

## An Art Star's Comeback? Those Aren't His Words

By DEBORAH SOLOMON

**S**AGAPONACK, N.Y.  
DOES everyone have to make a comeback? Can't any artist, entertainer or disgraced politician just age gently into oblivion?

Probably not. This is America, land of the 2nd, 3rd and 400th act.

Take the once-celebrated, later-reviled art stars of the 1980's. Julian Schnabel is now what the media likes to call "back," not as a painter but as a film director, whose baroque, priapic ambitions have finally found a constructive outlet. Eric Fischl, in the meantime, has correctly come to be regarded as a serious realist in the American lonely-guy tradition of Edward Hopper. That leaves David Salle, the third in this oil-on-canvas trinity. A show of five of his latest pictures opens at the Mary Boone Gallery in Chelsea on Saturday, and it represents a kind of homecoming, if one can call a sleek Manhattan gallery "home." Mr. Salle is switching back to Boone after being represented by the jumbo-size Gagosian Gallery for most of the 90's. The move, which he says was prompted by a desire to be "with my old friends," leaves no doubt that not only Mr. Salle but even Ms. Boone, the quintessential 80's art dealer, is getting a second look.

Who is David Salle? His pictures hint at a plot, mainly because there are shapely women in them as well as recognizable objects like flowers, bowls of pears and cartoon ducks. But over the years he has politely declined to answer a crucial question: What do his pictures mean?

Just try asking him. "Being interviewed is kind of artificial," Mr. Salle told me in a recent interview. "Normally you're not interviewed in life. You're just living life."



Maxine Hicks for The New York Times

David Salle with a new painting, "Sestina," in his studio in Sagaponack, N.Y., where he has been preparing for a "homecoming" show at Mary Boone in Chelsea.

### David Salle

Mary Boone, 541 West 24th Street.  
Saturday through March 1.

[Arts & Leisure](#) (Jan. 5, 2003)



Mary Boone Gallery, New York

David Salle's "Byron's Reference to Wellington" (1987), painted at the height of his early fame.

Instead of answering questions, he deconstructs them. Asked if he thought of himself as unusually detached, he said in a calm, deliberate voice: "How would I know if I were detached? Isn't that a relative term? I don't feel detached. I feel engaged."

Mr. Salle is right up there with Jasper Johns as one of contemporary art's all-time great question dodgers. Although he was initially viewed as a cynical provocateur, that characterization is no longer useful or even accurate. With the gift of hindsight, he seems more like an art Sphinx. His pictures feed at least partly off Mr. Johns's use of pop images, and their work is similarly confounding, a box of puzzle pieces that you keep trying to put together only to realize that six pieces are missing on the floor of your hall closet.

True, Mr. Salle appeared less complicated amid the clamor of the 80's. He first exhibited at the Boone Gallery in '81, in the hyperactive, Reagan-baked days when tax cuts made the rich richer and eager to invest in the rising art market. As if on cue, Mr. Salle and his fellow Neo-Expressionists appeared out of nowhere to revive a supposedly dying art form (painting) as well as the tradition of the artist as strutting brat.

But with the collapse of the art market in the early 90's after a decade of financial euphoria, art stars became fallen stars. The backlash against them was as extreme and unanalyzed as their exaltation had been. The prices for their work took a dive, and they became a symbol of everything unsavory about the 80's: the hype, the fickle collectors, the cocaine, the notion of art as a blue-chip investment — in other words, everything short of Nancy Reagan's astrologer and the Iran-Contra affair.

Mr. Salle, in turn, seemed to lose his momentum in the 90's. He made a movie called "Search and Destroy," which received mixed reviews for the same reason his paintings did. (People complained they didn't know what the movie was about.) Once a socially intimidating presence who had appeared around town with Karole Armitage, the vanguard dancer and choreographer, he now moved out of his loft in TriBeCa and left Manhattan altogether. He built a farmhouse in Sagaponack, where he continues to live year-round in semiseclusion, if one can call a stylish, cedar-sided house in the Hamptons secluded.

"It's very easy to confuse the art world with art, and they are not the same thing," Mr. Salle said, claiming indifference to the shifts in his reputation. "The art world is what people talk about at cocktail parties, and the art is what people do in their studios."

It was an unseasonably warm December afternoon, and we were sitting in his barn-cum-studio. Now 50 and unmarried, the artist is lean and wiry, with a high forehead and an intense gaze. He has a big dog, Winnie, who was named for a character in Samuel Beckett's "Happy Days," a comedy about an ever-smiling optimist trapped in a mound of sand.

