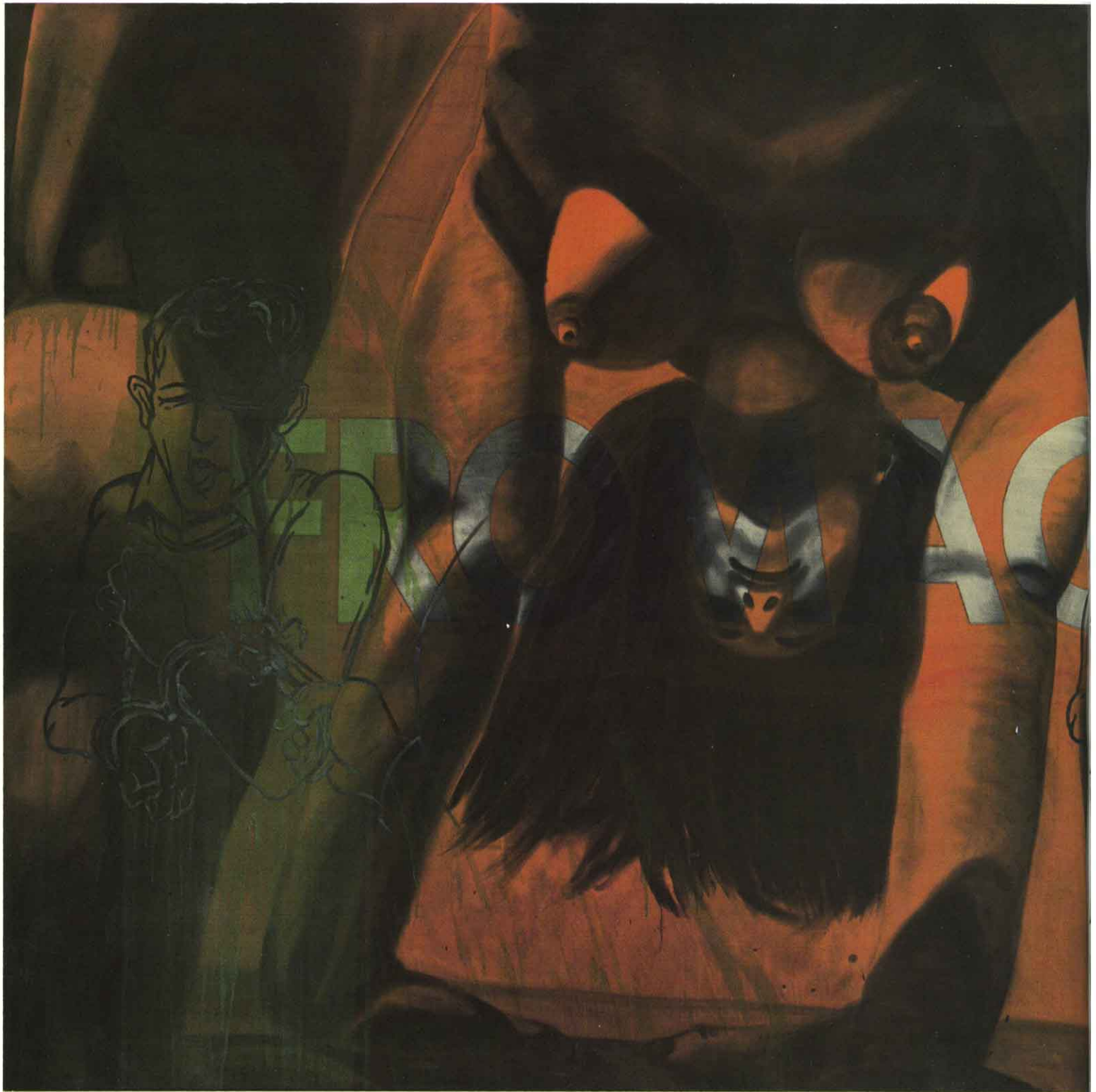


Art in America

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Cover: Philip Johnson's AT&T Building, 1983–84
New York Skyscrapers/Hardship Art/Bonnard's Late Paintings
Morris Graves Retrospective/New Work: Jasper Johns, David Salle
Judd on Art Today/Venice Biennale '84/Books/Review of Exhibitions





David Salle: *What is the Reason for Your Visit to Germany?*, 1984, oil and acrylic on canvas and lead on wood, 96 by 191 1/2 inches. All works this article Mary

The Real Salle

With a willful array of modernist, Pop and porno images, David Salle presents a provocatively subjective world where, according to the author, lust mingles with dread, sublimity with derision, adoration with contempt.



Boone Gallery and Leo Castelli Gallery.

