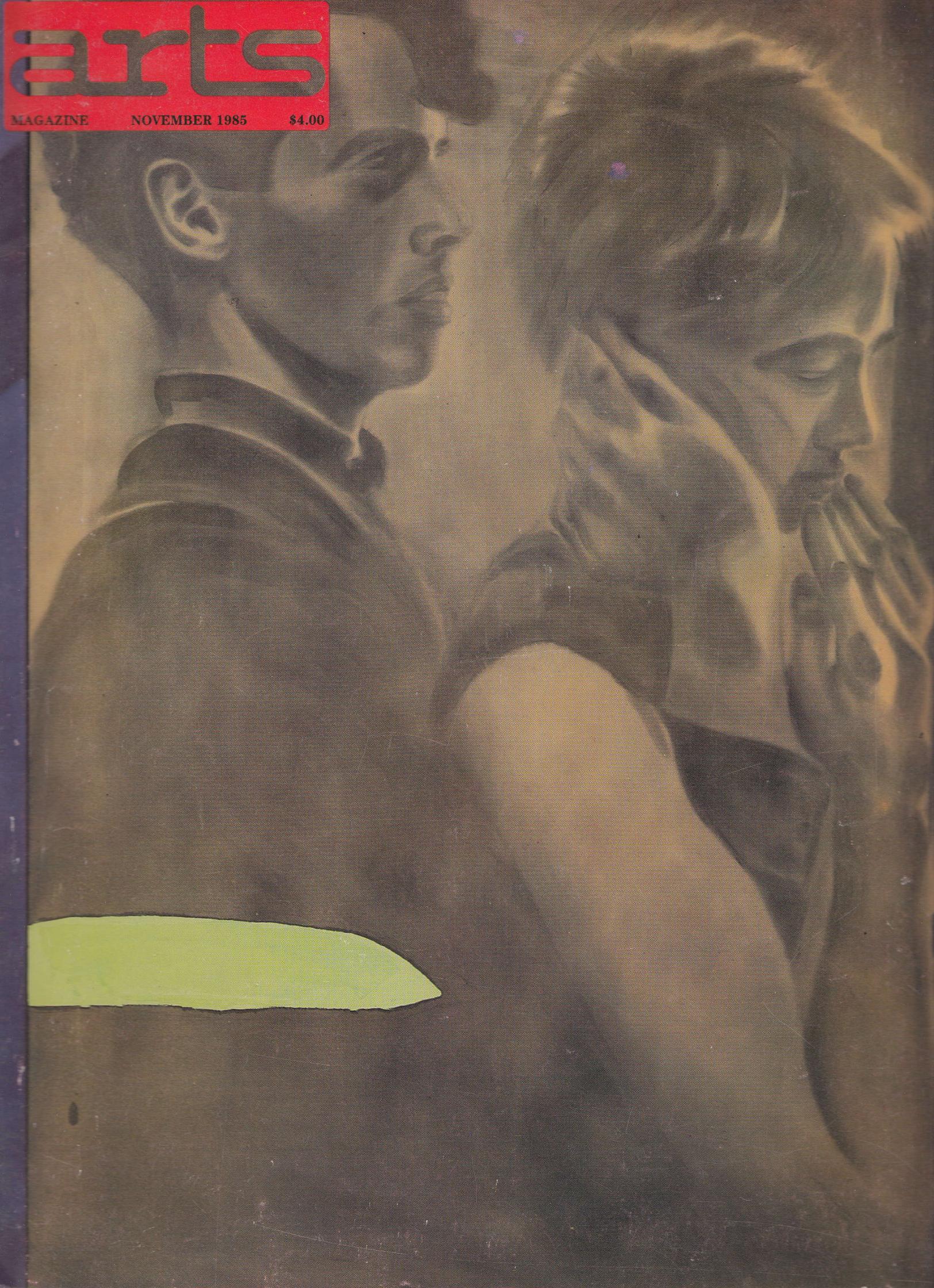
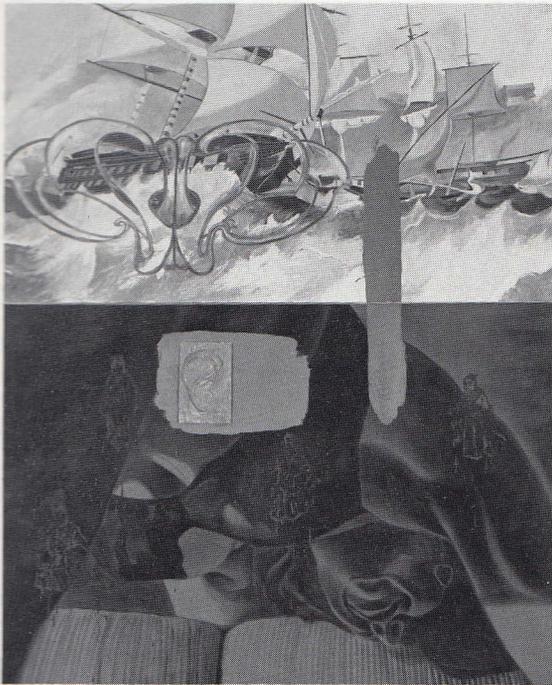


