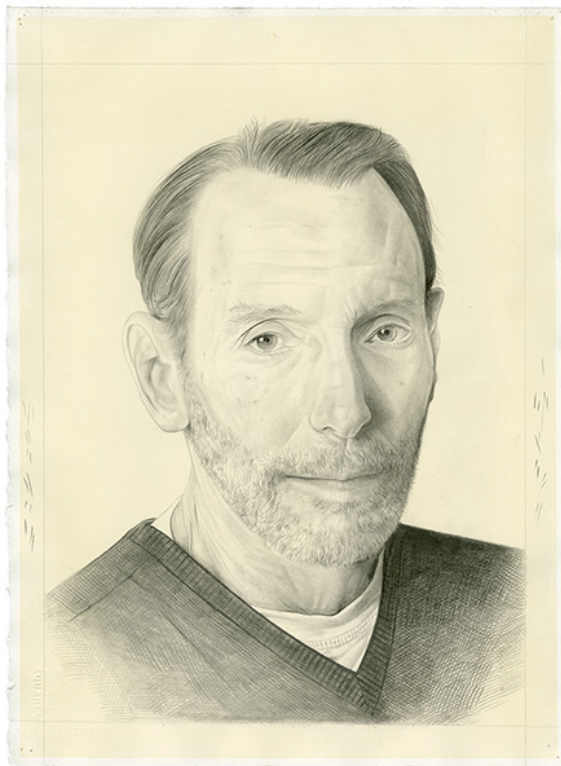


# DAVID SALLE

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 by Hunter Braithwaite

<http://www.brooklynrail.org/2015/05/art/david-salle-with-hunter-braithwaite>



Portrait of the artist. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui. From a photo by Zack Garlitos.

I met David Salle in the crowded lobby of the Jولة Hotel on Main Street in downtown Dallas. He was in town for the opening of *Debris*, a large show of his paintings and ceramics on view through August 23, 2015, at the Dallas Contemporary. *David Salle: New Paintings*, is on view at Skarstedt Chelsea from April 30 – June 27, 2015. This conversation took place upstairs in a quiet suite. There, for over an hour, he spoke with humor and fine acuity about a painter's influences, the continuum of aging, and discovering Frank O'Hara on a rotating rack in Wichita, Kansas.

**Hunter Braithwaite (Rail):** Janet Malcolm wrote that “David Salle has given so many interviews, has been the subject of so many articles, has become so widely inscribed as an emblematic figure of the '80s art world that it is no longer possible to do a portrait of him simply from life. The heavy shadow of prior encounters with journalists and critics falls over each fresh encounter. Every writer has come too late, no writer escapes the sense of Bloomian belatedness that the figure of Salle evokes.” That was in 1994, 21 years ago. It makes my job quite difficult. What did you think of that piece when it came out?

**David Salle:** Janet and I became close friends in the course of doing the piece. Just hearing you read that sentence—she's such a great writer.

When it first came out I was well satisfied with it. In a strange way, it wasn't personal. I read it a few years later and it had become personal. The character in the piece—that is to say me, or a version of me—was someone I barely recognized. Then, years later, I read it again and the character had somewhat regained his sense of humor, but still wasn't someone I could imagine being. I don't know what all that means. I never didn't admire it as a piece of writing. I seem to have been in a kind of bad mood for much of it. Well, it was a more ideologically fraught time.

**Rail:** How so?

**Salle:** It's kind of a long story that starts in the '70s, if not much earlier. In certain quarters, this thing called modernism was identified with the Left. It became something that couldn't be questioned. So from

the outset, postmodernism was seen as betraying the struggle, as if such a thing even existed apart from college campuses. This has not gone away, though the alliances have shifted somewhat because the new enemy is so much worse than the old one. Of course all of this is silly, but I'm not making it up. The emotions were real. That's one piece of it; there are others but it would take too long.

