Interview

DAVID SALLE

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by Joe Bradley
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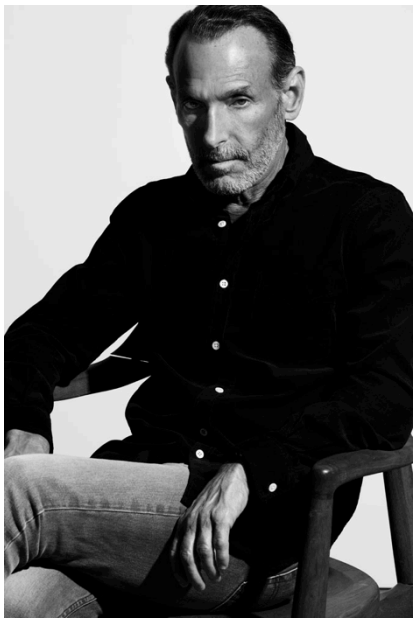

Developing his practice amongst contemporaries that include Cindy Sherman, Sherrie Levine, Richard Prince, and Robert Longo, artist David Salle first came to the public's attention in the early 1980s. Since then, his paintings have often incorporated appropriated images of advertisements, designs, and everyday iconography, as well as his own photography. Through this, the artist creates assemblages with various cultural references. What may appear like a popular culture reference on the surface, however, is more frequently an allusion to personal memories and history.

In his latest exhibition, "New Paintings," which opened last week at Skarstedt in Chelsea, Salle presents two new bodies of work: *Late Product Paintings* and *Silver Paintings*. The former, using a vibrant color palette and complex patterns, can be seen as an extension of his 1993 series, *Early Product Paintings*, while the latter evokes a contrast between painting and photography through singular subject, black-and-white paintings. Smaller versions or fragments of certain *Silver Paintings* can be seen within the compositions of *Late Product Paintings*, so when shown together, Salle's ideas of juxtaposition and sense of place are extended even further.

Before the opening of the show, artist Joe Bradley met with Salle at his studio to discuss all things past and present.

JOE BRADLEY: The cheese head painting is funny.

DAVID SALLE: I got the idea from Roy [Lichtenstein]; it was kind of an homage to him. He painted his self-portrait as Swiss cheese.

BRADLEY: [*laughs*] As a cheese head. Did you know Roy?

SALLE: Pretty well, yeah.

BRADLEY: Somewhere I came across one of his German expressionist paintings that looked fantastic.

SALLE: He could really build a picture. They're built like atoms; they're ironclad. He had all these devices, like looking at the painting in a mirror, looking at it in black-and-white. He subjected it to heavy analysis to make sure the composition was absolutely airtight.

BRADLEY: And what is Magna? This is a good place to start the interview.

SALLE: As far as I understand, it was a paint made by Lenny Bocour for Morris Louis. It's between oil and acrylic. It's either a water-based oil, or a something-based acrylic. It flows differently and has a different viscosity. Bocour was a painter who became a paint manufacturer. Did people study composition when you were in school? Was that a thing people talked about?

BRADLEY: Not really, I think at RISD we had maybe a year of that, and then they turned us loose. Did you have formal training? I know you went to Cal Arts for your MFA, but what about undergrad?

SALLE: I also did undergrad at Cal Arts, but I had more academic art training before I went there. I started when I was nine. Really, everything I know about color theory, composition, drawing, and painting, I learned when I was a kid. They don't teach you anything in art school about how it's done, just how to evaluate it.

BRADLEY: What was your first exposure to painting? Were your parents creative people?

SALLE: My father had wanted to be a commercial artist. He got as far as being a photographer in the army in World War II, but he was always a Sunday painter. At a certain point, he gave me his oil paints and I messed around with them, having no idea what I was doing. When my father died, I went to his house to deal with his stuff, and I found some of those very first paintings he had saved all those years, oil on cardboard. You don't give oil paints to a little kid.

BRADLEY: So you made it out of Wichita to Cal Arts. Were you aware of [John] Baldessari?

