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**Interview with David Salle**

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David Salle: *Digby Plays*, 1997, acrylic, oil and photo-sensitized linen on canvas, 74 by 84 inches. All photos this article courtesy Gagosian Gallery, New York.

# David Salle: At the Edges

*With a new body of work just released, '80s art-star David Salle here recounts his formative influences and offers some surprising observations on the condition of art, past and present.*

**INTERVIEW WITH DAVID SALLE  
BY FREDERIC TUTEN**

*I visited David Salle one afternoon this past spring to see his new work and to chat awhile. I was sitting there with him in the center of his studio surrounded by paintings looking at once familiar and wonderfully strange. As is David for me: the everyday David filled with energy and open intelligence, and the reserved and intellectually honeycombed David. The paintings were waiting to be packed off to be exhibited in Los Angeles at Gagosian, and wore the freshness of art just made, art innocent of viewers and critics. The atmosphere in the studio seemed fresh, too. A good place, I thought, after several years in which he has not been interviewed, to have David talk about himself and his art.*

—F.T.

**Frederic Tuten:** What does it mean to be a painter at the end of the 20th century?

**David Salle:** The sense of continuity is flagging a bit. Since painting essentially comes out of painting, there's a problem now in that there is less to react to, less painting that feels central. This produces a thin situation: like looking at the same images for too long and burning out the receptors. Of course the history of painting is sufficient—but it begins to feel, well, historical rather than of the moment. I grew up in a time when the idea of a work of art as having an autonomous life was still viable. The central idea was to make something which, instead of pointing to an experience, becomes the experience itself.

**FT:** Tell me about your reasons for becoming a painter.

**DS:** I think the desire to paint comes out of looking at paintings and identifying with the actual material process. You have to feel that your "self" is capable of being expressed through paint. You have to be able to sense painting as both a metaphor and as a specific physical reality, and feel that the two states are inseparable. Otherwise, you shouldn't bother. I had that feeling at an early age. I always had a feeling for the theater of it—or the making-meaning part of it. Probably I was in the last generation to be able to romanticize the act of painting, without too heavy a load of irony. When I came along, the making-meaning part of painting occurred primarily within the process of painting; now, making-meaning is a matter of cultural signage. That's a pretty extreme shift.

**FT:** You went to Cal Arts on scholarship. How did they know that you were a good artist?

**DS:** I sent slides of my juvenile paintings.

**FT:** Who were the painters then at Cal Arts?

**DS:** The primary ones on the faculty were Paul Brach, who was then the dean, and Allan Hacklin, who is now the chairman of the painting department at Columbia; at that time, when I was a freshman, he was only 28 and a marvelous teacher. We were abstract painters, mostly. It was a class in finding a form. There were no stated themes, no assignments and no curriculum. Looking back, if I had to say what the class was about, it was about being able to recognize a visual idea when you saw one.

**FT:** Was it useful to you?

**DS:** It was great. I remember how much everyone wanted to discover Allan's criteria for judging work. What makes something good? Little by little you began to understand what the criteria were. It all had to do with originality. The emphasis was on finding a form that was not blatantly borrowed and therefore not repetitive of some other style. The only example of this mysterious process that I can remember actually has to do with Eric Fischl, who was in the painting class with me in 1970-71. Everybody was struggling to find their own style, to find the elements that eventually

might constitute a pictorial approach. Some people developed a style out of habit, out of predilection, or basically out of liking other artists. The people who were doing the most interesting work were people whose style sort of changed every week, because they were really questioning each painting. I remember that Eric was making these funny, cartoony, balloony shapes in his paintings. One day he made a painting that looked like those long balloons that you buy on the street; those repeated pillowy shapes that were slightly bent at an angle. There were three or four of these forms stacked up vertically and diagonally in a rectangular field. The painting sort of seemed to come out of nowhere. I remember Allan coming around and shaking Eric's hand and congratulating him. It seemed like a real painting—self-sufficient. It was like a scene out of a movie. Everybody sort of dropped their brushes. We were all mad with jealousy and wondered how he did it. What's really funny is that he never came up with anything like that again, for the rest of the semester, as far as I can remember.