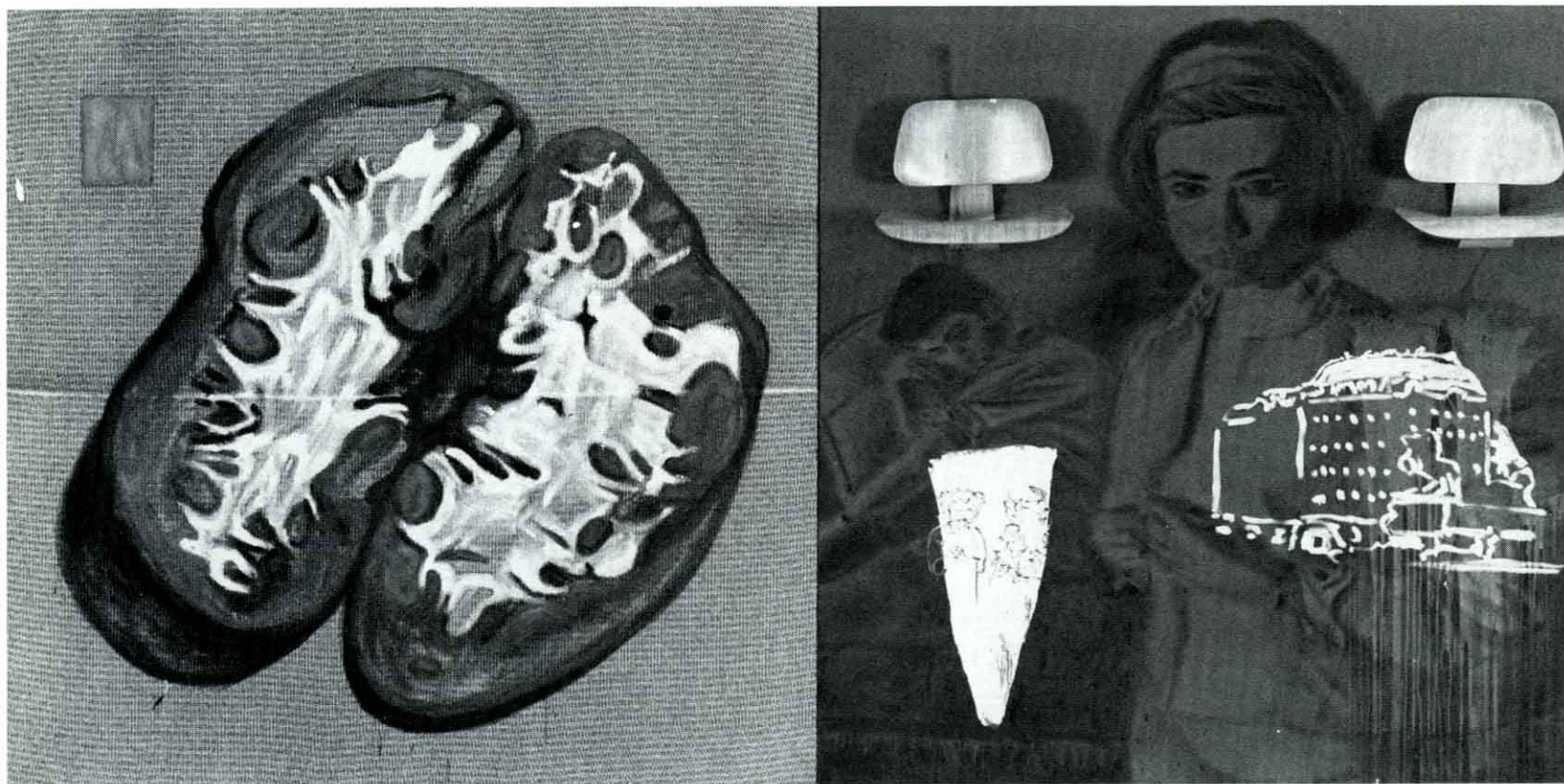
BY PETER SCHJELDAHL

To be despised proves nothing. Even minor artists have been despised. But a characteristic opprobrium salutes the appearance of a major artist, such as David Salle. People who agree on nothing else have been unified in loathing the

