



David Salle *Untitled, 1979*

## DAVID SALLE

### Nosei-Weber/Gagosian/The Kitchen

Modern art is clearly a thing of the past. The symptoms have been developing for years, but many artists felt they could ignore them until recently. Today however, any artist who acts as though modern art were not dying sentences himself to a lifetime of backward motion. Modernism's lingering departure leaves something of a vacuum, and to date no body of new work has emerged which can be embraced as definitively post-modern. The most successful attempts so far have all tended to be simply destructive, content to celebrate the passing of an old order, and so have persistently ended in an impasse, unable to develop convincingly (one thinks of the brilliant flashes of Dada, Fluxus, aspects of Conceptual Art and Earth Art). But now some artists are trying a less straightforward strategy, one of a morbid complexity. This is a policy of erecting a structure of false clues and conflicting evidence, of making art which seems both respectful of the idea of culture and totally disrespectful of it, art which treats sentiment, but with sardonic humor, art which is both seductive and repellent, sophisticated but crude.

David Salle's paintings must be understood in such a framework. He scatters images of women across a stained canvas, images which are derived from magazine photographs. Each painting is dominated by a crudely painted out-

line of a woman smoking, lost in thought. Behind lies an arbitrary arrangement of smudgy charcoal drawings of pornographic nudes, car crashes, airplanes and furniture. These paintings are extraordinarily effective, in part because they are so resistant to interpretation while appearing to be easy.

The important aspect of the work, however, is not Salle's use of pointedly ambiguous figuration, important though that is, but the manner in which he appropriates both his images and his support from a culture he feels distant from. Salle's attitude is fervid, but appears off-hand. He works in a cursory, seemingly careless way, allowing the canvas to stain unevenly, the charcoal drawings to look sloppy, the painted outlines to look clumsy. Painting is treated as a worn out tradition which must be courted only because it confers validity on an artist's activity in the eyes of his public. But painting of this sort, which seems to play the game, but which disregards the rules, operates as a Trojan horse in the temples of culture. It placates in order to gain admittance for the artist, only so that he can fulfill his desire to destroy the structure from within.

Since writing this review a stunningly appropriate model for this activity has made the news. Anthony Blunt, the perfect, gentlemanly scholar, one time Director of the Courtauld Institute in London, and Keeper of the Queen's Pictures, proves to have been a Soviet spy, an associate of Burgess, McLean and Philby. Totally acceptable in polite society, a revered member of the establishment, and all the while an agent of subversion. If the art being produced today is going to be successful, it must operate on similar terms, must gain access through the front door so that it can admit something unwanted through the back.

**Thomas Lawson**