**FT:** What did you do? Did you strive for something equally convincing for yourself?

**DS:** Yes, but it took me a lot longer.

**FT:** Who were your heroes then?

**DS:** I had a lot, but the only time I have committed an act of blatant fandom was . . . I had always been enamored of Bruce Nauman's work, even when I was kid. I knew he was living in Pasadena, and I just called him up out of the blue, something which I have never done before or since. I said: "I really admire your work, I'm a student at Cal Arts, and is there any possibility that I can visit your studio?" And he said: "OK." So I went to Pasadena and visited Bruce in his studio; he had his feet up on his desk, reading Wittgenstein. It was like a set piece; there was an enormous amount of trash in the room—actually, crumpled-up drawings. I then brazenly invited him to come to my studio and he did. Everything was so laid back in those days. He looked at the paintings that I was making and said one thing: "It's not clear enough what they're about." I met Nauman in New York years later with Peter Schjeldahl and he had no memory of



*Drumming Rabbit, 1997, acrylic, oil and photo-sensitized linen on canvas, 84 by 144 inches.*

**“When I came along, the making-meaning part of painting occurred in the process of painting; now it’s a matter of cultural signage.”**

this at all, which made me think maybe I had dreamt this whole thing up.

**FT:** The critic Kenneth Burke said that the work of art does something for the person who makes it and something for the one who views it, but it may not necessarily be the same thing.

**DS:** I think that there is a correspondence between what the artist does and what the viewer sees—I just don’t think it’s necessarily the one people talk about or imagine. Every painting, consciously or not, contains instructions on where to look for a way in, for what it’s about. This is contained in the painting itself, but you have to know where to look. How do you know? Well, that’s instinct and culture, isn’t it? I also think you can be taught—that is to say, the knowledge can be transmitted. Where are the tools? Within the grammar of the form. Why doesn’t everybody know this? I’m not sure why—and of course many people still do know this. But it’s a kind of cultural language that used to be more widely understood. When meaning in art is defined by external theoretical constructs, it becomes increasingly difficult for the viewer to have a personal response to anything.

I have never thought that every interpretation of a work of art is equally valid—that would be absurd. It’s not a totally solipsistic endeavor. Yet positions in art tend to call up their opposite number, so there is the illusion of all this controversy which many people misconstrue as autonomous points of view.

This “point of view” aggressiveness can be fun sometimes. I remember when I first came to New York, I occasionally hung out with painters who were doing work completely different from mine—a group then called the Lyrical Abstractionists; they were fairly hard-core guys who used to meet at Fanelli’s and trash everybody. To give you an example, there was a show in 1976 at the Guggenheim, or rather, two one-person shows: one was Brice Marden’s first museum show and the other a show of Max Ernst, which was a pretty good juxtaposition. Everyone loved Brice but those

guys said about Max Ernst, “He should never have been allowed to pick up a paint brush.” Isn’t that great?

**FT:** Do you think context determined those judgments?

**DS:** Context isn’t everything. Someone—I think it was Bill Wegman—once said to me, “It’s very difficult to make your work be about what it’s really about, and then it’s usually not about what you thought it was.” Words of wisdom. So much in art seems to be a result not of art itself but of the way we talk about art. Artists would say: “This work is about . . .” or, “I wanted to make a work that dealt with such and such.” How people talk about their work is revealing. But I don’t think that art *deals* with anything *per se*, and if it does, it doesn’t interest me *on that level* at all. When I hear the phrase “this work deals with,” my heart sinks. It reminds me of a Woody Allen routine from when he was a stand-up comic; he would end a show by announcing: “This has all been a subtle plea for better soil conservation.”

