

THE ART WORLD

David Salle

THE eleven paintings David Salle recently showed at the Leo Castelli gallery are very large—a number of them are in the range of eight feet high by twelve feet wide—but they wear their monumentality lightly. These collagelike pictures, which frequently include objects affixed to their surfaces, are so beautifully composed and yet seem to have been assembled with such nonchalant speed that they're elating. Looking at one of them, you feel that you have stepped into the artist's mind, you're with him as he makes his moves, and the whole operation is as simple as casually rearranging the objects on a desk. Salle (pronounced "Sally") has generally been grouped with a number of American and European painters who have come to the fore in the past few years and who use the figure in their work. Labeled "neo-expressionists," they have attempted to bring a romantic and often impassioned note into contemporary art, and to make paintings that encompass references to history, to comic strips, to old and new art. Salle has a lot in common with these artists, but his new pictures,

which were made within the last year and are larger in size and weightier in appearance than any he has done before, make clear what his previous work suggested: that the "expressionist" label doesn't really fit him. No label does. His work is as emotionally full as that of any current American or European painter, yet in spirit he is, at thirty-one, closer to being a new kind of classical master.

Salle seems to think about a painting the way a formalist might. That is, as a flat plane on which the artist arranges different elements—some of which recede, some of which push forward—to create a whole that is balanced but pulses. In a way, Salle redoes formalist art with an apparently autobiographical array of images—sexy, satirical, ironic ones. The backgrounds of his pictures are often softly brushed-in monochromatic drawings of figures. He places over these backgrounds, among other things, deft line sketches; figures from cartoons; clusters of geometric shapes (which recall the art and design of the thirties); and patches of smeary, expressionistic brushwork (which recall the fifties).

He places words over images, draws in a figure sideways over one that is upside down, and joins in the same picture a panel painted on canvas with one painted on, say, upholstery fabric. Salle makes us keenly aware of how one texture or color plays off another, and he has a sure instinct for how much variety a picture can take, so when we spot something that seems to be a slip or a miscalculation—a stain on a canvas, for instance—we can't help seeing it as another element in the composition.

"B. A. M. F. V." is probably his most elegantly poised picture. It brings together, to list a few elements, shimmering gray-on-gray pastiches of fifties line drawings of a matador swirling his cape; an unsettling portrait of a ravenous and goonish cartoon duck; a melancholy little picture of a nude woman smoking; a bushlike wire-mesh object painted a pale olive green; voluptuous yellow-orange line drawings of the female nude; and a squarish slab of dense pink oil paint, casually laid on a smear of thinly applied pink. Painted, in part, on an apricot-colored sheet of satin, "B. A. M. F. V." has the all-over composition—and presence—of Renaissance tapestries. These tapestries often presented to their audiences an overview of contemporary life in its most up-to-the-minute appearance. Salle's painting doesn't give us the appearance of contemporary life; but, shuffling vaguely risqué scenes and objects with not-so-charming cartoon characters, and suffusing both of them with boudoir and candy colors that we know were once considered tasteful and stylish and now seem amusingly exotic, he seems to capture the early eighties. He shows how the most up-to-the-minute thing about contemporary life can often be its enthusiasm for the recent past.

Salle's pictures don't have the public nature of most tapestries, though. He creates an immediate tension with his audience, because he makes us want to decipher these puzzlelike paintings, and we also sense that he



"Aren't you heartened by the return of elegance and good manners?"

may have a take-it-or-leave-it attitude toward those puzzles. If you are familiar with twentieth-century—and especially contemporary—art, you put a lot of mental energy into these pictures almost involuntarily. Registering the components, you're first a skeptic, then a passive enumerator, then a warmed-up partner. You say to yourself, "Oh, that carving of an ear affixed to the corner, that's Jasper Johns. . . . The lit light bulbs, they're just early Jim Dine. . . . I know that face, isn't it from an Oskar Kokoschka? . . . The way he uses words on top of images, Bruce Nauman did that. . . . Those legs from tables and chairs sticking off the side of the canvas, surely he's parodying Louise Nevelson. . . . That duck isn't Donald Duck—which duck is it? A duck from an actual cartoon? . . . Isn't the way he draws with one color over a single-color ground reminiscent of Raoul Dufy? . . . Why do some of his little line drawings make me think of 'Leave It to Beaver'? . . . Doesn't his sense of glamour owe something to Alex Katz, and isn't he also showing the tensions that underlie that glamour? . . . Isn't that drawing of a man doubling up in pain taken from the image of Lee Harvey Oswald being shot by Jack Ruby? Doesn't Salle look like that? Is he saying he's an Oswald?"