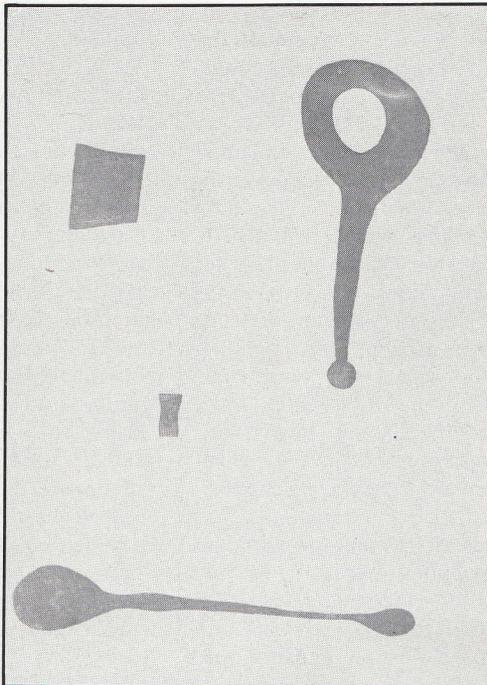
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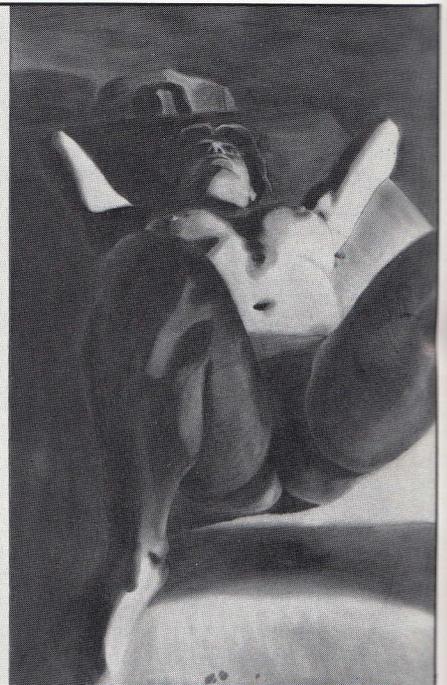




David Salle, *Making the Bed*, 1985. Oil, acrylic, and wood on canvas, 120 x 98". Courtesy Mary Boone Gallery.



David Salle, *The Bigger Credenza*, 1985. Acrylic, oil, and fabric on canvas, 108 x 154 1/2". Courtesy Mary Boone Gallery.



DAVID SALLE'S ART IN 1985: DEAD OR ALIVE?

RONI FEINSTEIN

A new and different sensibility seems to have entered David Salle's art. While still holding itself aloof, the work seems at the same time more approachable and inviting.

In 1979, David Salle declared, "The paintings are dead" [*Cover*, May 1979]. His paintings were dead, he explained, because they appeared "to participate in meaninglessness." Critics and writers saw evidence of the "deadness" of his art in the cynicism and melancholy that pervaded the work, in the crudeness of the drawing, in the muted, "off" quality of the palette, in the appropriation of mass-media sources (which seemed to testify to the irrelevance and futility of seeking to invent new forms), as well as in the impenetrable content (which seemed to represent a short-circuiting of the information systems of our culture).

