

# ARTFORUM

FEBRUARY 1987 \$6.50 / CAN \$8

I N T E R N A T I O N A L



# HARLEQUINADE FOR AN EMPTY ROOM: ON DAVID SALLE

LISA LIEBMANN

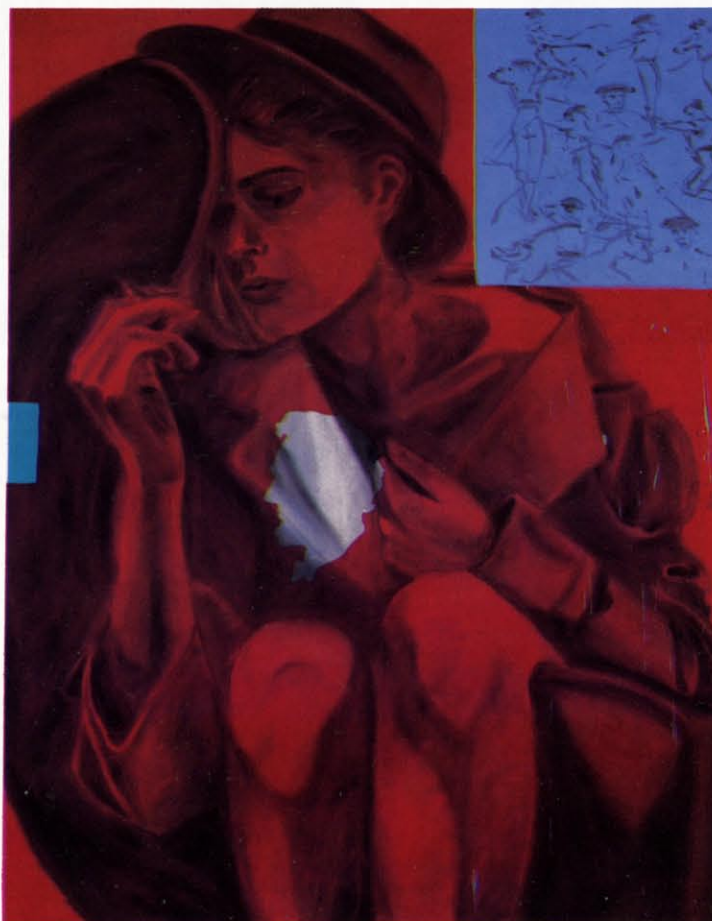
A close friend of mine, a lapsed Midwesterner in New York, once said that he could always detect other Midwesterners, however well camouflaged, however suited they might be to the small patches of sky and tight corners of the Northeast or Europe, by a certain little emptiness holding forth at the core of their being. This is an all-purpose zone of absence. It can work interchangeably and even simultaneously as receiver, transmitter, projector, screen, filter, cushion, and psychological room to spare, one protected by a lock. To put words in my friend's mouth, it replaces the traditional chiaroscuro of the soul as deep identity of the self,

waiting rooms—for conjecture, a suggestion reinforced by frequent inclusions of actual furniture and decorative objects, and by the leitmotif of his many and quite lovingly depicted rooms—*salle*, after all, means a big room.

The mixed and overlapping metaphors of fields and screens are never exhausted when it comes to Salle, his work, and his career. Salle was born in Norman, Oklahoma, a character away from normal, and he grew up in Wichita, Kansas, which, mythologically speaking, is even more normal than Norman. After attending the recently founded California Institute of the Arts—then the kind of way station that Black Mountain College was after World War II—he came to New York, where he began to make installations and show paintings in the then very glamorous context of alternative spaces. This is roughly the archetype for the trajectory of making it in America: from farm country to tinsel town to cosmopolis. It is somehow a fitting twist that the experience of seeing a Salle show is like seeing a movie in which the screen itself is the star.

