ROUGH IDEA

Painting on Prints

March 25

The following essay is about painters' use of software. It builds on **"Software as Underpainting,"** *published by Eyebeam in September, by considering the use of prints of digitally created and manipulated images in place of a plain canvas.*

Exhibitions of paintings on prints opened this year's fall season at two Chelsea galleries: Pieter Schoolwerth's **"Supporting Actor"** at Petzel (Sept. 4–Oct. 26) and David Salle's **"New Pastorals"** at Gladstone (Sept. 24–Nov. 2). Both artists used their own paintings as inputs to be manipulated by software programs, then printed the outputs and painted on those. Both bodies of work are palimpsests or collages, inverted and maximalist—paintings atop scanned and altered paintings. It has become common for computers to figure in the painter's studio process at some point, as a means of finding reference images, sketching out compositions, or editing images to be projected onto the canvas as a guide for a fabricator's brush. The traces of software aren't always visible in the paintings of the artists who use it, at least not to people who don't use the same tools themselves. But Salle and Schoolwerth's shows made it explicit. Their work emphasizes he digital transformations that took place during their process, while maintaining paint's primacy but putting it on the surface.

Salle rose to prominence in the 1980s with his postmodern collage painting. His best-known works of this era configure images in segments, holding a jumble of disparate compositions in a single frame. He later moved away from paintings-within-paintings, and experimented with layered and overlapping scenes. "New Pastoral" feels like the apogee of

this direction in his work. These paintings combine diverse imagery and compositions, without grid lines or other guides. The eye just follows the rhythms of shifting scale and flows of color.

David Salle: *New Pastoral Yellow Shorts*, 2024

The digital images on the underlying prints are collaged from outputs of an AI model trained on Salle's "Pastoral" paintings from the late 1990s and early 2000s. These were stylized renderings of a popular eighteenth-century genre scene—lovers relaxing in the countryside. In "Pastoral," those figures become line drawings and the landscapes get flattened, reduced to fields of evenly applied acrylics. Non sequiturs interrupt the composition. To make "Pastorals," Salle used both silkscreens and brushes to put paint on canvas. "New Pastorals" involves a mixed media process, too, this time with inkjet. The outputs seen on the printed substrate include stitched-up contours of the cartoonish faces from "Pastoral," patchwork oceans of blue and white foam, rough semblances of forest and sky. Salle didn't ask the AI to spit out pictures indistinguishable from his own. He wanted to show how

it gets things wrong, how it produces textures and gestures that a human never would. This makes a more exciting foil to his new painting, a spontaneous mix of images generated through call-and-response play with the outputs: part of a swimsuit model painted next to a digital ocean, a branch that gives shade to an approximation of a seated woman. There's a dramatic contrast between the smudgy, flattened digital images and the lustrous, voluminous forms made directly by Salle's hand.

These painted figures come from the artist's inborn neutral network: the eyeworms of mid-century art and design that have occupied him for decades. There are lots of partial bodies modeling the smart, angular silhouettes that make me think of the Sunday paper inserts from Sears and Filene's that I paged through as a kid in the 1980s. Plaid skirts are a big motif in "New Pastorals." The interlacing brushstrokes that describe tartan patterns folding over pleats are both a nostalgic image and a display of painterly virtuosity. There's a tart humor to this juxtaposition of twentieth-century imagery with cutting-edge software. Given the kind of outputs he has cultivated from the model, I suspect he's having some fun with AI's limitations. These models can only look backward, regurgitating images and styles that are already known, just as Salle, as a young postmodernist painter, decided he was doomed to do.