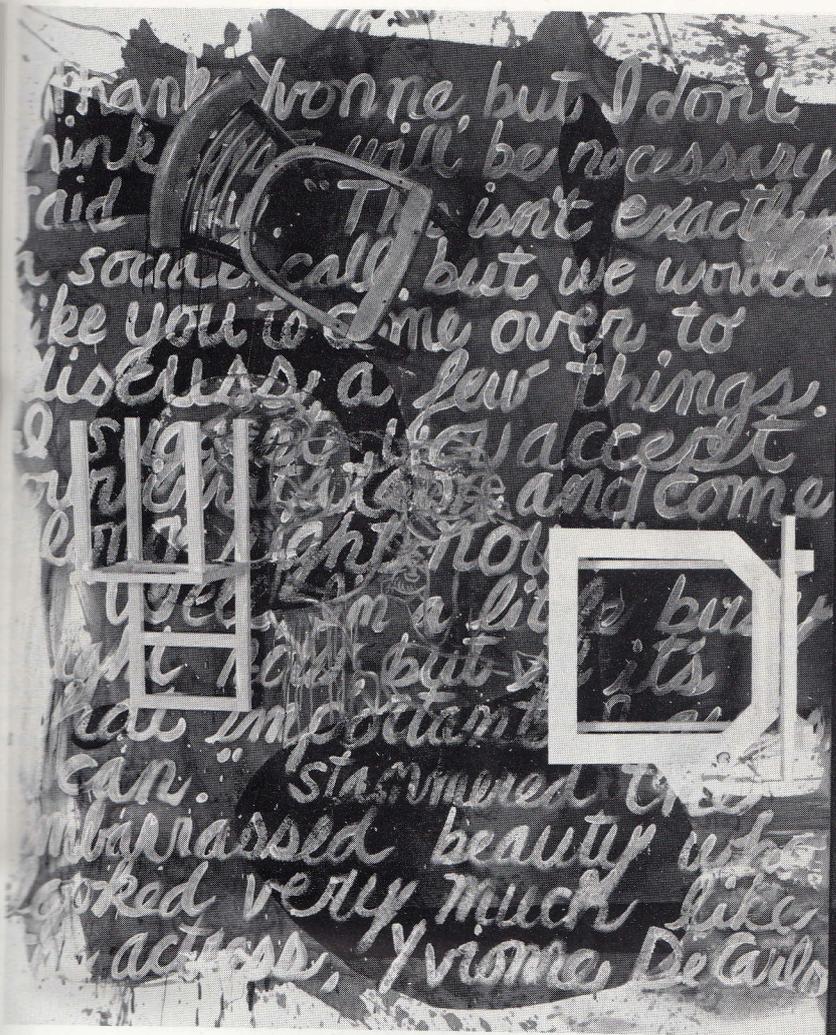
The eight monumental canvases that Salle exhibited at his spring solo show at the Mary Boone Gallery were very much alive. A new and different sensibility seems to have entered Salle's art. While still holding itself aloof, the work seems at the same time more approachable and inviting. Salle's treatment of the female figure, once off-putting and offensive to the extreme, now seems more sensitive and empathic. The fact that his imagery is appropriated seems far less interesting and important than the manner in which the images are manipulated once they enter into the realm of his art.

For the past several years, the pendulum has swung back and forth in Salle's art from an elusiveness and obscurity of content to a certain legibility. A number of works in the spring show could be read; the chains of association that linked image to image were clear. One painting, *Shower of Courage*, went so far as to approach the literary. In this work, a text (probably derived from a pulp novel) was inscribed across one of the work's panels in yellow script. In the text, a woman is asked "to come over to discuss a few things" of some undisclosed importance. On the adjoining panel, the monumental image of a woman in a dressing

gown seems to represent the woman who received the call about to embark on a "shower of courage" in preparation for the meeting she is reluctant to attend. The three actual wooden chairs attached to the surface of the panel inscribed with the text appear to symbolize the dreaded encounter.

