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David Salle: the present of painting in the age of artificial intelligence

On the occasion of the exhibition *Painting in the Present Tense* at Palazzo Cini in Venice, David Salle reflects on the relationship between painting, artificial intelligence, visual memory and composition. From Pictures Generation to new generative tools, one of the protagonists of contemporary art tells how the creative process changes without giving up the centrality of the pictorial gesture.

Luca Zuccala | July 14, 2026 | 5 minutes of reading

CONTEMPORARY ART



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Painting in the Present Tense

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Artificial intelligence does not replace painting. It can suggest new compositional possibilities, produce unpredictable errors, break conventions that the artist would hardly violate spontaneously. But the responsibility of the image, the construction of meaning and the materiality of painting remain deeply human. It is from this position that David Salle addresses one of the central issues of contemporary art. Among the protagonists of the Pictures Generation and a determining figure in American painting since the 1980s, Salle presents at Palazzo Cini in Venice *Painting in the Present Tense*, edited by Luca Massimo Barbero, a cycle of works born from the use of an artificial intelligence model trained on his own images. The result is an extension of the creative process, in which technology becomes a tool capable of producing new visual relationships.

In the following interview, **David Salle addresses the relationship between painting and algorithms**, the meaning of the present in the image, the dialogue with tradition and the future of representation, reiterating a conviction that runs through all his research: each painting builds its own time and its own logic.

The title of the exhibition, *Painting in the Present Tense*, emphasizes the "present" as a condition of painting. How does this series of works redefine the relationship between historical temporality and the time of the image?

I'm not sure I understand what you mean by "time of the image", but allow me to quote the always insightful Alex Katz on a close topic, that of time in the portrait. He once told me: "After about fifty or sixty years, a portrait simply becomes the image of someone in funny clothes". The title of the exhibition wants to remove any idea of nostalgia and, at the same time, put the obsession with historical reference in the background. Whatever the era from which an image comes, when it enters a painting along with other images, they all end up existing in the present time of the painting. I am interested in attenuating their referential character to strengthen their relational character.

In Venice, the works dialogue with a place full of history such as Palazzo Cini, with the Renaissance collection and historical tapestries. How does your work fit into this context?

Stratification is a condition of the place and my paintings add an extra layer. I was struck by seeing how naturally this overlap works in the spaces of Palazzo Cini.

The *Tapestry Paintings* were already a system of translations: painting-tapestry-painting. Artificial intelligence introduces a further step. Is it still a translation process, or are we already within a "logic of transformation"?

I really like your definition of "logic of transformation". That's exactly what happens. Every good painting builds its own logic of transformation: this is what makes painting. My goal is to stay within that logic as long as possible.

She calls artificial intelligence a "junior creative partner". When can a tool become a true interlocutor?

I don't know. But I can say that it hasn't happened yet.

The model was trained on his own works. Is it a way to radicalize his language or to question him?

My job is already quite radical. Artificial intelligence allows me above all to go beyond what I already know in terms of composition. It offers me something to react to.

He said the machine "falt the rules without guilt." Is this freedom that makes it interesting for painting?

The machine doesn't know it's making a mistake. For this reason it is less inhibited in the construction of space or in the deformation of the human figure. If a painter wanted to obtain the same effects, he should choose them consciously; the machine, on the other hand, has no intentions. He just produces them.

Simultaneity has been working since the 1980s. Now how and where we are now, immersed in continuous digital flows, does this strategy take on a different meaning?

Maybe just because today people can see more clearly what I was looking for back then.

In his paintings coexist art history, advertising, cinema, everyday, intimate, domestic images. Is there still a hierarchy among these sources?

Painting stages images, just as a director stages characters. There are entrances, exits, choral moments and monologues. If a hierarchy exists, it is born within the framework. It is part of the composition.

The most recent works seem to be characterized by greater formal instability. Is it a response to the simultaneous overproduction of images?

That's what I want to see today. It's a natural evolution of my language.

She often speaks of "ventriloquismo": images that

speak through other images. Who really takes the floor in his paintings?

I'm the ventriloquist.

The Pictures Generation reflected on the circulation of images. Artificial intelligence today takes that process to a completely different scale. Do you still feel part of that season?

Yes and no. Less and less, as time goes by.

What can painting still do that no other image production system is able to do?

No other system produces handmade images. The image does not only coincide with what it represents. Even the way it is painted, the materials used, the quality of the gesture, all this is part of the image itself.



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