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david salle early product paintings

Text by Diego Cortez

gagosian gallery
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A Clean Shirt

A grammar of advertising in David Salle's *Early Product* Paintings

by Diego Cortez

"With infinite precaution he began to paint. His face turned towards the picture and quite close to the woman whose sex blossomed as a mystic rose, as if his soul had passed into her with his last dying breath, and he was still gazing on her with his fixed and lifeless eyes."

—Emile Zola, *L'Oeuvre* (1886)

When Claude was a student, it became uncomfortable for him to realize that he could never *know* if what he was doing, what he was making, was any good or not. He had tremendous desire, in the arrogance of youth, and an insecurity of not knowing. It overwhelmed him. Most people outgrow it. He clung to it.

The salon artists who had broken federation with him earlier that summer did so with such despotism, such cruelty, that in his isolation, lying alone on his sandy blanket, an icy glance from an art world crowd at attention, babies and carriages parked on the hot sand, Claude felt betrayed by what he believed to be a menacing new mentality surrounding him. He considered it to be institutional, an academic *style*. He felt that the more *daring* artists, currently in vogue, were subverting their own agenda in trying to question *everything*, and were deluding themselves. First, he felt, they only questioned *certain* things; second, they only questioned certain things in certain ways; third, they only questioned certain things in certain ways using certain materials, all of which seemed borrowed, none of which were themselves examined. Their premise was that the unexamined life was not worth living, and yet these were artists and critics whom he felt were operating under the most appalling degree of unconsciousness.

"On whose authority," Claude brooded, "does someone infer that scrutinizing social injustice makes interesting art? According to whom?" Claude observed a troubling authoritarianism in their work. Very troubling.

These art professionals standing in the August midday sun, as if at a civil banquet, a vernissage, a wedding, were not the only skeptics who penetrated Claude's sanity. There were always the dissenters at large. Their rancor for works of art contained none of the irony or paradox needed to fashion a *major* work of art. Claude knew that at one level he just created baubles for the rich. But he hoped that, in time, his art would be perceived as something *other* than commerce. All art *is* commerce at one point or another, but it has a longer life. Artists should agree that the *art* value of a work outlives the commerce value. Marxists had claimed otherwise. Claude found it dispiriting that art objects seemed to have a life only inside of the nexus of wealthy people, whose interests did not seem consistent with his own. This was a contradiction which seemed to him both jocund and saddening. But, he felt there was no alternative.

One motive he had in painting for the *theatre* was that it was a more ephemeral art, less profit-driven, although found he was still obliged to engage the same types of personalities. He often said, "In the theatre, you're just a beggar!" At least as an object-maker he stood more on equal footing.

There are two types of pleasures in the world, social and private. He had such a hard time integrating the two. "A truly enlightened person can integrate them with much greater mastery," he thought. When involved in something with a more social dimension, it was never as alive for him as just living in his head. He didn't know if it was a blessing or a curse. Probably both. People underestimate the angst of being in one place or another. They always want both. They crave solitude, then a release from solitude. "Those impulses are in my work," he thought.

In the tired city, there was an unlucky communion of theories and counter-theories regarding the means by which an artist communicates—a well-meaning landscape or the centre of a riot. Heedless of expression and soured by poverty, the artist-as-critic emerged, pointing sanctity's finger at the *hated* picture. Claude's secret ambition, to wear a clean shirt and have the *heart* to paint each day in actual ceremony, a naked saint against the rising tide of banality, a stricken soul spurning the spectacle of failing genius, was in fact a form of flattery. Self-flattery? From the weighty sovereignty of art, an early reading of Claude's pictures invoked a new literature heedless of expression, an awful tabernacle of violent perfumes, an accumulation of voices in mingled grief against the public, towards a point of sleep: the *masterpiece*, a bed, an open grave.

Not walking that terrible bridge to the opposite bank, a foreign soil of *idea* men who despise grace, he began to paint. He felt the weight of the argument press in on his own figure. With want, he walked the Pont des Arts into a world where the canker of romanticism was accompanied by the exaltation and nausea familiar to women in pregnancy. A secret fever charmed his human lay figure. In some sickening vortex, he gleaned his fate. The whole idea was mad. Again, he began to paint.

Claude continued to visualize broad continuities and resonances, across time and space. His experience of *culture* was that the more connections it attempted to make between the incongruous or the incoherent, (not the *divisions* it made), the more rewarding it was. He wanted art to connect things, not divide them. Others seemed to thrive on divisiveness, and while the impulse was an obvious one, it proved not to be an impulse that had any *heart* to it.