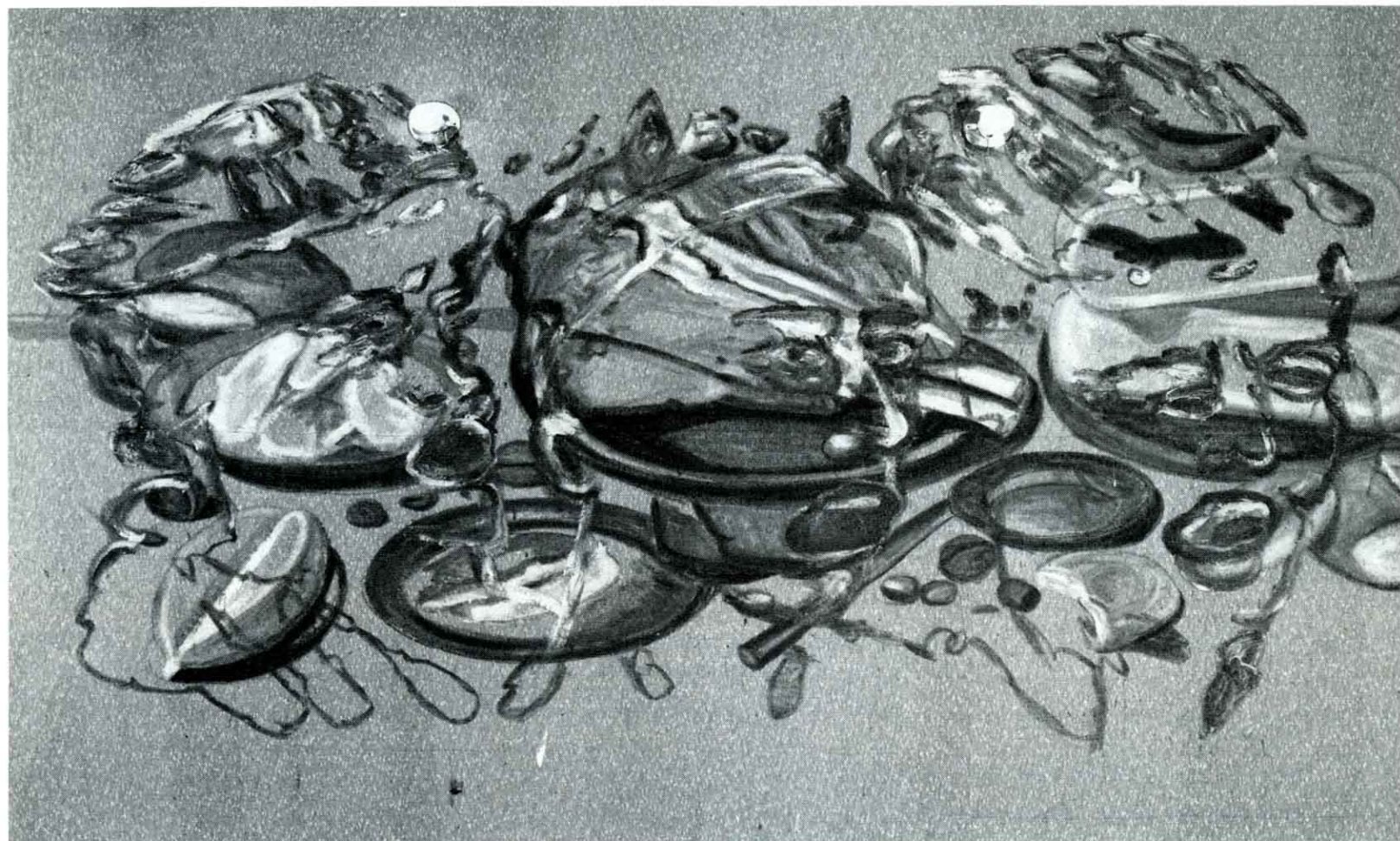
young painter from Kansas. For the left, he is a reactionary renegade, traitor to the "post-studio" vanguard. For the right, he is a vile piece of goods—the "worst" of the new painters, in Hilton Kramer's forthright estimation. The smart line in Europe dubs him an abject plagiarist of Picabia and Polke. Other charges include cynicism (or sentimentality), crassness (or man-

darin sterility), and sexism. The less articulate make do with mutterings of "hype." At least negatively, Salle has been something like all things to all parties, the avatar of each one's bogey.

Contradictory complaints typify the onset of a major art. Such art insults both necessity and freedom, disrupting the given and at the same time narrowing the range of what seems



Brother Animal, 1983, acrylic on canvas and fabric with Eames chairs, 94 by 168 inches.



Portrait of Michael Hurson, 1984, oil on fabric with colored lightbulbs, 86 by 130 inches.

possible. Conservatives hate it for trashing standards, radicals for messing up their plans. Standards are soon jerrybuilt once more, and fresh fulcrums for the lever of subversion present themselves; but the moment of pandemonium, in which efforts to quash the new simply intensify its sensation, is all the more delectable for being fleeting. One may even feel certain misgivings when the moment ends, as it surely has in Salle's case with the triumph of his recent show at Castelli: eleven large paintings and painting-constructions, all extraordinary and some better than anything the artist has done before.

The show was a big hit, in the slightly alarming way art shows can be these days: crowds, heady word-of-mouth, and formidable reviews (notably by Roberta Smith in *The Village Voice* and by Sanford Schwartz in *The New Yorker*). After being chilled, perhaps, by the somewhat bland and tricky works in his show last year at Mary Boone, the climate of art-world opinion about Salle ("the *echt* Post Modernist," in Smith's phrase, and "a new kind of classical master," in Schwartz's) is turning distinctly summery. The peril of a moment like this is that an artist, having been misunderstood, will be understood too quickly, and that negative feelings about him, having long been expressed ignorantly and arrogantly, will be hounded toward sullen and intimidated silence, toppling discourse from one kind of imbalance into another.

