



David Salle: *Exit Laughing* (1993)

ROBIN HOLLAND

Here and Gone

By Peter Schjeldahl

David Salle
Gagosian Gallery
136 Wooster Street
Through February 19

David Salle
Mary Boone Gallery
417 West Broadway
Through February 26

We are living in the 21st century already. You read it here first. I stumbled on the news while wondering why nobody bandies the words *fin de siècle* any more. That phrase with an odor of apocalyptically tinged decadence was rife a decade ago. Of course! Leave it to the 20th century to rush the festival of its own demise like kids ripping open their presents before Christmas. To be 20th century was to be too quick in all things, leaping to conclusions that promptly evanesced. Now we are making new kinds of mistakes, don't you think? (I mean, besides waiting for something that has already happened.) We won't go into it today. This is the 21st century, with all the time in the world.

So the 1980s were the last decade of the former century. They were a period of ripeness that proceeded to rottenness with the speed of a time-lapse film. Where they could overthrow political regimes, they did; elsewhere they

overthrew optimism. In the art world, which became unusually keyed into the world at large, many of us found the speed exhilarating for a while, then sickening. When decadence goes decadent, it becomes something you hate to think of. Today the '80s are infamous for a mass poisoning of society by variously tainted money. But in art the decade began promisingly with keen efforts to revalue, suffer, and enjoy a century's accumulation of broken dreams. I saw phantasmagorias built from plundered wrecks of utopias, with a rainbow of attitudes from stonehearted pedantry to wild, faint hopes of last-ditch redemption.

David Salle made the definitive New York artworks of the early, better part of the '80s. His ferociously inventive paintings did everything that was needed, and nothing that was unneeded, to model the epoch's hungry self-consciousness. The pictures were one-man democracies of images drawn from many times and levels of culture, filtered through a sensibility whose strange hostility murmured of hurt feelings. The images (including objects, techniques, colors, styles, whole grammars of meaning) were convened in the field of the New York School big painting, Abstract Expressionism's heroic machine for harmonizing selfhood with the music of the spheres. Salle com-

mandered the machine as a processing plant at the end of everything.

Some of Salle's early-'80s works were better than others, but the weakest had something and the strongest were riddled with failure. That stood to reason. Things had to fail, in terms of values they once served, to qualify for Salle's lexicon. For instance, women had to fail as Woman, a romantic ideal. That Salle's female-nude images suggested misogyny damned him for those who did not care that his rage amounted to a confession: his dream, his nightmare, his hopeless vengeance. The qualification was trivial if, as some held, the personal is political. Others, including me, countered in Salle's defense that everything is potentially aesthetic. We argued for the amoral license of the aesthetic as a realm where only truth (including true falsity or sincere insincerity, not to mention authentic weirdness) counts. We lost. The 21st century is wall-to-wall moralistic.

Salle started to lose when he had to justify his share of an '80s style of success that came between artists and whatever they had done to earn it. He figured he could serve both a living art culture and the rootless constituency—a castle on clouds of vanity—of the '80s rich. But the rich of the '80s didn't just use art; they used it up. Salle exhausted his initial

ambition and has not developed another. His show at Gagosian and iffy sculptures (painted-bronze-and-whatnot assemblages that seem to me more trouble than they are worth) is so drained of juice either personal or cultural that it crumbles at a mental touch. His concurrent show at Mary Boone—comprising a 1982 classic, *Autopsy*, and three 1983 painting-constructions along with a couple of pleasantly frazzled new pictures—gives a contrasting whiff of the old, sulfurous Salle elixir.

Having learned a lot from Salle about the zombic science of animating dead aesthetic qualities, I could make a case for the "Early Product Paintings," a series at Gagosian that recycles 1960s-style recyclings of 1950s magazine advertising. The advertised products run to liquor, cigarettes, and sweets, evoking a virtual economy of addictions. (Sex is soft-pedaled. This is a kinder, gentler Salle.) Done in a wizard variety of techniques and insinuating pastel colors, the pictures bid to be addictive themselves. Playing appearances of collage against facts of painting, they are suavely original. (People who see in them only imitation James Rosenquist have not truly looked at Rosenquist's work, to begin with.) A case for them is there to be made. It's just that no verdict in the case can matter as much as it ought to.

Be the new paintings either as good or as bad as is humanly conceivable, their game comes to the same thing: over, in any way that is important beyond the canvas edges. They don't do cultural work that needs doing. They apply lessons of early-'80s image consciousness that have been absorbed as thoroughly as, say, Barbara Kruger's epochal text-box-on-photograph graphic devices. Nor does Salle's current work convey any personal necessity more urgent than a drive to keep painting. There is no shame in that, but here is an artist who once cheerfully risked destroying painting by his manner of saving it. That audacity, fueled by obscure but infectious furies, has given way to essentially academic tinkering with big-painting conventions.

For the old edginess, consult *Autopsy*: a beautiful long canvas of pulsating geometric design—excruciatingly poised between ex-

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alting and ridiculing high-modernist abstraction—that abuts a canvas bearing the photograph of a naked woman who sits distractedly on a rumpled bed while wearing white paper cones on her head and breasts. The fusion of hypersophisticated aesthetics and goofy, seamy erotic play still shocks. It mounts a swing-bareled assault on any decorum or decency, either artistic or social, that wanders within range. It is a work of absolute willfulness and, at the same time, of candid self-abandon: the artist's heart, such as it is, laid bare. There is a sense of overflowing creative energy with lots more where it came from.

The 1983 painting-constructions at Boone are moody and clenched in feeling: *Cane*, a dark grisaille picture of an upside-down nude with, in the middle of it, a literal shelf supporting a glass of water in which rests the rubber-tipped end of a walking cane; *Man in a Hat*, whose eponymous subject broods behind a snarl of soiled copper tubing; and *Ugly Deaf Face*, whose title is lettered on the image of a heavy-featured face of indeterminate sex, with four small dime-store world globes dangling in front of it. These modestly sized works project a big scale, both physically and emotionally. They affect me with an enigmatic sense of fear and loathing suggesting awful childhood secrets. I think they are permanent objects, which will never not haunt.

Salle can't rewind the world and himself to that giddy peak, as gone now as the 20th century's characteristically premature *fin de siècle*. Just to survive it would be a rare feat for him—as for anyone else likewise blessed and cursed by an art culture where early success, more often than not, is a cage locked inside and out and thrown off a bridge. What happens next for Salle will depend on his ability and courage to look at himself. His gifts give him a tremendous potential for putting into public aesthetic play widely and darkly shared feelings and intuitions: soul stuff. Those gifts are worth rooting for.