

03 ***DAVID SALLE IN CONVERSATION
WITH BILL POWERS***

BP Richard Prince says that he's interested in how painting and photography can be reconciled without defaulting into collage. Does that idea resonate with you?

DS *Richard's right - that's one of the big challenges - and he solves it very well. Photography so easily gets the upper hand. Tip Dunham once said to me, "Oh, you're the guy who let photography in." But I'm interested in another thing: simultaneity. And disjunction, and dissonance - all the modernist impulses. I want the differences to show, but to somehow be resolved anyway. It's symphonic. I like to think of myself as a kind of orchestrator.*

BP Maybe it's because with the medium of collage we imagine the images being forced together? Or is it a coincidentia oppositorum?

DS *You know the term from literature, the free indirect style? It's usually attributed to Flaubert; the author freely enters a character's consciousness - and then another's, and then pulls back to describe the intricacies of the social customs, or even further back to sketch the political landscape before returning to the street where we might follow a housemaid on her errands, and know her thoughts as she opens the door of the butcher shop, and so on. We accept this type of authorial omniscience in literature, but it's rare to find it in painting.*

BP Your new paintings often provide multiple orientations. The artist Michael Williams will employ a similar approach where images come at you upside down or at an angle. In his case, he likens it to watching television while laying sideways on the couch, meaning, you can register what you're seeing, but your brain processes the information in a different way.

DS *Must we use the TV analogy?*

BP Okay, so skip the television reference, but film is a major influence on you, right? I heard "The Ghost Paintings" were inspired partially by a Bridget Bardot movie.

DS *Oh, I hadn't thought of that for years. There is the opening scene of Godard's Contempt, which sort of arbitrarily changes colored filters on a shot of Bardot and Michel Piccoli in bed. At its core, film language, its syntax is editing - the joining together of things in sequence. I once asked Claude Berri to tell me what was the essence of filmmaking. He answered by making a gesture of locking his hands together, fingers cupped, gripping the cupped fingers of the opposite hand, and then switching hands - over and over. It took me a while to get it - he was miming the joining together of one shot to the next. That's the whole thing. I think about that all the time.*

BP There's one painting where it appears two tropical drinks are in the middle of a toast.

DS *It's not a bad thing for a painting to have an implied sound: clink. Or this painting, Odes and Aires, includes the first a few bars from the overture to Romeo and Juliet. You could sing it.*

BP I believe it was Balzac who said that in painting colors perform the role of instruments. Are there famous examples of paintings that created sound in your mind's ear?

DS *It's funny - most of the paintings of musicians I can think of don't seem to make a sound. Like the Manet painting of the Spanish singer with his mouth open - it's weirdly silent. My paintings are pretty noisy by comparison.*

BP The loose stacking of crackers in a few paintings here are suggestive of a staircase.

DS *I did in fact have in mind a stairway to heaven. You get an A.*

BP The milk pouring upside down echoes Rosenquist to me. Or maybe that's a stretch.

DS *I was thinking of Vermeer - milk from a pitcher. Anyway, it's more about gravity than milk. Most of these pictures have a pouring or gushing, or cascading kind of energy.*



BP Do you consider the repeating of the cracker imagery to be a form of serialization?

DS *Not really. Can't a guy be interested in something more than once?*

BP One painting has the text Faster Healing partially obscured.

DS *I believe it's from an ad. I made the original collage for this painting twenty years ago. The only elements that survived are the words "faster healing" and the woman in a beige dress.*

BP Speaking of the woman's dress, some of the fashion in these paintings feel early 1960s to me. Is that intentional?

DS *A lot of the source material, if that's even the right word, is from the 60s. I went back to illustrated magazines from that period. The kinds of presentational decisions in that type of depiction still interest me. I'm not exactly sure why. But there's a whole world-view tied up in it.*

BP Did you ever consider that painting milk without cookies or crackers without cheese somehow suggests a missing component?