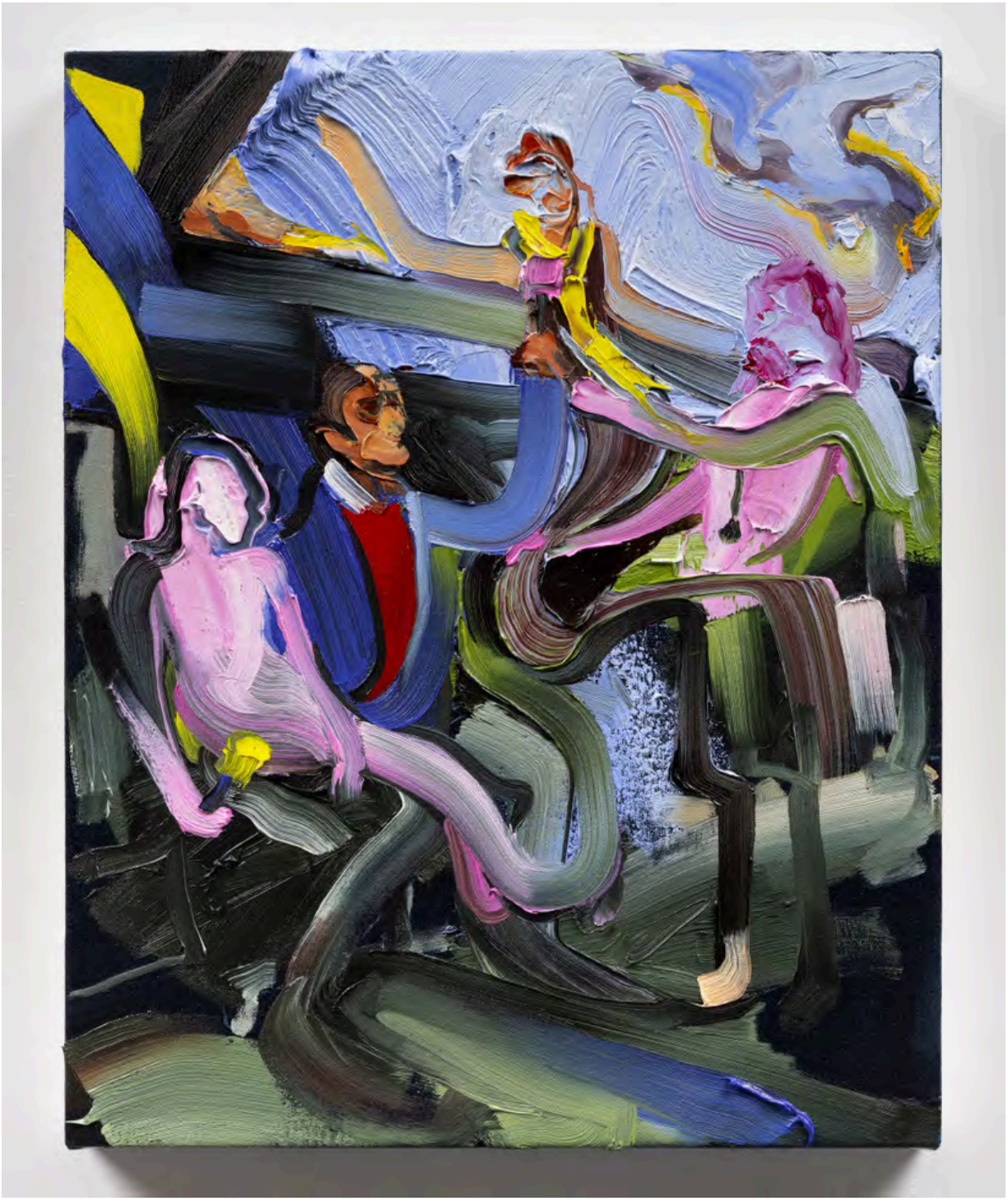
To highlight the juxtapositions, Salle leaves large swaths of the prints exposed. He paints around them. Sometimes he leaves space between completed figures. Elsewhere he paints his figures as outlines only—the sketched-out lines of a bustling cityscape. This lets the viewer measure human vision against the technology that simulates it. AI imagery, especially when made by less sophisticated models, often has fuzzy edges because the model is hedging its bets on where the figure is. It composes an image by probability, and gestures toward other possible locations of any given form. Humans don't think of shapes that way. We're taught to color in the lines. Borders help us navigate the world. We see objects in terms of spatial relations, not probability. The encounter of paint and prints in "New Pastorals" models an encounter of another kind. If the genre of the

pastoral was created in ancient Greece by poets reflecting on the differences between urban and rural life, Salle's new pastorals are about the exchanges between human and artificial intelligence.

