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well as improvised-looking black paintings in which the boy's huge grin was repeated as a white cut-out shape, like sinister, disembodied minstrel grins. The unit teemed with potted plants under hot, glowing grow lights—in an additional nod to Dan Flavin—and featured mounds of shea butter crudely carved or moulded to resemble huge primitive heads. The piece was called *Fatherhood*, borrowing the title of a book containing comic anecdotes and observations about fatherhood by Bill Cosby, a small stack of which provided a makeshift plinth for a pot plant.

Even before the allegations of rape surrounding the actor and comedian, Johnston had been interested in Cosby as a 'complex and dark figure', one who, throughout his career, has been outspoken about the perceived failures of the black community, as fathers, as mothers, as citizens. The one-dimensional archetype of the good father that he most famously embodied in his role as Dr. Heathcliff Huxstable in *The Cosby Show*, and the rather more uncomfortable reality, provided an opportunity for Johnson to invest aspects of his work with dense narrative layers exploring ideas of race, manhood and fatherhood (Johnson himself has a three-year-old son).

Anxiety, neurosis and psychotherapy are also clearly themes that are given free rein in his work. A recent series of black soap, wax and spray enamel paintings on white bathroom tiles was simply called *Anxious Men*. They were given a gallery to themselves in his Hauser exhibition. With their huge blob-heads and scratched-in gestural marks, they resembled the playfully naïve yet wretchedly tender Art Brut figures of Jean Dubuffet, although the paintings were executed in a far looser, improvised manner. Johnson listens to a lot of jazz when he's in the studio. He listens to hip-hop, and artists like the Grateful Dead and Tom Waits too, but, he says, 'Jazz is really the soul of the way I think about art because of its improvisation.'

Given the way anxiety and the fractured self are abiding themes in his work, it's not surprising to hear that Johnson's been undergoing psychoanalysis for the past four years. New York is the artist's adopted city, and there, as he concedes, analysis is 'almost mandatory'.

DAVID SALLE

SIMULTANEITY & COUNTERPOINT

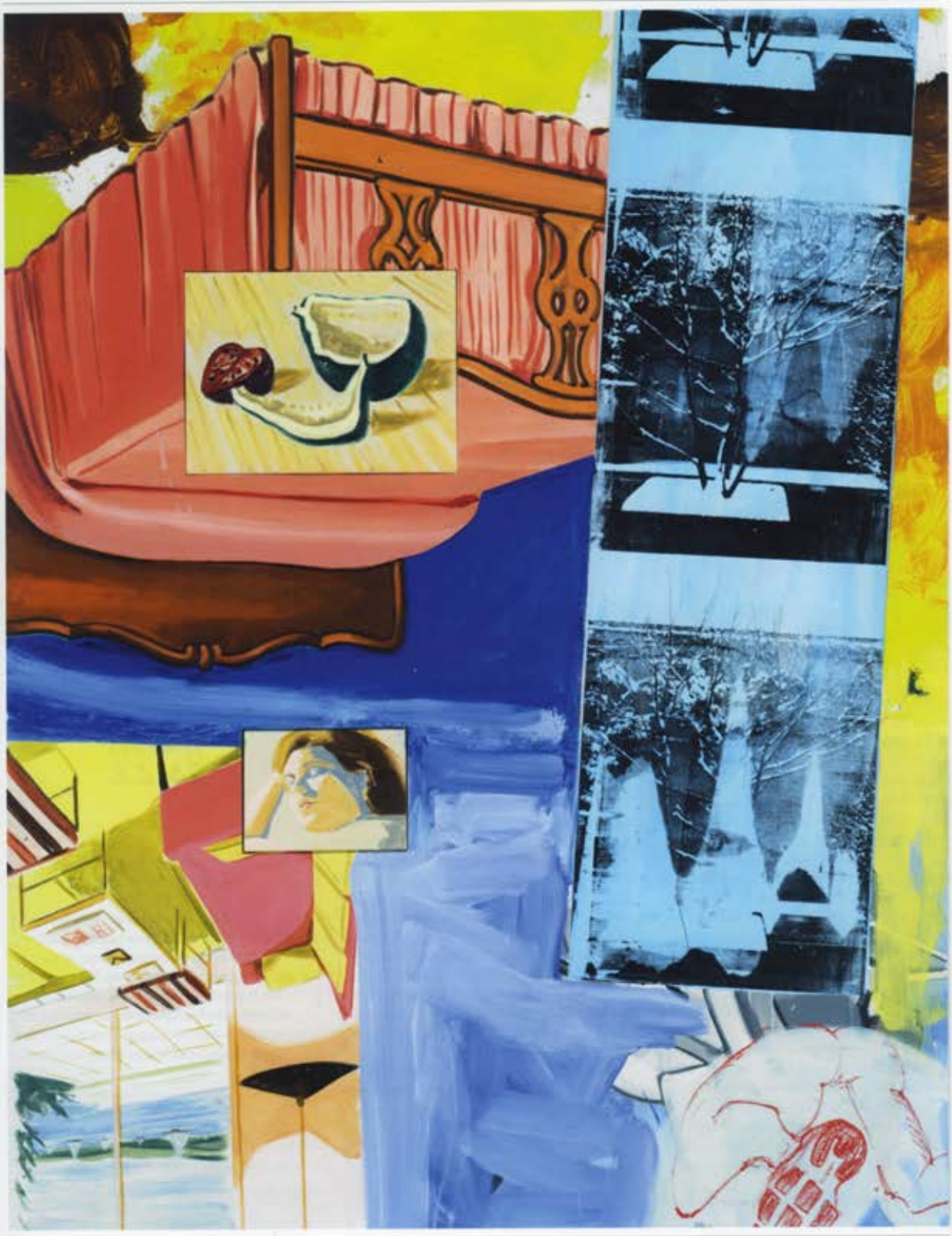
One of the leading lights of the Pictures Generation, **DAVID SALLE** helped to define the new languages of appropriation and postmodernism in the late 1970s. His reputation has continued to grow in the subsequent decades as he has broadened his practice to embrace the stage and screen. As a show of new work opens, he talks to **ROBERT SHORE**.

