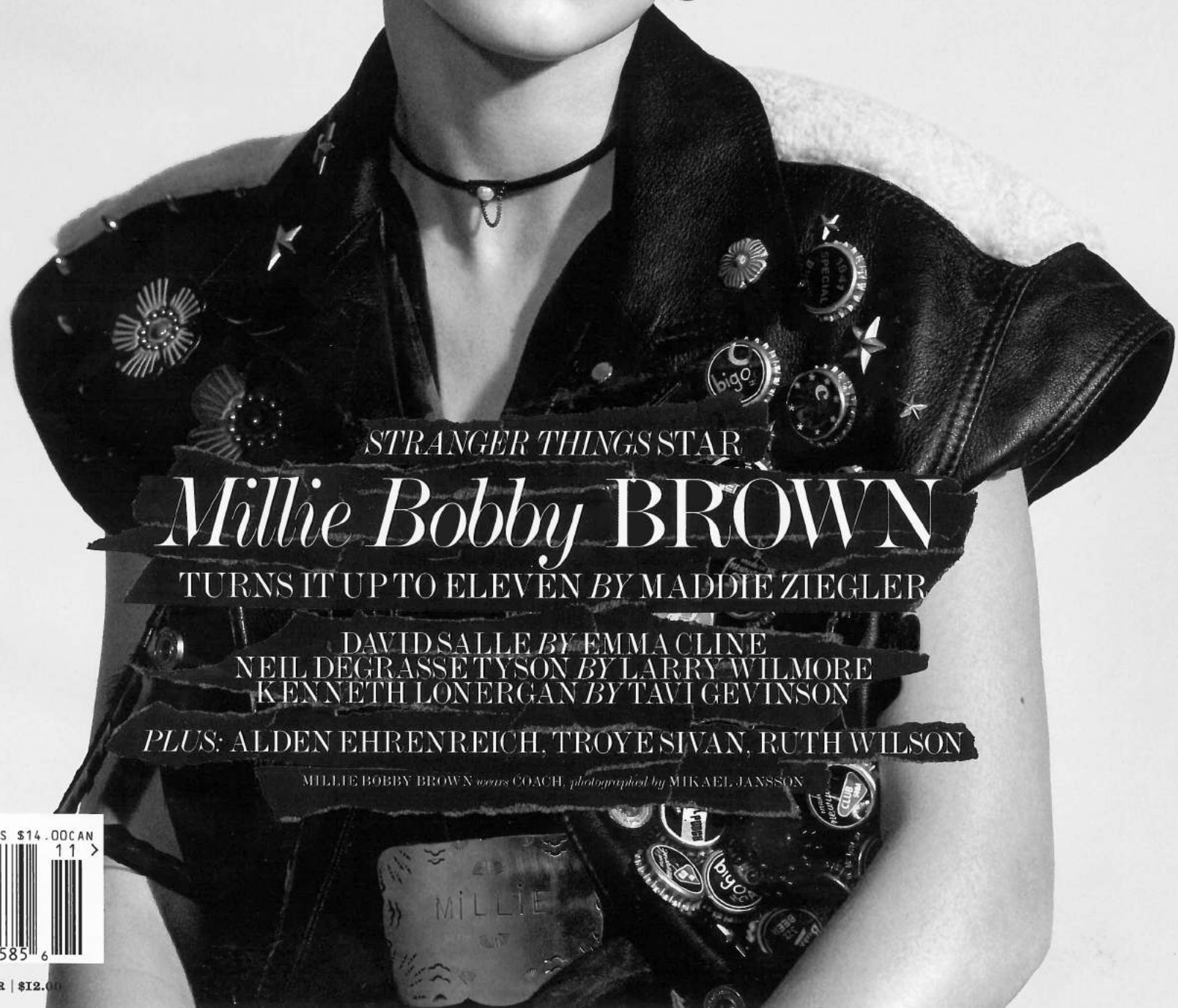


Interview



STRANGER THINGS STAR

Millie Bobby BROWN

URNS IT UP TO ELEVEN BY MADDIE ZIEGLER

DAVID SALLE BY EMMA CLINE

NEIL DEGRASSE TYSON BY LARRY WILMORE

KENNETH LONERGAN BY TAVI GEVINSON

