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**“Dislocations” at the Modern / The New Patronage in L.A.
New German Museums / Memorial Shows: Burton, Bladen, Brown**

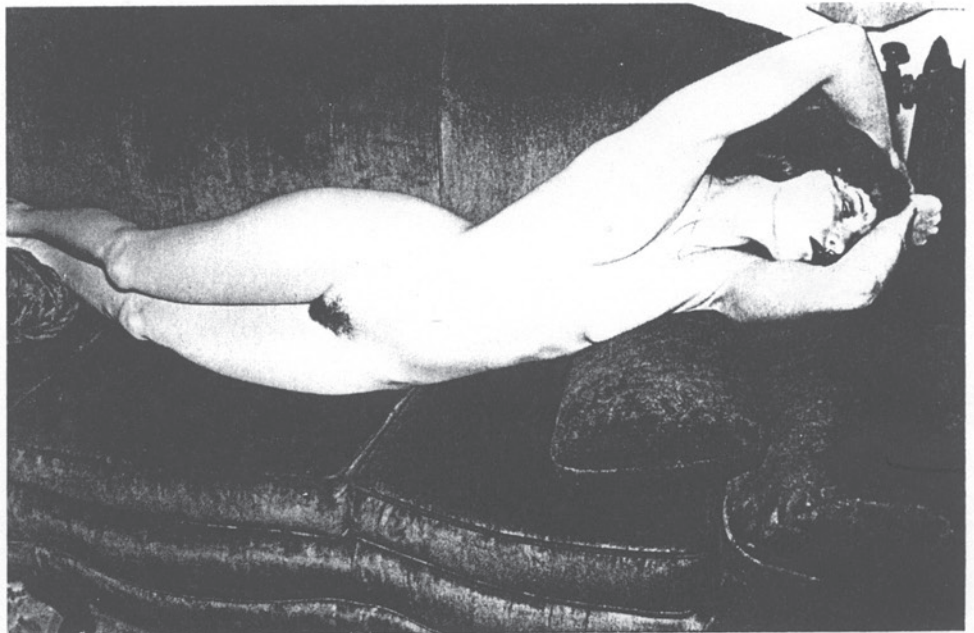
PHOTOGRAPHY

Lee Friedlander and David Salle: Truth or Dare?

In two recent exhibitions that concentrate obsessively on the female nude, Friedlander and Salle have risked today's ultimate representational offense—unabashed exercise of a politically incorrect gaze.

BY BROOKS ADAMS

Upon seeing Gustave Courbet's gynecological vision of female anatomy, *The Origin of the World* (1866), Scott Burton is said to have exclaimed, "Gosh, is that what it looks like?" This remark came irresistibly to mind when I saw a show of Lee Friedlander's nudes at the Museum of Modern Art, an exhibition that was billed as curator John Szarkowski's swan song. These stark black-and-white photographs of women's flesh, seen up close and in gritty detail, seemed unaccountably shocking. Perhaps it's because they appeared antediluvian in terms of sexual consciousness. A younger generation observer said to me: "Where does this guy get off, depicting women like that?" Similarly, a selection at the Robert Miller Gallery of David Salle's photographs made over the last 10 years, many of partially clad or naked women, provided unreconstructed glimpses of female topography. Guaranteed to exasperate feminists and intrigue Madonna-gazers (the Friedlander show included four nude shots of the entertainer from 1979-80, when she was still an artist's model), the events seemed to herald the survival of what Kay Larson in *New York* magazine called a "moribund" genre: images of woman as chthonic object,



Lee Friedlander: *Nude*, 1980, gelatin silver print, 11 by 14 inches. Courtesy Laurence Miller Gallery.



David Salle: *Untitled*, gelatin silver print, 14 by 11 inches. Courtesy Robert Miller Gallery. All of Salle's photographs were made between 1980 and 1990.

dense, mysterious, and deeply Other.