SALLE: No, I didn't know anything about conceptual art when I left Kansas. I went to Cal Arts to be a painter, but the exciting stuff was happening elsewhere, so I took a holiday from painting for a few years. It was a conceptual hothouse at the time, but it wasn't theoretical, because John is not a theoretical person; he's a very reflective, thoughtful person. It was more about making John laugh.

BRADLEY: So what sort of experiments did you perform when you were on your painting hiatus?

SALLE: [*laughs*] I did all the stuff that people do—film, performance, photography, pictures and words, words and pictures. In retrospect, I was trying to find some way to put things—meaning images and forms—together that highlighted some idea of what was underneath the surface of an image, what determined how something was seen. I didn't know how to do that in painting at that time; I could only imagine engaging with those ideas in other forms. Thinking about it allowed me to engage with how attention was structured, how certain forms of attention lead you to certain conclusions.

I remember making a videotape in a fancy hair salon in Beverly Hills. The soundtrack in the salon had a whole worldview behind it—I was interested in things like that. Of course, if you were to look at the video now, it would be so deadly boring you wouldn't be able to watch it for more than a few seconds. People had a high tolerance for boring in those days.

BRADLEY: By the time you were out of Cal Arts, were you back into painting?

SALLE: It came slowly. I backed into it again a year or two after I got out of school. Part of the reason it took so long was the challenge of making work in New York. As a young person, you have no fixed address, no studio, no money for materials, so I made things sort of on the run. That life doesn't favor the stability and spatial demands of painting.

My focus was always toward imagery of some sort. I started out making linoleum block prints from drawings, sometimes very small, 2 x 3 inches, and then stamping those lino-cuts on a canvas. I was using canvas because it was more durable than paper. Since I moved six or seven times the first year I was in New York, I had to be able to roll up the work, and paper would just get destroyed. Once I looked at what I'd done, I realized I had made a painting, sort of by default.

BRADLEY: When did you arrive in New York?

SALLE: 1975. Truth is, I didn't know what the hell I was doing when I got out of Cal Arts. I think I wasted a lot of time not being bold enough, or still engaged in the questioning that you get into at school. I felt like I knew what my subject was before I left California, but I don't think I had externalized it. It sounds formulaic now, but at the time, I was interested in the difference between the thing and the representation of the idea of the thing—the space between the two.

This is a little off subject, but I'm interested in those cases where someone is barking up the wrong tree, or misapplying their talent. You could say there's no such thing, but...

BRADLEY: I suppose some people find their voice later than others, but it's interesting to look back at really early work to see that there's some kernel or a Rosetta Stone, in a way. Everything is in place early on.

SALLE: Some more than others, but there's usually something that shows up very early. But I'm also interested in something that can happen later in life. In midstream, you can suddenly take what looks like a detour; I'm sure I've taken many detours. It's debatable whether they're all necessary or not.

BRADLEY: I was looking at your C.V. and there are some years that you're a very prolific artist [with] five or six shows. Do you find yourself pursuing a certain avenue in painting and then trailing off or losing interest? Do you ever suffer from painter's block?

SALLE: Occasionally. Some of the shows had very few works. I've had phases where the compass point seems lost. It can happen for various reasons, among them, that you're trying to do something outside your skill set; your skills have to catch up with the things you see in your head. But it's important to make all of those paintings, even the failed ones.

BRADLEY: You are using all these styles of painting, often times in the same painting. There's an abstract gestural passage. How do you shift gears?

SALLE: I give myself different roles. I think in different ways on different days. Sometimes I think of it as cooking—different flavors and different ingredients. Sometimes I think of it like orchestrating a piece of music with all the different instruments. There are different kinds of concentration required to make a painting, different kinds of being present...How important is humor in your work? How important do you think it is in art generally?

BRADLEY: It's a tough one to pull off, isn't it? I can only think of a handful of artists that can make a funny painting or a funny sculpture without it feeling coined in someway. Do you think your paintings are funny? I think they can be funny.

