



▲ David Salle *Nouns*, 2003, oil on linen, 342.9 x 812.8 cm. On view at Spike Gallery, New York.

One of the difficulties in following the work of an artist such as David Salle who came to prominence in the 1980s is that in the outsized, euphoric art market of that decade the hype surrounding his work was so insistent that it often stymied genuine critical engagement or appraisal. Instead of taking the work on its own terms and judging it accordingly, one was often forced to decide whether one was “for or against” it—whether Salle’s painting was, as the critic Roberta Smith wrote, one of the “great and most paradigmatic achievements” of American art of the 1980s, or was he the strongest candidate, as Robert Hughes commented, “for the title of Most Overrated Young American Artist”? This sort of Manichean opposition, typical of the hyperbole of the decade, reflected much more the explosive growth of the art market and its need to anoint new stars than anything internal to Salle’s art. Indeed even when the market collapsed in the early 1990s, and some of those artists fell, Salle went on painting as before, developing his *métier*, and expanding his range, unlike some of his peers who abandoned the medium that had made them famous as if they were selling a plummeting stock.

Salle developed his signature style in the painterly appropriation and juxtaposition of apparently incongruous imagery from such varied sources as Old Master and postwar art, generic illustration, film, and pornography magazines. Although painting had come under attack in the postmodern polemics of that period and was increasingly being supplanted by photo-based art, Salle adopted the medium for its

capacity to be self-reflexive or autonomous, unlike photography which he felt would invariably be read as referring to the world. The seemingly closed, hermetic air of much of his painting was due in part to the way his chosen imagery appeared as if it had already existed, several removes from its source. That is, Salle didn’t borrow depictions from Old Master paintings so much as borrow from the ubiquitous reproductions of those paintings that form the visual vernacular of mass culture. In this way Salle was not far from earlier appropriationists such as Picabia or Duchamp, and later artists such as Warhol and Polke, concerned as much with the circulation, source, and identity of imagery as with what the imagery is *of*. The paintings that resulted were complex, cool, and often sphinx-like in their mute obscurity, inviting but never yielding to interpretative decoding. In the large three- or four-panel paintings recently exhibited at Mary Boone Gallery, Salle’s style has reached an almost classical phase. Gone are the frenetic, visually cacophonous surfaces of multiple images layered upon one another like so many competing symbolic schemes. In their place are works such as *Fingers Out of Hand* (2002) in which a horizontal field of three red amaryllis flowers surmounts three panels: a shirtless man swinging a baseball bat; another with an open hand in front of his chest; and a mechanically posed woman in a white dress who looks like a mannequin advertising tennis wear. Each figure is closely cropped in a way that suggests the icy, detached figures of Alex Katz. Indeed, the figures in these paintings are oddly object-like, as if to expand what feminist critics argued were the objectifying



▲ **David Salle** *Fingers Out of Hand*, 2002, oil on linen, 193 x 335.3 cm. On view at Mary Boone Gallery, New York.

▶ **David Salle** *Poverty is no Disgrace*, 1982, oil, acrylic on canvas, chair, 248.9 x 521.9 cm. Courtesy Mary Boone Gallery, New York.



operations of Salle's borrowed pornographic imagery to clothed men and women alike. Such pornographic imagery forms two of the panels of *Lightening* (2002), but rather than being provocative, the images seem more blandly period-specific, circa 1960s or '70s, like the work's bright, multi-hued, striped textile backgrounds. The most visually compelling of these disjunctive paintings, *Sestina* (2002), shows three women in three different forms of light, one a Salle-esque nude in the harsh illumination of the studio, another outdoors in a frilly diaphanous dress, and the third a stylish young woman in a plaid skirt posed against a yellow background populated by flowers as if it were a Japanese screen.

Although Salle's paintings draw from an enormously wide range of visual sources, his motifs are relatively few in number and are continually revisited from work to work. At Spike Gallery, as if to

provide a lexicon of such motifs, Salle exhibited *Nouns*, a work in twenty-four panels, each of which featured a single motif: a ship in a bottle, an ice floe, a beach umbrella, a bronze statue, a tipped glass of water, an overturned bottle of ink, and so on. This work has the scale of a mural—in which the parts are typically subordinate to an overall gestalt—but demands to be read disjunctively, part by part. If in Salle's other paintings there is an impulse to interpretatively integrate the various elements of the imagistic mélange, this work functions as a collection of separate, autonomous, basic units, like the building blocks of our visual culture.

Jonathan Gilmore

This profile was published on the occasion of the David Salle exhibitions at Mary Boone Gallery and Spike Gallery, New York