One humdrum way in which artists work is to define themselves in terms of what they're *not*: "I'm not going to do this, I'm not going to do that. I'm not going to pander to the bourgeoisie. I'm not going to be dictated to by *men*. I'm not…" Claude remembered he had long ago discarded these methods of controversy. His true concern was one of resonances and correspondences. He could see them. That's how culture works—something doesn't stop where something else begins. Everything that ever was is still going on—every style that ever existed is still in motion.

Claude needed to *feel* his work. He once maundered, "I think that my work is *painful*. Beneath the apparent comedy, I think what I paint has overt sadness. It's the sadness of not being able to connect with other people, not really having any *room* for other people, yet feeling them very deeply. I don't seem to have the psychic mechanism by which to make real contact." There was a woman from Paris, whom he knew ever so slightly. She was married to one of those big-time intellectuals. She came into his studio, looked at the paintings for a few minutes and proclaimed, "I don't know how you can bear it!" The work made her so sad. She wondered how he could cope with that much sadness. People thought, "What do you have to be sad about?" It was something elemental. Perhaps he was mourning a past he never had. He was one of those people who became old prematurely. He was never really young. He now mourned youth in a significant way. He suffered the feeling of being trapped by the necessity of having to call things in the world by their correct names. Not to call something by its right name was to talk nonsense. He wanted so badly to drive a wedge between the name and the *named.*

A strange place. A clean shirt. An eye. Relapse. Open air. A glint of vice. A strong, cheap wine. Idée fixe. A mess of life. The whole idea *was* mad.

His future. This repulsive book. Her picture. A strange feeling of gloom. Painted lovers. Below the city.

Below our city, our Cité, "is a cemetery he would have understood, he was so keen on everything modern." Today, this cemetery lies at the foot of platinum work towers. Towers despised as symbols of world economic domination. Towers nearly toppled by fundamentalism. Near the nearly-toppled work towers lies an African burial ground, newly unearthed. The contingency of salvaging, of delivering, extricating, freeing, releasing, liberating, emancipating this burial ground from the forces of omnivorous trade, bears relevance to the world predicament of historical conservation, not only of buildings, trees, parks, streets and neighborhoods, but of feelings, pain, sadness. Artists today can be justified as preservationists of disconsolation and melancholy. Bacon, Freud, Johns, Hartley, Manet, Géricault, Still, Pollock, Warhol, Baselitz, Bourgeois, Friedrich—each contributed in preserving these states of sadness, reflection, introspection. As well, we today are forced to discern the confluence of nostalgia and modernism.

He found in his work a cardinal contradiction: he was a nostalgist, but he loved the "optimism of modernism." This dialectic fueled his work. For Claude, modernism *was* nostalgia. Part of the past that he mourned was the buoyancy and optimism of *modernism*. He knew that assumption might result in trivializing his work. His affinity for furniture design of prior epochs, was interpreted as *kitsch* by antagonists. This, he knew, was untrue. His friend Henry defined this yearning as the quest for the absolute *parents*. His visual dream was betrothed to his dream of life. It was a dream of a well-ordered place of *health*—a beautiful interior with broad panes of glass and ample light. Hadn't Neutra named his villa for Philip Lovell, built in 1927-1929, "Health House?"

For Claude, the period when *America* was most interesting was the post-Depression era. It had nothing to do with his fondness for *film noir*; relevant as it was in its depiction of America before prosperity: America waiting for the American dream. Fifties modernism exemplified those aspirations. For some strange reason, Claude's mind was stuck there. He didn't know why. He knew the significance of early childhood imprinting. He remembered the tale of Freud's childhood. He had been raised in a near-*tribal* atmosphere, not a bourgeois Viennese home. Closer to a lower-class commune, his was an extended family where polymorphous perversity was not only tolerated but encouraged. Freud was raised with few rules, and an open, expansive sense of a cosmic God. He would become bourgeois later. Freud's work was *his* attempt to return to an early imprinted past. Claude did not wish to analyze himself to *that* degree, but he recognized *modernism* as something coolly alive for him.

In school, Claude and his friends were concerned with more than just the semiotics of an image. They uncovered ways in which images or pictures connect to the world, and put themselves *in* the link. "Semioticians take themselves out of the loop," he said. That was an essential difference. Like Mike Kelley, who *paints* a droll inquiry into the vulnerability of citizens-as-consumers to manipulation at the hands of a black-white print media, Claude's recent paintings expose the lush seduction of full-color corporate advertisements, promotion and propaganda.

