

GLADSTONE

Max Lakin, "David Salle's Ghost in the A.I. Machine," *The New York Times*, October 30, 2024

The New York Times

CRITIC'S PICK

David Salle's Ghost in the A.I. Machine

At Gladstone Gallery, the painter's experiments with artificial intelligence yield compelling results and big questions.



By Max Lakin

Oct. 30, 2024, 9:35 a.m. ET

Since the 1980s, the artist David Salle has been developing his liberal use of both pictorial space and source material, drolly collaging images plucked from magazines and art history with a magpie's blithe indifference. His paintings display an icily cerebral, postmodern understanding that images can exist simultaneously across multiple contexts, or none at all.

The paintings continue to prove his willingness to leave meaning open-ended, which is a kind of generosity. As the director Jean Renoir said of his own approach, one that could easily apply to Salle's, when a movie is "perfectly intelligible, the public has nothing to add."

Salle has never strayed far from the highway that has carried him, with varying results, for the last 45 years. Still, it's hard to believe it took this long for Salle to appropriate himself. The nine large paintings of "New Pastorals," his latest body of work, on view through Saturday at the Gladstone Gallery, riff on "Pastorals," a series from the early 2000s.



Installation view of “New Pastorals” at the Gladstone Gallery. Salle’s neatly disjointed panels are gone, replaced by an all-overness of exploded figures and whorling blotches of color; the work of artificial intelligence. David Regen, via Gladstone Gallery

That one was built around a generic landscape scene, in the tradition of Giorgione, the Italian painter of the High Renaissance, and Watteau, the French Rococo painter, among others. The earlier series short-circuits: Portals rip open to reveal still lifes of apples and lemons, backgrounds crack and leak geometric shapes, figures glitch.

Where “Pastorals” were like the static of a television transmission creating unstable images, the “New Pastorals” pile those images into a juicer and hit “liquefy.” Salle’s neatly disjointed panels are gone, replaced by an all-overness of exploded figures and whorling blotches of color.

If the alpine backdrops and empty suits of “New Pastorals” seem skewed, vaguer and flatter even than the oblique combinations Salle usually stitches together, it is because they are the work of artificial intelligence, programmed to Salle’s specifications with the help of two technologists, Danika Laszuk and Grant Davis, who customized a model to generate images in Salle’s style.

The algorithm provides Salle’s starting blocks, printed onto the linen before he even picks up his brush. When he does, it’s to add lithe beach bodies and disembodied hands ricocheting against fragments of statuary and abstracted suns, as in “New Pastoral With Ladder” (2024). The visual static becomes denser. Some passages appear complete, others sketched or unfinished, like a half-remembered dream. There’s a mesmeric weightlessness, the action carried by centripetal motion as if the pictures were circling a drain.



“New Pastoral With Ladder,” 2024. The artist layered paint over his collaborator’s uncanny valleys — which are really his own, presented back to him through a shattered fun house mirror. John Berens, via Gladstone Gallery

Salle jokes that he sent the program to art school, teaching it how a painting works by feeding it a balanced diet of his favorites — Arthur Dove for line, Edward Hopper for volume, De Chirico for space, Warhol for color — as well as his own “Pastorals,” before administering a final exam. He effectively reverse engineered a David Salle painting.

Machines, of course, can’t “learn” anything. The backgrounds A.I. spat out are derivative distortions, based on pattern recognition. When the program quotes Salle’s snowcapped mountains, it garbles the syntax, making them a slurry of blue and white. The paintings have a haunted quality, but not by the algorithm, which (mostly) does as it’s told. Salle is his own ghost in the machine, layering paint over his collaborator’s uncanny valleys — which are really his own, prechewed and presented back to him through a shattered fun house mirror.

Who exactly is meant to be having the fun is unclear. The pictures are undeniably compelling. But they can also feel like a cop-out, with the creative labor of making a painting outsourced with terrifying efficiency. In some ways that isn’t that different from the studio assistant who does the grunt work of executing the artist’s ideas. In others, when you remember that a large part of what you’re looking at is a computer’s mimicry of a human pursuit, a chill rattles off the canvas.

Salle is open to technology’s possibilities. In conversation, he likens the algorithm to a palette knife — simply a piece of hardware for getting the image down. (Salle has always related his process to filmmaking, his paintings assembled like movie storyboards that refuse to offer resolution. When he made his actual directorial debut, in 1995, he described film as “another set of tools.”)

A.I.'s evangelists insist generative models will become too powerful to control, threatening human supremacy in every area, but so far these programs have only been able to produce a boring, bloodless photorealism. Salle wants to see if A.I. can do something more interesting, and it does. But it also ends up being a long, roundabout way to arrive at something I'm not sure he couldn't have accomplished anyway, but which asks him to cede a bit of humanity for the shortcut.

The redemptive value of that bargain is an inexhaustible well of fresh inspiration, which for artists is a biological imperative. In this case that inspiration happens to be self-referential, each painting its own mini-retrospective. All art is saddled with history. The A.I. assist merely confronts Salle with his own echo, forcing him to reckon with it.

Representational images naturally invite interpretation — if an image exists, it must *mean* something. But Salle's art has never required a literal interpretation. So it's easy to see how he would see A.I. as bestowing a kind of freedom. In some ways it finally allows his painting to be what it has always been about: pure form. "A theme is exactly like a landscape for a painter," Renoir said. "It's just an excuse."

David Salle: New Pastorals

Through Nov. 2. Gladstone Gallery, 515 West 24th Street; 212-206-9300; gladstonegallery.com.