The words “field” and “screen” apply directly, indeed could loosely define, the physical, formal, and theoretical distinctions and fluctuations of mainstream postwar American painting, a history that Salle has carefully screened. (In brief, and to this viewer: Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and Barnett Newman painted screens, whereas Hans Hofmann and Willem de Kooning were all over the field. By and large, Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg are both screeners. Frank Stella sows and reaps acres of sometimes hilly field. All of Pop is quintessentially onscreen. Morris Louis, Helen Frankenthaler, Kenneth Noland, and Larry Poons stain or color fields by screening paint, but Ellsworth Kelly tills hard, flat, fenced ground. Minimal art is of course often out in the field, most often quite maximally, while Conceptual art has to do with the inner screen. And so forth.) The detonations, over the last seven or so years, of art, and of the commercial, political, critical conundrums surrounding it, could almost be described as the noise of a war between elusive projectionists and distracted field goalies, a war in which no battle lines can be drawn, and about which many players, undecided, keep switching sides. There are now regiments groping their way through Chinese boxes of ever more elaborately refracted sources and meanings, as if searching for the void of some ultimately corrupt night or the void of total purity, most finding that boxes, simply, can be infinitely small or large. A smaller platoon is prospecting for some sort of esthetic DNA. And then, of course, there are the traditional green berets defending “quality” against the encroachments of fanfare, interest, life, and art.

Salle, perhaps alone among topical and high-ranking figures of the day, is *hors de combat*. His paintings are at once exquisitely discontented and



David Salle, *The Life of a Shrug*,  
1983, oil and acrylic on canvas,  
104 x 80". Private collection.

and, he concluded, this metaphysical Midwestern toolshed-cum-screening room equips its hosts beautifully for outside turbulence. The heart of David Salle's work bears this imprimatur of the prairie. For all their sophistications of surface, their hoops of reference, their allusions, puns, techniques, ingredients, for all their pungency of content, Salle's paintings are at base as receptive as the flat expanses that literally and perhaps also figuratively sustain them. Fields and screens are the active, visible, and coexistent agents for all of Salle's work, wherein, always, imagistic veils are layered onto chromatic grounds. His paintings are foyers—

imply erotic availability or insidious avocation, Salle is quite spectacularly unconcerned with the material of flesh and the more erogenous senses, except for sight, which in many of our own pornographic plots is probably the most potent force. He is devoted to surfaces and their composition, to the emphatically visible, and while material abounds in his work, it is culled as if from the 24-hour machine at one's local branch of the image bank, in whatever one's domestic currency.

Salle is certainly involved with associative complexities, but not in any Baudelairean sense of "correspondence." His paintings are, in effect, counterlibidinal, and make few direct appeals to the senses of touch or smell. They propose an intense but generalized aura of subjectivity. With the exception of one or two rather desultory glimpses in his work of male nudes, he does not depict or inflect genitalia (or, in most cases, their alter egos, faces) but merely indicates their generic whereabouts in the shadows. The female figures are incorporeal, unfinished, not conceived for any kind of close-range contact. Almost all of Salle's work, in fact, is best seen at a remove, and, in exhibitions, his paintings tend to be most effective when given acoustical latitude and a lot of room up front. (At the recent exhibition initiated by the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia, for instance, where they were crammed and cacophonous, their frequency was garbled; an expanded version of the exhibition is now at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. While the Whitney's exhibition was not yet installed at this writing, this institution has in the past been more sensitive to Salle's use of air time.) In "Notes on David Salle" (also in the Edition Bischofberger book, a cornucopia of Salle testimonials) Robert Rosenblum makes an analogy between Salle's female figures and Courbet's nudes, and the analogy is well-drawn for the contrast it allows. One has but to take one look at any Courbet subject (female, male, nude, clothed, or for that matter inanimate) or, among living artists, at any gritty rendering by Lucian Freud (whose pictorial frontality and eye for the decay of age and worldly juxtapositions—as reflected, for instance, in *Portrait of a Man*, 1981–82, of the industrialist and collector Baron Thyssen with a partial view of one of his paintings, a Watteau—may have infused the mood of some of Salle's work), to see how inexorably, inviolably clean and disciplined these females, and paintings, are.

Even an aggressive piece of work such as *Schoolroom*, 1985, in which a pair of grisaille buttocks are met and buttressed by a foreshortened foot, conjures an atmosphere of erotic tension more like that present in one of Degas' rehearsal rooms—erotic tension wrought by remote control, by the artist as ballet master—than to any climate associated with or likely to pervade boudoir, bed, or brothel. Salle's erotics have a great deal more to do with work, au-