PLUS: ALDEN EHRENREICH, TROYE SIVAN, RUTH WILSON

MILLIE BOBBY BROWN wears COACH, photographed by MIKAEL JANSSON

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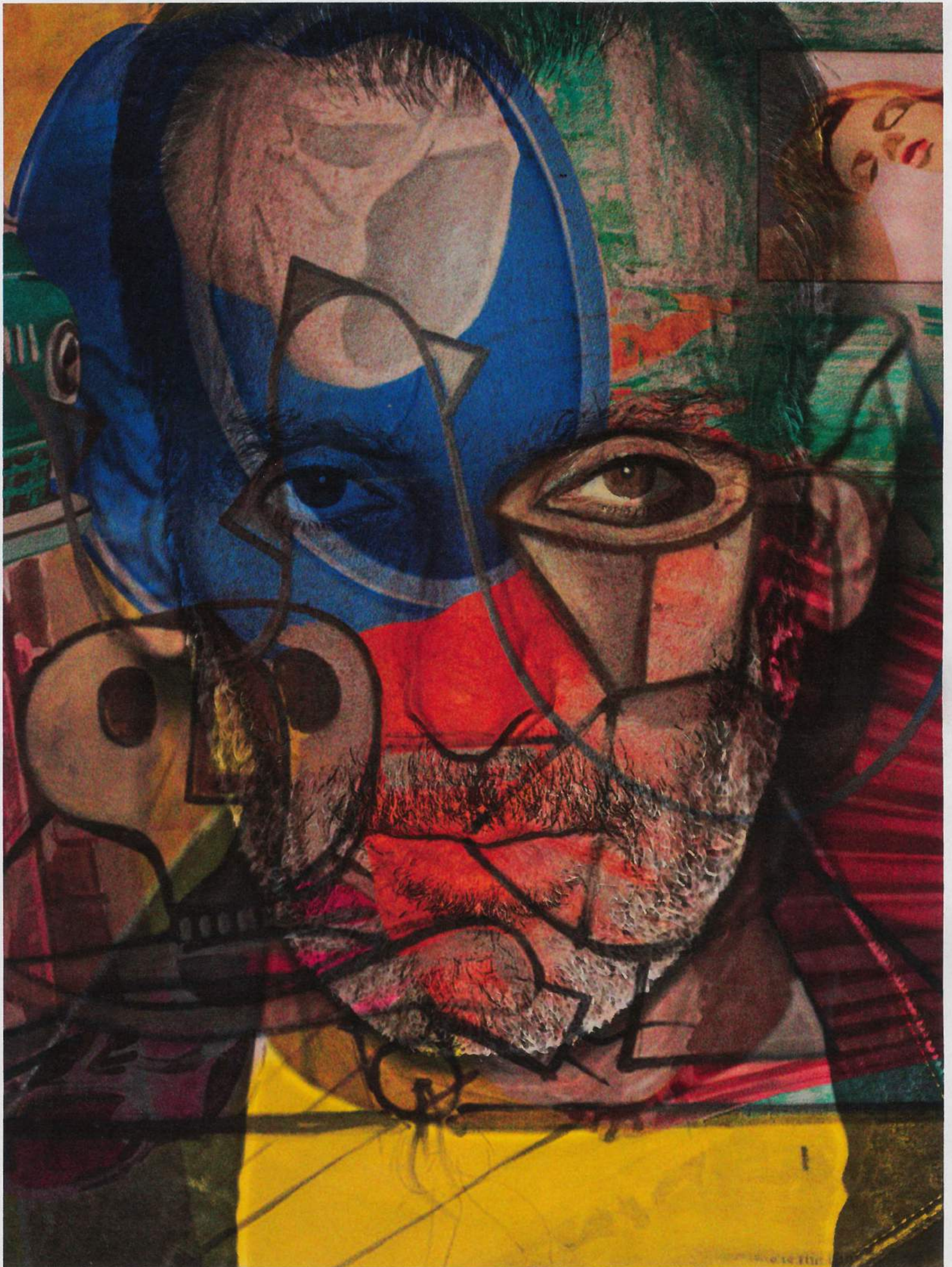
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David
SALLE
BY EMMA CLINE