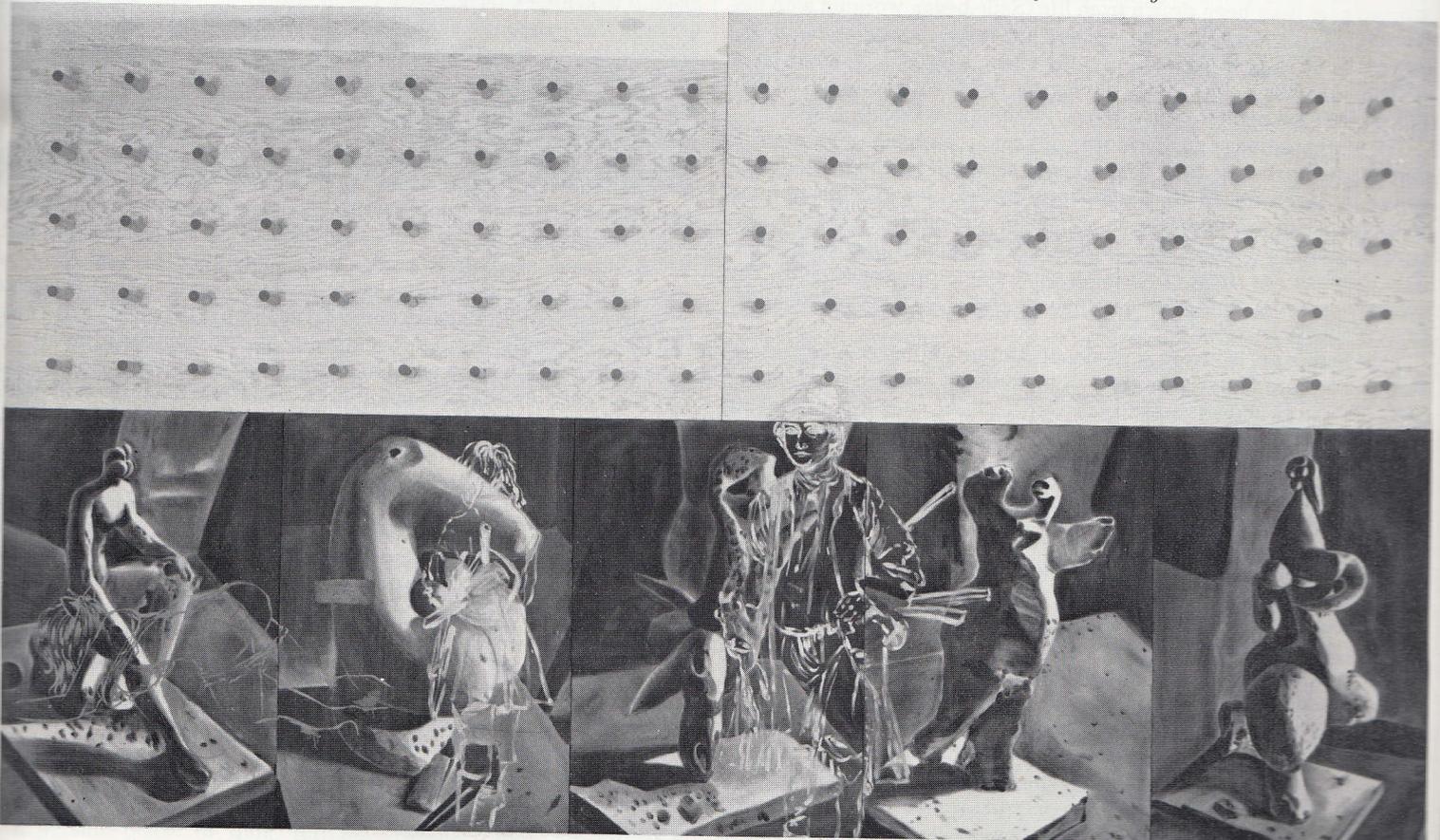
In this work, a narrative is set forth, recounted by means of bits and pieces of information that fit together through association. Other layers of imagery and meaning also exist. Close looking reveals that the panel with the text and chairs contains a series of biomorphic forms, a crudely drawn illustration of an even cruder motif (a man crouching down holding a candle to a woman's ass), and other elements which suggest that there is a sexual content to the meeting referred to above. *Shower of Courage* does not "participate in meaninglessness." While the content of the work is never fully reconciled, its substance is understood.

