

SUMMER 2006

David Salle

TALKS ABOUT HIS PAINTINGS AFTER THE SISTINE CHAPEL



David Salle, *The Flood*, 2005–2006, diptych, oil and acrylic on linen, overall 7' 6" x 15' 5".

MICHELANGELO IS A TOUGH ACT TO FOLLOW—and pinch-hitting for Andy Warhol probably isn't much easier—yet these were precisely the challenges presented to David Salle when Roman art collector Carlo Bilotti recently asked him to execute a commission on the theme of the Sistine Chapel (a recast version of an unrealized Bilotti project once slated for the Pop master). Salle, who splashed on to the scene twenty-five years ago with a brazen brew of postmodern pictorial eclecticism and New York School-scale, capital-*P* Painting, would seem a natural fit for such an epic return to art history, having spent the past three decades developing a distinctive painterly vernacular in which preexisting imagery is deployed in lyrical, all-over compositions. Typically the juxtapositions of disparate images in Salle's works destabilize our deep-seated visual habits and undermine traditional narrative, but in the three paintings completed for the commission, the artist addresses a single, unifying subject, updating biblical stories to reflect our crisis-laden era. Salle's signature free-associative image flurry is maintained, but here it includes, for example, direct references to recent natural disasters such as the 2004 Asian tsunami and last year's Hurricane Katrina, which explicitly recall the deluge in the book of Genesis. (There is also a nod to Warhol in the silk-screened newspaper clipping that runs along the bottom of *The Flood*, 2005–2006.) Salle worked slowly on these paintings, executing them over the better part of a year, but finished them in time for their May unveiling at the Museo Carlo Bilotti in Rome, where they are currently on view through October 1 alongside two other recent commissions on religious themes by Damien Hirst and Jenny Saville. —JORDAN KANTOR

I'D SEEN THE SISTINE CHAPEL a couple of times and been awed—along with hundreds of others craning their necks—but I'd never really studied the paintings. After doing some reading on their iconography, I began to see images that had a metaphorical quality I thought I could deal with. The idea of the commission was not to repaint the ceiling, but to make some kind of contemporary reference to it. Together with Carlo, I picked the three themes of the Creation, the Flood, and the Last Judgment as being representative of the whole. The first painting I worked on represents the Creation. Rather than take the most famous image from that cycle, in which God touches Adam's hand, I used the image of God as a purple-clad protean actor flying around, building, making stuff happen. This seemed the most compelling and straightforward image to use, because God was so identifiable and, in Michelangelo's mind, linked to the idea of the artist-creator.

This task represented a complete break for me, since it allowed for a kind of literal-mindedness I normally abhor. While there has always been a narrative thread in my work, as there is in almost all painting—even abstract painting—I've generally tried to keep it autonomous to and within the painting. I've wanted to illuminate a pathway rather than illustrate a story. In the past, if I were to use an image of a glass of water, for instance, I would try to make a new connection to some *not water* images. When I was young, I didn't want to be understood too quickly, though I realized that sometimes you just end up concealing rather than revealing yourself. Now those kinds of more literal, narrative connections wouldn't faze me. I might even find them reassuring. Still, this is the first time I've consciously kept a family of images tied together, like spokes in a wheel. The challenge here was to develop a correspondence among the emotional, narrative, and thematic lines of the subject matter and the formal considerations that generally occupy me—how to, for example, connect images of

Hurricane Katrina from the *New York Times* to the Michelangelo scenes. It was interesting to see that doing this didn't kill the painting; it didn't kill the art. We live in a moment that is so crisis-laden that biblical or apocalyptic metaphors seem appropriate—and the scale seems right—whereas in another time they might have felt preposterous.

I started by drawing and redrawing the Michelangelo images, first on paper and then on smaller canvases. It quickly became clear that a key task was going to be how to present the "Michelangelo part" in a way that wouldn't swamp the picture. The solution was essentially technical. I would paint the Michelangelo parts—like the ark, the people huddled under a tree, and the man carrying another man on his back—in acrylic, not only because acrylic has a surface texture and luminosity that approximates the fresco technique of the originals, but also because it is quite flat and sits more naturally in the background. Everything else—the non-Michelangelo material like the helicopter—is painted in oil, which is much brighter and more saturated, making for a natural separation from the background.