THE NEW YORK ARTIST HAS OFTEN BEEN CONSIDERED THE PREMIERE POSTMODERNIST PAINTER. BUT DAVID SALLE HAS MORE THAN ONE SKILL UP HIS SLEEVE. IN HIS NEW BOOK OF ESSAYS, THE WISE AND WITTY AESTHETE CUTS THROUGH THE POMP AND PRESS-RELEASE-SPEAK OF THE ART WORLD AND PROMOTES THE WONDER OF ACTUALLY EXPERIENCING A WORK.

Photography STEVEN KLEIN
Digital Manipulation KENN SIX

OPPOSITE PAGE: DAVID SALLE IN NEW YORK, SEPTEMBER 2016, SUPERIMPOSED WITH *THIS IS THE FUN* (2014–15), OIL, ACRYLIC, AND DIGITAL ARCHIVE PRINT ON LINEN AND CANVAS, 70 × 96".
FOLLOWING SPREAD: *SHOOTING* (1995), OIL AND ACRYLIC ON CANVAS, 84 × 119". © DAVID SALLE.
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“THERE IS A SENSE THAT THE ARTIST IS A POLITICAL CANDIDATE, AND THIS CANDIDATE IS BEING PUT FORWARD, AND THEY ARE MEANT TO REPRESENT US. IT’S A BIG JOB FOR AN ARTIST TO HAVE TO FILL.”

David Salle is, of course, a well-known painter, but for the entirety of our friendship, we have mostly talked about books. Salle is one of the more avid readers I know. He reads widely and thoughtfully across many genres, from contemporary short stories to essays to novels in translation. The last time I saw him, we both enthused over *Outline*, by Rachel Cusk, which he had just finished, and *Mating*, by Norman Rush, which he had just started. Two other books he was in the middle of reading were splayed around the room, while another stack waited in the corner. After all our talk of books over the past few years, it was a pleasure to get the chance to speak with him about his own, *How to See* (Norton), a collection of essays about art—many written in his capacity as a critic for *Town & Country* and also for magazines including *The Paris Review* and *Artforum*.

Salle’s writing is much like his conversational style—thoughtful and witty, easily associative. The essays manage to be deeply literate without ever going soggy with jargon or theory. Salle’s decades as an artist make the book particularly clearheaded and relevant, and a welcome alternative to the kind of overheated art writing that obfuscates rather than illuminates. With his vivid language, he brings our attention again and again to the primacy of the work rather than the noise that surrounds it. To read this book is to engage fully in the act of looking, and Salle is an especially well-qualified guide.

I spoke to David Salle at the end of a blustery Labor Day. The streets were empty and the city seemed slightly apocalyptic in the way it sometimes does on holiday weekends. We sat at the kitchen table of Salle’s Brooklyn home—he was leaving for Hong Kong early the next morning and still hadn’t finished packing. He had, however, already decided what books he would be bringing.

EMMA CLINE: I was at the Whitney over the weekend, and I noticed something I always notice at museums: the museum gait. You know, the shuffle pause, shuffle pause.

DAVID SALLE: Like shackles. Museum shackles.

CLINE: Yes, little steps. And it struck me, why is there still this sense that there is a right way to look at art? We live in a time when people are pretty adept at giving their opinion on anything; that’s how the internet functions in certain ways, facilitating 35 impassioned Yelp reviews of a gas station. So why do people still feel unable to trust their opinion when it comes to art?

