

Reviews/Art

David Salle Enters a Rococo Phase

By ROBERTA SMITH

The 1980's may be over, but David Salle, an artist indelibly identified with the decade, is not letting up. His exhibition of new work at his new venue, the Gagosian Gallery, is one of his best. The strength of this show should give pause to those who are busy writing off the 80's as a period of meager artistic achievement.

It may also momentarily disappoint those who would like to see the current frenzy of gallery-switching, exemplified by Mr. Salle's desertion of Mary Boone for Gagosian, fall flat. (If the migrations of prominent artists continue, the blue-chip layer of the art world may soon be consolidated into two swollen entities: Gagosian and the Pace Gallery, where the latest additions are Donald Judd and Robert Mangold, who were previously represented by the Paula Cooper Gallery.)

Nonetheless, Mr. Salle's six new canvases speak for themselves. Although they cling to some of the artist's nastier habits, especially in his sometimes humiliating depiction of nude women, they take his art to a new, milder and more exuberantly visual place. Delicately tinted and frothy and possessed of a silvery glow, they might be said to signal the artist's rococo phase, the onset of David Salle Lite.

Mr. Salle continues to be adept at devising formulas for making paintings that are first and last formal objects. His latest efforts are fuller, in terms of both images and subjects, than his previous works. At once dense and weightless, clogged and transparent, they range through the last few centuries of art and design with an expansive, almost effortless grace, and their visual fullness makes for an increased emotional richness as well.

The artist's latest formula, operative since a series of works made in 1989 and shown that year in London, is to place his thoroughly modern images over turbulent figurative scenes from older art, some of which are laid on in characteristic monochrome grisaille, others in pale colors. These images, which generally fill the entire background with overlapping bodies or heads or the occasional rearing horse, are generic and nonspecific: a crowded Italianate interior in "Ugolino's Room," a Caravaggesque group of gamblers and revelers in the painting titled "Dean Martin in 'Some Came Running.'" In several instances where the crowding is most extreme, it is clear that figures from more than one source have

been patched together.

The pale tapestry-like backdrops close off space and create a new all-over decorative unity. (Think of Jackson Pollock's dripping, looping paint converted to figurative terms.) Their compositional complexity gives Mr. Salle more chances to show off his coloristic talent, and the piled-up images also multiply the possible meanings of the paintings, although in the end Mr. Salle's famous post-modern ambiguity prevails.

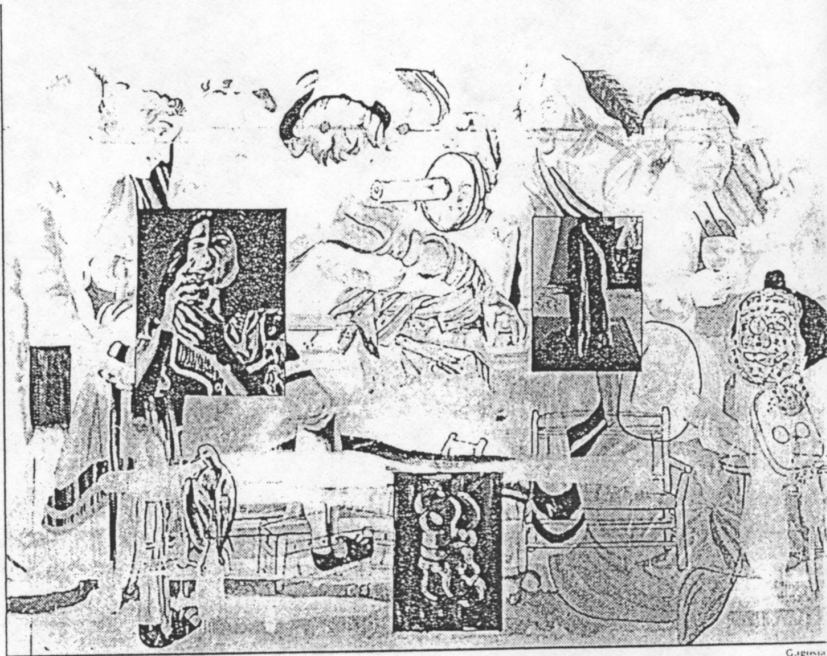
The background dramas are interrupted at crucial points by the images laid on top. Some of these are lightly outlined, some are painted with thick impasto, as if Mr. Salle were trying to cover all the bases between drawing and painting and between nonchalance and precision. The eye and mind move around these surfaces with a new velocity, darting in and out, parting company and meeting up again, as different images come in and out of focus.

Nearly every painting includes outlines of design objects: chairs, candelabras or cars, as well as colorfully blanketed-out cartoon balloons. These last additions give the background scenes wry hints of modern (and low art) consciousness, especially in the painting titled "Ugolino's Room." Images of African sculptures, E.T. propellers, two women who seem deep in conversation and, in one instance, a leaping male dancer also put in appearances.

In addition, each painting harbors a pair of small inset canvases that display grisaille images of women in ruff-collared Harlequin suits. Sometimes, as in the idea of Pierrot as a woman, these images have a pensive poetry. Sometimes they offer a gratuitous nudity that the paintings could easily avoid, especially since half of them already do so. But Mr. Salle's usual and rather misogynist focus on women is played down here by the fact that both men and women figure prominently in the backgrounds. Perhaps he is saying that art is always fraught with sexual innuendo. But in the process he delineates the tensions between the sexes in much more equal and reciprocal terms.

Finally, all but one of these paintings are finished off with one or two loosely painted horizontal lines that smear across the canvases edge to edge as if to say: this is all equally fake, all equally abstract and formal. Yet, despite their extreme artifice, these paintings are generated by a love of looking, an affection for other art and a basic generosity. Sometimes the distance from the decorative to the profound is not far at all.

David Salle's new paintings remain at the Gagosian Gallery, 980 Madison Avenue, near 76th Street, through May 4.



"Dean Martin in 'Some Came Running'" by David Salle at the Gagosian Gallery in Manhattan.