What's new about both Friedlander's and Salle's photographs is their unabashed reenactment of the artist-model scenario with all its male-chauvinist, art-historical overtones intact [for more on the artist-model relationship, see *A.i.A.*, May '91]. What's missing from the work of both artists is any critique of the posing session as a professional encounter and any acknowledgment that such photos might project overtones of sexual harassment in the workplace.

From the 57-year-old Friedlander, better known for his masterfully oblique, documentarian stance, the female nude may signal the onset of a midlife crisis. Indeed, Ingrid Sischy asks, "Why only women? Friedlander's answer is that he's not curious about men. . . . I . . . kept wondering whether this desire to photograph women at what he sees as the prime of their lives had to do with his sense of his own aging."¹¹

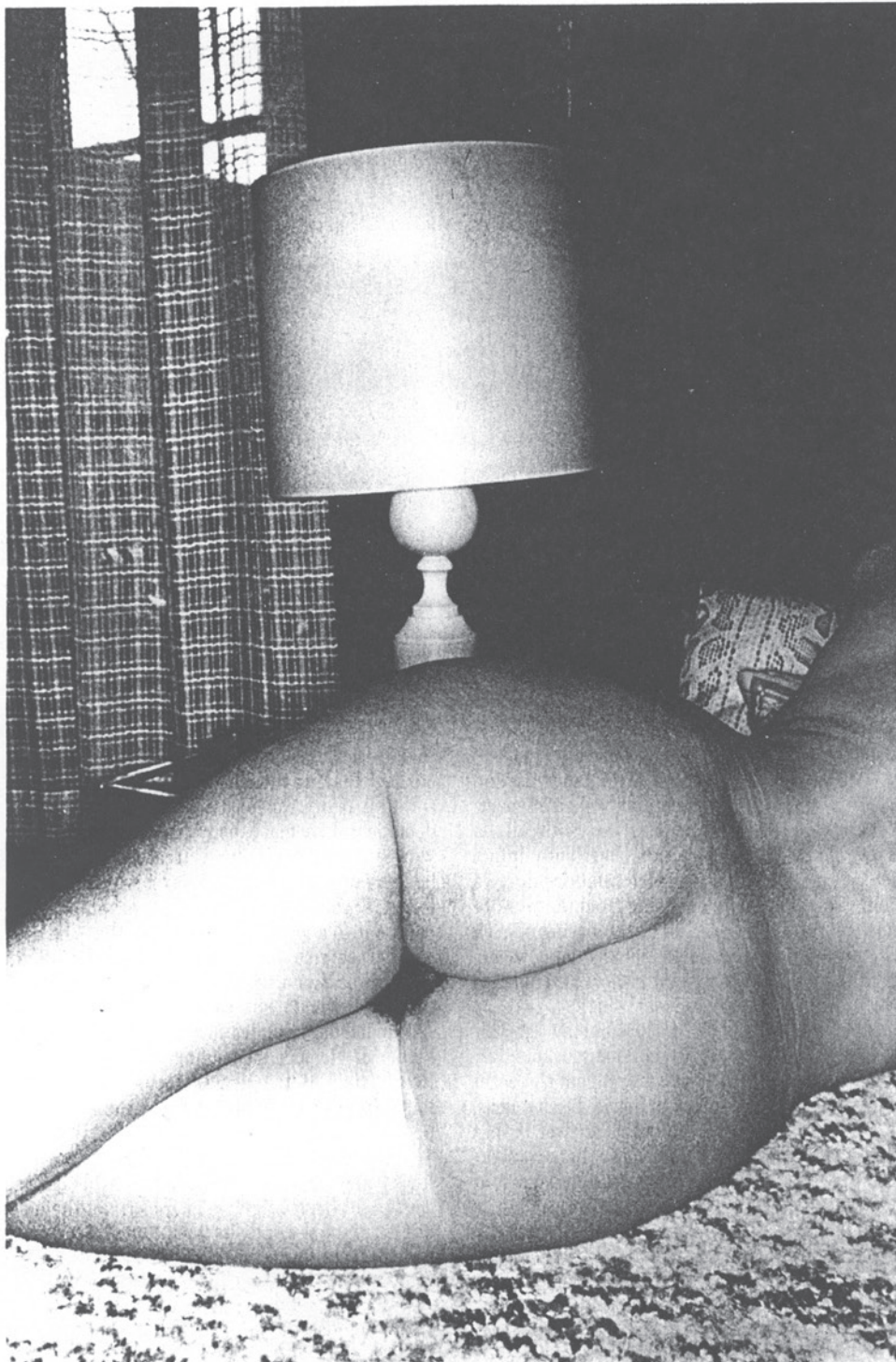
A case could be made that Friedlander's unsparing depictions of these models at home, sitting at their own kitchen tables or sprawling on vintage couches or their own messy beds, constitute old-fashioned images of liberation. These photos date from the high-feminist era when young women (especially on college campuses such as Rice University in Houston, where