SALLE: Do you think the museum shuffle gait implies a mystification?

CLINE: Yeah. Or a dutiful looking, like taking your vitamins. You’re sort of looking without actually engaging in one piece more than another.

SALLE: No one’s quite figured out how to make the images come to the viewer. I guess if they put it on a conveyor belt, you could stand in one place like at sushi restaurants. That could be a next generation of museums. Someone should try that. [Cline laughs] I think ideally you want to have a contemplative space for the viewer. And shuffling around like a chain gang does work against that.

CLINE: Your book is partially about how people can trust or articulate the feelings that a piece of art evokes. Why is that particularly difficult with art?

SALLE: That is a good question. Why should it be difficult for someone to claim their personal reaction, especially, as you said, in this time where we are only too happy to share our personal reactions about everything, no matter how trivial. Maybe the answer is conditioning. This is pure conjecture, but I think people go to museums to participate. And really it becomes a question of architecture. How do you move people through a space and allow them to have an experience? I, probably more than most people, suffer from museum fatigue. I always want to just stay still or sit in a chair and look at one thing, but that’s not the experience of the museum. People have to file through to get to the whole shebang. But still that doesn’t answer the question of why people feel art is outside of themselves.

CLINE: With music or literature, people tend to be very comfortable trusting their own response. Somehow viewing and talking about art still has this aura of mystery or difficulty, where you feel like you’re doing it wrong.

SALLE: Maybe we should keep it that way, keep a little mystery to it. [laughs] No, you’re right. And unfortunately this has given rise to the culture of the wall label, which tells people exactly what it is they’re supposed to be thinking about or feeling.

CLINE: Yeah, it’s the hand-holding aspect.

SALLE: It makes the art represent something, so you’re seeing it as a representation of some idea, which it might be. But that also clouds anything else it might be saying.

CLINE: Did you ever read about International Art English?

SALLE: I don’t know if I did.

CLINE: It’s the language of press releases for art shows, and wall labels, too. Artspeak, almost like its own language.

SALLE: People talk about this often in the art world. The press releases have reached a level of absurdity and creativity—creative absurdity—that has completely detached from its intended object. It’s left reality behind long ago. It’s like something out of William Burroughs.

CLINE: But who does that benefit? Because it doesn’t seem artists really connect to that way of talking either.

SALLE: No, I don’t think we do. I don’t know. How did it start and who encourages it?

CLINE: You write a lot in your book about this hyper focus on the artist’s intention. I wonder if it’s connected to that—this idea that everything has to have some easily identifiable origin point.

SALLE: Of course, these are generalizations, which maybe don’t apply to two people. But there is a sense that the artist is a political candidate, and this candidate is being put forward, and they are meant to represent us. It’s a big job for an artist to have to have to fill. Few artists are temperamentally equipped to fill a job like that. Or maybe today artists are more comfortable with it. I don’t know.

CLINE: You compared it to propaganda.

SALLE: I guess propaganda is the next step.

CLINE: Do you feel like if a piece of art is successful, the intention is assimilated into it so seamlessly that you couldn’t pull it apart or reposition it?

SALLE: Yeah, I do. Fairfield Porter [the midcentury American painter, poet, and critic], who has

been my model for art writing all along, said that if the most interesting thing about a work of art is its content, it’s probably a failure. I think it’s true that if you find yourself thinking about the meaning in an author’s message, it’s probably not very interesting as art. Obviously, this is a tough concept, because if you withdraw intention, what else is there?

CLINE: You write about giving viewers the autonomy to respond in an individual way. For you, it’s a lot about the feelings a work of art evokes.