DS *Well something's always absent from painting, isn't there? Isn't that part of its power?*

BP Are the "Silver Paintings" simply named for their color?

DS *Yes, the feeling of classical silver plate photography, that grayscale. These pictures relate to your first question about Richard - about painting and photography. It's the challenge of holding both things in your head at the same time. I'm trying to make them indivisible.*

BP In the "Silver Paintings," it feels to me the painting aspect has been absorbed into the realm of photography whereas with the composite paintings the photographic moments are interwoven.

DS *That's a pretty serviceable way to characterize the difference.*

BP Do you always use black and white film when you're shooting pictures?

DS *Yes. When I began making figurative painting early on, I didn't want to think about local color, you know, skin tones and what not. I only wanted the dynamism of the pose, and the value pattern. I'm really not a photographer. Or maybe I should say that my interest in photography is limited; I turned to photography initially because it breaks the subject down into lights and darks.*

BP I interviewed John Currin recently who said he was thinking about Picabia's work and your work while making his new paintings. Do you feel a spirit connection there?

DS *You mean to John or Picabia, or both? I'm a tremendous admirer of John's work. Our work has very little surface similarity, and our techniques are completely different, but there's another level on which we are quite simpatico, as least I think so. John is able to get inappropriate, that is to say, out of sync, material into the painting, sometimes to the point where the image breaks down completely. I especially like John's paintings where the background and foreground are from different worlds, and he makes no attempt to merge them together. It's a kind of theatricality, something invented.*

BP And when John mentions you and Francis Picabia in the same breathe?

DS *The great revelation was seeing Picabia's paintings from the 1930s and 40s, which had really never really been seen before the early 80s. They were considered to be pure kitsch, beyond contemptable. I remember looking at them, thinking how rare it is to have no clue about how you're supposed to interpret the work. Picabia really cut the audience adrift. There was no editorializing in those paintings - they are no act of good citizenship. And those juxtapositions! Two nudes with a bulldog - why? For the sheer fun of it I suppose.*

BP Mark Grotjahn told me that sometimes if he's struggling with a painting, he'll add a little white to it.

DS *I'm going to remember that.*

BP There's a crude drawing of a woman in your Ballentines painting that doesn't strike me as being commensurate to your talents. Is that meant to be a primitive nod?

DS *Oh, you think it's crude; I think it has marvelous energy. That's an interesting development. A few years ago, I had a student at NYU - her name is Sofi Brazzeal - who was treated rather shabbily by the school. I started to mentor her a little bit after she graduated, and she's blossomed into what I believe is a major talent. That section of the Ballentines painting is after one of her drawings. You're right though, it's a totally different vocabulary from mine.*

BP As an artist who believes in formalism, do you think people are confused by what that term actually means?

DS *I don't know if it's formalism exactly - I believe in understanding how a painting works, what it actually does. How can you separate that from what it looks like? Maybe you bring up a larger misconception about what painting is generally. It's like in literary criticism, there's no author, only texts. In art we sometimes have the reverse problem: all that matters is intentionality. Down that road lies the cult of the artist. To which I would say, forget the author, just look at the work.*

BP Would you also consider yourself a romantic?

DS *Historically the romantic movement is a celebration of the individual as opposed to the group. It's the individual achievement that matters, how one acts within or against a certain context. I know people who don't believe in all that; it's not for everyone.*

BP What about the language in these new paintings? The words appear to be cut off or truncated.

DS *Letters can be pure design elements. This is hardly news.*

BP How does a viewer tell the difference between painting and illustration?

