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Art in Review



David Salle

'Some Pictures From the 80s'

Mary Boone Gallery
541 West 24th Street
Chelsea

Through June 26

Twenty-five years on, David Salle's paintings of the 1980s haven't gotten any nicer. They still unsettle, still resist assimilation. The 10 here, made from 1980 to 1985, show a young artist coming into his own: a precarious balance of dystopian and decorative.

A form of large-scale, extra-physical collage, these paintings are oxymoronic — formalist/realist — and they barely hold together, like memory, or maybe life. Their mixtures of motifs, colors, textiles, images and occasionally objects or words imply that anything is fair game. Their shifting techniques of grisaille, monochrome outline and traditional brushwork keep the basic pictorial arts of photography, drawing and painting in play. In "Gericault's Arm," a brightly colored ceramic jar set into an expanse of velvety grisaille is an alluring beacon; then we see that the grisaille depicts a scantily dressed woman raising her arms as if holding a dance pose — twice. Formal elegance plays against erotic elegance; the simple life of objects contrasts with the less simple, human kind.

In Mr. Salle's paintings things are kept as far apart from one another, in terms of meaning, emotion, style or actual space, as the canvas will bear. The spaces between things signal the absence of barriers between, say, art and design or proper and improper behavior, and they acknowledge the mind as an uncontrollable free agent that makes its connections.

Despite the gaps, however, there are many links: punning forms, rhyming colors, odd cultural or pictorial echoes. In "Molecular Paper," contrasts between blue and brown or orange play out in shifting ratios across three very different panels, culminating at the right: one of Max Beckmann's great, muscular, forward-tilting views of Frankfurt on the River Main is outlined in brown on a slightly silky blue and green plaid fabric that implies wateriness and evokes a teenager's bedroom.

Sometimes a kind of symbolic justice emerges: In the largely pastel "B.A.M.V.F.," the only sour note is a snarling, beer-swilling cartoon duck (Donald, old and bitter) on the left, depicted in garish blues and oranges; these colors reappear on the right, as a constricted little vortex. It's the duck shriveled up, like the Wicked Witch in "The Wizard of Oz."

The especially strong two-panel "Miner" centers on a grisaille image — perhaps from a Works

Above, the two-panel "Miner" by David Salle centers on a grisaille image of a brooding man.

Progress Administration photograph — that shows a brooding man who may be a jailed worker. Above him, two white stools of 1950s vintage jut aggressively forward from the canvas, their circular tops violently splintered. They resemble broken lamps, and indeed might be saying, Careful, or I'll punch your lights out. The second panel, on a finely striped fabric in oranges and blues, is more of a tangle. Here, over three largish inkblots, are sketchy indications in orange of the Egyptian-style columns of Frank Lloyd Wright's Johnson Wax Building and the blue-green outline of a woman with her head covered — possibly one of Delacroix's Algerians. Worlds collide: new, old and older still. Everything is laid out transparently, as if we and the images can all think for ourselves. This is Mr. Salle's optimism. **ROBERTA SMITH**