

The New York Times

4 Art Gallery Shows to See Right Now



David Salle

Through Oct. 30. Skarstedt, 20 East 79th Street, Manhattan. 212-737-2060, skarstedt.com

The art stars of the mostly denigrated 1980s persist. David Salle's latest show, "Tree of Life," indicates that diligence has yielded some of the best and most beautiful paintings of his career. As usual this erstwhile Neo-Expressionist/Appropriation artist layers together images from high and low culture (mostly low this time) and different eras and styles of painting (usually abstract).

In most of the works here, the grisaille forms of well-dressed men and women from Peter Arno's New Yorker cartoons fill the background, providing a quiet imaginary audio of squabbling couples, inappropriate remarks and unexpected quips. On top of the Arnos, the simple outline of an innocent tree (maybe from a children's book) dominates the center of the painting; its trunk and (sometimes) falling leaves are painted different pastel colors. The tree is often the pedestal for an overly large S-curve caterpillar whose lines and colors add to the visual salad.

The best paintings are those with separate predella-like panels, attached below. Sometimes the trees' roots continue into this domain, but usually a horizontal stretch of abstract painting ensues — dripped, stained or smeared in the manner of various postwar painters — with fragments outlined over them, maybe an angular modern-looking head. Salle is a wry, unemotional painter, which doesn't hamper him; a skillful draftsman (especially with a projector) and a brilliant colorist and tonalist. His tangled compositions seem to have been compressed, which gives them new tensions and bounce. In a dreary time that has more than its share of dreary art — or maybe just dreary-eyed curators — these paintings are a bright spot, encouraging artists to make things that are cause for optimism — and to make them better.

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