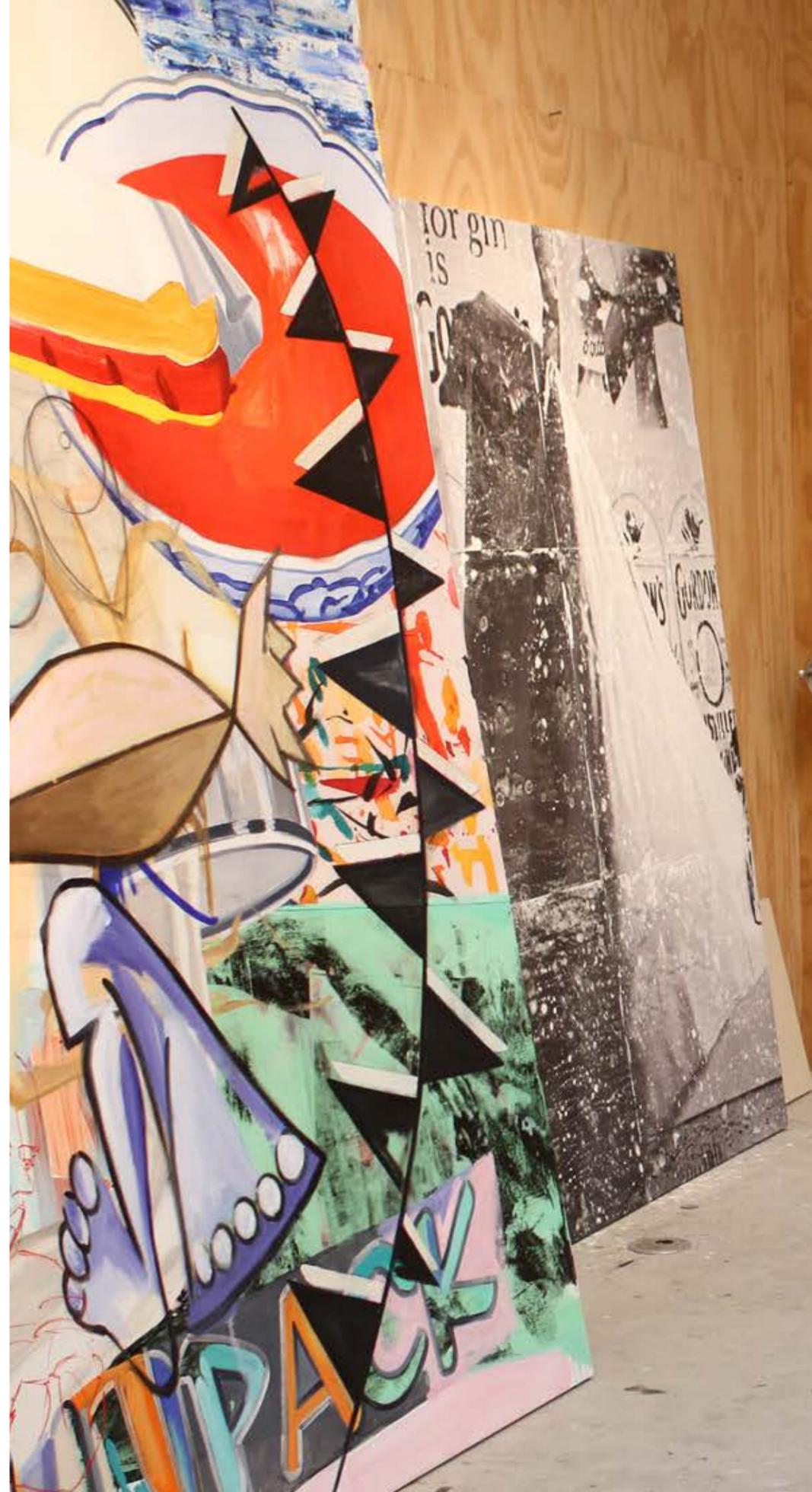
DS *Illustration is painting with a forgone conclusion. Think of Norman Rockwell.*