Salle's method of layering one image on top of another isn't new to art. The Cubists did a version of this seventy years ago, and there are no doubt earlier examples. But Salle makes it feel new. Perhaps only in movies have we seen something like the gentle and diaphanous effect he gets, of different images simultaneously drifting back into and rising up from other images. It's television, though, far more than movies, that his work seems to be saturated with. His method of constructing a picture recalls the way on TV in any given fifteen-minute period images flash by that are different from one another in texture and importance and yet come to seem equal in weight and value. The relationship between his often pale and ghostly large background drawings and the brighter, juicier, more densely painted images and objects that float over—and literally pop out from—them is comparable to the relationship between a TV show and a commercial break.

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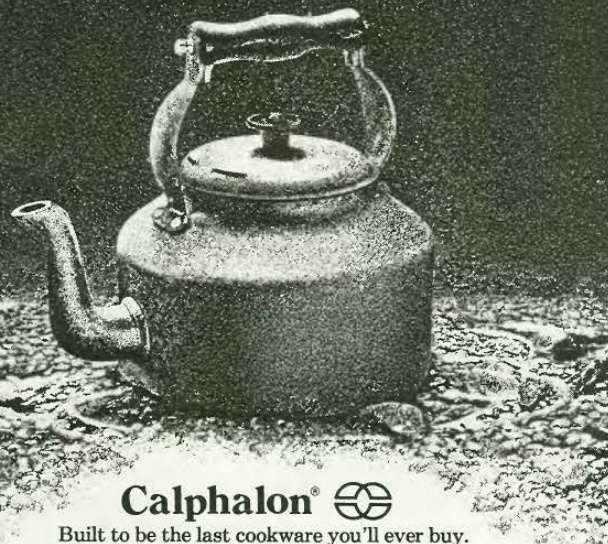
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be signalling that it's time for a cultural commercial. Some members of his audience may believe, though, that the reference is to Jasper Johns, who put the name Tennyson across the bottom of a 1958 abstract gray painting. Johns' picture is probably, in part, an ironic joke on Tennyson's being a kind of "good gray poet," but his image is solemn. With its stately lettering, the painting resembles a grave marker with the deceased's name at the bottom instead of at the top. When Salle writes the poet's name across the center of his picture, he appears to say that he himself wants to be linked with Johns and that he believes his painting-assemblages are part of an influential tradition in contemporary American art. Here he's announcing that he has joined the club. Spelling out Tennyson in enormous letters, and in a sans-serif type that would be perfect for a sneaker ad, he may be kidding Johns, too; he might be saying to the painter, "Must everything be veiled and portentous?" Or perhaps Salle's point is merely "The Victorian poet and a nude on a beach don't go together, right? So here they are."

David Salle is such a masterly mimic, and he can make his audience so suspicious of his motives, that you feel you are on thin ice in seeing themes in his work—even in talking about him as a painter. In a sense, he's more aptly described as the inventor of a great picture-making device. Though some of his figures and faces are drawn freehand, many are taken from magazines and books. He projects the images onto a canvas (or whatever he's working on), and fills in, in shades of gray, with a fairly dry brush—or sometimes stipples on, in a single color—the enlarged picture. His cartoon "spots" and delicate line drawings are also often taken from printed sources, mechanically projected, and traced. He has the touch and eye of a born painter-decorator, though, and that's why his pictures work. He has a genie's intuition for knowing which color to place over another color so both will jump. And he stays in the mind as a figurative artist, too.

"Brother Animal" is one of Salle's most powerful "figure" paintings. It is made up of two adjoining panels (which together are about eight feet high and fourteen feet wide). The picture on the left is of two large, amorphous shapes. Painted in red and yellow, they may be lungs, or pieces of shad roe, or ornate bedroom slippers—or just shapes. Whatever they are, they

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seem both pliant and firm, and cast dense shadows. The painting on the right shows, on a dark-blue background, a brushed-in drawing of a girl who is either buttoning up or taking off her shirt. In the distance is a dark-haired fellow with his arm outstretched, looking back at her. He's a bit crestfallen, and she's pensive; she might be looking at herself in a mirror, thinking about the encounter they have had or will be having. Attached to this canvas (from behind) are two blond Charles Eames plywood chairs, which are placed high up and to the sides, like candelabra flanking a fireplace. (The legs have been removed.) The picture is so large that from almost any distance the curvy chairs appear surprisingly small and delicate; from ten feet or so they become flashes of light on the shadowy blue-black ground. A third element is an image of a building, placed on the right of the canvas. Drawn on top of the dark blue, in a glistening pink, and with a squirmy line that one might see used to decorate a cake, it suggests a grand and glamorous place at night—perhaps a hotel.