this series began in 1978) self-consciously stopped shaving their legs and armpits. The frisson that many women I know expressed at the depiction of so much body hair can perhaps be viewed as signaling a '90s retreat from that great *laissez-faire* moment. (The day I was in the galleries, a young female docent was at pains to point out to a group of older ladies that "he does a great service to women, because he allows them to be so natural.") In any case, these are *tabulae distinctly non-rasa*.

Friedlander's nudes are full of formalistic humor or violence, depending on how you see it. Nearly half of the images focus on the lower torso, front or back, and in these the relation to Courbet's notorious *Origin* is particularly strong. The thought occurs that these models are perhaps being violated by the camera. Although the small Leica that Friedlander uses is not the most phallic of implements, its flash could be seen as a tool of surprise and even intimidation. And the compositional relationships are often very aggressive. In one photo, a model's nipple seems to strain to touch the top of a window. In another, a model's buttocks seem about to be penetrated by a bulbous lamp base. The more placid nudes recall Hans Arp's biomorphic sculpture, the more strenuously posed ones Hans Bellmer's Surrealist

sex dolls. The *horror vacui* in several photos seems indebted to Philip Pearlstein's complex plays of collectible objects, collectible patterned fabrics and collectible flesh. In these exquisite, silvery prints, which are mostly quite small, we see a consummate range of detail and tone used to capture funky batik bedspreads, velveteen coverlets, crumpled sheets, nacreous flesh, the tiny print on the foreign postcard by the bed—all rendered in extreme sharp-focus.

In several works, it's almost as if Friedlander were returning to the classical idiom of Weston, first seen in his youth, and reclaiming it as his own. He is abstracting from the nude, yet how unabstract these images are in their insistence on physical detail! One photograph of a woman seen in profile next to a white door seems at first glance to have some of that reductive purity we associate with the older master, but look closer and you see how rough the paint job is on the



Friedlander: *Nude*, 1979, gelatin silver print, 14 by 11 inches. Courtesy Laurence Miller Gallery.



Friedlander: *Nude*, 1978, gelatin silver print, 14 by 11 inches. Courtesy Laurence Miller Gallery.

portal. Furthermore, the characteristic decapitation of the model allows us to concentrate ever more surely on the abstract swell of her buttock, here dazzlingly illuminated, as is the white door and hairy arm, by Friedlander's flash.

Despite his sexist, bad-boy reputation, the 39-year-old Salle displays a vision of the vulval universe that seems entirely more circumspect. Some of his more striking photos are abstract studies of bed sheets with bodies under them. Chosen with the help of John Cheim (of the Robert Miller Gallery) from over 10,000 negatives, the pictures were shot in Salle's studio and loft. Most of the props, including a small painting of a boy by Alex Katz that one model clutches to her breast, are objects the artist owns. Outstretched arm gestures seem frozen and rhetorical, almost as if the models were wooden mannequins. Often the women wear shiny harlequin costumes—usually the tops only, leaving the pudenda exposed. These are, however, depilated '80s women, and the body hair depicted is usually minimal.