**FT:** What are those things that you find offensive in a work?

**DS:** Nothing really in any work as *itself*. Why would I? I have no quarrel with anyone, nor is art a competition. We’re just talking about attitudes. I do have trouble accepting at face value a canon of artists, mostly but not exclusively abstract artists, whose work is taken as an example of sincerity because of its consistency. Somewhere consistency is equated with sincerity. I assume everyone’s equally sincere. Anyway, it’s not about reduction for me. I’m interested in simultaneity and also in a new kind of sequencing. Or conversely, I doubt that frantic quasi-destruction equals audacity. I mean, in what way exactly is Damien Hirst different from Arman? You can be charmed by his work or not. It’s a matter of how you slice it. Personally I think his work is like eating an old shoe, but I understand that it adds zest to other people’s lives. I certainly don’t think an artist is the same thing as the dominant perception of him. There’s an old chestnut from the movie business: “No American film has ever been successful for the right reasons.”

**FT:** If media was the discovery of the ’60s, what was the discovery of the period in which your work was developing? What was the ethos of that period?

**DS:** First, a different relationship to media. The art/media relationship of the ’60s was about mechanically reproduced imagery—artists were bringing “outside to inside.” My generation had a different relationship to media. There is more reciprocity with mainstream culture now, but it



*Windmachine, 1997, acrylic, oil and photo-sensitized linen on canvas, 72 by 144 inches.*



*Drape, 1997, acrylic, oil and photo-sensitized linen on canvas, 72 by 144 inches.*

means less. The undeniable pleasure in the '60s of dragging mass-media culture into art is lost. It was about jumping class barriers. Dragging low into high has been accomplished. There is no more sense of outrageousness, no more pleasure to be had from camp. We have come out the other side. As for me, I loathe popular culture. I have no use for it whatsoever. I'm only interested in elite culture.

**FT:** Anything else?

**DS:** Ego as material.

**FT:** Can you talk more about that?

**DS:** The hallmark of ego-goal art is that it becomes very dire. Is that because it's more self-involved than other art? I don't know.

**FT:** By dire you mean what? That there was an emergency of feeling in the '60s?

**DS:** Yes, and the urge to entertain the catastrophic fantasy. It was many things. Some aspects of the work of that period had to do with the drug culture. Cultivating the extreme has always been, will always be, recreational for the young and the young at heart.

**FT:** And you think that quality is no longer extant in your generation of artists?

**DS:** It's not sustainable.

**FT:** So where do you see the ego component in your art, where is the ego moment?

**DS:** I use the word "ego" in the analytic sense, not in a derogatory sense. The self, that self I find specifically revealed in the juxtapositions of images, is my subject. It's a fragmented self constructed through un-programmed juxtapositions, a self that stays experiential at all costs. There is art that reflects the singular self, and there is art that reveals a nonsingular, fragmented self. Obviously I am an example of the latter. The word on the street is that reductivist art is better for you, and that a fragmented art is contaminating. Just for myself, I might prefer to be a singular, reductivist artist, but I don't have it in me, so I approach it the other way around.

**FT:** But there are other things, David. To look at your work is partly to have to extrapolate the content. There is something unnerving about these paintings, and it's a quality that has always been there.

**DS:** What you do in life is to constantly find equivalents for feelings. We are constantly finding and using expressions, jokes, puns, images, innuendoes, insults, gestures, music, tone, timbre, touch, rhythm, inflection, frames within frames, halls of mirrors, sweet and rough things, etc. All of

it. This is just what I apply to the work. It's not programmatic at all. I always said to students that the way to know what to do in a painting was the same as to know what to say to someone on the telephone. It's the thing that actors work with, "What does my character want?"

**FT:** Do you enjoy doing this? When you get to your studio, do you still sort of tool around and have a sense of playfulness in it?

**DS:** Sometimes. Sometimes it's very hard, but it doesn't really make any difference. I don't believe a state of playfulness necessarily yields better pictures.

**FT:** Does it get less playful as you get older?

**DS:** Yes. I know a lot, and it takes a lot of elbow grease to keep it all in play.

**FT:** D.H. Lawrence said that puritanism takes many forms, it changes its appearance.

**DS:** It's a very interesting subject. There is a Dionysian current in contemporary art which always has to be couched in the grammar of some mainstream proposition.