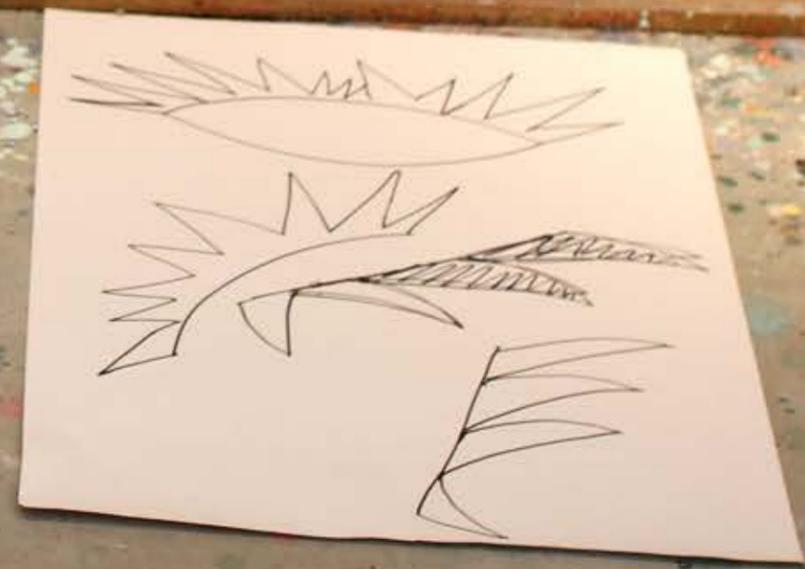
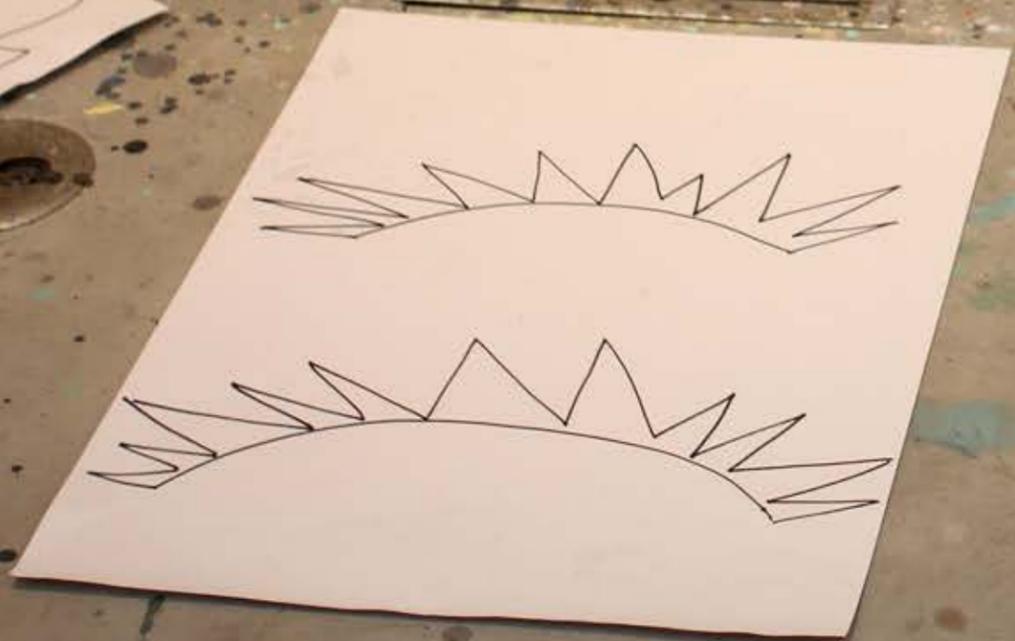
BP Odes and Aires has another smaller painting stuck to the surface of the canvas. Why is it important for you to break the single plane? I know I've seen other works where you've attached ceramics to the front of a painting.

DS *It's interesting sometimes to make a discontinuous surface - to interrupt the painting in a different way. For decades, I've been cutting windows in the paintings and inserting other paintings into them; people say, why not just paint on top of what's there? It's just not the same thing as an actual a break in continuity. I like the fragility of it.*

BP What role does voyeurism have in your work?

DS *Somebody once asked Philip Johnson what he thought about the (so called) erotic element in my work and he offered up one of his pearls: That slight tumescence you feel is part of looking. God, I miss Philip.*







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