

Separation Anxieties

By Roberta Smith

Ever since Minimalism's almost exclusive attention to the art object's physicality, there has been widespread awareness of how material, structure, and process convey meaning. The "proto-New Imagists" work of Jenney, Bartlett, and Zucker, granted imagery equal status with material, which proved subversive, and a frolicking, giddily complex, ironic art often resulted. The New Imagists—in particular, Rothenberg, Lane, Moskowitz—instigated a sweeter, latently Minimalist treatment of the image. And at the end of the 1970s, a third wave has emerged. They manipulate the art object more self-consciously than ever, with distinct Minimalist/Conceptualist overtones. The object harbors an image (usually derived from photographs or film stills) which separates itself disquietingly from the very material which makes it visible. The object is present, the image removed—by its earlier life in another medium, by the ambiguities of its transformation into "art" and by the way it continues to resonate beyond the object. This unequal weight of object versus image may simply be two different kinds of "heaviness": one

physical, one mental—but it is intriguing, and one way to consider the works of David Salle and Troy Brauntuch, both currently on view in Soho.

The tension in their work stems in part from the way it quietly shifts media on you, moves your attention from object to image and back, running hot and cold, violent and static, evil and something else, not necessarily good but maybe realistic. At first glance, Salle's work seems to be drawing masquerading as painting. His isolated images and image-fragments (figures, torsos, domestic scenes, furniture) are drawings after photographs lifted from current magazines (porn, household, adventure) plus other sources. His klunky quasi-academic drawing style tones down the borderline sexism of some of his images (as does the addition of the male figure this year). But his evenly stained monochrome is not extraneous; it turns the images fuzzy and grayish, pushing them away from the viewer to a silent, dislocated space. Salle's titles are exotic; they rarely fit the images but they regularly re-arouse all the suggestions tamped

down by color and drawing style. Sometimes the combination of color, image, and title seem too offhand and inadvertent. Nonetheless, I like the way the floating images seem to be in transit, almost "passing through" these paintings, and I like the fact that the work is not overjoyed. It's skeptical, mildly erotic, mildly puritanical, and smart.

Brauntuch's art seems even smarter, perhaps too smart for its own good. Where Salle's art breathes out, Brauntuch's breathes in—and holds its breath. Its tone is retentive, ungiven, didactic. Salle gives the viewer almost too much to play around with; Brauntuch makes you feel constrained, discomfited. That may be part of his strength, but also part of what makes the current work seem repellent and confused.

Brauntuch may well be the Ad Reinhardt of his generation: hermetic, austere, yet sensuous. Like the past itself, his images are hard to get at. Derived, via various drawing and photographic processes, from photographs of the Third Reich, the images are murky, uncommunicative; they make you squint past your own reflection in the glass which covers them. They look like a cross between film stills and Seurat but their malevolence and sadness is still with them, a defuse palpable presence. Several drawings here offer dim, ominous scenes of the studio of

an officially, sanctioned obviously undergenerate sculptor: outlines of blocky neo-classical heads, nudes, colossal figures are visible in the half-light. The undercurrent of fascist aesthetics is hard to miss and hard to take (could be Italy, Germany, or Rockefeller Center); in all this blackness there's a feeling of something both beautiful and rotten to the core fading away.

The heavy dark frames, black mats, and glass further distance us from the image and also echo the autocratic, elegant look of the art within. I have trouble with the way Brauntuch's treatment of the object itself seems implicitly fascist. I can't tell if the presentation of the work protects you from the "truth" of the images, or serves them up to you on their own terms, gift-wrapped. Either way, I much prefer the freedom and casualness, the slight crudeness with which Salle puts his paintings and their images together and leaves more of the connections up to you.

Salle's and Brauntuch's works attempt to give a positive meaning to the pejorative "illustrative"—to combine seeing, reading, and knowing in a new way. They use images we all know and don't necessarily love, and that has possibilities. (Salle at Mary Boone, 420 West Broadway, 966-2114, through April 2; Brauntuch at Metro Pictures, 169, Mercer, 925-8335, through March 21) ■