Andy Warhol and Jasper Johns have most often been identified as Salle's mentors. It seems, however, that the truest precedent for Salle's art, especially with regard to its revised approach to reading and meaning, resides in Robert Rauschenberg's Combines of the middle Fifties (works which were of influence upon Johns and Warhol as well). Like Salle, Rauschenberg appropriated objects and images from the mass media and the culture at large, among them reproductions of Old Master paintings, pornographic images of women, written texts, images derived from newspapers, comics, and magazines, tables, chairs, patterned fabrics, etc. Rauschenberg displaced these materials from the real world into the realm of his art where they were juxtaposed with one another and intermingled with abstractly painted passages. The materials retained their original identities while gaining new ones as they par-



David Salle, Shower of Courage, 1985. Acrylic, fabric, and wood chairs on canvas, 98 x 148 1/2". Courtesy Mary Boone Gallery.

David Salle, My Head, 1984. Acrylic and oil on canvas and wood, 120 x 210 1/4". Courtesy Mary Boone Gallery.



ticipated in their new, multi-directional context. Chains of association were generated and exploited; non-sequential narratives were told. In the end, however, meaning remained open-ended, open to the thoughts of the individual viewer and the passage of time.

The differences between Rauschenberg and Salle are, of course, vast. Salle's art is of its own time and one finds in the work numerous modifications on Rauschenberg's aesthetic dictated by the intervention of both Minimal and Conceptual art. As against Rauschenberg's inclusiveness and excess (which reveal his origins in an expressionist era), Salle practices an economy and control that bespeak his Conceptualist beginnings. Salle's art possesses a singleness of focus and a willfulness that is foreign to the work (and personality) of the older artist. While Rauschenberg appropriated actual source materials into his art, Salle recreates them, often employing several different techniques and styles to this end within a single work. Salle does not, however, deviate from Rauschenberg's conception of the canvas as a literally flat surface filled with information and ideas. Although like a new/old-fashioned painter he might academically model form, Salle cancels the effect of illusionistic space and preserves flatness of surface by overlapping illusionistic images with crudely drawn forms or by abruptly juxtaposing a modeled form with an ineluctably flat field.

The latter is found in *The Bigger Credenza* of 1985. The left-hand panel of the work presents two biomorphic shapes and two quasi-geometric forms which have been cut out of green fabric and collaged on a large, flat white field. The right-hand panel presents the image of a woman lying on what appears to be an examining table. Her form is rendered with chiaroscuro modeling in black on white and is seen from above, from a vantage point in which the woman is easily "penetrated" by the viewer's gaze. The work is obviously about sex; the biomorphic forms on the adjoining panel resemble nothing so much as sperm. Further, a "credenza" is a sideboard or table and the implication seems to be that the woman is something to lie things (oneself) down on.

The Bigger Credenza, however, is neither bawdy nor lewd. It is instead strangely moving. The lusty content of the work and its many sophomoric (and rather Duchampian) indignities are neutralized by the dignity of the artist's execution—by the somber tonalities, by the anti-sensuous nature of the rendering, and by the pensiveness and quietude that permeate the whole. The clinical aspect of the work introduced by the examining table and the blankness of the woman's stare also works to dispel the work's sexual energies. Further, although the image of the woman may have been drawn from life (Salle began working with live models several years ago), the stillness and monochrome of the image, as well as its slightly blurred or grainy effect, suggest a photograph or a cinematic frame. The image is thereby removed from real life, displaced into the realm of art where it functions as symbol and idea.

The juxtaposition of an illusionistically rendered female nude embedded in a monochrome field with an abstract motif has been seen elsewhere in Salle's art. In *My Subjectivity* of 1981, for example, a nude woman was shown kneeling on a chair in one panel while the other panel featured a uniform grid pattern of holes (which, like the biomorphic forms in *The Bigger Credenza*, carries an erotic suggestion). The recurrence of the motif seems to indicate that it is of special and continuing significance for the artist.

That Salle's art is highly personal and often autobiographical in nature is nowhere better seen than in the tellingly entitled *My Head* of 1984. This work addresses two of the artist's basic concerns: artmaking and sexuality. An enormous, wall-sized work, its top half is occupied by a grid pattern of wooden cylinders that protrude about six inches off of a plywood support; the ends of each of the pegs are painted blue. Stretching across the bottom half of the work is a series of five panels, each containing a grisaille representation of a different, fully three-dimensional sculpture which stands upon a base and is seen in raking light. The sculptures range from the figurative (as in the long-limbed representation of the female form to the left) to the abstract, with varying degrees of distortion of the female form being seen from one sculpture to the next. They appear to represent various stylistic options within Modernism. The regular pattern of pegs above stands in extreme contrast to the painted representations of the sculptures below as they represent the late, great, Modernist style Minimal Art. A game of oppositions is set into play between the upper and lower motifs in terms of the abstract and the figurative, the constructed and the painted, literal space and illusionistic space, real shadows and painted shadows, the

cool and impersonal, the individual and self-expressive, etc. *My Head* seems, on one level, to be about art history and different modes and styles of artmaking.