SALLE: I think people have to be given—or take—the permission to say that something is nothing. Just because it’s in a museum doesn’t mean it’s anything. So the problem with that, of course, is that it sounds as though one is embracing a kind of philistinism. I guess that’s the danger one has to be able to live with. I’m comfortable with that danger. What if everything in a museum is crap? It’s entirely possible; it’s not the end of the world. [Cline laughs] I was in a group show at a museum in Torino called the Castello di Rivoli. It was a show of a lot of American artists installed in a floor of this museum. Another floor of the museum houses the most refined collection of arte povera in the world, which is perfectly selected and perfectly installed. I remember being struck by the contrast between the Italian works and the American. I would say the hallmarks of the Italian style are a poetical connection to nature and to materiality, materials, and exquisite taste. On contrast, the American work was essentially a bunch of bad-tempered, complaining kids.

CLINE: I relate.

SALLE: I remember saying to the director of the museum at the time, “I’m so mortified. I feel like all the American artists are aesthetically not very interesting and mired in a complaining relationship to its own culture, whereas the Italian work, from a different era, is so comfortable with its relationship to nature and to culture.” He said, “Oh, you’re exaggerating.” But, my point is simply it would have been unthinkable to walk into that show and not say, “American art from this period is really not nearly as dynamic,” or to have some crushing opinion about it. I think many people did.

CLINE: You sound a lot crankier in that story than in this book. [laughs] In the book, there’s a real generosity toward art and other artists. There’s Eric Fischl, who wrote a memoir recently where he was very unsparing about other artists. But I just don’t see that in this book at all. You seem grateful for the chance to encounter and think about other people’s art.

SALLE: I can be so cranky. But, no, I do feel grateful in general and at times just astonished that anybody did anything worth looking at. I find it so amazing and so full of wonder when something is good. I do feel like we should celebrate it rather than worry about whether it’s on the right side of history, because I don’t know if anyone can really know that.

CLINE: Yeah. There’s a nice story in the book about you seeing a Jeff Koons flower puppy.

SALLE: I was installing a show in Bilbao at the Guggenheim, and they had one of Jeff’s flower puppies in

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“

I THINK IT'S WHAT ANY ARTIST WOULD WANT: TO FEEL LIKE THEIR WORK CAN BE TAKEN IN ON A LEVEL OF EXPERIENCE BEYOND THE HEADLINE OR THE PRESS RELEASE. I DON'T THINK ANY ARTIST WANTS TO BE REDUCED TO A PRESS RELEASE.

”

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THIS PAGE: *SILVER 5* (2014).
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SUGAR
FREE
LESS THAN
1 CALORIE
PER BOTTLE

LESS THAN 1 CALORIE PER BOTTLE

"I DO FEEL GRATEFUL AND AT TIMES JUST ASTONISHED THAT ANYBODY DID ANYTHING WORTH LOOKING AT ... I DO FEEL LIKE WE SHOULD CELEBRATE IT RATHER THAN WORRY ABOUT WHETHER IT'S ON THE RIGHT SIDE OF HISTORY."

the promenade directly in front of the museum. It's visible at quite a distance, and from many points in the city. I'm not using its ubiquity or its mere visibility as an indicator of value, but it was such a dynamic concentration of imagistic energy in a specific place related to architecture and urban design and sculptural aesthetics. It does all of that in such a compressed and efficient way. Every time I saw it, I just felt so grateful, so happy. I don't know how there could have been any other reaction to it. It's so on the side of life, more life, more imagination. So yeah, art can fail in lots of different ways or even commit lots of sins as long as it does that occasionally.

CLINE: One of the lovely things about these essays is that you are writing about your friends and contemporaries, some of whom you've known for 30 or 40 years. I think most criticism doesn't benefit from that breadth of knowledge.