He regarded advertising, source material for his new works, to be slightly insidious, but also slightly benign. He was interested in the level of *invention* that produced it. Once, when Claude decried the popular culture to a friend, he was told it didn't really matter whether he liked it or not, it just keeps churning itself out…

In a new group of paintings Claude prepared for an upcoming exhibition, he noted a shift in focus from subject matter to *composition*. Although composition had always been important, it tended to emphasize the choice of subject, or a specific autobiographical resonance of the subject, as seen by the viewer. But, in the new "early product" works, in addition to the specific subject matter of found fifties graphic advertisements culled from period magazines, one observes more clearly the *overall* visual structure. The first thing one sees, and the last, is the *structure* itself. It has a paradoxical effect. Nothing in the painting exists outside the painting. Then, almost the opposite happens—images end up being extractable from the painting. They can be seen as independent things, as such, and can be lifted *out* of the works and made part of a three-dimensional world.

Before, Claude had organized subject matter utilizing oppositional forces, in juxtapositional ways. Compare and contrast. Top-bottom. Right side, left side. Point, counterpoint. Now he achieved more *all-over* compositions, found in the *process* of painting. Formalistically, not imagistically, the collage technique of cutting and pasting, not a painting technique, had its own built-in limitations: nothing was discovered at the end of a brush. Claude thought the backgrounds of earlier works were "representations of the

pleasures of collage," but the pleasures of paint, layered on top of the renderings of the pleasures of collage, now established the primacy of paint over collage.

Certainly there was now more illusion of depth, and also more ways to participate *in* the work. In cinematic terms, the point of view of the paintings became less external, with the viewer more *inside* the paintings. Perhaps these observations are difficult to justify. They're partly sensations. But clearly, in Claude's earlier works, while sustaining an often searing emotional appeal, the viewer was nevertheless situated more *outside* the painting. A fractured point of view *within* the imagery, now resulting from the collage composition method overlayed by a more direct, painterly method, allows a more all-over interior space in which to enter. Two principal procedures of modern art here are fused together: collage and painting. Formerly brought together simply through juxtaposition, they now were more intensively fused throughout the works.

Claude had never seen his work as issue-oriented. Personally, he was not interested in issues. "I don't even know what they are," he muttered, "I'm interested in how to see. Maybe artists who solely address *topics* should be called essayists. I would never want to be a topic-addresser." The argument of a more overtly politicized art supplanting painting raged while he was a student. The fact that the debate had not dimmed twenty years later, he thought, was in itself a clue to the artificiality of the argument. It was not an issue that was ever resolved, ergo, not an issue that was really *about* anything. It seemed more a war of sensibilities, forever clashing.

The fragmentation of what it is people want from art seemed due to the divisive times in which Claude lived. They were not unifying times. The utopian urge in modern art, originally wed to painting, had peeled itself off into activities which were no longer dependent on the *subjective*. Painting, as a result, was relegated almost wholly to the realm of the subjective. For Claude, the interesting thing about making art had been the indivisibility of subjective sensations or sensibilities from ideas and meaning—meanings of language, society, and human communication. He felt those ideas only came alive when expressed through the *hyper*-subjective, resulting from intuitive gambles without external controls for *verification*.

From which standpoint something can be verified had always created rifts in philosophical circles. On whose authority can something be verified? Claude felt that ironies in the art world in the past twenty-five years had developed to a point where black had become white. The initial impulse of *conceptualism* was, in a way, the last gasp of utopian ideals of formalism. It was a desire (platform) to make a work which had a system of external verification. And yet, to Claude, it was *that* desire which had so quickly become distorted, put to the service of a sort of low-level fascism. The real thing that art could attempt that philosophy could not, he felt, was to conceive a subjective world, based on intuitive impulses, which could directly access the viewer to *concepts* equally as profound and elemental as linguistic structure.

Of course, he felt that the purpose of art was to question the *nature* of art, to undermine accepted meanings wherever

they occur. But what didn't logically follow, at least to him, was to limit the argument of what the nature of art was, to the argument alone. Art seemed more complicated than that. He witnessed artists and critics trading places with the enemy, without realizing it. Those who initially were historically stimulated by a utopian impulse ended up being the most authoritarian. To Claude, the only aspects of art not infected by this pernicious authoritarianism were the ones hardest to *verify*, i.e., subjective, intuitive, personal art-*making*.

