

Make Like a Tree

Notes on *David Salle: Tree of Life*

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THE TREE OF LIFE IS YOUNGER THAN TREES, but old as metaphor. It flourishes in orchards of human imagination. It is guarded, in Genesis, by at least one cherub with a flaming sword. On Assyrian palace reliefs, it's flanked by eagle-headed genies. In the Quran, it stands for, among other things, certain modes of thought, and grows to biomorphic splendor in centuries of architecture and textiles. For the pagan Vikings, its boughs can bend to form a kind of dome world. (The Minnesota Vikings also boast a dome.) Is the Tree of Life the palm at the end of the mind? Are fire-fangled feathers ruffled by the question? And what about the Bodhi tree?

Once, at a picnic bench beneath the linden trees at the Bohemian Beer Hall in Astoria, Queens, my friend lit a then-illegal marijuana cigarette. A very large bouncer appeared and asked, with palpable rage in his voice, "Are you smoking tree in my garden?"

In most traditions, the Tree of Life is not the Tree of Knowledge, though both bear fruit. Legend says, or should say, that if you eat the fruit of both trees at once, and swallow the

seeds, the Tree of Art will sprout in your belly. You will burst forth with marvels of creation, but you also risk choking on the foliage, unless you employ the proper shears, otherwise known as your sensibility. David Salle has the sharpest, most exquisite shears.

A marijuana cigarette, when I was a kid, was called a joint, unless you were a real burner, and called it a bone. Maybe famed *New Yorker* artist Peter Arno, whose figures have been conjured by Salle's tree (if a tree grows in a garden and nobody lingers under it...), called them Jazz cigarettes. I'd like to think so. But he probably wouldn't puff one during one of his well-publicized dates with a debutante. Too many journalists and photographers about. "Joint" has many meanings. Toward the end of Arno's heyday, a journalist I know once had his writing complimented by a fellow "scribe" thusly: "Kid, your stuff sticks out like a sailor's joint on a Saturday night." While Peter Arno might not have talked thusly, at least in the editorial offices of the *New Yorker*, he would have known what the scribe meant. It's all there in the men he drew, their baggy trousers, repositories of dark and light.

The Tree of Life lives by its roots, which live in darkness. "Root" has several denotations as well. It's what anchors and nourishes the tree. One can also root around for meaning, as I do here. Root can be a sexual act, or some of the equipment involved in such proceedings. A poet puts multiple meanings into motion, as does the painter. "Get with child mandrake root," John Donne suggested. He meant a root known to grow under gallows. Gallows are trees of death.

But let us now move into the light, David Salle's extraordinary color and light. The Tree of Life is ever changing. It can be blue or green or red or lavender or yellow. Or a barky brown. Or a frostbite black. Or pink-shimmer gray. A spring tree. An autumn tree. The Tree of Life abides by the seasons. Its leaves are green, purple, pink, yellow, orange, or gone.

Wherefore the worm? With those silly, knowing eyes, cartoonish but from an alternate cartoon universe, the worm seems key to this kingdom. Is the worm our narrator, our judge, a "stage manager" from a Thornton Wilder play? With those bright segmented bulges, those hairs, is the worm the sum of our happy-go-lucky, or lately-gone-wilting, prurience?

And what about the people, these lovers and lechers and gossips and voyeurs beamed down from Planet Arno? They are sometimes black-and-white, but they also appear in joyful pinks and brooding purples and whiskey-sad ambers. Most are folks from another age. To us they could be the parents or grandparents of the mum and dad who fuck you up in Larkin's famous poem, the "fools in old-style hats and coats." The men cavort, canoodle, berate, beseech, wallow, and menace beneath the Tree of Life. Some of the women are equal participants in the romp, others are aloof, peeved or effecting an escape. One is in a dead run away from some gent with a nasty grin. She's like Daphne fleeing Cupid-cursed Apollo. Daphne's father, the river god, "saved" her by turning her into a tree.

The tree, the worm, the people, the panels. These are the *what*, but it's never just—or even mostly—the what. It's the *how*. "It don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing," said a musical genius from the New York of the good/bad old days. A painting beats out a rhythm for the eye. But you feel the pulse in your *kishkes*. A visual pathway for desire's complex electrics. Childlike wonder is for children. Art is play for grownups. Heartsmash and gallows humor infuse the soft shoe and glitter. History, art history, biology, and mythology, these roots writhe, form a mesmerizing tangle of seeing and feeling and knowing beneath the bright happy tree.

Master of the tangle David Salle has confessed that his Tree of Life paintings violate a cardinal rule of design: "Never put

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something in the middle of a painting, because it makes the space go dead.” This is reminiscent of something the cellist Yo-Yo Ma once remarked: “The dead space keeps you honest.” Maybe Salle puts his trees in the geographical center of his pictures (nearly the Kansas – his childhood state – of his canvasses) to keep himself honest. The dead space in Salle’s paintings is also part of the gag, and the gag is a lesson which, if heeded, yields powerful delight. The lesson is this: Don’t fret the what, the swirl of signs, of metaphor, history, mythology, of Mesopotamia or ancient Greece or La Conga Nightclub, New York City, 1939. The swirl is not there for ideological decipherment, or for marching orders. It’s to acknowledge, and discover quiet ecstasy within, the swirl itself, its glamor and humor and charge. In this way, we remain in life. We do not petrify.

The Tree of Life bisects the panels, fed by the underworld and springing up out of it, out of the humus and the neuronik murk of consciousness, into the world of light and leaves (notice how they get heartshaped near the faces of lovers and would-be lovers?). The Above-World belongs to the starkly contoured people and their absurdly stock wants. Don’t think they aren’t us, but please don’t make a story about it. These aren’t stories. They are paintings. To stay in the painting, to give the great David Salle his due, is to refuse narrative, its hierarchies, its sub-basements and B plots. The levels, or panels, are a trick, anyway. The paintings, and the world as we know it, are a single surface in the end. One crust we all inhabit. Ask our old friends Adam and Eve. After they nosed from that other tree on the advice of a snake (or maybe a worm?), they didn’t climb down from some sky garden. They walked straight out of Eden, whistled for a taxi. Adam in his pin-stripe suit. Eve in her strapless cocktail dress. To start a new life. Plant their own trees.