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The New York Times

David Salle on How to Look at David Salle

By Daniel McDermon
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“Summer Party” (2017). Credit All Rights Reserved David Salle/Licensed by VAGA, New York; via Skarstedt, New York

David Salle’s new paintings are crowded: The nine large canvases upstairs at the Skarstedt gallery on the Upper East Side are brimful of archetypal images from 1960s-era advertisements — cars, cigarettes, shoes and food.

Those disparate elements pack the frame, layered in a way that has characterized Mr. Salle’s work since his career took flight in the early 1980s.

But the artist insists that to focus too much on what is in the paintings is to miss something more important. “I’m not suggesting that the *what* is incidental,” he said, in a recent

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interview. “It’s not, obviously. But the *how* is what makes a painting a painting. The subject is painting, not Kleenex boxes.”

“Ham and Cheese,” which gives the show its title, began with an ad for soup, Mr. Salle recalled.



“Ham and Cheese” (2017).CreditAll Rights Reserved David Salle/Licensed by VAGA, New York; via Skarstedt, New York

The broad planes of the bread “reminded me of the underside of an airplane,” he said. “If you turn it upside down and imagine it flying through the air.”



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“But it wouldn’t be interesting if that were the whole painting,” he added. “It’s an element in the composition.”

That composition also includes a Kleenex box,



a bottle of bourbon,



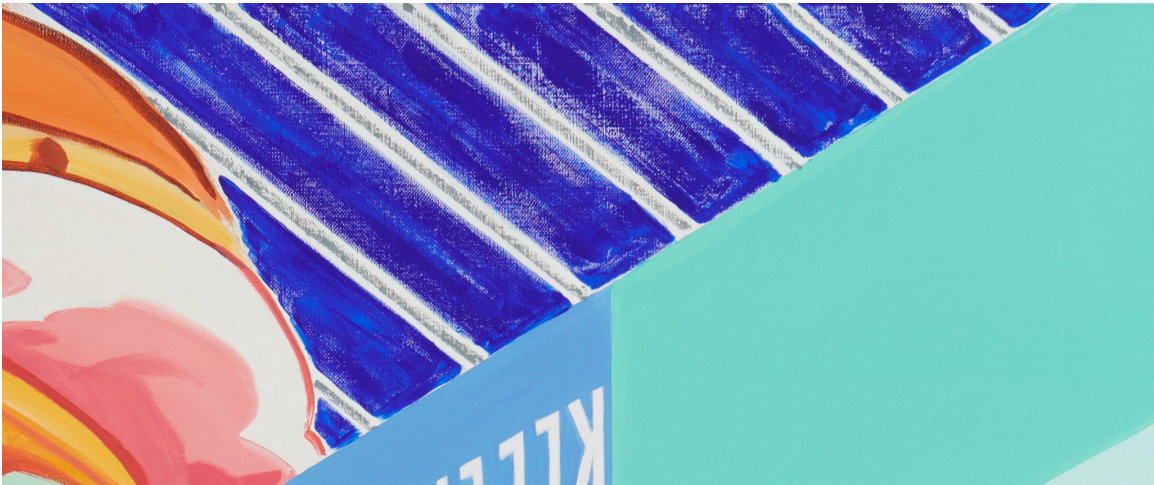
a watermelon



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and a swatch of blue and white stripes.



The paintings are built up in stages, Mr. Salle explained. One element leads to another, and that combination leads on. A shoe drawn from an advertisement and a visual quotation from Picasso sit side by side.



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That kind of pileup might seem very current, as if it relates to the sea of digital images in which we swim, but Mr. Salle flatly rejects that suggestion.



“Ham and Cheese” (2017).CreditAll Rights Reserved David Salle/Licensed by VAGA, New York; via Skarstedt, New York



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His work has touched on this kind of mixture for decades. (A 1987 [article](#) in The New York Times Magazine was headlined “How David Salle Mixes High Art and Trash.”)

While a number of visual references recur, Mr. Salle cares less about the objects themselves than about what they do with one another. The structure is what matters, Mr. Salle said. “So if people think about the proliferation of images, that’s fine,” he said, “but that is unstructured, by definition. And that’s not what we do here.”

For him, a painter’s tools are largely unchanging: line, shape, color, texture, materiality. A baseball player practices hitting for years, but ultimately he’s just swinging a bat.



“Portrait of Beverly” (2017). Credit All Rights Reserved David Salle/Licensed by VAGA, New York; via Skarstedt, New York

In a nearby painting, “Portrait of Beverly,” that watermelon is the centerpiece, its fleshy interior detailed in a row of pinks and reds that Mr. Salle likened to a drawer full of socks.



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A cigarette the size of an arm juts toward the viewer, driving the eye to a woman's photograph at bottom center.



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Mr. Salle pointed out the range of tones, the pale pink beginning at left growing more intense across the width of the canvas, yielding a deep red at right.

“That would be cloying if it weren’t for the acidity of the yellow and black,” he said, pointing to the photograph intruding at the bottom.

“That sharpens the painting up,” he added. “It’s almost like being whacked by a ruler by the teacher when your attention’s wandering.”

The five-foot watermelon that dominates the center of the picture, he said, “almost looks like a shark jumping out of the water.”



The source material he chooses, largely dating from a bygone era of advertising, often brings along a jolt of humor, he acknowledged. It’s a kind of sincere visual style that has long been surpassed in commercial art but retains a singular influence on him. (A satirical Twitter account, [70s Dinner Party](#), often highlights food shown in a similar pictorial style.)



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It's a consistent element in these pictures. A wedge of cake looms,



Detail from "Green Zowie" (2017).CreditAll Rights Reserved David Salle/Licensed by VAGA, New York; via Skarstedt, New York

and a salmon-colored bedspread oozes.



Detail from "Green Zowie" (2017).CreditAll Rights Reserved David Salle/Licensed by VAGA, New York; via Skarstedt, New York



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And while the accretion of all those references is often one of the first things viewers ask about, Mr. Salle returned the conversation again to talk of the fundamentals, including composition, line and color.



“Green Zowie” (2017). Credit All Rights Reserved David Salle/Licensed by VAGA, New York; via Skarstedt, New York

“Images are just stuff,” he said. “Experience — and, in an even more heightened way, painting — is the ordering of stuff. In a way, that’s the only distinction that has to be made. The world is not going to stop generating stuff, but that’s not art, and it’s not even very interesting. It’s just stuff.”

“David Salle: Ham and Cheese and Other Paintings” runs through Oct. 28 at the Skarstedt gallery, 20 East 79th St., skarstedt.com.