Tell us about your new exhibition at Skarstedt in New York.

It involves two different bodies of work, related internally but different in surface

David Salle *Ballantines*, 2014, oil, acrylic and pigment print on linen.

NEW YORK



appearance. One is collage paintings—large-scale amalgams of still-life imagery, among other things, in which I've pulled out all the compositional stops; orchestrating quantities of disparate things to make music, much as I have done these past 35 years. Their tone and mood is high-keyed, a little off-kilter, baroque, bordering on hysterical at times. The other paintings are the end point of photographs I made roughly 22 years ago. These pictures are black-and-white 'transfer prints' of photographic negatives. The subject in each case is a performer, the gallerist Massimo Audiello, who in an earlier life was an actor—someone who had gift enough to be a great silent clown, at a time when the job no longer existed. I made hundreds of photographs of Massimo improvising in front of my paintings at the time—paintings that are, to some limited extent, the template for paintings I'm making now. The transfer-print paintings (the name is misleading; the paintings are all unique and unrepeatable) have a range of greys, a silvery-toned light that results from the process of transferring inks on to the canvas. Hence the name of the series: *Silver Paintings*. So how's that for a sustained contradiction? The big-picture, very composed *Collage Paintings*—full of images and high-keyed colour—and the *Silver Paintings*—photographic, monochromatic, with a unitary, single image. Although made as if from opposing camps, the painterly and the photographic, they are, in a way, each other's flip side. They fit inside each other like nesting dolls. If one were psychologically inclined, something I'm not especially, you would say they represent two very different but equally necessary sides of my character. I've been living so long in the world of counterpoint and simultaneity that the idea of showing them together is natural.

You trained at CalArts under John Baldessari. What was his biggest lesson?
John taught by example—by showing what an artist is like, the full person. John's art is embedded so much in who he is. It can't be taught exactly, but it can be shown.

You recently asked John Baldessari the following 'rather absurd' question: 'How do you think your work might have been different if you hadn't breathed and grown up with art history?' Could you answer that question yourself?
At times I've wanted to *push off* from painting only to find how much I've merged with it. Your question has an underlying assumption that all periods of art are equal, or that I'm interested in them all, which I'm not really. I do think, in my case anyway, that wanting to make art comes from having seen it—that art comes out

"I FELT THAT EVEN IF YOU WERE TO REPAINT A PAINTING, IT WOULD RESULT IN SOMETHING ELSE, A NEW THING, SOMETHING MORE ON THE ORDER OF AN ACTOR TAKING ON A ROLE"

David Salle. Opposite: *Falling into Bed*, 2014, oil and acrylic on linen with silkscreen and pigment. **Above:** *Silver Painting #1*, 2014, pigment transfer on linen.

of art in the general sense. The basic pictorial idea that has kept me awake at night since I was a kid is the problem of representation, and by extension of 'presentation'—how to translate what can be seen into a way of painting it. I'm primarily concerned with finding form, or giving form. The cultural part, the interpretive, subject-matter part, the part that people write about—I suppose it's also part of me, but my relationship to art history is pretty spotty and idiosyncratic. I'm interested in what things look like, and also how they got to be that way. As far as my own image bank is concerned, I don't really give a damn about the thousands of years of world art—I care about relatively few things, in fact. But if you were to take away *those* things—let's say from Manet to Marsden Hartley to Clyfford Still, to name three wildly disparate examples—if I'd never *seen* those things, I'd probably be doing something else.

