

Reading David Salle

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DAVID SALLE RECENTLY ACQUIRED AN ADDITIONAL IDENTITY. Bypassing the usual larval stages, he emerged fully formed as a major art critic. His debut collection of essays, *How to See*, was published to acclaim in 2016, and he writes regularly for *The New York Review of Books*. He can fairly be called the most eloquent and formidable artist-critic to be writing in America since the sculptor Donald Judd reviewed exhibitions in the 1960s.

So as I sit down, on a summer morning, to think about Salle's powerful new show at the Skarstedt Gallery – it brings together thirteen major paintings that were made between 1985 to 1995 – I am visited by a feeling of expendability. I suspect that Salle could write an essay about his new show better than I could. His language would be more precise, his tone more authoritative, and he no doubt has an inexhaustible supply of wise, appealingly gnomic David Salle comments with which to pepper his text.

I do, admittedly, have certain advantages over him. For one, I have a presumably objective distance from my subject, a welcome remove from which to view his art. But then again, that might be irrelevant, because Salle, too, maintains a distance from himself. Indeed, the most commonly mentioned characteristic of his work is its arctic detachment, the braininess and ostensible impartiality with which he ponders different styles of art and design, and different realms of experience.

Salle emerged on the art scene in the early 1980s, along with Julian Schnabel and Eric Fischl, under the rubric of Neo-Expressionism. All the same, he is not an Expressionist, whether neo or paleo. He has not demonstrated great interest in splashing around oil paint, except in knowing appropriation of expressionist gestures (drips included). Rather, he is the Master of Division. He invented a conceptually ingenious style of painting that crossed Pop art with the cinematic split screen. His innovation helped rescue contemporary art from the worn-out orthodoxies of Minimalism and Conceptualism and thereby rehabilitate the grand tradition of figure painting. The revival is still going strong.

Although Salle's work is universally recognized, it remains surprisingly misunderstood. A standard critical cliché holds that his paintings take as their main subject the mix-and-match, collaged feeling of contemporary life. Supposedly, they are emblematic of browser culture, with its chaotic and meaningless flow of mass images. But such broad sociological readings are not helpful. If you

wanted to contemplate our current state of image overload, you could spend an hour in front a TV with a remote control – you wouldn't need Salle at all. As the artist himself once noted, “The Web's frenetic sprawl is opposite to the type of focus required to make a painting.”

His work, in my view, is more private and interior than has been acknowledged. It deserves closer analysis in terms of both its literary themes and formal structure. The parts from which his paintings are composed – with their visual rhymes and reversals, their startling shifts of scale and focus – are no more random nor interchangeable than the phrases in a poem by John Ashbery.

What are Salle's paintings about? For starters, they acquaint us with an artist who (judging from his imagery) is an undisguised aesthete. His subject matter refers openly and warmly to music, ballet and modern dance, not to mention art history and vintage design. One theme that has remained consistent in his work is theater and the pleasure of watching performances. And perhaps, on some level, he sees his own art as an inner theater of experience, a place where a painter performs, offering little miracles of form – creation whose meaning cannot be translated into words. Although Harold Rosenberg adopted the concept of performance as the basis of his treatise on Action Painting, he was writing about a generation of artists whose gestures were tethered to the existential present. Salle, by contrast, is in touch with the high and low forms of the past, and his gestures reverberate with historical consciousness.

Pictorially, Salle's work is rooted in the basic strategy of Surrealism – i.e., the illogical juxtaposition of objects. His most Magritte-like painting is probably *Melancholy* (1983), a stirringly lovely, cloud-like work that includes an actual object – a black umbrella – affixed to the canvas. Perhaps it's a reference to that famous line from the 19TH-century French poet Comte de Lautreamont, a hero of the Surrealists who defined beauty as a random encounter between a sewing machine and an umbrella on an operating table.

Yet, unlike the Surrealists, Salle is not trying to conjure a dream world, or excavate shards of meaning from somewhere down there in the rubble of the subconscious mind. Rather, he locates meaning in the exertions of the high-IQ conscious mind.