thority, and effectiveness than with either pain or pleasure. In paintings such as *Gericault's Arm*, and even more pointedly *The Tulip Mania of Holland* and *Fooling with Your Hair*, all from 1985, the model is put through her paces almost as if literally at the barre, and in stages of meticulous dishabille that more than slightly suggest current, meticulously disheveled fashions in dancers' rehearsal gear. Furthermore, Salle punctuates these exercises with staccato beats—strict, formal successions and flash appearances of African bodies, Italian lamps, striped fabric, Giacometti figures, and Géricault limbs occur on these canvases—in the rap-rap-rap rhythm of the wooden classroom sticks wielded by many an old-school Russian ballet mistress demanding perfection. As Rosenblum points out elsewhere in "Notes on David Salle," the thrice-repeated, underlying image in a triptych called *Abandoned Shells*, 1984, is a well-known photograph of Balanchine rehearsing, and there is cause to wonder whether Salle did not put it there as a kind of perverse, idealized, or wishful self-portrait. Like Balanchine, like Degas, a little like the fashion-photographer protagonist in Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blow-Up* (1966), Salle clicks into the poetics of regimentation, and the art of self-denial, with a will to control. His sometimes supposed "perversity" has nothing to do with violence toward or exploitation of female subjects; rather, Salle is off on the daunting mission of fully appropriating some order in culture hinged on the "feminine principle," and of bending these ideals—sometimes literally bending *her*—into a more chaotic position within his own excruciatingly delicate, serenely uncomfortable balletics.

Salle, like a number of other major artists of his vintage, is terrifically prolific; over the last seven years he has made scores of paintings, watercolors, and prints, and designed the sets and costumes for three full-scale theater productions. To compare the earliest works involving imagistic overlay such as *Rob Him of Pleasure* or *I can Even Personify*, from 1979, with a recent painting like *Dusting Powders*, 1986, is to note a splashy advancement of technical skill, surface complexity, and formal ambition. A sweeping overview of his work will, nonetheless, reveal a remarkable consistency of what are commonly called production values.

One senses clearly that any given piece is conceptualized, plotted, assessed as it progresses and fiddled with as it nears completion, that he works with the headset, as it were, of a writer, a director, or indeed, as some detractors have suggested, of an art director. Salle is a brilliant designer. Many of his more spectacular concoctions—among these I would include *How to Use Words as a Powerful Aphrodisiac*, 1982, with its orange, magazine-vérité raised fist, its center panel of bumptious green mechanical-pony riders and overpainted Picassoid sneer, and its truncated side panel in *faux* Jean-Paul

Riopelle; the elegiacally nasty *B.A.M.F.V.*, 1983, featuring a boozing, mutant cartoon duck, poison-yellow satin with flesh tones, chicken-wire protrusion, and various bilious sketches; *What is the Reason for your Visit to Germany*, 1984, where a doubled-over nude, lead-covered saxophone, and cheesy, abstract excretion (Salle is especially cutting in his use of Riopelle) build to a crescendo whose climax is the very rude, stenciled "FROMAGE" comment; and *Muscular Paper*, 1985, with its fun-house visions of acrobatic suspension acts and overarticulated physiques—are veritable monuments to designerly hubris. They are improbably, hilariously, grandly obnoxious designs, with ill tempers and ugly mugs that could only be countenanced by the selective indulgences of art. (From this particular key of Salle's, Jeff Koons seems recently to have taken a cue to inspired if monosyllabic effect. This is also the place to mention that Salle's titles, which sometimes seem cavalier or show-offy at first, have an absolute inner logic.) And if these five ambitious paintings, in their somehow Swiftian savagery, strike chords of triumphant tastelessness, Salle's many pieces in the key of melancholy, études like *Run a Grocery Store or Build an Airplane*, 1980, *We'll Shake the Bag*, 1980, *My Subjectivity*, 1981, *The Life of a Shrug*, 1983, *Man in a Hat*, 1983, *Melancholy*, 1983, and *Tennyson*, 1983, are icons of subdued good taste—melancholia is always tasteful. These postexistential bluesworks—like the sound of American jazz in *nouvelle vague* movies—are the ones that allow you to project your own home movies, full of lost lovers and after-sex cigarettes, booze and rain, onto Salle's silver screen.