SALLE: The whole *raison d'être* for the book is to discuss works of art in the way that artists talk about art, which is very different than the way critics or journalists or the art market talk about art. Artists talk about art in sort of straightforward terms, more like the way you talk about plumbing fixtures. Does it function well? Does it bring the hot water up from the cellar efficiently, or does it lose too much thermodynamic energy in the process? Artists are also very ruthless with each other and can be very brutal in evaluating each other's work because their criteria is almost more mechanistic. Does it do what it's supposed to be doing in an efficient way? That doesn't mean that intention is not part of the conversation, but it's not the foreground. This next comment is more of the cranky kind, but when I first came to New York, I knew some painters older than myself. I was kind of the kid who was allowed to hang out with them at 1 University Place, which was Mickey Ruskin's bar after Max's Kansas City. I was actually dumbfounded by how some of these people talked to each other. For example, it was a normal night at a bar, nothing very momentous, when I walked a painter. The other painters at the bar had a bit of an attitude about it. One said to him, "You know, I'm tired of that feeling of hot air coming out from behind your work." And I thought, "Well, that's interesting." I didn't know you could even think something like that, let alone say it right to someone's face. That is more the way people talked in those days. But the point is it was perfectly normal to question a work's fundamental premises and its fundamental visual manifestations. It was perfectly okay to say, "Oh, that should have been red" or something like that. In a funny way, the way artists talk about art is to de-privilege it.

CLINE: Encountering the thing itself instead of the aura around it.

SALLE: Right. There was a review by Fairfield Porter from the 1950s about Mark Rothko, one of the more hallowed names in American art. The fact that he killed himself only enhanced the aura of sanctity and extreme sacrifice. Porter says something like, "Yeah, Rothko paints rectangles of color. They have mass but no weight." That's not in any way a detraction, but it's a description. And it has nothing to do with the spiritual dimension. Here's the point: Rothko's colored rectangles, they do these things over here, but they

don't do these things over here. And that's fine. The main thing is as an intelligent viewer, to identify just what those things are that it does, that those rectangles do, and then not assume that they do these things over here. I don't know why that's challenging.

CLINE: You write about the scene at CalArts during your time there, how there was this sense that anything goes. I was sort of touched by that idea of no one being given a hard time.

SALLE: Yeah, what counted was the attitude. There were successful ways of expressing the attitude and less successful ways. I think that spirit is very much alive today actually. That's what a certain generation of curators is alert to or on the look out for: an attitude. And it is a brilliant and moving spectacle when it happens. It's almost like watching a magic show when you're a kid. You know it's magic and that someone's pulling the wool over your eyes in a way, but it's so damn pleasurable. That suspension of disbelief is something that we all respond to. But it's hard to capture the butterfly without tearing the wings off of it. [laughs] I kind of digressed with it.

CLINE: I've heard you talk about a couple in Kansas who were your first art teachers. I was wondering how they spoke about art to you?

SALLE: There are so many different ways to talk and think about art. We just spoke about when attitude becomes form. But when I was a kid, I had these two art teachers, a couple, who were continuing a line of very classical, atelier art training, and they instilled in me a sensitivity to all the classical verities of line, shape, color, texture, and composition, which is only engaging if you're making two-dimensional objects. It has not much relevance to the world of conceptual art, but it's what I refer to almost every day. I feel like it's not so much a tradition as a system that has been codified over the centuries starting in the Renaissance that applies to any painted surface. So if you're engaging in paintings, this is the language that one has to learn and is obliged to speak. I was very fortunate that I learned this language when I was a kid before I went to California, where I learned the language of attitude. Somehow the two things began to coexist.

CLINE: I was a big reader as a kid. And I remember the first time I really understood that there was such a thing as a book review or that you could decide for yourself that something was actually good or not good. Until that point, I just thought that if it was a book and I was holding it, it was probably really good. I was just grateful for the reprieve that a book offers. There were books I loved, which I only later discovered were commonly understood to be schlocky and sentimental. I wonder if the same is true for art.

SALLE: Good question. I think what you're asking about is the role of taste.

CLINE: To me, art was so holy that the thought that I could have a personal opinion about it took me a while to understand—how to make the connection between art and myself. In these essays, you insist on the human as the scale by which to talk about art. Your own work has a deeply human quality to it as well. There is this desire to bring everything back to the context of the human experience.