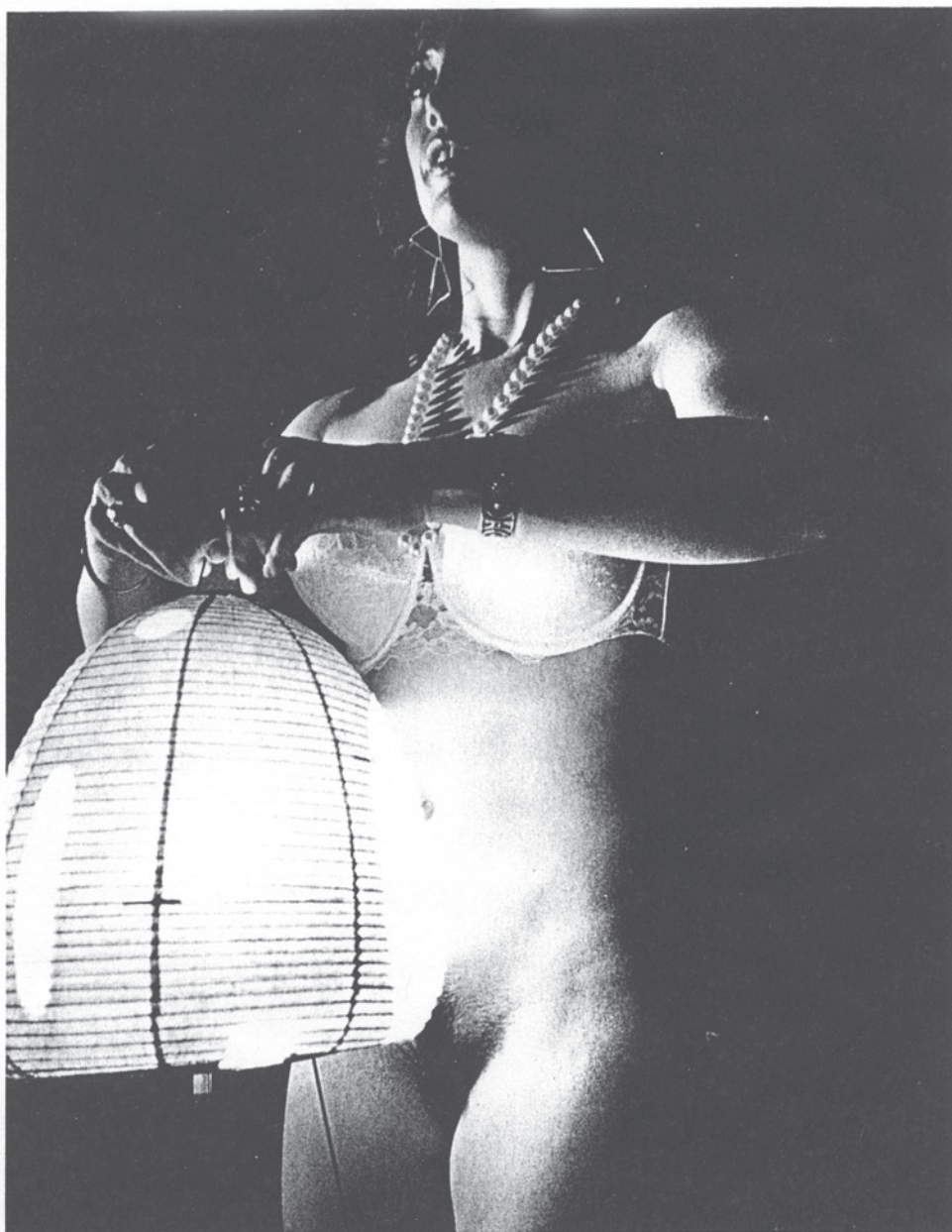
Salle's photographs do seem to offer a parodistic, willfully arty approach to nude photography. It's all part of his *commedia dell'arte* iconography, which distances the subject and frames it. Salle is reaching back to Watteau, Picasso and late Derain in these photos. As the artist explains in Henry Geldzahler's catalogue essay: "Sometimes I'm surprised by what holds my attention. . . . I feel like I'm trying to internalize the meaning of a gesture. I am looking at the