**FT:** Give me an example in painting.

**DS:** It's not in painting any longer. One of the principal cultural alliances is between the avant-garde and sexual libertinism.

**FT:** That's why the Surrealists saw de Sade as their hero.

**DS:** So-called extreme sexuality is one of the avant-garde's signatures, another one being utopianism. Sometimes the latter reacts puritanically against the former. One of the impulses in new art is to cast oneself in a futuristic light. In earlier modern art that impulse was utopian. It was precisely to envision a better future. Even though that has passed out of fashion, its residue is very much alive now. In recent art the overriding theme has to do with fusing the preoccupation with sexuality with the desire to be a mutant. The desire for the human race to mutate to some new hybrid form, whether that involves artificial intelligence or a third gender, hermaphroditism, or robotic parts. Whatever one wants to clothe the drama in, the drama is essentially about having something to do with being a mutant. That is, I think, one of the fundamental impulses of the age, and it has many precursors. It is about the desire to get outside oneself. The desire to transcend one's place, to use oneself as a material for art, to envision a future so that art can actually go somewhere, which is synonymous with rejecting the present. How is this related to my work? Only tangentially, if at all. I'm not futuristic. Perhaps not having a vision of the future is a limitation.



*Cyclorama, 1997, wood with pegs, acrylic, oil and photo-sensitized linen on canvas, 84 by 128 inches.*

**FT:** Everything about your art seems to me inclined toward a notion of the history of art, toward a notion of canon. The work allows for its place in the tradition of Western art. One of the things that may not be futuristic in your work is the delving into a certain kind of preconscious feelings, and an iconography that is about the mysteries of the self. I see the notion of the self and the notion of tradition blending in your work.

**DS:** Well, that's the ideal. There is a documentary film that Jacques Rivette made about Jean Renoir's movie *Rules of the Game*; it's called *Jean Renoir, the Boss*. Renoir was one of Rivette's champions and Rivette returned the favor by interviewing him. They are in the screening room, having a conversation—they are mostly talking about *Rules of the Game*. The conversation is interspersed with clips from the film. For the documentary they staged a reunion between Renoir and the actor who plays the character of the Marquis, Marcel Dalio (better known in America as the maître d' in *Casablanca*). They are talking about the casting of Dalio against type (he was a sort of vaudeville comedian) for the role of a marquis, and they were laughing about that choice—about the freedom of it. There is a scene in the movie in which the Marquis and Octave (played by Renoir himself) are in the background of a scene in a reception hall and they are both making the most irrelevant gestures: blowing their noses, coughing, pulling something out of their teeth, shuffling and bending over backwards, gesticulating in a way that is completely detached from and inappropriate for the action of the scene. According to Renoir, they made an agreement before shooting that they were going to use the most outrageous, silly behavior they could come up with and just see what would happen, and it was left in the finished version of the movie. I'm bringing it up because I think it relates to my work and to the work that I admire. Renoir confirms that in *Rules of the Game*, they didn't really know what they were doing—what the film was about and whose story it was. There were way too many elements to control, and he felt very lucky because it allowed the film to be at the

edges of things, to fall in between the obvious concerns.

I burst into tears hearing this discussion. The beauty of that statement, the clarity of it! Is there a more beautiful and concise description of the modernist enterprise? It seemed to me to be what one wants to move toward in one's work. It is about things in between the obvious things. That is the way someone really makes work.

**FT:** It's the unknown, it's the surprise within the structure. It's the willingness to take chances within a given structure, to work in directions that may seem antithetical to the main purpose of the work. What you are really talking about is the profound difference between art and a product. It's interesting that you chose your analogies for art from cinema rather than from painting.