"A MAN CAME UP TO ME AT THE OPENING AND AFTER INTRODUCING HIMSELF AS A PSYCHIATRIST TOLD ME THAT HE FELT 'REJECTED' BY MY WORK"

In that interview with John Baldessari, you talk about American art as opposed to European art. Is there still an operative, visible (or conceptual) distinction in the globalized art world?
You're right to ask the question. What is American about American art? It does feel less and less relevant. But I use it synonymously with New York School painting—with the tradition of the big painting. I still feel like that is something apart, though hard to define.

You 'emerged' as part of the Pictures Generation. Were you conscious of being part of a 'revolution' at the time?
Revolution is too strong a word. One hoped that one had something to say—not everyone does—and I think that by and large we did. Everyone was, and for the most part still is, doing their own thing, but we were collectively part of a different way of thinking about *the image*, and culture—the often obscured visual

David Salle *Waste King*, 2014, oil and acrylic on linen.

syntax of it; and cultivating a state of, what to call it—internal congruence with those things. Some things which later became sort of commonplaces, all the talk about the simulacra and Anti-Oedipus and so on—we, I mean myself and a few others like James Welling and Sherrie Levine—we came to it instinctively and out of our own experience. We weren't illustrating a theory—it was our awareness of our own schizophrenia, culturally speaking. When Jim Welling and I interviewed each other for a magazine in 1981, we chose as a title: *Images That Understand Us*. It was close in a way to linguistic theory—the origin of language is within the brain. But I don't want to give the impression that I'm theoretically inclined—I'm not at all. I don't even think it's my job to know my motivation all the time—I'm just glad I have one.

How did it feel to be part of the Pictures Generation 'reunion' (Jerry Saltz's word) at the Met in 2009? What's it like to be historicized in that way?
I read about a guy who had been a flying ace in World War I. Many decades later he was shown some documentary footage of early air combat over France, and when asked how it felt to see the film, answered, 'It was nice to see the old boys come to life again for a few minutes.'

How do you feel about the words appropriation and postmodern at this stage? Is appropriation still a useful term? Did you ever feel consciously a postmodernist as opposed to a modernist?
There were basically two different ideas about appropriation and what it meant. I felt that even if you were to repaint a painting, it would result in something else, a new thing, something more on the order of an actor taking on a role. The other idea of it was involved with refusing to be forced to be 'original'. The force of the refusal carried all the drama. *You can't make us*. That sort of thing. Fine as far as it goes, but I'm not going to lead the cheer for appropriation; it created a monster. Whatever usefulness it once had has devolved into a mindless esteem for the replica. I mean, who cares? All these piss-elegant replicas of every consumer object—is that the best we can do?

As for the other part—modern or postmodern. Postmodernism was just about freedom—it wasn't an end in itself. I see the individual psyche of the artist in conflict with, and trying to establish some relationship to, the larger society, nature, world and planet. But I believe in the individual-actor notion of the artist fundamentally. I also believe in rebellion, but one has to be firmly enmeshed in some ethos to be able to deconstruct it.

You write about art and other artists as a critic.

Why? And why don't more artists do it?
Writing about other artists' work is an extension of what I was saying earlier about representation. It's engaging and challenging to figure out how to put this feeling, this sensation or attitude, into that form. It's another problem of translation. But I wouldn't do it if I didn't feel a dearth of common-sense writing. Unfortunately, art writing has largely been disconnected from what it actually feels like to look at things. We all have a million opinions, but few people can explain why they like something in a way that's convincing. It's often a matter of social consensus. On the surface of it, there's simply no agreement about the meaning of certain forms—it's just a question of what audience is being served. But I'm not so sure I want to go to my grave without at least thinking about if that's really true. It's very hard to write about art—it's hard to write well period. Call it a sense of civic responsibility combined with ego—at times I have a healthy enough ego to feel that I can do it.

I wish more artists did it—what artists say about art is often to the point and very useful. The reason they don't is because it takes a hell of a lot of time. I work quite hard at it, spend hours and hours on a piece, and all the while have a nagging feeling that it's time that would be better spent in my studio. But something compels me to want to give my version of events; I suppose it's compensatory in a way.