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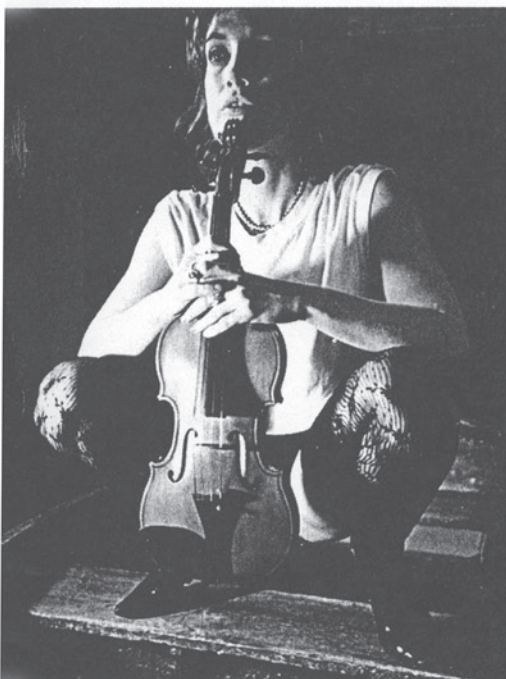
model and she is also partly me, or I'm *her* doing it."² Is Salle really asking us to consider his images as androgynous self-portraits?

These photographs began primarily as studies for paintings. Several of them will be familiar to Salle-watchers, since they have been appropriated directly as photo-silkscreens or projected images in his big, complex canvases. The photos look familiar on another level, too. The sumptuous sepia tones of the prints are redolent of Man Ray and of fine-art photography in general. In a sense, I prefer the glossy black-and-white working proof that I was shown last year; this had an anonymous, X-rated look to it; I couldn't even identify it as a Salle at first. The works shown at Robert Miller have a newly antiqued aura which is entirely consonant with the tapestry-inspired canvases seen last season at Gagosian [see *A.i.A.*, Sept. '91]. By being printed so beautifully, these snapshots made with a Nikon instamatic have in a sense *become* Salles.

The painter's allusions to art history in these photos are legion. Two dorsal shots featuring a



Salle: *Untitled*, gelatin silver print, 14 by 11 inches. Courtesy Robert Miller Gallery.



Salle: *Untitled*, gelatin silver print, 14 by 11 inches. Courtesy Robert Miller Gallery.

peach held up to the buttocks seem to be jokes on Cézanne's apples, and one depicting a large light-bulb cutout grazing a model's *fesses* may imply a preposterous rear entry (shades of Larry Rivers's *Lamp Man*). In all these slightly ponderous antics, I feel the influence of Italian architect Carlo Mollino's erotic photographs, several of which Salle owns. (Mollino's labial-looking chair with its famous cleft seat and back can be glimpsed in many of the painter's photographs.) The Mollino snapshots, taken in the '50s and '60s in the *garçonnière* apartments he also designed, evoke an obsessive, overly art-directed erotic scenario that Salle clearly prizes.

The photos of women wearing black lacy stockings and squatting in rowboats, with phallic violas propped up under their chins, may seem at first like a travesty of all we hold dear about

music and art. But on longer consideration, Salle's photographs, like Friedlander's, seem to celebrate traditional, high-serious, sexist attitudes in a way that is nervous-making and life-affirming, precisely because, in the current climate of political correctness, such fervently held obsessions seem so expressly forbidden. □

1. Ingrid Sischy, "Afterword," in *Lee Friedlander: Nudes*, New York, 1991.
2. Henry Geldzahler, "Introduction," in *David Salle: Photographs 1980 to 1990*, New York, 1991.

"*Lee Friedlander: Nudes*" travels to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art [Nov. 1, 1991-Jan. 5, 1992]. "*David Salle Photographs 1980-1990*" will be shown at Stuart Regen in Los Angeles, mid-February to mid-March.

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