Actually, Salle stands little immediate chance of unanimous acceptance. The provocative, sometimes shocking aspects of his art—its unblunted edge of perversity and willfulness—make it anything but embraceable. His ubiquitous use of female nude imagery, some of it grossly sexual (and sexually gross), is an especially durable point of controversy, as may be the art-historical question of whether Salle is a gravedigger of modernist traditions or a resurrector of them. He has been praised or condemned as both, and this is not an argument to be foreclosed lightly.

Keeping an open—that is, a troubled—mind about Salle is more than a dictate of intellectual fairness. It is a recognition of the open and troubled nature of his art, the kind of grinding discomfort he renews in each picture. One may conclude, as I do, that in his best work Salle achieves some sort of esthetic and poetic resolution, but the

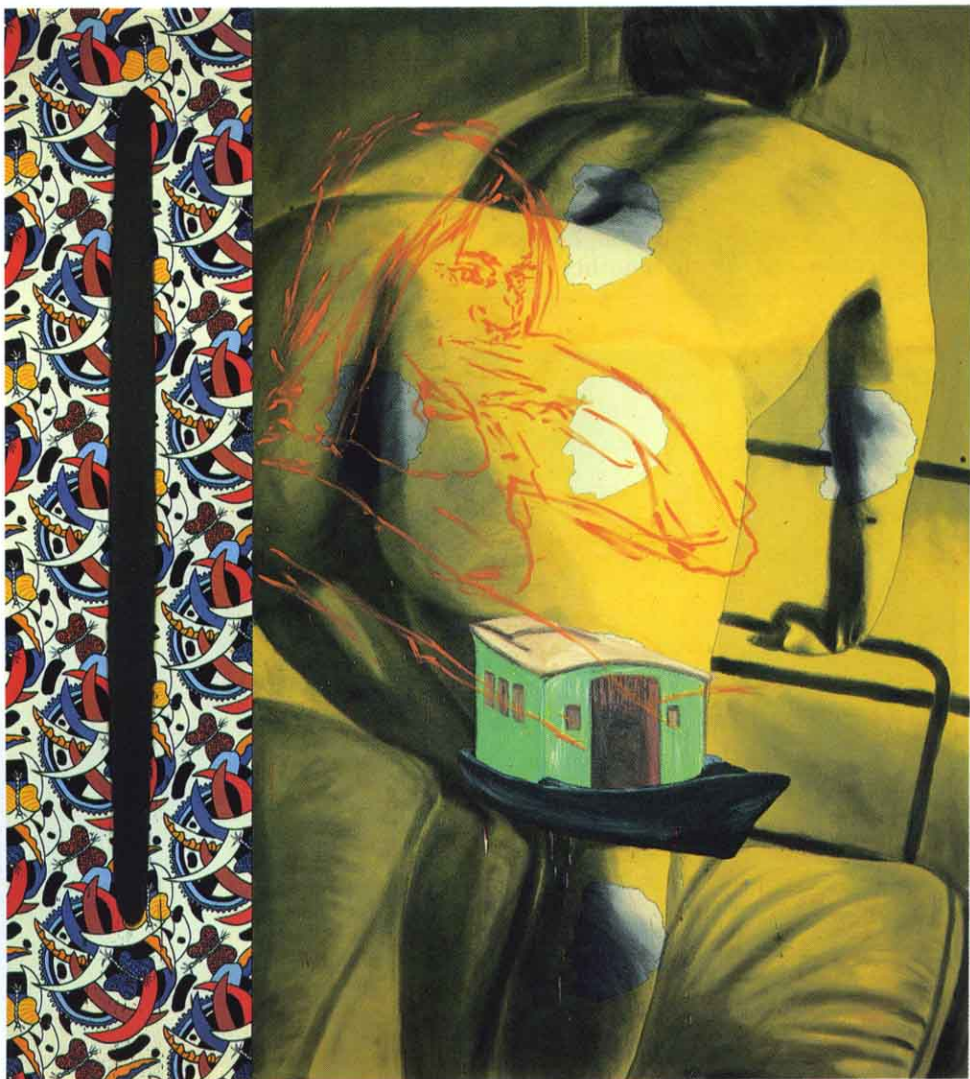
Everything in Salle's art has a prehistory as a sign of some genre, style, sentiment or taste, aromatic with decayed connotations.

resolution is important precisely because its materials are recalcitrant and upsetting.

What do we see when we look at a Salle? Images. Everything in his pictures—a swath of abstract paint-handling or a block-lettered word no less than a nude or an attached Eames chair—has a prehistory as the sign of some genre, style, sentiment, obsession or taste, aromatic (like potpourri)

with decayed connotations. Almost always, the sense of an original context is so obscure, trivial, or exhausted as to be literally inconsiderable. To know the sources of Salle's images, whether in old masters or in old magazines, is to know nothing useful. As everyone can confirm who has attempted it, grasping for specific meaning in Salle's images is as frustrating as trying to pick up a BB while wearing gloves. Such frustration of our normal ways of digesting images is the basis, the psychic ground level, of everything that happens in our experience of Salle's art.