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Many of the paintings in the current show at Skarstedt have never been exhibited in this country, and I was not prepared for their formal richness and enticing psychological complexity. Salle made them when he was in his thirties and early forties, neither young nor old. I have come to think them, in the interest of nomenclatural convenience, as the post-Whitney paintings.

For the most part, they followed in the wake of Salle's influential and much-mooted “mid-career” retrospective, which arrived in New York, at the Whitney Museum of American Art, in January of 1987. Salle, at he time, was 34 years old, and his youth seemed to irritate critics as much as anything about him, as if he were somehow personally responsible for everything infantile in American culture.

The two earliest paintings in the current show (*Woodsmoke* and *Fooling with Your Hair*, both from 1985) predate the Whitney retrospective and hark back to Salle's enfant-terrible days. *Fooling with Your Hair*, especially, a large, horizontal painting with the scale and bluntness of a mural by Diego Rivera, brings you Salle at his most transgressive. The painting is divided into garishly opposed halves. The top half, with its orderly sequence of designer lamps and Giacometti sculptures lined up like so many trophy-statues, is alluringly bright and modish. The bottom half, by contrast, painted in noir-ish grisaille, presents three frames of a half-dressed woman lying on a metal table. She is angled so that her face is distant from us and difficult to read, while her spread legs could not be any closer or more legible. All in all, the painting seems to say that wanton desires run rampant beneath the gleaming surface of art.

Salle was often accused of objectifying women in his early paintings. The question was raised of whether some of his imagery was pornographic. But eventually, the kinky scenes faded from his work, as if Salle had outgrown them. Perhaps when he was starting out, he was drawn to sexually explicit subjects as a way to focus attention on his work and revel in his new sense of personal and expressive freedom. Call it the Portnoy effect, in honor of the late Philip Roth, another brilliant violator of boundaries.

Today, amid the rising chorus of #metoo demands for sexual equality, it might be pointed out that the female performers who have remained a central presence in Salle's work have evolved, over time, into strong and even noble figures – not props, but adults with visibly interesting minds. Another devel-

opment is that figures and forms that were isolated on neutral grounds in the early work eventually became more integrated into an environment or even a landscape. Three decades have passed since the Whitney show, and it is time for a major American museum to organize a new retrospective that tracks the deepening themes of Salle's work and acknowledges his influence on younger artists, for whom he has made so much possible.

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The centerpiece of the current show, *Mingus in Mexico* (1990), is a grandly scaled, majestic painting that measures 8 feet tall and 10 feet wide. From a distance, it almost looks abstract, a mélange of densely-packed, overlapping forms that emit a soft yellow and gray glow. It can put you in mind of an all-over type painting, perhaps a late de Kooning landscape. Trying to identify the individual images strewn across its surface requires proactive looking, like trying to locate a shirt in a laundry pile. But the painting is given both pictorial and thematic focus by the presence of a woman who appears on the right side, pensively drinking a glass of water. She occupies a separate panel inserted into the canvas, a compositional device that Salle has used to great narrative effect since 1985. (The idea of the inset was invented by Jasper Johns, whose *Gray Rectangles*, of 1957, contains three small, grayed-over canvases inserted into the surface of a five-foot-square painting. Salle, by contrast, favors figurative imagery and insets that clash with the surfaces into which they're embedded, a style of disruption that has been widely imitated.)

The image of the water-drinking woman is based on one of Salle's own photographs of a model, and the ruffles near her neck suggest she is wearing a Tyrolean costume. He has always done this, culled his motifs from both published images and photographs that he takes himself, a reminder that his manner of creation owes as much to the compulsions of private invention as to borrowings from a publicly-held image bank.

Officially, *Mingus in Mexico* is part of Salle's so-called Tapestry series, which helps explain the Greco-Roman imagery. Based on a Renaissance tapestry, it abounds with partially occluded views of men and women who are draped in togas and consorting with each other in a public plaza. A horse – or rather the

watchful, never-blinking eye of a horse, a voyeuristic eye – gazes out from the center of the painting.