**Rail:** How about this Bloomian belatedness, this anxiety of influence? Your paintings were and are so aware of the canon, of what came before, but they don't seem that anxious. They seem to me, looking at 2015, quite the opposite. How did you feel about that as a young painter? How do you feel about it now?

**Salle:** I've always thought about art like a river system, to use a kind of hokey analogy. A great, wide river with all sorts of tributaries, that we are all part of. I don't have much anxiety about influence or having arrived too late. Some doors close; others open up. I've always been more interested in, and felt buoyed up by, a sense of continuity. Another image I have in my head is that of a filmstrip, something that you can run backwards and forwards, and see how one thing grabs onto the tail of another.

**Rail:** Do you ever consider your paintings in similar terms, not necessarily aspiring to a cinematic narrative, but having some visual continuity from frame to frame, and with that, the passage of time, a transit, a beginning that moves towards an end?

**Salle:** I do think about the passage of time in my work, how to represent it, as well as what the work is moving towards or away from. I hadn't thought of it, but your idea would make a nice little time lapse something or other.

**Rail:** Could we talk about your signature style, if there is such a thing?

**Salle:** For years, the drive had been to lay claim to a tightly defined signature style; I started to feel that was too much like having an armored personality; I just didn't want to go around being so *defended* all the time.

There's always a tension between things that are immediately recognizable, and things that kind of shift around. So much of modern art has tended to favor the singular vision, the *one*—the white rectangle on a white ground; the stainless steel box; that reductivist, specialized, and highly focused kind of experience. As much as I admire that kind of art, and might have liked to work in a more single-minded way, and make something recognizable from 200 feet, I just didn't have it in me. Having to do one kind of work at the exclusion of everything else is alien to my nature. My approach has been more multifaceted. I'm on the side of spontaneity and contrapuntal thinking. Also, I get bored easily. That's somewhat at odds with the way a signature style is developed.

**Rail:** In your paintings, that tension between what is immediately recognizable and that which is not exists both on the level of identifying the individual elements and grappling with the connections between them.

**Salle:** When I was younger, I was interested in obscurity—almost for its own sake—partly as a way of slowing things down. I don't think that's the case anymore. One does change, over time. Things that might have bothered me 35 years ago, interpretive, narrative things wouldn't faze me now.

**Rail:** These issues of influence and signature style differ greatly when talking about young painters, or those who have been doing it for a while. How have the more recent paintings been influenced by your earlier work?

**Salle:** After a certain time you're influenced by yourself, by your own work.

**Rail:** Is there a moment when that happens?

**Salle:** Depending on the length of the career, it probably happens more than once. It has to do with one's starting point. It's not exactly news that much art, maybe even most art, is referential in some way. The more you look into it, the more you realize that even someone like Watteau was a reshuffle of existing stuff. Old master paintings that seem so complete and envisioned, are actually a composite, an assemblage of different elements taken from here and there repositioned and whatnot. At a certain level, that's just how art's made.

**Rail:** That reshuffle could be called appropriation. What does that term mean to you?

**Salle:** There are quite distinct ideas about what appropriation is and what it means. One kind is more ideological, or psychological, in which appropriation is an act of resistance: "I won't do this, you can't make me do that." The copy as a way of denying the original, the patriarchal authority and all that.

Another kind is more about liking things or resurrecting things. Within that approach, there is the idea, which I believe, that even when you repaint something, even making a more or less faithful copy, it's a new thing that layers a personal valance on top of the underlying material.

**Rail:** You studied at CalArts with John Baldessari, who has joked that in a hundred years he's going to be remembered as the guy who put dots on faces. How will you be remembered?

**Salle:** No idea. On some level it must be human nature. You can't expect people to hold to some higher, more complex integration. We all do it—reduce things to a sign. There's too much information in the world not to. But maybe the categories can be adjusted a little bit.