A lot can happen in this experience, if it is willingly and attentively pursued. (Critics of Salle might be categorized according to the stages at which they check out of participation with his work, slamming the door on further understanding.) The essential interplay is between the residual connotations and possible associations of



His Brain, 1984, oil and acrylic on canvas, 117 by 108 inches.

the imagery and its visual deployment, involving minute registration of differences between small and large, drawn and painted, grisaille and overlay, isolated and juxtaposed, close-up and faraway, one color and another, on and on. Inflecting the hypersensitive images, each formal decision in Salle's work has a subtle but palpable emotional consequence. He is constantly changing tones and temperatures like someone fiddling with an amplifier or a thermostat—but his apparatus is nothing so neutral. It is the viewer's consciousness, his or her subjective, inner life.

It is possible, even natural, to resent such attempted manipulations, and I suspect that a sense of outraged autonomy is at the root of the more vehement reactions against Salle's art. The outrage is rarely spelled out, however. It tends to be encoded in rigidly judgmental terms, like "sexism" as a response to Salle's gynecological nudes. Inaptly personifying references are made to "the women" in his paintings, as if those denatured representations (representations of representations) were somehow indistinguishable from people in daily life. The fact is that Salle no more "paints women" than Andy Warhol "painted Marilyn Monroe" or "painted soup cans." He avoids the public domain of Warhol—just as, in another way,

*For Salle reality is
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in the eye and mind.*

he departs from the autobiographical mode of his other major influence, Jasper Johns—but in both cases the subject/object of the art is not an image of reality but the special and equivocal reality of an image.

For Salle, this reality is pervasively and variously erotic, a world of sex in the eye and mind: lust and dread, affection and loneliness, adoration and contempt. The brutality of some of Salle's images is undeniable, but so are the tenderness, awe, and dispassionately scrutinizing tones of others. Taken together, Salle's female images are, beyond a repertoire, a kind of lexicon, no more to be enjoyed or rejected on a selective basis than a dictionary is to be read or banned because it contains dirty words. Come to that, the most indecent of Salle's female images is dignified when compared to the kindest of his self-portraying male ones: a rogues' gallery of often cartooned demons, plug-uglies, and morons. Nor are objects, materi-

als, and art styles spared. All present sliding scales of effect and affect, from near sublimity to yacking derision.

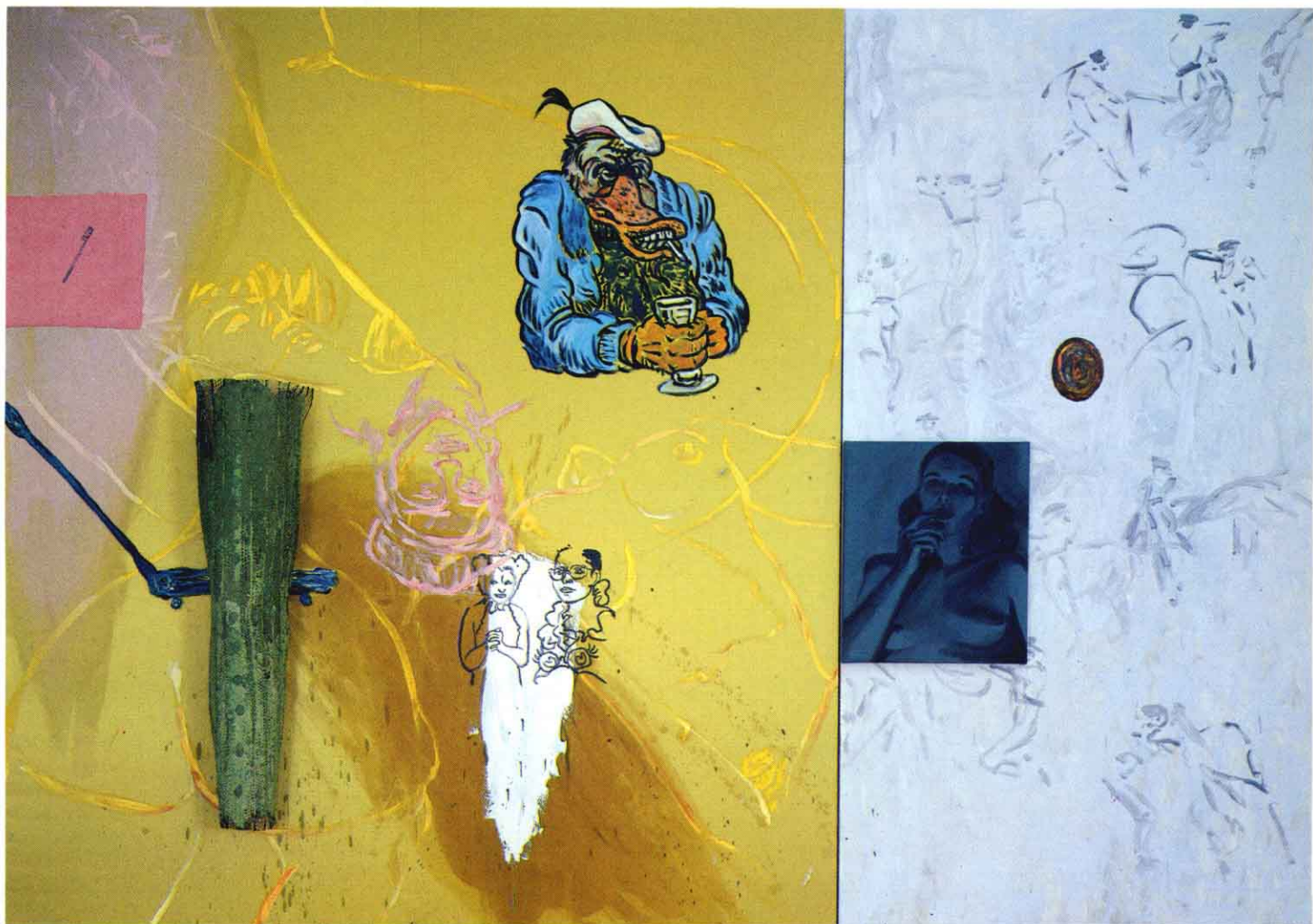
Not that the emotional valence is ever precise. In compensation, as it were, for importuning and seducing one to respond, Salle allows indefinite latitude to interpretation. He leaves one alone, though alone with a strident and exacerbating object. The reading of his pictures must—liberatingly, I believe—be personal to each viewer, and personal in an unusually full, intense, and unlimited sense. Salle's work is like a text so designed that it cannot be read in any other way than that recommended by Paul Valéry: "One only reads well that which one reads with some quite personal purpose. It may be to acquire some power. It can be out of hatred for the author."