For all the behind-the-scenes engineering, "New Pastorals" looked more or less like a standard painting show: a suite of gorgeous, lustrous large-scale works. "Supporting Actor" was much weirder. Schoolwerth translated his conceits into the exhibition's form. The show is based on a narrative—relayed in a CGI video projected in a darkened gallery—about a man who passes through his bathroom's medicine cabinet to a seedy nightclub where monsters play music and dance. These creatures are shaped like the water stains on the drop ceiling tiles in the man's bathroom—a 3D rendering of Schoolwerth's own bathroom in Brooklyn, which was also reproduced in the gallery as a disorienting installation, turned 90 degrees so the toilet jutted from the wall and those water stains could be appreciated at eye level. The tale of an otherworldly journey beyond the bathroom got mapped onto an exploration of painting's forays into virtual space. In Petzel's north gallery, small oils on canvas hung in a cramped, temporary room, where steps led to a tunnel that offered a peak at the sideways bathroom and beyond to a glimpse of the big paintings in the south gallery. It was a twinned display: a suite of modest paintings and another suite of their big, mutant doubles.

There was plenty of eye candy in "Supporting Actor": the shiny bulbous CGI in the video, the dizzying craziness of Schoolwerth's bathroom plopped in the gallery. But its heart was the visual intrigue of comparing the two sets of paintings. The big paintings reproduced and manipulated the motifs of the small ones. Schoolwerth made ultra hi-res scans of the small paintings and edited them in Houdini, a powerful program for 3D graphics. Visible brushstrokes merged into smooth expanses. Their curves and hollows were emphasized with drop shadow effects. Schoolwerth cloned his own brushstrokes as 3D models so he could reuse them elsewhere in the file. When I visited Schoolwerth's studio last spring, he described Houdini as a modular synthesizer for CGI: all the qualities of an image are interpreted

through sliders, so he can max out or diminish selected textures and effects.



Pieter Schoolwerth: *Texture Tile #6 (Noone Believes Anything, and They Believe Everything)*, 2023

The gallery-within-a-gallery at Petzel's north end had CNC-milled Sintra models jutting out the back of those temporary white walls—physical renderings of the virtual space painted in them. Years before Schoolwerth took up 3D modeling programs, he practiced the old academic technique of building dioramas and other physical models as preparatory work for painting, and started thinking about how to revisit and update those techniques with software. Earlier he used Photoshop; now he prefers Houdini. Schoolwerth's allusion to academic modeling is a reminder that painting has always involved some kind of imaginary space. Artists are forever stepping back and forth between the virtual and the real; Schoolwerth's wacky myth of the bathroom as a purgatorial passageway dramatizes that movement.

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In their respective bodies of work, Salle and Schoolwerth both reflect on the status of painting and their own work as painters by taking a detour through software. But the paths they follow are different, and the contrasts between them are illuminating—they reveal the variety of ways in which painters can interpret and make use of software's effects.

The title "New Pastorals" evokes a kind of plein air painting. Salle stands before the print and responds to what he observes. It's an art of exteriority. "Supporting Actor" is about interiority. These works are expressions of emotive states. Schoolwerth emphasizes his inward turn by making 3D versions of paintings that hang behind the walls of the little gallery, and by reproducing the private space of his bathroom.

Salle sees technology as a new frontier, as something to explore. His art is a restaging of his encounters with it. Schoolwerth understands contemporary computing as a new regime of everyday life that mediates between public and private, and his aim is to develop an approach to

painting adequate to the conditions created by technology. For Schoolwerth, digital media is a form of social space rather than an additional or alien element, as it seems to be for Salle.