Salle is intensely caught up with the exactions of formal range, what it takes to riff as well as to compose. In addition to the discordant symphonies and the études, there are capriccios (*View the Author through Long Telescopes*, 1981); forays into lieder (*Painting for Eli*, 1983, *Ugly Deaf Face*, *For Myself and Strangers*, and *Sales Girls*, all 1983) and zarzuela (*Cut Out the Beggar*, 1981); serial chamber pieces (*Autopsy* and *The Happy Writers*, both 1981); epic, vaguely Mahlerian orchestral works (*The Old, the New, and the Different*, 1981); scherzi (*Black Bra*, 1983, *A Collapsing Sheet*, 1984); a number of neo-classical concerti (most of the '50s furniture combines, or a piece such as *Landscape with Two Nudes and Three Eyes*, 1986); several codas to the all-American tonalities of George Gershwin's rhapsodies (*Vivid Cuban Words*, 1980), Aaron Copland's populist odes (*Footmen*, 1986), Irving Berlin's Depression anthems (*Miner*, 1985), and black blues (*Plastered Again*, 1984); and many themes—cultural anachronism, for instance, and romantic disillusion—that evoke strains from Richard Strauss, for example Strauss' wistful allusions to Mozart and more classical times in *Der Rosenkavalier*.

Like Johns, with whom he has often been com-

imply erotic availability or insidious avocation, Salle is quite spectacularly unconcerned with the material of flesh and the more erogenous senses, except for sight, which in many of our own pornographic plots is probably the most potent force. He is devoted to surfaces and their composition, to the emphatically visible, and while material abounds in his work, it is culled as if from the 24-hour machine at one's local branch of the image bank, in whatever one's domestic currency.

Salle is certainly involved with associative complexities, but not in any Baudelairean sense of "correspondence." His paintings are, in effect, counterlibidinal, and make few direct appeals to the senses of touch or smell. They propose an intense but generalized aura of subjectivity. With the exception of one or two rather desultory glimpses in his work of male nudes, he does not depict or inflect genitalia (or, in most cases, their alter egos, faces) but merely indicates their generic whereabouts in the shadows. The female figures are incorporeal, unfinished, not conceived for any kind of close-range contact. Almost all of Salle's work, in fact, is best seen at a remove, and, in exhibitions, his paintings tend to be most effective when given acoustical latitude and a lot of room up front. (At the recent exhibition initiated by the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia, for instance, where they were crammed and cacophonous, their frequency was garbled; an expanded version of the exhibition is now at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. While the Whitney's exhibition was not yet installed at this writing, this institution has in the past been more sensitive to Salle's use of air time.) In "Notes on David Salle" (also in the Edition Bischofberger book, a cornucopia of Salle testimonials) Robert Rosenblum makes an analogy between Salle's female figures and Courbet's nudes, and the analogy is well-drawn for the contrast it allows. One has but to take one look at any Courbet subject (female, male, nude, clothed, or for that matter inanimate) or, among living artists, at any gritty rendering by Lucian Freud (whose pictorial frontality and eye for the decay of age and worldly juxtapositions—as reflected, for instance, in *Portrait of a Man*, 1981–82, of the industrialist and collector Baron Thyssen with a partial view of one of his paintings, a Watteau—may have infused the mood of some of Salle's work), to see how inexorably, inviolably clean and disciplined these females, and paintings, are.

Even an aggressive piece of work such as *Schoolroom*, 1985, in which a pair of grisaille buttocks are met and buttressed by a foreshortened foot, conjures an atmosphere of erotic tension more like that present in one of Degas' rehearsal rooms—erotic tension wrought by remote control, by the artist as ballet master—than to any climate associated with or likely to pervade boudoir, bed, or brothel. Salle's erotics have a great deal more to do with work, au-

thority, and effectiveness than with either pain or pleasure. In paintings such as *Géricault's Arm*, and even more pointedly *The Tulip Mania of Holland* and *Fooling with Your Hair*, all from 1985, the model is put through her paces almost as if literally at the barre, and in stages of meticulous dishabille that more than slightly suggest current, meticulously disheveled fashions in dancers' rehearsal gear. Furthermore, Salle punctuates these exercises with staccato beats—strict, formal successions and flash appearances of African bodies, Italian lamps, striped fabric, Giacometti figures, and Géricault limbs occur on these canvases—in the rap-rap-rap rhythm of the wooden classroom sticks wielded by many an old-school Russian ballet mistress demanding perfection. As Rosenblum points out elsewhere in "Notes on David Salle," the thrice-repeated, underlying image in a triptych called *Abandoned Shells*, 1984, is a well-known photograph of Balanchine rehearsing, and there is cause to wonder whether Salle did not put it there as a kind of perverse, idealized, or wishful self-portrait. Like Balanchine, like Degas, a little like the fashion-photographer protagonist in Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blow-Up* (1966), Salle clicks into the poetics of regimentation, and the art of self-denial, with a will to control. His sometimes supposed "perversity" has nothing to do with violence toward or exploitation of female subjects; rather, Salle is off on the daunting mission of fully appropriating some order in culture hinged on the "feminine principle," and of bending these ideals—sometimes literally bending *her*—into a more chaotic position within his own excruciatingly delicate, serenely uncomfortable balletics.