What Is the Reason for Your Visit to Germany?, 1984, is a two-panel masterpiece. Its larger, canvas panel, stained orange, is dominated by the monumental grisaille image of a standing nude bent over and facing out between her spread legs—legs like massive columns, breasts like bombs. Her hair cascades lyrically; her expression is hieratic, uninvolved. Overlaying each leg is an identical cartoony drawing of Lee Harvey Oswald taking Jack Ruby's bullet. An acidic green wash is splashed across one Oswald; a palette-knifed paint tornado obscures the face of the other. The word "FROMAGE," in dropped-out block letters, spans the canvas. The smaller panel is plywood mostly covered with a sheet of lead pounded down over a saxophone, which shows in relief.

In a general way, *What Is the Reason* may be about power or oppression. Certainly it is "powerful," with its brute symmetries, assaultive images, and literal, light-drinking darkness. (Fully six floodlights, trained on it at Castelli, could not dispel its Rothkoviean gloom.) Stylistically, it suggests an elegant synthesis of Abstract-Expressionist, Pop, and Color-Field esthetics violated by scabrous content, like a cruise liner commandeered for use as a troop ship. I felt, in its presence, a sense of unspecified calamity—whether in past or future, rued or dreaded (or both). "Fromage"? Vaguely racy in context, the word takes on a funny but disquieting, maniacal inflection, as of a wryly guttural obscenity or threat.



The Face in the Column, 1983,
acrylic on canvas, 75 by 100 inches.



B.A.M.F.V., 1983, oil on canvas and satin, 101 by 145 inches.

What do I get out of this? What does it do for me? It gives me a scarcely believing, grateful feeling of being accompanied in shadowy recesses of myself, places of inchoate desire and fear intimate without being exactly my own. An eerie detachment or formality rules this regression, as of a tour guide in Hell: Over here you will observe the Saxophone Memorial to Cancelled Joy, and there goes a dust devil of Somebody's Violent Emotion. The Assassin Assassinated Replication Gizmo, as you see, is functioning smoothly. Her? Don't mind Her, or do think of Her as, perhaps, the weather here. (Rather oppressively hot, I'm afraid.) You might even say She puts you in the picture, or not. It's as you choose. (Say "cheese," please.)

Off-putting until one relaxes with it, the artificiality of communication in Salle's work—the tour-guide quality—signals the priority he gives to *will*. His very seriousness is willful, deliberately forced—deliberation being the

operative term. He does not lean on some criterion or other of "authenticity," the merest possibility of which meets, in his art, an abyssal skepticism (as in Johns or Samuel Beckett). He is not hostile to transcendent value—not a nihilist—but he is definitely indifferent, because his ambition to be an artist is not predicated on transcendent values. A dandy to his bones, he will trust only the empirical: sexuality and other *ur*-stuffs of subjectivity, kept apart from any object, and the nuts-and-bolts mechanics of esthetic response.