I met a woman at a party just the other night who said her first introduction to art was seeing a show by Fred Sandback. The place where we were talking was so noisy I couldn't hear a thing. I said, "Who?" and she assumed I didn't know who she meant, when in fact I just hadn't heard. She said, "Oh, you know, the Minimal yarn guy." [*Laughs.*] So, what categories do we have to work with? Someone's a Minimalist, a Neo-Expressionist, an Appropriationist, a Conceptualist, a Neo-Conceptualist, a Multi-Culturalist, etc. What would happen if we were to throw all those things out for a time—maybe a five or ten-year hiatus from using those words so that we would have to invent other categories? We need categories to get our bearings, I'd just like some different ones. What would be some of these new categories? Maybe something on the order of, "he's an artist who had too much motherlove."

**Rail:** Who would that be?

**Salle:** Oh, no. You have to guess. In other words the conversation would be more characterological, like the way you describe people—which it is anyway. You know, the way people talk about couples, trying to figure out what the dynamic of a relationship is. A big part of life is describing others. One can do it with more or less insight.

There's a wonderful essay by Milan Kundera about why he doesn't want to be called an Eastern European writer. Everyone knows Milan Kundera is a Czech writer, the inheritor of Kafka, of Prague, etc., and Kundera says, "No, I have no interest in Kafka, he has no influence on my style. I have no interest in Eastern European writing." He feels that his antecedents are 19th-century French writers like Balzac and Stendhal, and also Edgar Allen Poe. He sees himself as an inheritor of that strand of realism. What I'm trying to get at is the "non-marketing" description, some other kernel of identity embedded in the work—its DNA.

**Rail:** It's interesting to compare how an audience talks about writers and artists. Who is Norman Mailer? Is he defined by whatever strand goes through his work, or is he defined by the penknife that he stuck in his wife?

**Salle:** Literary style is more traceable, in terms of other stylistic intersections. It's perhaps more hidden in visual arts, but I still think the analogy holds.

**Rail:** What are you reading these days?

**Salle:** Funny you mentioned Mailer. I spent a good part of the winter rereading certain things of his. I read the *Selected Letters*, which came out recently, which lead me back to the work itself; I just reread *Armies of the Night* and *An American Dream*, a book that made a big impact on me at 14.

**Rail:** As a young painter, was there anything that you read that was especially influential?

**Salle:** Probably many things. Early on, along with everyone else, I wanted to find a visual equivalent to the world of Borges. And Beckett of course. Then when I moved to New York, I sublet Jennifer Bartlett's loft, and on her shelves I discovered the novels of John Hawkes, *The Blood Oranges*; *The Lime Twig*; *Travesty*; they gave me a taste for a kind of hot-house, homegrown symbolism. The black bra used in one of my paintings comes from an image in *The Blood Oranges*. I later got to know John. We traveled to Colorado together—what a crazy trip that was.

I was very involved for a time with Peter Handke, especially his book of aphorisms, *The Weight of the World*. I carried that book around with me everywhere one summer. Two writers who influenced my thinking, my *style*, enormously were George W.S. Trow and Harold Brodkey, both of whom I knew well, and loved. But to go back to the beginning, also at 14, I discovered Frank O'Hara. That changed my life.

**Rail:** What changed your life?

**Salle:** That sense of freedom and everydayness. The sensory world that Frank provides access to in the poems was the one I wanted to inhabit. I wanted to live in a Frank O'Hara poem, and I did what I could to get close to that. It is really O'Hara's New York that I carry around in my head, and, to the little extent that I can, live in.

**Rail:** You were reading this in Kansas?

**Salle:** Yes. Thank God for Larry Ferlinghetti and the City Lights Bookstore. He had put out those little pocket editions of the principal Beat poets; my local bookstore had them on a little revolving rack. I got them all, including *Lunch Poems*.

**Rail:** What about Burroughs?

**Salle:** I'm not a Burroughs-ite in the way some people in my generation are, though I certainly get the originality of his vision. I've never appreciated Burroughs more than hearing him read himself—that *voice*.