This was the juncture at which Claude became drawn into the world of theatre and dance, towards a more corporeal form of spontaneous improvisation. As the act of painting *is* gestural (not administrative), the roles of actor/dancer provided him with new sources of inspiration and new subject matter. He learned that there were many different *kinds* of intelligence. People seemed to only consider linguistic forms of intelligence. But, in this new cultural arena, Claude beheld actors/dancers who often didn't operate in a literate mode, rather were brilliant in a performance mode. Theirs was an innate and developed intelligence concerning the meanings of time, space, personal identity, character—things most complicated. None of these great performers could quote from the first pages of any important reference books, from which so-called *smart* artists love to quote. There were so many kinds of intelligence to consider—musical intelligence, physical intelligence, and so forth. Claude: "What I try to do is make pictorial intelligence as interesting as performing intelligence, something completely unverifiable, except in the most important way: when you *see* it." For some bizarre reason, the "know it when you see it" rule for determining quality, good enough in any other evolved milieu, had fallen into disapprobation in the art world.

He was drawn to actors, dancers, performers, also writers, for the more technical side of their work, for the *materials* with which they work—pauses, silences, audio punctuation, the shape of a dancer's back. He could see ten technically proficient dancers on a stage, but only one of them might be good. What was good about that one dancer? People in the art world scoffed at Claude's analogy. But it was the only thing that mattered to him—giving access, as it did, to *feeling*. Nothing else had any hold on him. When he saw a great actor or dancer, he noted what better artists do—set themselves *free*, in order to enter an area where there is simply *no* verification, one of total risk. Art, he felt, was all about personal risk. It wasn't true that actors create characters. What they really do is present *themselves* in so honest a way that it ends up as something which you've never seen before, because so much has been stripped away.

Painting is the act of *touch*ing, first the canvas, then the viewer. It's the act of charging an object, leaving a *mark* charged by the artist. Claude found the job of painting embodied the reciprocity between the *mark* as a result of something the hand does, and the *mark* as a component of an overall system of describing and meaning-making.

A unique capacity of art *objects*, paintings for example, is stasis—partic-

ularly in our technological and media-dominated culture, so dependent upon motion and *speed*. Their inability to move, to emit sound, project light, or what have you, remains their constant and enduring purpose, end, extremity: a meditation. Art objects are about the only things left that *don't* move. The culture of stasis is certain to be a growth industry. It goes to say, when inanimate *objects* confront viewers who possess laconic attention spans, an exchange transpires as abstruse and painful as when the spectre of death beckons the viewer/witness by *name*. No picnic.

Another property of art *objects* is, of course, their *permanence*. Claude understood the disparity between the almost ludicrous and insignificant act of dragging a brush across a canvas, and the fact that once there, it will be like that forever. "It's that discrepancy between *small time* and *big time*, between a *little* increment of time (creation), and the biggest increment of time (the gaze), that makes paintings so charged," he pointed out to a friend one peaceful Saturday afternoon.

A painting's strength is in its limitations, a result of its *primitiveness*. "Not the fetishistic act of painting," he insisted, "painting involves a language superimposed on another language, and that language is sometimes superimposed upon yet other languages. That's how film works." His dissatisfaction with all art based upon photography, and essentially most conceptual work, was due to its inability to transform one language into another, to be filtered through the sieve of another language—it's only *one* language. "It's just too easy, just too easy," he declared. "There's no *mastery*, when all that's happened is the manipulation of *one* language, usually the artist's native tongue. Where is the *mastery*?" Dance *mastery*, for Claude, took a recalcitrant form—the human body—and made it express the musicality of time, in addition to the language of *shape*, in addition to the performer assuming a character, in addition to *millions* of other things.

Mastery and physicality are closely aligned, a notion rejected by conceptualism. The history of art of this century is a lineage of conceptualism. But a contradiction that results is that dematerialized art *objects* end up being every bit as much commerce as traditional objects, perhaps even more fetishistically so. In political terms, the greatest failure of concept art was that, in not *making* the work themselves, artists became bosses, exploiting other people's labor: they joined the ranks of *management*. Claude reiterated, "theirs was an authoritarian art both in terms of how it was made, and how its value was established."

Claude endeavored to return to the historical sources of his work in his new "product" paintings. He had circled round them for a long time. For some reason, the relationship between the depiction and the depicted, the name and the named—the poignancy of that relationship seemed more visible in the *publicity* source material from the late fifties, early sixties. He didn't know exactly why. There were probably all sorts of sociological reasons, but, in his opinion, that was the time when this *gap* was most discernible. One could liken it to the ability to track a comet with the human eye, or viewing an eclipse.