"Technique" is part of Salle's subject matter, in a sense more radical, more capaciously and profoundly ironic than that of Warhol's silk-screening, Johns's "sincere" brushwork, or Frank Stella's formalist engineering. Salle handles paint marvelously, for instance, without there being any "Sallean" manner of paint-handling. The same goes for his increasingly virtuosic drawing and excruciating color. Skills, as much as

images and styles, function in his work like a chorus of ventriloquists' dummies, each saying its patently phony but captivating piece. There is, almost, no such thing as David Salle the artist—a fact that has brought all would-be imitators of him to instant grief. In just one procedure does Salle seem directly expressive, as well as something of a genius: composition. What goes where, and with what, in the building of a picture is a question he obviously addresses with total absorption, though also in that spirit of playfulness without which art is a mistake.

No conjunction in a good Salle is without tantalizing, galvanic, ramifying effect. A simple example is the halving, in *The Face in the Column*, 1983, of the head of a grisaille nude lying in bed with the overlaid drawing of a nude seating herself on a toilet. An obscene joke is suggested so forcefully that one might imagine, at first, that



Tennyson, 1983, oil and acrylic on canvas, 78 by 117 inches.

it constitutes the meaning of the image, but it quickly dawns on one—if one has not simply turned away in disgust—that there is no “the image” here. There are *two* images, utterly different in every way except reference to the female: grisaille in dark green/drawn in white with a fume of purple, modeled/flat, monumental/dematerialized, somber/bawdy, dreaming/“dreamy.” The composition is like a grip holding one’s hand to a live wire as various jolts course through it. The coherence of one’s response breaks down under the onslaught—ultimately reconstituting itself, I think, in an identification with the imposing and ambiguous nude in bed, whose “mood” becomes the picture’s poetic center of gravity. The final, unresolved sensation, for me, is like a hypnotic buzz or drone in the mind, an egoless and bodiless erotic vibration.

The way Salle’s art “happens” in the consciousnesses of viewers, who in a sense create it, marks him as an inheritor of Minimalist and Conceptualist esthetics. His feat—in this way

similar to that of the otherwise much different Anselm Kiefer—has been to reinvent painting on terms faithful to the rigorous implications of the late-’60s avant-garde, notably its definition of the art object as a phenomenon rather than an entity. No less than Minimal sculpture, Salle’s painting is frankly theatrical, functioning in real-time relation to the viewer. One confronts it as one does a performance, self-consciously and with a sense of risk—with no guarantee that the ensuing experience will be positive, only that one will have an experience of some kind. A taste for adventure is requisite.

Consider Salle at his most spectacular and operatic, in *B.A.M.F.V.*, 1983, another two-panel blockbuster. Deployed on the pale-green, satiny ground of the large panel are partial nudes sketched with suavely speedy yellow and pink lines; a pink painting-within-a-painting of a toothbrush; a leg-shaped attachment in wire mesh encrusted with green paint; a small white tornado on which is drawn a funny couple, the woman costumed as

an animal and the man perhaps wearing a dress (The World’s Most Embarrassing Parents?); and, dominating everything, the stridently modeled and colored cartoon of a depraved, sniggering sailor-duck. The smaller panel is thickly painted white with wet-in-wet sketches of bullfight scenes and a tiny, multicolored, impasto swirl; attached is a small iridescent-green canvas on which a grisaille nude touches her mouth (a gesture, suggesting “hunger” in sign language, repeated on the other panel, and elsewhere in the show).

No other picture of Salle’s has been so heady or high-keyed as *B.A.M.F.V.*, evoking (or else imposing) a consciousness aware to the point of distraction, even panic. Banging light around, the painting overwhelms the eye as its contents overwhelm the mind: a surfeit that, one feels, would add up to something—perhaps something momentous—if only the human sensorium were not so sluggish and frail. It is an ambiguously cruel picture. The ambiguity consists in whether its cruelty is suffered by artist and

viewer alike or inflicted by the former on the latter. This oscillation—between compassion, perhaps, and hatred—raises the stakes of the dynamic stalemate reached in all Salle's art: promise of meaning/frustration of same. Like some horrible machine for grinding out feelings—like the Soul?—*B.A.M.F.V.* whirrs on without respite or end.