**DS:** Well, it's easier to narrate these issues in a parallel medium.

**FT:** Do you want to talk about art that you care for?

**DS:** Well, there are so many completely different things that I respond to. There's so much great work around. Of my contemporaries, Terry Winters is pushing painting the furthest in terms of structure. His recent work is profound. Philip Taaffe has joined image with structure brilliantly. Kara Walker knocks me out. Jessica Diamond is very cool. I think Juan Uslé is very fresh. Stanley Spencer is very much in the news now, because of the theater piece that was recently in London and New York, but I was interested in his work for a long while. Spencer is like the real Lucian Freud. There is an untowardness in that work which I find extremely valuable. He's both direct and indirect, and very brave. There are so many others I admire and some of them are the obvious ones.

**FT:** I love the way that artists and poets rediscover other artists and poets through each other. Eliot with Donne and the metaphysical poets, and you with Kuniyoshi or Kuhn. Through your eyes I started looking at them again and really appreciating them very much. We tend to push aside artists that have had their moments.

**DS:** I remember asking John Ashbery once who he was reading and he said his favorite poet was Weldon Kees.

**FT:** I've never heard of him.

**DS:** I hadn't either. It's very difficult to even find anything by him. A quite interesting figure in the '50s. He was a painter, actor, musician, and poet who one day just disappeared, presumably a suicide.

**FT:** Who would you like to rescue from obscurity as a painter?

**DS:** Myself!

**FT:** Among my friends, including writers and poets, few read as much as you do. What does reading mean to you as an artist?

**DS:** It's often escapism. Sometimes I learn something. One seldom reads something which is fundamentally antagonistic to one's existing sensibility or point of view. I don't read things that are aggravating, I read things that are substantiating. I don't have any kind of regular group of peers or colleagues so I get continuity through my reading. I am buoyed up by it.

**FT:** Well, you choose certain books because they speak for you. Do they speak for you in terms of how you understand your work? Philip Larkin is a poet you read—is it his demotic language or the structure of a rhyme? Anything like that?

**DS:** Well, I like to read humorists, but I don't know whether it's to be entertained or because I see some principle at work which I can use, or both.

**FT:** Do you make annotation in your books?

**DS:** Yes, I write in books all the time. I do not keep a diary but if I went back and found all the copies of all the books and pulled out things that I've marked in them, I could probably construct one. I don't keep a regular notebook, I just jot things on scraps of paper and then lose them. I have a very poor memory so I have to keep reading because I can't remember anything.

**FT:** What are the things in your paintings that we may not be acknowledging?

**DS:** I know it sounds like it, but I'm not a very theoretical person. There's a range of things that I do that use rhythm, sequence, timing, surprise, scale, structure, light, inflection—things like that. Concrete things. I think it's about the way the things are put together—the terrific freedom of it. The freedom to make associations, pictorial associations, to make them in a way that feels right but not literal. The style has not spawned any real versions of it. It can't be imitated because it's completely personal.

**FT:** Someone once said that the fiction that lasts is always the fiction that does not resemble other fiction, that has some kind of offness about it.

**DS:** The pictures are not strange to me, of course, at all. To me they are very natural.

**FT:** Are they revelatory to you once you finish them?

**DS:** Sometimes. But they don't have to be. They are themselves, hopefully. I'm not sure if it's a revelation. It's an access to some kind of intensity.

**FT:** What are you looking for?

**DS:** I practice my own kind of transcendentalism. It may surprise you, but my work is full of love.

**FT:** You mean it ironically?

**DS:** Not at all. □

*The new paintings by David Salle reproduced with this interview were on view last spring at Gagosian Gallery in Los Angeles [Apr. 26-May 31]. Salle recently installed a 20-by-60-foot mural for the Nagahori Corporation in downtown Osaka, and he will have an exhibition at Claudia Gian-Ferrari Gallery in Milan in November. A major traveling show is currently being organized by the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, for 1998.*

*Author: Frederic Tuten is a novelist who also writes about art. His most recent book, Van Gogh's Bad Café, was published in the spring by William Morrow.*



*Lemons and Stars, 1997, acrylic, oil and photo-sensitized linen on canvas, 96 by 144 inches.*