On the bottom half of the work, overlapping the grisaille representations of the sculptures, are a few sketchily drawn figures. At the very center of the piece, crudely drawn in orange paint, is a three-quarter frontal view of a man wearing the garb of another era. Brushes protrude from a sack on his back and identify him as a painter. His dress and demeanor suggest that he was appropriated from a seventeenth-century Dutch painting or drawing. To the left, this same figure is seen again in a three-quarter view from the back; the cap which he wore in the frontal image (and which extended onto the wooden panel above) has now been removed, revealing his shoulder-length hair. This figure seems to be looking at a woman whose form is described in blue paint. The woman, who seems to belong to the contemporary era, is naked and kneels with her camisole hiked up and her panties pulled down with her behind pointing toward the man. He is able to adopt the "penetrating stare" that was granted the viewer in *The Bigger Credenza*. While he is of the world of the past, she is of the contemporary era, so that they are forever removed from one another; a green rectangular brushstroke floating between the man and the woman asserts both their linkage within the context of the work and their separation.

My Head seems to be a meditation on the artist's relationship to women, both as a painter and as a man. A sense of desire and frustration is conveyed. The pegs at the top of the work can be understood to double as just so many phalli. The viewer may also come to notice that the buttocks of the woman rhyme with two bulbous forms in the sculpture to her right which coincide in turn with the buttocks of the man, establishing a further linkage between them. Nothing is accidental in this art of supreme intentionality.

Several of the works in Salle's spring exhibition went beyond the self in order to address themes of social concern. One of these, *Wild Locusts Ride* of 1985, seems to offer a critique on the American way of life. Drawn upon the slate blue field of the left-hand panel of the work is a monumental, illusionistically rendered image of a woman in a tank-top wearing sunglasses and holding a drink in her hand (presumably at her summer house in the Hamptons). To the right, superimposed upon a gold, brown, and orange checkered fabric, is what appears to be a reproduction of an agitprop poster of the 1920s drawn in red paint. Salle rendered the image in a manner that clearly reveals the source to have been a woodblock print. So as not to leave any doubt as to what the point of this juxtaposition might be, Salle painted upon the panel with the woman the jolly, disembodied head of Santa Claus. The sun-drenched world of comfort and pleasure of the woman to the left is contrasted with the protest and struggle—the rage and the passion—of the oppressed workers to the right. Salle seems to be saying that the life style of the upper classes in American society, with its easy fulfillment and unconcern for larger issues, is as innocent and childish, as based in myth, as the belief in Santa and the expectation of his gifts. While variations on this interpretation of the painting are certainly possible, most, it would seem, would run along similar lines. *Wild Locusts Ride*, together with *Miner* and *Pauper*, other works of social conscience, seem to show that Salle is taking seriously his position in the public eye. There can be no doubt that the urge to communicate has emerged in his art.

Salle's move toward a quasi-narrative, iconographically rich art has not been the only change seen in his work. While the artist still deliberately courts certain crude and inaeesthetic effects, his art has become more elegant and refined. Salle is a master of the wide range of styles and techniques that play against one another across the surfaces of his combines. Many of his effects are theatrical; some are no less than brilliant. In *Pauper* of 1984, for example, the enormous, hammered lead sheet that forms the right-hand panel of the work presents a chicken in high relief at its center, while below, almost lost in the very wrinkles and folds that describe the image, is the profile of a man's head. The most recent addition to Salle's repertoire of effects is seen in *Making the Bed* of 1985 in which an armada in a frothy sea is represented in full color with lush, painterly brushstrokes. Already a draftsman of impressive talent, the artist seems about to enter the realm of the painterly.

The changes in Salle's art discussed above will probably cost him some supporters while gaining others. There can be no doubt from either camp, however, that Salle remains a most influential, provocative, and vital force in the art world of our time.