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Review: David Salle's 'How to See,' a Painter's Guide to Looking at and Discussing Art

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David Salle
Robert Wright for the New York Times

“So many poets have the courage to look into the abyss,” Kenneth Koch wrote in an appreciation of the French poet and diplomat Saint-John Perse, “but Perse had the courage to look into happiness.”



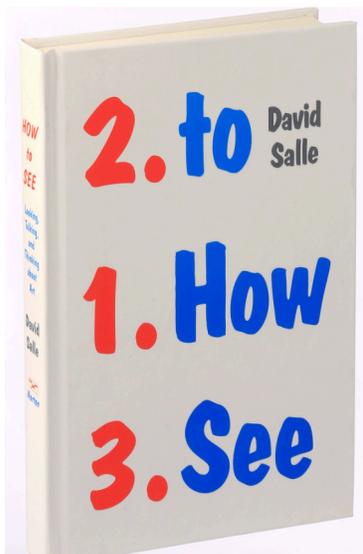
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The painter David Salle, in his new book “How to See: Looking, Talking and Thinking About Art,” goes bravely in search of happiness, too. His quarry is aesthetic bliss. He stalks it through museums and galleries on both coasts as if he were David Attenborough tracking a curious swan.

Mr. Salle’s mission in “How to See” is to seize art back from the sort of critics who treat each painting “as a position paper, with the artist cast as a kind of philosopher manqué.” Mr. Salle is more interested in talking about nuts and bolts, about what makes contemporary paintings tick.

“Theory abounds, but concrete visual perception is at a low ebb,” he maintains. “In my view, intentionality is not just overrated; it puts the cart so far out in front that the horse, sensing futility, gives up and lies down in the street.” Nobody ever loved a painting, he says, for its ideas.

Mr. Salle gets no points for originality of insight. About every art form there are those who’ve memorably argued for shaking off critical yokes. (“Read at whim! Read at whim!” the poet Randall Jarrell used to thunder.) The committed gallerygoer long ago learned to sift through competing opinions and seek delight where he or she could find it.



But “How to See” is lovely to read, mostly, because Mr. Salle can actually write. In the mid-1970s, when he first arrived in Manhattan, he sold art criticism to various publications to pay the rent. He’s has good feelers and a sensitive, sunny style.

He sends you racing to the internet to look up the work of painters he speaks so engagingly about. You will use Google because the small art reproductions in this book are in black and white; they’re murky and unsatisfying.

About the painter Dana Schutz, for example, he declares, “Schutz is our pre-eminent painter of cluelessness.” He’s speaking about how she catches the “physical awkwardness, social infantilism and self-regard” of certain men.

He slowly builds a case for her work, noting among other things her singular subject matter. “Paintings of people sneezing, yawning, being poked in the eye, shaving their pubic hair, or vomiting — as far as I know, none of these has been the subject of a painting before.” Mr. Salle also happens to be enormously, and unpredictably, literate. He’s as likely to quote the humor writer Veronica Geng as the choreographer George Balanchine, and as likely to drop a reference to “The Sopranos” as to the French filmmaker Claude Chabrol. He’s a witty writer who appreciates the wit of others.

His range of reading takes you places other art writers have not. Speaking about today’s young fiction writers, for example, he notes how “the parodists, inventors, miniaturists, and



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tinkerers are now coming into prominence, taking over from the arid metafictionists.” He neatly pivots to link this observation to contemporary art: “Writers like George Saunders, Ben Marcus, Sam Lipsyte, Sheila Heti, Ben Lerner, and Chris Kraus have clear parallels with painters Charline Von Heyl, Mary Weatherford, Joe Bradley, Chris Martin, Richard Aldrich, et al. Painting and advanced writing are now closer in spirit than at any other time in living memory.”

That’s as useful a critical observation as I have read this year.

Many of the essays in “How to See” appeared originally in *Town & Country*, *Artforum*, *The Paris Review* and other publications. Mr. Salle is open about how he frequently writes about his friends and collaborators. There are often tidbits like this one, about the artist Urs Fischer’s studio, which, “should you be lucky enough to drop in at the right time, produces daily a delicious organic lunch served family-style.”

That Mr. Salle is intimate with his friends’ work allows him to make us more intimate with it. At other times you wish for a bit more bite in his observations, bite he is rarely willing to deliver about his companions. You wish he were more in touch with his inner troglodyte. This book has other small defects. He goes to the well too often for references to the same things. The movie critic Manny Farber’s notion of “termite art” is cited, for example, in four separate essays.

He doesn’t often argue out his opinions, and once in a while his critical discourse veers close to meaninglessness. When he speaks of how the sculptor Vito Acconci wishes to “interrogate the broader culture” in his work — as hoary an art-criticism cliché as exists — you may begin to interrogate your GPS device for a road out of here.

But he grounds that same essay not just in canny observations about Mr. Acconci’s work but in a story about how, as a student in 1974, he helped Mr. Acconci make a video.

For the video, Mr. Acconci tied a string around his penis. About his own participation, Mr. Salle writes, “I would yank the string on cue, giving the impression that the penis was a kind of Beckettian character in an absurdist drama; it would jerk itself upright to deliver a line or two before collapsing back again just out of frame.”

About Mr. Acconci’s talking member, he says, “It had a lot of grievances to air.”

Mr. Salle’s writing in “How to See” puts me in mind of Frank O’Hara’s poems. It’s serious but never solemn, alert to pleasure, a boulevardier’s crisp stroll through the visual world.

Looking, Talking, and Thinking About Art
By David Salle
Illustrated. 270 pages. W. W. Norton. \$29.95.

