

ARTSEEN

DAVID SALLE: *PAINTINGS 1985–1995**By Benjamin Clifford*

David Salle, *Old Bottles*, 1995. Oil and acrylic on canvas, 96 1/8 x 128 1/8. © David Salle / Licensed by VAGA, New York.

This presentation of thirteen works by David Salle focuses on the ten years following his establishment in the art world—a period that saw the painter’s compositions grow denser and more complex in their staging. Despite these surface differences, however, the works shown here continue to engage the issues that informed Salle’s rise to public attention around 1980: his use of pastiche, his transgressive subject matter, and above all, the stereotyped opposition of painting and photography.



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In the early 1980s, painting and photography were seen as incompatible. Painting was linked to the expression of private experience, while photography was considered an effective tool of institutional, social, and political critique. These practices were associated with two allegedly antagonistic groups: Neo-Expressionist painters like Julian Schnabel, on the one hand, and the conceptualist Pictures artists, on the other. Salle, however, eludes such factionalized rhetoric. He is a painter who makes extensive use of photography, and although associated with Neo-Expressionism, he shares the intellectual background of pictures mainstays Jack Goldstein and Troy Brauntuch (all three studied with John Baldessari at CalArts in the early 1970s).

Fooling with your Hair and *Woodsmoke* (both 1985), the two earliest works in the exhibition, highlight many of Salle's now-signature methods. In each of these large paintings he combines seemingly unrelated images—some sourced from photographs—in diverse and disjunctive assortments of representational styles. The discontinuous nature of the imagery is mirrored in the material conditions of the works themselves. Salle often assembles his paintings from multiple canvas panels, leaving the narrow gaps between them largely undisguised.

This modular construction is frequently exploited to shape encounters between photography and painting. Consider, for example, *Mingus in Mexico* (1990), a painting made up of three canvases, with the two smaller ones set in spaces cut from the surface of the third. The two small canvases present black-and-white images that are clearly based on photographs. One, an ambiguous figure or object draped in a sheet, appears to have been taken by Salle himself. The other, a woman drinking from a glass, is likely drawn from an advertisement. The larger surface that surrounds these photographically-derived images is covered with a dense accumulation of motifs: a painted reproduction of a Renaissance tapestry, line drawings of furniture, and even a cartoon speech bubble.

In a recent piece in *Interview*, Salle referred to *Mingus in Mexico* as an attempt at “all-over” composition. And indeed, the various motifs filling the larger panel are knit together in a non-hierarchical fabric of line, form, and color that recalls Jackson Pollock's drip paintings, the origin point of the “all-over” approach. One might also say that the openings in Salle's canvas allude to Pollock's “cut-out” paintings, in which sections of the dripped image were removed, allowing a



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backing layer of masonite to show through. In these high modernist touchstones, the removal of the pictorial field reveals further layers of abstract form and provokes, to paraphrase Michael Fried's classic analysis of Pollock in "Three American Painters," a purified optical experience that is specific to painting alone. By contrast, the incisions in Salle's *Mingus in Mexico* reveal only post-modernist, mixed-media impurities—painting's invasion by the photograph, its most threatening and proximate other. Elsewhere in the exhibition, Salle has found ways to bring photography and painting into even closer contact. In *Blue Face* (1988), he inserts a photographic print directly into the painted surface, and in *Ghost 4* (1992)—another draped form, here traversed by horizontal bands of gold, teal, and a rich blue—the two become literally coextensive. This unusually abstracting work was created by rendering a canvas photosensitive and then printing the image of the model concealed beneath a sheet directly onto the canvas.

The veiling of the body in this work throws into sharp relief the fact that Salle's best known and most controversial subject matter—eroticized depictions of naked or partially clothed women—is relatively absent from the show. *Fooling with your Hair* and *Woodsmoke* are the only ones to feature nudes. The central question that emerges in these works is: Does the objectified and dehumanizing view of women in Salle's work reference personal or systemic dysfunction? This dilemma reproduces, in another register, the same questions that surrounded the use of photography and painting in the 1980s. Does this painting, borrowing from the photographic practice of the Pictures artists, represent a critique of American image culture that addresses misogyny within the media, within the art world, and even within the fabric of society itself? Or is it just a typically chauvinist example of painterly expressionism, reflective only of Salle's own exclusionary attitudes? Even adopting the generous interpretation that Salle's images originally functioned with real criticality, looking at them in 2018 it is difficult to say the same. Today, the deadpan or ironic display of exploitative material is without a doubt inadequate to the task of dismantling gendered structures of power. A more direct and a more sincere approach is necessary.