SALLE: I think it's what any artist would want: to feel like their work can be taken in on a level of expe-

rience beyond the headline or the press release. I don't think any artist wants to be reduced to a press release. We have a whole industry whose function it is to process and present information. There's nothing wrong with it, but it's not the thing. I'm always very grateful for stories about the great coffeehouse wits in Vienna at the turn of the last century. People would wait for a chance to stand near the table where the great wits were trading witticisms as a spectator sport because it was that good. They were that on fire and there was no product. They didn't write anything down. It was just the pleasure of engagement with the moment. I think that's my kind of ideal of how I live. As we're talking, in my kitchen there's a picture of Frank Stella as a young man on an announcement card. It's a beautiful, romantic black-and-white photograph of Frank probably in his thirties or forties looking at a deconstructed French curve painting of his from the '70s. You feel, even from this photograph, that this was someone leaping into the void without any net, without any assurance that pushing painting into three dimensions was going to be anything other than a folly. And maybe it was a folly, but I keep that photograph almost as a talisman, a trigger of what that must have felt like to stand in a studio and just wonder about jumping off into the void. Of course, Frank never thought he jumped off into the void because he knew exactly what he was doing. Does that make sense?

CLINE: That's what I was trying to say before—the things you are drawn to. I think of James Salter and the way he writes about details of food and clothes and objects. There's no sense that it's trivial to think about those things.

SALLE: I have to say, that's pretty typical for artists, kind of embarrassingly typical for artists that everything is all about selection. But, yeah, Jim is also a great inspiration of how to condense something into a few essentials. It has to be the right essentials or it doesn't resonate.

CLINE: Sometimes he seems to be saying that this is the substance of what life is.

SALLE: This is what we can hold in our hands and weigh like stones, and that's what we have to go on.

CLINE: You were friends with James Salter, yes?

SALLE: I feel very fortunate to have known Salter, not very well, but I knew him over the years. Beautiful guy. Very much like his work. Very much in sync with what he produced. Always, people would be talking, talking, and after digging themselves into a deep enough hole, they would turn to Jim and wait for him to utter the single clarifying sentence.

CLINE: I met him once and he said, "You must live in Brooklyn like they all do." So, yeah. That's him. You seem to have a lot of writer friends. I wonder how the world of writing became interesting to you. How did you come to want to write a book?

SALLE: It's just folly, yet (CONTINUED ON PAGE 127)

EMMA CLINE IS A NEW YORK-BASED AUTHOR WHOSE DEBUT NOVEL, *THE GIRLS*, WAS RELEASED LAST JUNE. PHOTO ASSISTANTS: MARK LUCKASAVAGE, WILLY WARD, STEPHEN WORDIE. SPECIAL THANKS: WEST KILL FARM. OPPOSITE: *ON THE ROAD* (2016). OIL, ACRYLIC, CHARCOAL, AND ARCHIVAL DIGITAL TRANSFER AND PRINT ON LINEN, 80 x 60". © DAVID SALLE, LICENSED BY VAGA, NEW YORK. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND SKARSTEDT, NEW YORK.

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nity to learn more about what life is like for a soldier. MARTIN: What are your ultimate ambitions in the business? You talked about directing.

EHRENREICH: Acting-wise, I've had all these experiences. Yet when I look at certain people whose careers I admire, they've gotten to play so many different characters. So it's just that — getting to have more of these singular little adventures where you get to be a part of a completely different world. But even a kid, directing was something that I did. I made short films in school. I feel like I've been in the best film school in the world, having gotten to work with all these people. Warren was very adamant and very encouraging of me to direct. It's definitely something that I'd like to pursue more in the future. The biggest challenge to being an actor is when you're not working, just being unemployed, the downtime and not having anything to do.

MARTIN: Assuming you have downtime in the next decade or so.

EHRENREICH: [laughs] Right, yeah.

MARTIN: Well, it's been a real pleasure to be able to check in with you again.