**Rail:** I heard that you are working on a memoir.

**Salle:** Yes. I started by writing about times in New York that were meaningful to me because I didn't want to forget them. I wanted to make sense, in not just a personal way, of the '80s, and found myself writing about two people who had a big impact on me at the time, George Trow and Harold Brodkey, who I've already mentioned. They're both gone now, and unfortunately fading from memory. So I really just wanted to write about them in order to hang on to them. That's what kicked it off.

**Rail:** When did you start writing this?

**Salle:** About a year ago.

**Rail:** How will you structure the book? Will there be a narrative arc?

**Salle:** So far it's episodic. There will be a chapter about my first teacher, the woman I studied with when I was a kid. The one thing about this memoir—about life in general—is that at a certain point you can reach backwards *through* the people you knew to a much earlier time. You also reach forward through the younger people you know to a point far into the future. I'm not expressing it very well, but you're always at the midpoint of a rather long continuum.

As an example of what I mean, when I was 9 years old I met a couple, a husband and wife who were both painters. They ran an independent art school in Wichita, Kansas, the town where I grew up. When I met the Dickersons, Betty was probably in her late 50s and Bill was a little bit older, maybe 61 or 62. They were, in 1960, at the midpoint of a painting tradition that stretched back to the '20s, if not much earlier. Bill, who was part of the Taos School, had known Edward Hopper, had associated with artists of that generation. And Hopper was a living link to 19th-century French painting, having studied in Paris with teachers who had known Manet. So there in the Midwest, in the early '60s, you had this laying on of hands that reached back nearly a hundred years. And now I have a stepdaughter who is 10—about the same age I was at the beginning of the story. One always contains the links to quite a long span of history, if you want to think about it that way.

The Dickersons were my first mentors. Much of what I know about painting I learned from them when I was a little kid—like color theory and dynamic symmetry and what not. Anyway, they are long gone, and that's the reason to write the book, to make explicit that sense of linkage. Of course there will be a chapter about the storied first years of CalArts, which, though less so, are also fading from memory.

**Rail:** One almost has an obligation to write these things down.

**Salle:** The early stuff is my experience, but I'm not so much interested in myself. It may sound as though I am, but that's not really the point. I'm interested in that moment in mid-20th-century America when regional culture had a meaning distinct from provincial culture. There was an authenticity, an identity that could be considered constructive. A short time later, people became self-conscious, and regional culture was rejected in favor of provincialism, which is to say, it became something that looked only to the capital. To use the example of this private art school, which had been based on the 19th-century model, and from which much of what I know about painting was learned, this school was rejected in favor of the university art department—based on a totally different model. And it ruined everything. [Laughs.] So that's what I wanted to write about.

**Rail:** You write about art for *Town & Country*. A few years back, you wrote that “the idea for this column is to write about shows I like in the language that artists use to talk about art among themselves.” Could you tell me more about this language?

**Salle:** Oh, an artist would probably not say, “what a great Minimal painting.” They might say “that painting doesn't collapse,” or “it doesn't fold.” Or, “I'm tired of the feeling of hot air coming out from behind your painting,” something I actually overheard once. Or, “That painting would look good in a synagogue.” That's the type of thing an artist would say.

**Rail:** What does collapse mean, in that sense?

**Salle:** Just what it says—that it doesn't cave in from the pressure of whatever context it's in. That it holds its own.

**Rail:** How does this differ from the bulk of writing about painting?

**Salle:** Probably most people who write about painting have never made one. Is that odd? I guess not. Few film critics have ever made a commercial film. Of course you don't have to be a practitioner to write well

about something. However, there are certain things that might escape your notice. Or more to the point, not being a practitioner may lead one to over-value certain aspects—to *over-notice*—while under-valuing others.

**Rail:** What is it that artists notice?

**Salle:** Artists are basically looking for things they can use. Is there anything to admire? Or, is there anything I have to worry about?

I just came from the Gutai exhibition [*Between Action and the Unknown: The Art of Kazuo Shiraga and Sadamasa Motonaga*, at the Dallas Museum of Art]. Some of these painting made in the '60s look really great. That sense of present-tense, fully arrived energy is so palpable. It's impressive enough to make a painter slightly nervous. And you know when it's not there: "that painting doesn't have any inner life." But someone who's not a painter may not approach it that way; they might be more interested in the sociology, the backstory, or the market, or something else altogether.