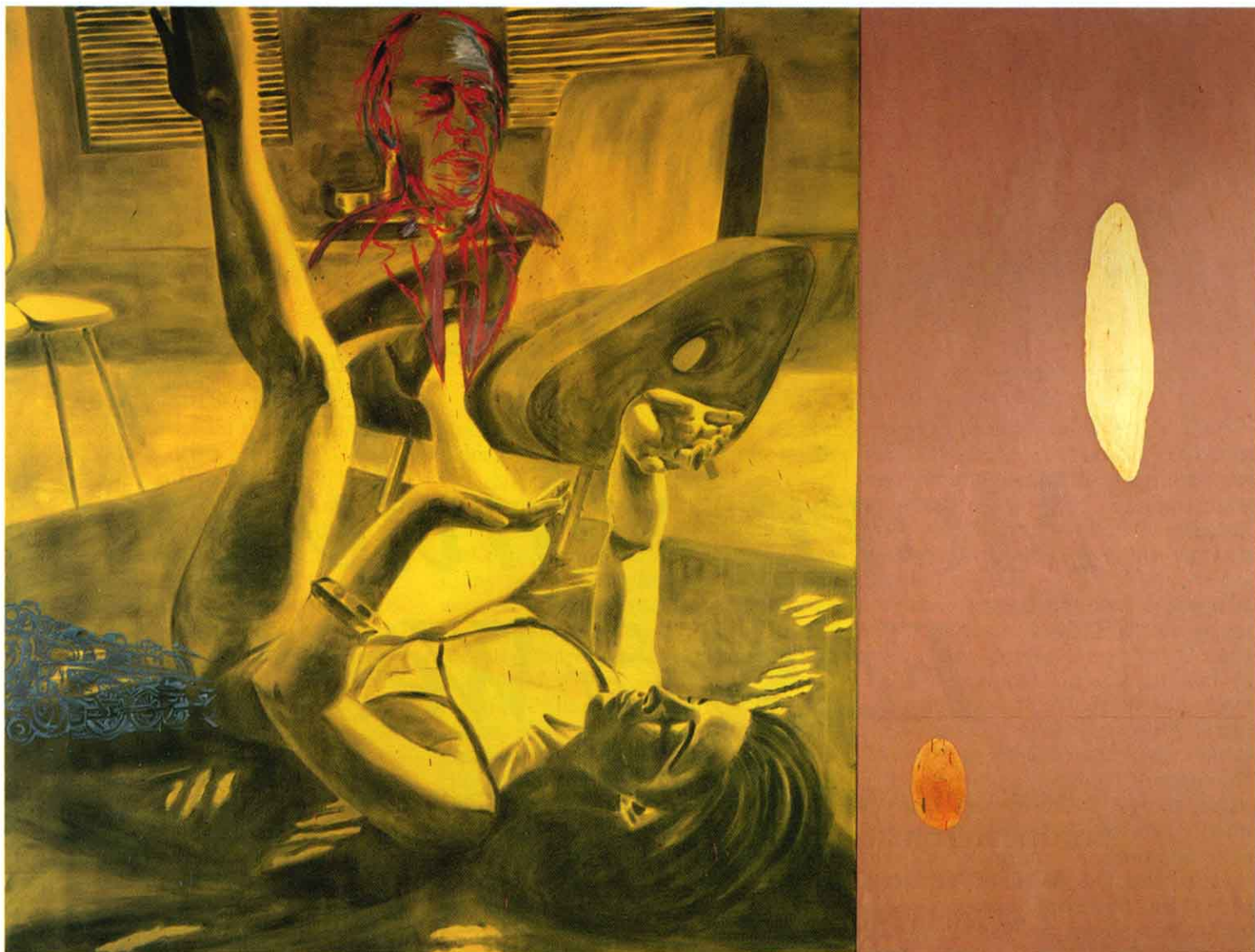
In comparison, *Tennyson*, 1983, is a contemplatively quiet and, while enigmatic, unusually accessible picture—a chamber play—though one with a possible, cunning parallel. A sensual nude, posed on a beach (in the soft-core, “art-photography” way Salle likes), inhabits an acrid yellow-brown field inflected with red and aqua patches of Clyfford Still-like brushwork and, framing the block-lettered title, what look to be water stains, their effect inexpressibly

The final sensation of a Salle painting is like a hypnotic buzz or drone in the mind, an egoless and bodiless vibration.

nasty. An ear carved in a block of wood is affixed to the canvas. I think the ear is a rebus, and that it says “Listen!” To what? The first two letters of “TENNYSON” are filled in with color. Say them: “T-E,” tee-hee, a titter. A laugh on whom? I am reminded of *B.A.M.F.V.*'s dirty duck and feel close to the crux of something, some burning chemistry of shame and glee—an aching adolescent gestalt, perhaps. Is the duck a self-portrait? Is a giggle The Master's Voice?

These are questions without simple answers, and irrelevant, besides, to the ultimate, artistic significance of Salle's achievement. But there are moments in the apprehension of his art—like that of all major artists, who invariably secrete themselves in the receptacles of their work—when a startling sensation occurs of feeling about everything, about life, with another's heart. I submit that this experience is *never* agreeable, but it may be what gives major art its special utility: as a particular pattern of subjectivity widely experienced, an initiation linking individuals ever after in depth. As an attitude, the pattern need not be—and, reality being what it is, may never honestly be—admirable. It doesn't matter one bit. What matters is always and only the real. □

Author: Peter Schjeldahl is a poet and critic living in New York.



Midday, 1984, oil and acrylic on canvas, 114 by 150 inches.