There may well be several days in which to view such phenomena, but there are *certain* days when they are *most* visible.

It was a mistake to assume that Claude was attached to the fifties. What he was attached to was the *gap* between the name and the named, and it was *in* the fifties, as viewed now, when it was most visible. American life at that time was simultaneously itself and the *representation* of itself, to a most pronounced degree, sometimes shifting in and out of focus. Scholarly attempts to bare the roots of pop art, harping back to cubist collage, Stuart Davis, or Duchamp's readymades, missed the point for Claude: "It's not the use of subject matter and images from one's immediate world," he said. "These sources are not in my immediate world, I have to go back in time." Watteau, in his *fête galante* imagery, not current to his time, was also a reshuffler of existing prototypes. Watteau created a *fictional* time, not his own, even with links to a much earlier time—the origins of commedia dell'arte itself, at least a hundred years prior. All artistic activity creates a fictional world, an attempt to simplify, to describe what's directly in front of you.

In the group of "early *product*" paintings, Claude had pictorial intentions involving shock, surprise, and discontinuity—dada motives. He speculated that the *publicity* source materials already were derived from the *dada* aesthetic, filtered down from a more advanced visual art. Publicity art of the late fifties and early sixties was, no doubt, a broad sampler of surrealist/dada photomontage and collage. When pop art emerged in the early sixties, people more fully understood that advertising art was the American surrealism, Lautréamont's *chance* meeting of "an umbrella and a sewing machine on a dissecting table." There was, in fifties ads, the same anthropomorphism associated with surrealism. The dada canon of making the inanimate animate was employed to humanize *objects*—consumer products. The rubber glove, which represented a whole universe to the surrealists, was now peddled into each and every kitchen of the universe, in between episodes of "Search for Tomorrow." Containers and packages, surrogates for the human form, enabled a moral nation to not visualize the *literal* human body: upright products for upright times. Corporate advertising, in committee decisions, succeeded in veiling the human body with fundamentalist abandon. Not only was the body *veiled* by advertising, it was fragmented, cut into pieces, collaged, detailed. Disembodied hands, long symbolic of a spiritual realm, now were employed to inspire consumers to acquire things.

Claude construed this as the world of the *macabre*. To him this "early product" era was "an upbeat, pastel-colored sense of the *macabre*." This dovetailed with his propensity to see everything as two things—in divisible ways. What seemed most visible to him in advertising was the *grammar* of the images, the grammar of the gestures. He attempted then, within his paintings, to take that grammar and shatter it, as an atom smasher—to make, for example, a glass of chocolate milk and a bottle of gin, "*equal*, in order to accelerate the grammar which exists in the free-floating mentality of advertising."

Claude always sought "a very dry,

almost chalky surface." He found this in the "tapestry" paintings. Also, his early acrylic "stain" paintings had matte, chalky surfaces. But these earliest works were more like drawings. It had become difficult to maintain a dryness of surface when painting more complicated imagery. The breakthrough which allowed such surface transformation, came in what Claude describes as an accident: his FADE into scenic art. All of the last six or seven years of work flowed from his experience in making set designs, learning how to paint in the manner of a scenic artist. It's a technical fact that backdrops had to be rolled and unrolled, folded and unfolded, stored and retrieved ten years later to be used again. If the paint had *any* buildup at all, it cracked, and fell off the canvas. Everything was obliged to have the thinness of a single coat of very watery paint. Thus he was forced to make images from drawing and illusionism, where surfaces were always set in beautiful matte chalky water-base paint. These new experiments were metamorphic. It changed the *look* of his work and presented him with the exact surface he required. Claude reflected: "The *baldness* of illusionism is one of the pleasures of scenic painting. Up close, it looks terrible," he joked, "but from the front row of a theatre, from about 60 to 75 feet, it's *dynamite*!"

In the "early product" works, Claude sets a more historicist tone than did most of his *pop* predecessors: not only in the decision to cite earlier source materials, but through his use of non-reflective, *matte* paints, supplying not only a poor, unrefined, awkward, naïf look, but also a used, timeworn look. The enforced two-dimensionality of the *flattened* picture plane, an overall singularity of image through the paring down of superimposition or compare-and-contrast juxtapositions, the *dry*ness of image accomplished through *matte* surfaces, and the choosing of intellectually dry (dada) subject matter: the *early products*—all contribute to a new cohesion in Claude's *oeuvre*.