*You've done set and costume design for the stage, and directed a film (*Search and Destroy, *1995, starring Griffin Dunne and Christopher Walken). Have you ever thought of these as full-time alternatives to being a painter?*
I love designing for the stage and everything connected to that world. And I've spent an ungodly amount of time immersed in the film world with very little to show for it—directing but one little feature. Over the years I've worked on developing numerous projects that, for one reason or another, never happened. But I think that some of my best work, work most true to the best and most original part of myself, has been for the ballet stage. How what I did contributed to the *gestalt* of the ballet is something that I personally count as a high-water mark of my creative life. Few people saw those ballets, and now they are gone forever. So what to say about that now? It's the nature of the performing arts, a built-in

Opposite: David Salle *Solar System*, 2013, oil on linen and metal. **Above:** *Pink Field*, 2013, oil on linen and metal panel and hand-thrown glazed ceramic.

sadness and horror of nearly inevitable loss. But I was compelled to give myself over to it at times. I think it works by taking me to the edge of some sort of risk—the immensely pleasurable sensation of falling into that. Most theatre people I've known have that quality. There's something so bittersweet about it. All that being said, I would not have been able to make those decors, and the film as well, if I were not first, and primarily, a painter. I can't adequately explain it, but my approach to the theatre was entirely painterly.

You've often quoted André Gide's 'Don't understand me too quickly.' But, in retrospect, have you been understood quickly enough? Do you mind when even positive criticism or praise-filled opinion describes your work in a way that feels wrong to you?

It's funny—when I was very young, I used to quote Gide's line. Later on, it turned into a kind of joke: I didn't mean that I *never* wanted to be understood. There are so many levels of understanding. As implied in the answer to the previous question, I don't feel that someone who did not see my work for the stage could possibly 'understand' me as an artist—have a feeling for what I've been trying to get at and see the *connectedness* of all the things I've done. So that cuts out most people. What one gets as an artist are people's opinions, and those opinions generally serve a specific agenda, which itself is often nothing more than a social consensus. In other words, fashion. That's just the way of the world. As such, all opinions are fine by me. I don't mean that in an idle, cop-out-ish way. The weight of opinion probably does mean something, and if I've not been understood, then the fault, if that's the right word, is at least partly mine. One of life's little ironies: my work is often described as obscure or difficult or maybe just not worth the trouble. To me, it's an open book. Who's right? Maybe I didn't really want to be understood. But all this is a little misplaced. I don't think any artist worth his or her salt deliberately sets out for either maximum comprehension or total obscurity. It's part of one's personality in a way. The first time I showed my paintings in NewYork—it was 1979 at Larry Gagosian's first gallery—a man came up to me at the opening and after introducing himself as a psychiatrist told me that he felt 'rejected' by my work. People don't like to feel rejected, and if they dislike it enough, they'll make you pay as a result.

But which artist is ever really understood? Is anyone? Is understanding the same thing as critics being more or less in alignment with an artist's intention? The problem is I don't really care about an artist's intention, except so far as I can discern it from my own engagement with their work.

The thing about opinion—it's a little like the 'smart rat, stupid rat' experiment. Do you know that one? Some scientists gave people rats—as pets—and told them that their rats were a highly intelligent variety. They gave another group of people rats from the same litter, but told those people their rats were pretty low on the intelligence scale. After a few months, they collected all the rats. The so-called smart rats did measurably better on all kinds of tests—finding food and whatnot—than did the rats labelled stupid. Those rats, when faced with their mazes and puzzles and whatnot, acted like: why bother, we're stupid. The way people acted towards their pet rats—valuing them, or not—changed the rats' sense of themselves, and their actual performance. Not to put too fine a point on it, but opinion is a little like that. Tell people that an artist is 'popular', and chances are that, over time, they will be. But understood? I don't know.

But that's a little afield of your question. As to how I see myself in this regard—my work has been taken to mean certain things, to be part of a certain narrative that needed illustrating. Of that type or level of understanding I have had quite a lot and there's no reason to complain about its shortcomings. But discussion of what I consider to be my 'real' themes and concerns, the things the paintings actually *do*, or at least try to do—of that I have read next to nothing. Nothing that looks into the work itself to find the connective tissue, the syntactical specificity of what the painting is doing. You have to look at it from the other side—why would anyone take the trouble to do that? But maybe it's the wrong question. As I said, which artists have had that kind of understanding? If it comes at all, it's something that happens slowly, over time. What we have now are fans; fans on the one hand, indifference on the other. Maybe we're just not in an age of understanding. We're in a time of sensation; experiencing the communal vibe is the meaning—why look any further? I try to be sanguine about it, and on some days manage rather well.

David Salle *Ghost 6*, 1992, ink on photosensitized linen.