The painting also includes Salle's usual over-layer of drawing, the scoring and scratching over his own imagery. A salmon-colored word bubble lays on the surface as blankly as a patch of Silly Putty. Seven pieces of rustic furniture (rocking chairs, benches, a side table) rendered in sketchy blue outline ring the perimeter of the painting. Officially, the chairs are examples of "Willow" furniture, which was manufactured before World War II in Indiana prisons, among other places. Salle later recalled seeing the chairs in his boyhood, on the porch of his uncle's house in Oklahoma. He found them intriguing, perhaps because they resonated with some part of him that was already an artist-outlaw.

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One day, I showed a reproduction of *Mingus in Mexico* to my friend Daphne Merkin, the writer and novelist, and asked her what she thought the chairs meant. "The chairs suggest the invisible listener," she replied. "They're there for you – to come and sit down." Interesting, it seemed, that she used the word "listener" instead of "viewer" to describe the painting's potential audience, since paintings do not normally make noise. But then the title of *Mingus in Mexico* refers to a musician, and it should be noted that Salle's paintings are often structured in musical fashion, with repetition and variation between parts and "the creation of imagistic chords," as he mentioned in an email to me.

In a recent article in *Interview Magazine*, Salle explained the painting's title. In 1990, he related, he rented a studio in Los Angeles for a few months. By coincidence, the previous occupant had been Joni Mitchell, the beloved songwriter. She is also an amateur painter, and many of us still remember sitting in our teenage bedrooms, listening to her album, *Clouds* (1969) and admiring the earnest self-portrait that graced the cover. The blond bangs. The face in freckled-close up, framed against a vast yellow, coral-streaked sky.

When Salle moved into the vacated studio, he noticed some wall labels in the room, a leftover from a show of Mitchell had held on the premises. It sounds quite lonely—he encountered a world from which paintings had vanished and only descriptions of them survived. A world with no art and only

criticism – a nightmare! At any rate, he was struck by one of Mitchell’s titles: “Mingus down in Mexico, A Happy Sad Little Painting.”

So the title of Salle’s *Mingus in Mexico* turns out to be a bit of found poetry. Or rather adjusted found poetry, edited by the artist to become less folksy and floppy, more alliterative and crisp.

And what of the woman with the water glass, a motif that has appeared often, in multiple forms, in Salle’s work? This one is darkly beautiful, with shoulder-length black hair and dark eyebrows. As she raises the glass to her lips, she is actively satisfying her own desires, or at least slaking her thirst. Perhaps she is avidly “drinking in” the world around her. On the other hand, perhaps she is just washing down an aspirin and feels a headache coming on.

The woman re-appears, in a slightly altered pose, in Salle’s *Drink* (1990). It is one of my favorite Salle paintings, perhaps because it is so emotionally cohesive. The woman, again inscribed on a separate panel, dominates the top half of the painting, as a raft of abstract forms (or rather objects magnified to the point of unrecognizability) float around her. Compared to *Mingus in Mexico*, where the woman raises the glass to her lips, this time her head is tipped back more, and her lips are parted. She could be “the lonely painter” (to continue the Joni Mitchell theme) who thinks, “I could drink a case of you, darling, and I would still be on my feet.” All in all, she is an active figure, a centrifugal force who could have dreamed up the landscape around her. She is, in other words, the opposite of the objectified women in Salle’s earlier paintings, those creatures of bovine passivity. They were devoid of agency, or what our high-school English teachers used to call “will.”

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In interviews, Salle tends to sound like a formalist, suggesting that the meaning of his paintings resides mainly in their structure. What’s ultimately important, he says, are not the women and the costumes, the stylish orange lamps or the loaves of yellow bread – a challah, of all things – rocketing through the universe. What matters, he says, is how the shapes and colors relate to each other, and the warmth that the relationships generate. But let’s be clear about this. Salle is not an abstract painter, and the figures and objects in his pictures are not

neutral. They, too, have evolved over time, in ways that amplify the evolution and development of his work in general.