What is the image of the couple doing with the ambiguous shapes, the chairs, and the bubbly pink sketch? What do they add up to? It's hard to say, yet these elements feel right together. The image of the couple looks as if it were taken from a still from a tacky summer-romance movie or a TV soap opera, and it ought to be banal. But, treated as if it meant no more than the shapes or the chairs, it is unexpectedly imposing. We feel that a moment everyone has lived through and not thought about much—that moment on a date when one partner retreats—has been presented in an ultimately simplified way. And the chairs, which cast shadows on the canvas, suggest the room this scene takes place in. They're oddly protective; they're a bit like the trees in a romantic forest scene, which surround and darken the faces of the unhappy lovers.

"Brother Animal" doesn't have the snap or the formal unity of, say, "B. A. M. F. V." Yet "Brother Animal" holds us longer, not only because a longer look is needed to make the parts cohere but because the image of the people who are clearly tied together—yet are placed with a gulf between them—dramatizes the sense of dependency and unconnectedness which pervades Salle's art. In his work, images take on life because they're seen in relation to other images. Yet no im-

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age, no matter how pale, ever loses its individual color and texture.

Salle has been thought of as one of the more cerebral of the new American and European painters, and his pictures do seem dispassionate at first. There is a sombreness, even a bleakness, in his art, though—it comes out indirectly. Telling us that, say, a strip of decorative fabric or a cartoon vignette can count for as much as a realistic drawing of a nude, he's saying that everything is equally absorbing to him—and he implies that nothing commands his total allegiance. His work has such an overriding sense of formal grace that you can miss the fact that in his pictures faces are often drained, bodies don't have any pep and are turned in on themselves. His nudes, whose legs are sometimes spread, are sexy, sometimes even coarse, and he no doubt wants to challenge his audience with these elegant parodies of girlie-magazine photographs. These drowsily accommodating dishes, though—and the tough number in heels in "Midday"—are only some of the ways he shows women. In paintings here and in previous exhibitions, his women also appear in quiet domestic moments and in battered and indrawn states. (Men generally have a secondary role; they're seen in the distance, or they take the form of wizened or pathetic or donkeyish cartoon characters.) Salle has made some of the most sensual pictures in recent American art, yet his women are literally seen in the background and are dry, washy, colorless. The combination of desire and affection—and intangibility—is his special note. His pictures present a world where ideas and objects are bright and solid, and people are mirages.

In "Portrait of Michael Hurson" Salle seems to make a joke out of this, and also indicates that his view may be changing. The painted image, which takes up most of the picture's space, is a still-life of food—done in browns, a copper-tan, bright yellow, and green—over and through which are drawn, in a dark blue, three stark, primitive, open-mouthed faces (none of which resemble the artist Michael Hurson). Above the still-life, sticking out through the fabric on which the picture is painted, are actual red and blue light bulbs, which are lit. They beam out "Idea! Idea!" The light bulbs are funny, but they seem a little incidental. This is the only picture in the show where Salle doesn't play off a cool, removed kind of painting with paint-

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ing that is brighter and hotter; virtually every mark is emphatic and hot. It's possible, of course, that he is merely parodying painterly verve. Yet this picture is also different in structure from the others. He doesn't make every part of it, even the distant corners, equally balanced; there is a real velocity—a centeredness—to the composition. We take in the utensils and pieces of food, and the faces that are laced in and out of them, the way we'd watch a roller coaster racing through the loops of a pretzel-shaped track.

The Hurson painting is thrilling—you're unprepared for the energy it radiates. Complete with a lemon, a chop, a round of cheese, and butter biscuits, this large picture has the mixture of confidence and belligerence that ten years ago an American artist would have brought to an earthwork. Salle's chosen theme, so far, seems to be modern eroticism, but he appears to want to redo everything with his picture-making devices—or, at least, you want him to. A viewer can leave this show almost as excited about Salle's future work as about the work he has just seen. After that chop and those biscuits, you may think, God, what will he do with a tree? —SANFORD SCHWARTZ

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