**Rail:** The laundry hamper of categorizations.

**Salle:** That's all fine, but there are plenty of people on that beat already.

**Rail:** Can we talk about your show at Dallas Contemporary? The title, *Debris*, is quiet literal.

**Salle:** I like the sound of it, lovely word. Some of the imagery in the paintings is derived from photographs of junk that washed up on the beach after a big storm—debris. I had another idea that it was a nice kind of reverse claim about the work. I was reminded of something that Alex Katz said about an artist who will remain nameless. (This is one way artists talk about other artists.) He said, "After his show comes down, they can just hose it all out into the street." So I had that image in mind. I'm being a little flippant, but there is a certain, I don't know what, in showing these ceramics—I have no idea if they are good or bad. Who knows?

**Rail:** You are being flippant. They grow from the paintings, are almost sculptural annexes of the paintings, but, on their own, are autonomous pieces. How long have you worked with ceramics?

**Salle:** Well, yes, you're right. I have been making ceramic objects to embed in the paintings on and off for years. I like your description of them—sculptural annexes. I couldn't find anything ready-made that was grotesque enough, so I made them. After a while I started to take them more seriously. They took on a life of their own in the past year or two. It's like they crawled out of the water onto the land.

**Rail:** They do have this washed up quality to them. I couldn't help consider debris in terms of today's image saturation. As someone who has sourced images from disparate places before, what do you think of today's image culture?

**Salle:** The main quality of image culture is its relentlessness. My experience of my own work is somewhat different. Of course we all grow up awash in images, more or less meaningless, transitory. No doubt that's in my head, just like everyone else, but I'm interested in trying to make something where the images matter, not as bits of random stuff, but as form. Recently someone was telling me what a young artist said about their work, noting that the same thing has been said about mine, that they like to have the TV on, and the radio, and they're playing a video game, and so on—saturation and overload being the point. I said, "stop right there." In the first place I don't watch TV, and I never play video games; I'm a noise-phobe and I can't do two things at once. I mean, I'm not a Luddite, I have all the modern devices, but so far they haven't changed the nature of the stuff that matters, at least to me. The images I use in my work are specific; they're not random. They're not from all over the place; they're from certain places.

**Rail:** Can you elaborate on this specificity? What are you looking for in a source image? What is the ideal relationship amongst the imagery in your compositions?

**Salle:** It's hard to put into words. Usually the images I use have a kind of constructed quality. How the image is broken down into a system of representation is at least as important as what it's a picture of. That's true for any painting. This might sound tautological, but they are things *which can be painted*. The advertising images I've been using recently have a presentational quality. They say, "Look!" They say, "Telephone for you!" They're unabashed. They simultaneously are the thing, and also hold the thing up to be seen.

I use other types of images—the diaristic, the notational or schematic—to do other things. The images are like a borrowed shell to a crab. I have to be able to set up house inside of it. I have to want to paint it. The *how*—how something is painted—is at least as important as the *what*. Or rather, they are the same thing. The compositional relationship of all these things is the art part. That is *really* hard to put into words, but I'm interested in a kind of ensemble in which all the parts stay separate but also work in complete unison. It's kind of like orchestration in jazz—which instruments play which notes.

**Rail:** The recurring photographs of tangled wire cut through the paintings with a certain mood, almost of tension or distress.

**Salle:** I think they have a lot of surface energy. They're my version of the kind of pictorial rhythm you might find in abstract painting of the '50s.

**Rail:** And you have a show at Skarstedt opening in May.

**Salle:** The show at Skarstedt is another body of work altogether, actually two different groups of pictures that I want to juxtapose. One's almost the inverse of the other. Highly composed, intensely chromatic paintings, and black and white, single images. Very different on the surface—but I think they're going to do something interesting together.