SALLE: Sometimes I think they're hilarious! I don't know if anyone else sees that side. Maybe I don't have the same sense of humor. Maybe people aren't comfortable gauging a painting that way. They think that if it's a painting then it must be serious. I think Picasso can be hilarious, to name one example.

BRADLEY: I don't laugh out loud at paintings that often.

SALLE: That's a somewhat different thing. Laughing out loud in art is rare.

BRADLEY: I'm always hearing about people weeping in front of paintings. I mean, have you ever wept in front of a painting?

SALLE: I have to say I have, [and] with some regularity. A picture can be funny and also weep inducing. One cries for many reasons. The state of weeping, for me, is induced by recognition of a rarified level of integration—thinking about what must it have taken to reach that integration. People weep at music all the time, because music gives form to some abstract level of integration. It happens in painting too.

BRADLEY: I think painting has that unique potential to project opposing viewpoints. I feel like I've wept listening to music, but a painting, I don't know, it doesn't hit me in the gut the same way. It's more cerebral. You can look at a painting and days later still be processing it.

SALLE: Some images reveal something deep about how the world works; it seems as though they can access how consciousness is structured. Paintings exist in the present tense, yet somehow, because of how it's structured, it can move backwards through time as well.

BRADLEY: Painting has this ability to send the viewer [backward], but it's also this physical object in the room with you. It's always knocking you back into the present moment, which I find very pleasurable.

SALLE: That present tense-ness is the deepest pleasure. Alex Katz always says, "A good painting has to do about 12 things at once."

BRADLEY: How do you begin a painting?

SALLE: Wish I knew. [*laughs*] It's largely improvisation. I'm not a planner. I should be more articulate about what the imagery means, but I don't have a good reason for it; it's just there. A class of Columbia students came [to my studio] a while ago and one woman in the class asked me why I was using such impersonal images. I didn't realize that they were impersonal! They don't feel impersonal to me.

BRADLEY: You mix what seems like very personal imagery with imagery borrowed from pop culture that feels like it belongs to the collective imagination at large.

SALLE: It's a funny semantic turn—when someone paints a landscape, no one says they "borrowed" it, only that they painted it. I'm not interested in popular culture, particularly. I'm not against it, I'm not avoiding it, but I'm not interested in it as a force in life.

BRADLEY: There's something retro about the pop culture references in the paintings, so I'd imagine it's not as much a pop culture reference as a pop art reference.

SALLE: Well, they're not current images. The time they're mostly from corresponds with my youth. It's closer to painting ruins than contemporary culture, in a way.

I think what's happened in art criticism, or art thinking, in last 30 or 40 years is a confusion between the "what"—the subject—and the "how." Most attention goes to the "what," but it's the "how" that's the important part—how something is brought into being.

BRADLEY: There's a Ryman line about that—it's not what's painted, but how it's painted. How do you feel about painting, and the presence of new technology that's emerged in the past 20 years? Has the internet changed your approach?

SALLE: It hasn't changed my way of painting. The internet might be a convenience, but it hasn't yet, for me, been a fundamental reordering. These things are supposed to be time-savers, so you have more time standing at your easel if you so choose. But technology's always changing. There was a time where oil painting was a new technology. *That* changed painting.

BRADLEY: Was television important to you growing up? This image proliferation and juxtaposition...

SALLE: Probably more than I acknowledge. However, the era of television in which I grew up was much simpler than now. Its conventions were quite transparent and fun to think about. Who could ever remember the plot of those shows? It's the conventions in which it was presented that linger. I still see it everywhere in art. For example, did you see Christopher Williams' show? He seems to be working in that territory.

BRADLEY: It's the moment you recognize what a culture thinks of itself or how it chooses to project its own image.

SALLE: Or everything that's being done to make sure that the culture doesn't think of itself in a certain way, yet it does anyway.

"NEW PAINTINGS" IS ON VIEW AT SKARSTEDT'S CHELSEA LOCATION IN NEW YORK UNTIL JUNE 27.