Salle, like a number of other major artists of his vintage, is terrifically prolific; over the last seven years he has made scores of paintings, watercolors, and prints, and designed the sets and costumes for three full-scale theater productions. To compare the earliest works involving imagistic overlay such as *Rob Him of Pleasure* or *I can Even Personify*, from 1979, with a recent painting like *Dusting Powders*, 1986, is to note a splashy advancement of technical skill, surface complexity, and formal ambition. A sweeping overview of his work will, nonetheless, reveal a remarkable consistency of what are commonly called production values.

One senses clearly that any given piece is conceptualized, plotted, assessed as it progresses and fiddled with as it nears completion, that he works with the headset, as it were, of a writer, a director, or indeed, as some detractors have suggested, of an art director. Salle is a brilliant designer. Many of his more spectacular concoctions—among these I would include *How to Use Words as a Powerful Aphrodisiac*, 1982, with its orange, magazine-vérité raised fist, its center panel of bumptious green mechanical-pony riders and overpainted Picassoid sneer, and its truncated side panel in *faux* Jean-Paul

Riopelle; the elegiacally nasty *B.A.M.F.V.*, 1983, featuring a boozing, mutant cartoon duck, poison-yellow satin with flesh tones, chicken-wire protrusion, and various bilious sketches; *What is the Reason for your Visit to Germany*, 1984, where a doubled-over nude, lead-covered saxophone, and cheesy, abstract excretion (Salle is especially cutting in his use of Riopelle) build to a crescendo whose climax is the very rude, stenciled "FROMAGE" comment; and *Muscular Paper*, 1985, with its fun-house visions of acrobatic suspension acts and overarticulated physiques—are veritable monuments to designerly hubris. They are improbably, hilariously, grandly obnoxious designs, with ill tempers and ugly mugs that could only be countenanced by the selective indulgences of art. (From this particular key of Salle's, Jeff Koons seems recently to have taken a cue to inspired if monosyllabic effect. This is also the place to mention that Salle's titles, which sometimes seem cavalier or show-offy at first, have an absolute inner logic.) And if these five ambitious paintings, in their somehow Swiftian savagery, strike chords of triumphant tastelessness, Salle's many pieces in the key of melancholy, études like *Run a Grocery Store or Build an Airplane*, 1980, *We'll Shake the Bag*, 1980, *My Subjectivity*, 1981, *The Life of a Shrug*, 1983, *Man in a Hat*, 1983, *Melancholy*, 1983, and *Tennyson*, 1983, are icons of subdued good taste—melancholia is always tasteful. These postexistential bluesworks—like the sound of American jazz in *nouvelle vague* movies—are the ones that allow you to project your own home movies, full of lost lovers and after-sex cigarettes, booze and rain, onto Salle's silver screen.

Salle is intensely caught up with the exactions of formal range, what it takes to riff as well as to compose. In addition to the discordant symphonies and the études, there are capriccios (*View the Author through Long Telescopes*, 1981); forays into lieder (*Painting for Eli*, 1983, *Ugly Deaf Face*, *For Myself and Strangers*, and *Sales Girls*, all 1983) and zarzuela (*Cut Out the Beggar*, 1981); serial chamber pieces (*Autopsy* and *The Happy Writers*, both 1981); epic, vaguely Mahlerian orchestral works (*The Old, the New, and the Different*, 1981); scherzi (*Black Bra*, 1983, *A Collapsing Sheet*, 1984); a number of neo-classical concerti (most of the '50s furniture combines, or a piece such as *Landscape with Two Nudes and Three Eyes*, 1986); several codas to the all-American tonalities of George Gershwin's rhapsodies (*Vivid Cuban Words*, 1980), Aaron Copland's populist odes (*Footmen*, 1986), Irving Berlin's Depression anthems (*Miner*, 1985), and black blues (*Plastered Again*, 1984); and many themes—cultural anachronism, for instance, and romantic disillusion—that evoke strains from Richard Strauss, for example Strauss' wistful allusions to Mozart and more classical times in *Der Rosenkavalier*.