EHRENREICH: Thank you so much. So we'll talk when I'm how old? In another eight years, I guess. [laughs]

MARTIN: 2024. Got it. Meet you here.

more SALLE

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 121) another way to waste time, to deflect myself from what I should be doing. I've always read, I've always admired writers and was lucky really to meet some extraordinary ones and become friends. Certain times you just like people, and it grows out like a nautilus shell.

CLINE: Let's talk about your title. *How to See* is very prescriptive, but you're also doing something a bit wry.

SALLE: It was the working title. I never thought it would stick. I thought, "Well, the publisher is never going to go along with this. To my surprise, people seemed to accept it as a normal, natural title. And what else would you call it? Because it is a how-to guide. It's a kind of a *Popular Mechanics*, like, "This is what a screwdriver looks like, and this is a number ten Phillips head." But I kept waiting for someone to say, "You can't call it that."

CLINE: I always thought that you were being tongue-in-cheek with the title.

SALLE: Well, of course. A couple of friends expressed some reservations that the humor might be missed. The title could be taken the wrong way. Fortunately, thanks to you, I met Peter Mendelsund, who designed the most brilliant cover, which makes it clear that the title is a source of fun.

CLINE: The title makes me think a little bit about *Ways of Seeing*. Did you ever read that?

SALLE: Well, there is that reference, and I have a terrible confession to make, sort of like those people who say that they've been mispronouncing a word all their life: I've never read *Ways of Seeing* all the way through. I'm sure I carried it around with me in art school.

CLINE: What I remember most about John Berger is that I went to my local bookstore when I was a teenager and asked for John *Bergé*.

SALLE: That's a natural thing to ask and much better. I think I pronounced it *Bergé*, too.

CLINE: It sounds a lot more impressive. He's got some great book titles: *The Shape of a Pocket*; *And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos*.

SALLE: It would be neat to write a book with that kind of title. I read very recently his Picasso book. It's

a different point of view. But anyway, the connection to *Ways of Seeing* is both amusing and fun. But from a commercial standpoint, it's one of those fraudulent associations that I have no interest in correcting.

CLINE: There's a real ease to your writing, a wit and warmth, and I wondered how conscious it was. What's the difference in thinking about what your writing style would be versus your painting style?

SALLE: I would love it if they felt kind of congruent. I don't know if they do. I do work hard at trying to find the right expression for something, which might be like finding the right image—choosing not only the right words but down to the right number of lines. I remember being in Maine once at Colby College with Alex Katz. It houses hundreds of his works. There was a painting of just one seagull against a blue sky. I was admiring it and Alex said, "45 brush strokes exactly."

CLINE: Wow.

SALLE: That kind of efficiency and concision is something I think about, and hopefully, there is a reciprocity between doing it in painting and doing it in writing. I remember using a section from Jim Salter's memoir, *Burning the Days*, when I was teaching. And I ran into Jim at a *Paris Review* party and told him about it, and he was amused. He asked what passage I had chosen, and luckily I had my wits about me and remembered exactly the line. He's describing starting his life over after being divorced. He's with a much younger woman, and he's leaving Colorado to move back to the East Coast. His expression of that scenario is four words: "Health, good. Hopes, fair." And I told him that. He said, "Oh, there was much more, but Kay made me cut it."

CLINE: Often when we talk about books or painting or art in general, there is always a struggle to find an equivalency between writing fiction and making a painting. I wonder if it's a futile thing to try to do. It's a different language basically. I was thinking about a time in your studio when you were painting, and you were trying to choose what color to paint this little flag, and you asked me what color I thought the flag should be. It was a funny moment for me because I thought, "Should I know what color?" And is there an equivalency in fiction where I would expect someone to be able to guess the correct word?

SALLE: I don't know if there's any equivalency, but I like thinking about one. It's fun to think about it.

CLINE: It is. It's fun for me to hear about the art world because it's gossip in the same way that a soap opera would be gossip, where it doesn't come to bear on me specifically, but I enjoy it as a world. I feel no pressure to be involved with it.

SALLE: Yeah, that's the good thing about not taking sides. Maybe that's a title of something else.

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