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Blue, 1993. Oil and acrylic on canvas,
84 x 60 inches (Detail)

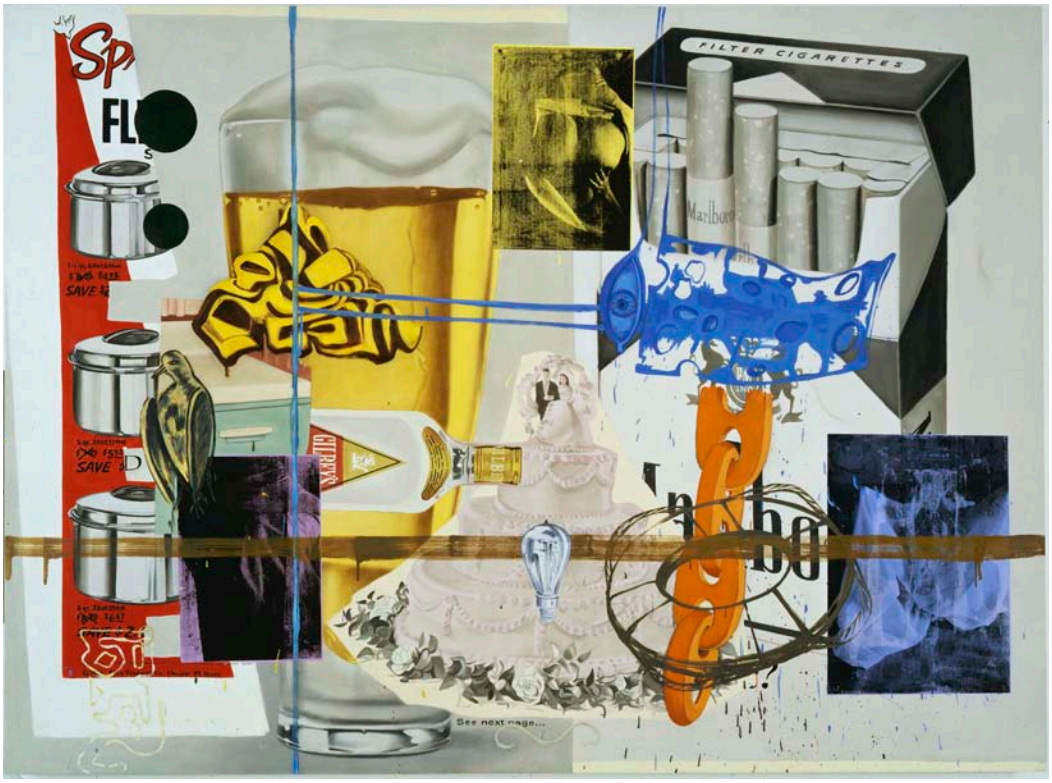
BACK COVER:

Jokerville, 1992-93.
Cast bronze and sandblasted cast glass,
33 x 18 1/4 x 17 inches (84 x 46 x 43 cm)
Edition of three

14 LIFESAVER

1993. Oil and acrylic on canvas.

120 x 72 inches (305 x 183 cm)



16 *study for* Exit Laughing

1993. Pencil and collage on paper.

15 3/8 x 22 inches (39 x 59 cm)

Exit Laughing

1993. Oil and acrylic on canvas.

84 x 114 inches (213 x 290 cm)

18 GILBEY'S

1993. Oil and acrylic on canvas.

82 x 92 inches (208 x 234 cm)

EXIT WEEPING

1993. Oil and acrylic on canvas,

72 x 120 inches (183 x 305 cm)

22 **Home**

1993. Oil and acrylic on canvas,

48 x 42 inches (122 x 107 cm)

24 Picture Builder

1993. Oil and acrylic on canvas.

84 x 114 inches (213 x 290 cm)

26 **Blue**

1993. Oil and acrylic on canvas.

84 x 60 inches (213 x 152 cm)

28 *study for* Big Letter Rack

1993. Pencil and collage on paper,
15 x 21 inches (38 x 53 cm)

Big Letter Rack

1993. Oil and acrylic on canvas,
84 x 114 inches (213 x 290 cm)

30 LOLA REMAKE

1993. Oil and acrylic on canvas.

102 1/2 x 122 1/2 inches

32 A Double Life

1993. Oil and acrylic on canvas,

87 x 114 inches (221 x 290 cm)

34 FINAL CUT

1993. Oil and acrylic on canvas.

72 x 120 inches (183 x 305 cm)