Like Johns, with whom he has often been com-



**David Salle, Schoolroom, 1985**, oil on canvas, 93 x 120". Private collection.



pared and to whom he may compare himself, Salle seems to take the long view of his career and is building up an inventory of leitmotifs, including, of course, those clean young ladies—*les sâles*—as well as many reoccurrences of chairs and light fixtures, of vaguely Johnsian found ears that predate David Lynch's movie *Blue Velvet*, of poetic polka dots out of Francis Picabia via Sigmar Polke. Also like Johns, he is a conscious classicist, and moreover has taken the cause of classicism for his battle cry. Late-17th-century, hard-to-place French landscapes, Watteau figures, Revolutionary-era tricorns, early-19th-century, grand-style figurations, and Abraham Lin-



David Salle, *Cut Out the Beggar*, 1981, acrylic on canvas, 86 x 56". Private collection.

coln's haunting postclassical profile speak eerily of half-remembered history and crop up like loose coins in paintings like *Dusting Powders*, *The Face in the Column*, 1983, *His Brain*, 1984, and *Blue Paper*, 1986. In fact they bear some resemblance to European paper money—to Dutch guilders and francs, French and Swiss especially, with their subtle color schemes and palimpsests of floating heads, monuments and landscapes and mint-printed dots and dashes. In the last couple of years principal themes in his work have included the dancer and choreographer Karole Armitage, with whom he has a personal and professional partnership, the latter centered around their shared, "drastically classical" vision, a vision that seems to be made up of equal parts of a verve for technical and formal neologisms



Top: David Salle, *Landscape with Two Nudes and Three Eyes*, 1986, acrylic and oil on canvas, 102 x 139". Bottom: *The Birth of the Poet*, 1984, performance view, December 1985, Brooklyn Academy of Music, N.Y. Directed by Richard Foreman; libretto by Kathy Acker; music by Peter Gordon; sets and costumes designed by Salle. Photo: Jean Kallina.



**The Elizabethan Phrasing of the Late Albert Ayler, 1986**, performance view, October 1986, Théâtre de Bobigny, Paris. Karole Armitage. Choreographed by Armitage; sets and costumes designed by Salle. Photo: Julio Donoso/Sygma

(dancing to Nichols and May, then to Paul Hindemith, or having Stravinsky, Albert Ayler, and the comedian Lord Buckley share music credits) and of an odd, jaundiced reverence for the great dead parents of Modernist culture, including classical ballet as defined by Balanchine in this century.

The “postmodern” generation, to its distinction, may be the first for whom parentage, actual or spiritual, has become an irregular, fractal equation. Some of us may have elected to take the last great railroad trip—Balanchine, Stravinsky, Picasso—as a tour, or an inspiration, but have done so in the name of genetic engineering, not to continue the track. Salle’s promiscuous contacts with the past, and his multiple affinities with living artists (Johns, Rauschenberg, Roy Lichtenstein, Andy Warhol, Freud, Alex Katz, Polke, Bruce Nauman, John Baldessari, Eric Fischl, Julian Schnabel, etc.), are

within the context of no context, to quote the title of a book written by George W. S. Trow, to whom he dedicated a painting. Salle’s classic rooms and his pained classicism make for on-the-spot period pieces for this moment of *attente*, this waiting for the millennium, and they imply some concept of a spiritual home, and doing it up in style for the eventual guests therein.

What is most important about Salle’s work, and what’s more, what is moving about it—his paintings as well as his sets for the theater, including *The Birth of the Poet*, 1984, with Richard Foreman, and, with Armitage, *The Mollino Room* and *The Elizabethan Phrasing of the Late Albert Ayler*, both 1986—are the impressive measures taken, the topspins diligently applied toward convincing himself and us that significant things are happening that might, bit by bit, lead us home. In the *The New York Review*

*of Books* shortly after the death of Balanchine, Lincoln Kirstein wrote that “there has undoubtedly occurred what must be called an unfocused but active revival of religious interest in the West, seeking unfamiliar access to an absolute. It is not too much to consider a well-performed ballet a rite, executed and followed with intense devotion, that shares in some sort of moral figuration.” In a period during which so many angels are dancing on the pin of art, Salle, with his ballets on canvas or with Armitage on stage, is seeking unfamiliar access to the little emptiness at the core. The dancers, the music, the costumes, the sets, the canvases, and the currency needed for the voyage are well under control, and that harsh wind from the prairie rasps the only word to use to get there, “work.” □

Lisa Liebmann contributes regularly to *Artforum*.