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Forbes

What Words Fail To Describe: The Paintings of David Salle
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David Salle
Ham and Cheese
2017

oil, acrylic, flashe, charcoal, and archival digital print on linen

74 x 104 inches

Image courtesy of the artist.

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In trying to describe to me how to approach his paintings, David Salle had to resort to musical analogies.

“I like paint, I like painting, and different paints do different things,” he told me as he walked me around “Ham and Cheese and Other Paintings,” an exhibition of his latest paintings open at Skarstedt gallery through October 28, 2017. “The kinds of things I think about when I’m painting are orchestration. We have a melodic line, and then the score has to



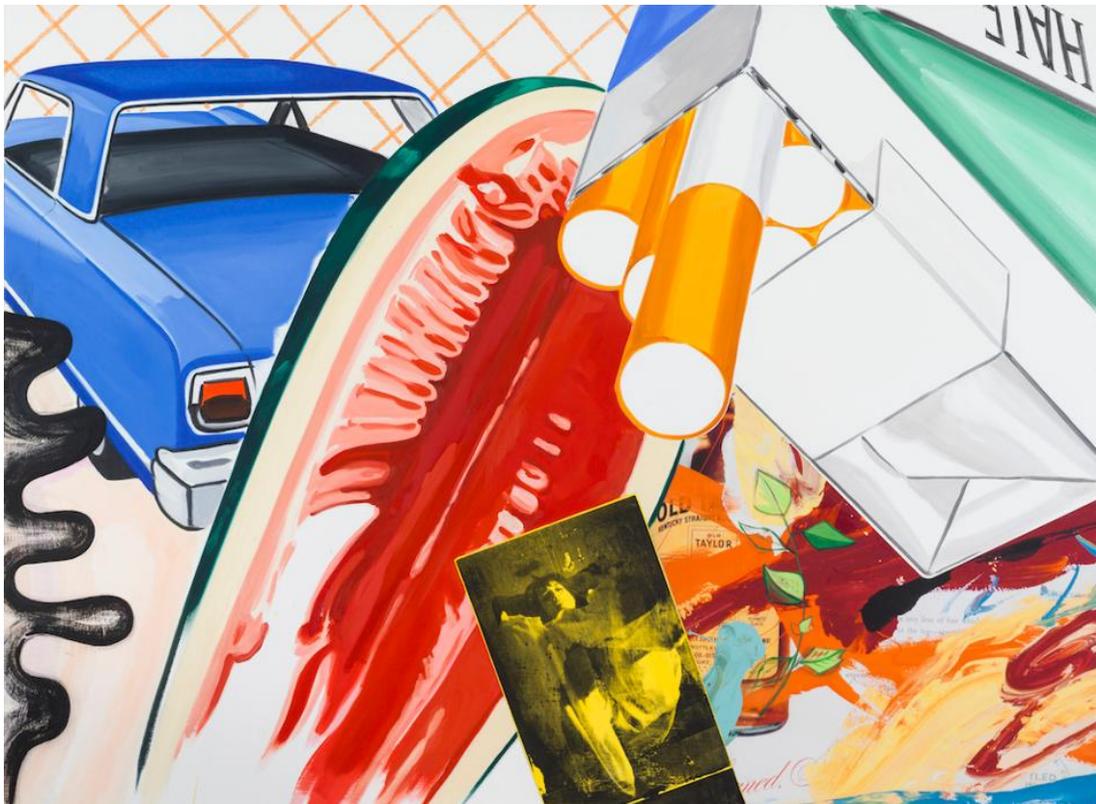
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be divided up in between instruments. Knowing the right one is its own kind of gift. It's very largely intuitive."

ut I didn't want to know how the paintings were made. I wanted to know what they meant. They canvasses were full of symbols that I recognized — cocktail olives, Kleenex boxes, ladders, watermelons, cherries, beautiful women, ham and cheese sandwiches — but did not make sense in context to one another, at least not to me. My brain wanted to make a connection. What, I pressed, do they capture?

"I'm not sure if capturing is what painting does," Salle responded. "Painting paints. A camera captures. You can't capture something that can't be named." Then he turned the question around on me — "We are looking at my paintings now — what do they do for you?"

I fumbled. In truth, I've never been able to access Salle's work. I get tripped up by how glossy but inscrutable they appear, like a Super Bowl advertisement that doesn't reveal what it's selling until the very last second of the commercial. Only with Salle, there's no reveal. I am further intimidated by the term "post-modern," which is almost always used to describe Salle's paintings in texts about his work. I have a graduate degree in art history, and to this day, I cannot define what post-modern means.



David Salle
Portrait of Beverly
2017
oil, acrylic, flashe, charcoal, and archival digital print on linen
67 x 92 inches
Image courtesy of the artist.
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Neither, it turned out, can Salle. “I don’t know what post-modern means — do you know what it means?” he laughed.

He continued: “I think post-modernism is pretty fluid. It has a specific meaning in architecture, but not in art. In art, it just refers to a time in the evolution of modernism in which more things are at play simultaneously. There was this idea of a linear progression of style, which was thought to be the coherence of modernism, and after a time, people were not interested in that any longer.”

What Salle was referring to was the idea that the history of painting is a progression from the vanishing point of the Renaissance to the eradication of the figure in modernism. Once painters exhausted the possibilities of a monochromatic canvas during the 1950s — and it was quickly — they returned to painting a variety of things in a variety of different ways. Post-modernism is painting whatever you please.

“I am trying to do two things that are seemingly contradictory, but are actually complimentary,” he told me. “One is immediate visual impact. The second is that the image unfolds slowly over time, and repays prolonged looking. To that end, there is a great deal of consideration put into the structural underpinnings. How the compositions are made to work as a structures that hold these things, or contain these things. There are certain rhythms and velocities, and directions that the eye gets engaged with.”

Talking to Salle, I began to get a sense of how to read one of his paintings. Not as a story, or a political statement, or a theory, or an aesthetic object, or in context to pop culture — but instead, as a visual experience. Salle’s paintings are meant to challenge perception as it relates to the eye, and nowhere else. They entice the more you look at them.

I could see his symphonies. The more I looked, the more my eyes began to follow lines in the compositions. There was depth to surfaces that previously seemed polished and flat to me. Objects whirled out of space, and receded. They were held in balance. They barely fit, but they also fit perfectly.

“The things I choose to paint can be painted,” Salle told me. “If you are a painter, you know what I mean.”

There’s a lot I don’t get about painting not being a painter to myself. And that’s a shame, because I’m an art critic. But Salle helped me be a better viewer. He really did.



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The Old Bars (after MH)

2017

oil, acrylic, flashe, charcoal, and archival digital print on linen

67 1/8 x 92 inches

170.5 x 233.7 cm

Image courtesy of the artist.

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In parting, I wondered why he resorted to describing his paintings with musical analogies — rather than, for example, comparing them to literature.

“We accept the fact that music doesn’t have a subject, and doesn’t have a meaning qua meaning, it has a meaning qua sound,” he said. “For some reason in art, we get all fatootsed about meaning.”

I loved that. Why does art have to have meaning? It was a question, Salle noted with a smile, which required more time than we had in the space of our interview.