Salle takes a conventional approach to color. The yellows and blues that always look good in painting are well represented in “New Pastorals.” Schoolwerth’s palette is ostentatiously garish, almost off-putting—sick neon green, candy apple red, many hues of purple. These are colors that pop on the screen, imitated with physical pigments. Their artifice is enhanced by the toxic sheen of oil, and abundant black and white underscore the extremity of the other hues.

Salle is interested in paint as a means of creating form. When you look at his painting you can see how much he loves turning a gesture with a brush into something substantial that possesses flesh and shadow. Schoolwerth is less interested in what he can create with the brush than the form of the brushstroke itself and software’s capacity to reconstitute it.

Both Salle and Schoolwerth are playing with scale. But Schoolwerth takes the composition as a whole as something to zoom in and out of. Salle assembles the composition from figures of varying sizes.

Schoolwerth’s interest in modeling painting, in both dioramas and software windows, reflects his fascination with the representation of space and depth. This is less of a concern for Salle, who tends to skip over the middle ground to contrast paint’s lushness with the flatness of the surface. He’s known for foregrounding the picture plane by parceling it into segments. “New Pastorals,” like much of his other work, has no uniformly defined space. The ground shifts with and under the figures.

Schoolwerth defines “model” as a version, as a means of simulating or planning out the space of the painting. Salle’s “model” is artificial intelligence, a way of seeing and recapitulating his own work. It’s a model of a mind, not a model of a painting.

Salle is keen and perceptive when writing about other artists' work but he doesn't like to build conceptual scaffolding around his own. If he does, he's reticent about articulating it. Schoolwerth likes discussing ideas about digital painting as an allegory of privacy, about how media and phones change our perspective on everyday life. But these thoughts don't coalesce into a crib sheet for interpreting his painting. He keeps it weird. The narratives he comes up with are strange enough to let the viewer's imagination roam, to keep the experience of the work in an intuitive, bodily realm.

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Painting on digital prints is not very common, though I have come across it a few times in the past. Richard Prince likes to do it. "High Times," his 2018 exhibition at Gagosian, had paintings reworked as prints and collages and turned back into paintings. For her 2012 show at Metro Pictures, Cindy Sherman laid clear gesso over images that had obviously been heavily edited in Photoshop to give them a painterly texture. Prince's show seemed to me like a meditation on the interplay between technological reproduction and the creative spirit, whereas Sherman was thinking through the artifice of digital editing and its similarity to the imaginative work of painting. I can't think of many artists who have combined paint and prints to comment on the qualities of digital brushstrokes, except for Michael Manning. In his "Microsoft Store Paintings" (2013) and subsequent series, he applied clear gesso to prints of expressive fingerpainting that he made on big touchscreen displays at retail stores.

My comparison of Salle and Schoolwerth is driven less by any affinity between their bodies of work than by the coincidence of their exhibitions happening at the same time. I wanted to locate both of them in a legacy of mixed media painting to get away from the cliches found in reviews of Salle's show—e.g., "is it really art if a computer did it?" I wanted to write about the work in a way that positions the computer as one tool in the

artist's studio, rather than the defining component of the work. Like oil on canvas, painting on digital print comes with no predetermined meaning. It's another combination of medium and substrate that artists can do anything with. Salle and Schoolwerth have both used it to underscore their use of digital imagery, and so their work gives some insight into software's place in contemporary painting. They disclose a studio secret. They put it right in front of us. They ask us to think about the media with which paintings are made and seen now.

Thanks to Salle and Schoolwerth for giving me insight into their work during studio visits in 2024. The reproductions of works are taken from their respective gallery websites. The email version of this I sent to subscribers also included some details of paintings I photographed with my phone but Patreon's interface automatically enlarged them when I uploaded them and they looked terrible so I decided not to include them.