A Salle painting is easy to recognize. His work depends on a basic strategy of modern art: the juxtaposition of irrational images, a technique invented in the 1920's by Magritte and the other Surrealists. But Mr. Salle isn't interested in the surreal. He's after the real. His pictures track the rushed, scattered, depleted feeling of contemporary life, the way your mind can shift in all of four seconds from something lofty (a Giacometti sculpture) to something titillating (a woman undressing). You can say he captures the process of thought, the fleeting images you see in that space behind your eyes, where everything seems either urgent, or pointless, or probably both.

Over the years, his pictures have shed some of their ambiguity, their grayed-over tones and layered look. They've become more direct, and so has their creator. Back in 1985, he said of his paintings: "There's no narrative. There really is none."

But now, he is willing to concede: "I think my work is totally accessible."

Yesss! Now we're moving! I asked him to explain a picture hanging in his studio, "Sestina" (2002), which will be in his show. It is contrived from three panels and as many female figures: a Japanese woman in a red turtleneck, a reclining nude who resembles a carved wooden sculpture and a third woman seen from the back, her white dress fluttering in a breeze. Plus there are flowers, two black-eyed Susans, and a bunch of tulips propelled from a green bowl as if by centrifugal force.  
The meaning?

"Ask me later," Mr. Salle said. "Ask me in an hour."

Just try.

"I don't think you can put it into one sentence," he said.

Could he put it in two, then?

"When I was a kid," he said, "I had a record of Woody Allen as a stand-up comic. At the end of the record, he said: 'Thank you very much. This has all been a subtle plea for water conservation.' "

Not fair. Comedians can get away with punch lines. Painters can't.

Long pause. Finally, he spilled the beans.

"The painting," he said, "is an exhortation to be happy."

He continued, "One of the reasons that still-life painting is inherently compelling is because from the beginning it was a representation of the fleeting nature of existence. The objects in the painting are all that is left behind. But this painting" — he nodded toward the picture we had been looking at — "is only nominally a still life. It's a dismantled still life."

You wonder how the three women in the picture are connected.

Are they separate beings lost in reverie, each unaware of the presence of the others? Perhaps the reclining nude is dreaming them all up, as if recalling scenes from her past. She appears to be thinking back to a perfect moment, probably a summer one, the kind suggested by the flying flowers or the woman leaping into a hot pink sky. "The connection between the women is syntactical," Mr. Salle said, a bit cryptically. "It operates on the deepest level of pictorial syntax."

The women in the painting mark a departure from his earlier women, who were often shown from the back, legs splayed. The women in "Sestina," by contrast, do not exist for the benefit of the so-called male gaze. They have interior lives; they exist for themselves. They're descended, however indirectly, from Vermeer's serene maids and housewives, who are often shown alone in rooms and appear to relish their solitude.

I asked Mr. Salle what had prompted this move away from Hustleresque images and toward more complicated and pensive women.

He smiled in silence, and said only: "We're all more grown up now."

Are the women stands-in for himself? "I feel identification with everything I paint," he replied bluntly.

In all fairness, it should be noted that other artists are not routinely asked to explain the meaning of their pictures, even artists whose work has no clear narrative meaning. No one asks what a Frank Stella or a Clyfford Still or a Robert Ryman means. And no one expects a storyline to coalesce from the looping skeins in a Jackson Pollock drip painting. As everyone knows, modern art has been anathema to literary themes like love, death and men in top hats communing with untamed nature.

Nonetheless, with Mr. Salle the question of meaning remains legitimate. You can't paint pictures of people, particularly erotically charged people, and pretend they are just about form, an exercise in pure pictorial composition. On the other hand, his new work, or at least the painting I saw in his studio, is relatively up front about its meaning. He had called it a dismantled still life, a term that is useful, in part because it reminds you that this artist who was once labeled an enfant terrible, as well as just an infant, is in fact a painter in the grand tradition, one who possesses substantial talents as a colorist (note the contrasts between dark and sugary tones in his new work) and a way with the brush that seems increasingly unfussy and fresh.

Can David Salle come back? You can criticize the question as a media construct, and it is. But it is also a genuine expression of our desire to find new meaning in the work of older artists. With Mr. Salle, that meaning lies, somewhat paradoxically, in his willingness to make meaning itself accessible.

By the time our meeting ended, it was dark outside. "I've been thinking about this idea that I am elusive or hidden," he said as I prepared to go. "But what could be more visible than painting? You can't spend your life painting and remain hidden. My work is an open book."

As we headed toward the door, he paused in his foyer, by a long table stacked with dozens of books, and suggested I take some reading along — a collection of stories by Mark Strand, or some poetry by Anne Carson, "a very beautiful writer," he said. I declined the offer, but noted the gesture. It was an exhortation to be happy.