Some of Salle’s subjects and motifs are no doubt rooted in biographical sources. Born in Norman, Oklahoma, on September 28, 1952, the younger of two sons, he moved with his family to Wichita, Kansas, before he turned two. His parents, Tillie and Alvin Salle, were first-generation Americans of Russian-Jewish descent. In Wichita, his father initially worked in a dress shop, as a buyer and window designer. Later, Salle’s mother helped in the store too, as a saleswoman. It hardly needs to be stressed that a sensitive young boy visiting a dress shop in Midwestern America in the sexually repressed and provincial ‘50s might have been stimulated by the chance to observe a female domain, especially one characterized by the constant putting on and taking off of clothing.

All of this seems relevant when I look at a masterpiece like *The Wig Shop* (1987), which I had never seen before the Skarstedt show. Where was it hiding? A large, horizontal, handsomely earth-toned painting, it juxtaposes three separate panels that relate in as many ways to female identity. On the left, we see a glimpse of the daily goings-on in a cramped shop. (The image was borrowed from an early 20TH-century Spanish artist named Jose Gutierrez Solana and has a distinct Iberian flavor, putting you in mind of blue-period Picasso, or the Portuguese painter Paula Rego.) In the center of the shop, a young woman who is perhaps in her early twenties sits in the make-up chair, in front of a mirror, being fitted for a wig. The sharply angled planes of her long face and dark hair lend her a resemblance to Salle. Around her, puppet-like heads enliven the shop and give it a theater-like presence. Three of the heads are wig stands that have been brought to cartoonish life, complete with goofy expressions and crossed eyes.

Compared to the toasty-warm colors that define the lively shop, the right half of the painting is draped in mystery and shadow. Painted in sienna-brown monotone, it shows a violinist in looming close-up. Her arms are radically foreshortened and her hands are huge. She is, in short, an art warrior. Instead of playing the instrument, she holds it like a shield – there’s no bow in sight. Her strapless evening dress looks like a cross between a Spanx corset and a medieval suit of armor. An amusing inset positioned near her crotch – a thrift-shop painting of a basket of vegetables – attests to her fecundity.

One of the most satisfying aspects of the painting is the link between the left and right panels. They are brought together by the violinist's all-powerful gaze. As she turns her head to the left, she appears to be peering into the wig shop or remembering a poignant scene from her past. Perhaps she is recalling a day when she was fixing her hair and readying for a performance, the hours of preparation it took to make her performance look effortless.

"Myself, I must remake," wrote W.B. Yeats, which could be the title of this painting. Although it appears to hark back to Salle's childhood (and memories of the dress shop), it upends the Freudian notion that childhood experiences are the source and measure of all meaning. Instead of trying to unveil a hidden, singular self, the painting implicitly argues on behalf of generating new selves.

In some ways, Salle's work is consistent with a generation of post-modernists who see identity as malleable. His "Wig Shop" can put you in mind of Cindy Sherman's photographic masquerades. Salle, like Sherman, is a connoisseur of costumes. Going through his current show, you become aware, tangentially, of outfits in his paintings that include billowing togas, retro cocktail dresses, a clown costume with oversized buttons, and a ruffled gypsy dress worn with a pair of ballet slippers.

All of the dressing and undressing, masking and unmasking – it reminds us of a contemporary art scene that is focused on the subject of invented identities. Still, Salle's art isn't commenting about culture today. He is not bemoaning, as Sherman does, the loss of an authentic self amid a shuffle of alternative consumerist selves. Rather, he has more in common with earlier ages, especially the 18th century, with its open acknowledgement of the artifice of art. Many of his paintings directly reference the neo-classical infatuation with Greek subject matter, endless drapery, order and clarity. Salle is part of a tradition of artist-masters who do not accept a romantic view of art, understanding that cerebration and intelligence are themselves a form of feeling.