somehow save us from climate change, while others point out the emissions costs of advanced computing; “One query to ChatGPT uses approximately as much electricity as could light one lightbulb for about 20 minutes.”). I’m not suggesting that Salle’s paintings are some kind of statement about any of this (I don’t go to paintings for statements); instead, I’m trying to indicate some of the ways they are both new and pastoral, that is, how these artworks interact with their title and conceptual frame.

The founder of the ancient Greek pastoral was Theocritus. The “unifying trope” of his Idylls “is the pastoral singer’s self-identification with an imagined predecessor: a would-be herdsman-singer proves his mastery by merging with his own archetype in performance or fails conspicuously in his attempt to do so.”⁵ These *New Pastorals* involve the interplay of a singer/painter and a very different kind of archetype, but Salle’s “failure” to merely merge with SALL-E is key to the paintings’ tremendous success. And while there is ultimately more of a collaboration than a contest between Salle and SALL-E, I’m still put in mind of “amoebaen singing,” the bucolic competition where singers take turn improvising songs, the display of skill judged in part for how each new improvised response builds off the previous verse. In the *New Pastorals*, we have kind of “amoebaen painting”: Salle paints back to and beyond a version of himself.

But then, having generated such a label, having attempted to indicate the conceptual richness of these new paintings, I want to kick it all away. Part of the genius of these canvases is how lightly they wear their concepts, how all the subtle oscillations between old and new add to the vibrancy of the paintings as opposed to muting or reducing them to props in a program. The call and response between over-painting and under-layer in the *New Pastorals* could launch a thousand dissertations, but Salle’s animating touch can’t be captured by argument or description (or even high quality reproductions). It still has to be experienced—in real time, real space, away from the blue light of the screen, by humans.

Footnotes:

1. *Tiepolo Pink*, Knopf, 2011.

2. *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*. University of Minnesota Press, 2005.

3. *The Uncanny*. Penguin, 2003.

4. *New Directions*, 1974.

5. *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetics*. Princeton, 2012.

New Pastoral 10, 2024

Oil, acrylic, flashe and charcoal on archival UV print on linen
54 x 74 inches (137.2 x 188 cm)



New Pastoral 12, 2024

Oil, acrylic, flashe and charcoal on archival UV print on linen
60 x 92 inches (152.4 x 233.7 cm)



New Pastoral, Ballerinas, 2024

Oil, acrylic, flashe and charcoal on archival UV print on linen
84 x 126 inches (213.4 x 320 cm)





New Pastoral 11, 2024

Oil, acrylic, flashe and charcoal on archival UV print on linen
78 x 120 inches (198.1 x 304.8 cm)



New Pastoral, Purple Shawl, 2024

Oil, acrylic, flashe and charcoal on archival UV print on linen

54 x 74 inches (137.2 x 188 cm)





New Pastoral 21, 2024

Oil, acrylic, flashe and charcoal on archival UV print on linen
72 x 108 inches (182.9 x 274.3 cm)



New Pastoral, the Acrobat, 2024
Oil, acrylic, flashe and charcoal on archival UV print on linen
54 x 74 inches (137.2 x 188 cm)





New Pastoral, Enchanted Forest, 2024

Oil, acrylic, flashe and charcoal on archival UV print on linen

72 x 108 inches (182.9 x 274.3 cm)



New Pastoral with Shroud, 2024
Oil, acrylic, flashe and charcoal on archival UV print on linen
72 x 108 inches (182.9 x 274.3 cm)





New Pastoral with Red Tights, 2024
Oil, acrylic, flashe and charcoal on archival UV print on linen
72 x 98 inches (182.9 x 248.9 cm)



New Pastoral with Ladder, 2024

Oil, acrylic, flashe and charcoal on archival UV print on linen
60 x 92 inches (152.4 x 233.7 cm)





New Pastoral, Double Breasted, 2024
Oil, acrylic, flashe and charcoal on archival UV print on linen
60 x 92 inches (152.4 x 233.7 cm)



New Pastoral Yellow Shorts, 2024

Oil, acrylic, flashe and charcoal on archival UV print on linen
78 x 120 inches (198.1 x 304.8 cm)





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of the exhibition

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