David Salle
Painting in the Present Tense

5 May—27 September 2026
Palazzo Cini Gallery, Venice

Workplace, 2025–26
Oil, acrylic, Flashe and charcoal on archival UV print on linen
182.9 x 236.2 cm (72 x 93 in)

One way to subvert a hegemonic technology is to co-opt it.
— David Salle

Coinciding with the Biennale Arte 2026 and marking his first solo presentation in the city, David Salle's exhibition at the Palazzo Cini Gallery extends the New York-based artist's use of artificial intelligence as a tool to unravel and recalibrate the logic of painting. The exhibition is curated by Luca Massimo Barbero, Director of the Institute of Art History of the Fondazione Giorgio Cini, and supported by Thaddaeus Ropac gallery. Focusing his AI model on his earlier *Tapestry Paintings* (1989–91) – a series of works based on 18th-century Imperial Russian tapestries that were themselves interpretations of 16th- and 17th-century Italian oil paintings – Salle creates new paintings that collapse time, medium and place. Though committed to the centuries-old tradition of paint on canvas, Salle has been quick to adopt new technologies into his practice. His recent partnership with AI can be seen, in part, as an act

of resistance to the proposition that AI will replace human creativity. As he explains, 'One way to subvert a hegemonic technology is to co-opt it for one's own ends.'

Salle has been on the cutting edge of AI image production since 2022 when he began developing a personalised model trained primarily on the contents of his own oeuvre. His purpose was not to outsource his role as an artist or thinker, but to introduce a destabilising force to his art. As the artist puts it, 'To get outside of myself.' The machine does not paint, or even draw anything; it distorts and deconstructs compositional space, and then reassembles the pieces into a new, synthetic whole. Salle gives us a body of work that directly engages with the central anxiety of our time: What of the human capacity for expression will survive the rise of artificial, self-teaching intelligence?

Yellow Shawl, 2025–26
Oil, acrylic, Flashe and charcoal on archival UV print on linen
152.4 x 195.6 cm (60 x 77 in)

The original *Tapestry Paintings* embodied a key aspect of Salle's style: simultaneity. The 16th- and 17th-century Italian paintings – depicting biblical narratives, court portraiture, still lifes and other genre scenes – had been expertly translated into wool and silk by Russian weavers. Salle retranslated these tapestry compositions back into paint on canvas, creating the lyrical image clusters which are the hallmark of his art. He also introduced separate inset panels, cut into and set flush with the canvas, to interrupt the paintings' compositional architecture and provide contrasting time signatures and motifs. All the elements of the composition – painted tapestry background, lyrical over-painting, inset images – must be taken together, experienced in their relational present-tense-ness.

In this exhibition, Salle's *Tapestry Paintings* undergo another, more profound transformation. Filtered through Salle's AI model, the figures and scenes already twice translated from their original Italian contexts are now warped into phantasmagorical, all-over abstractions. Though completely transformed, they retain the DNA of Salle's original paintings, as well as that of their distant art historical source material. The designs are then printed onto canvas, establishing the grounds for the artist's present-day intervention. Reacting intuitively, Salle corrects, attacks or amplifies each printed pixel with his brush, while introducing another layer of imagery atop them, painted in high-contrast, high-key colour. A very old technology – oil paint – is made to coexist with a contemporary one. In the final result, AI-hallucinated courtiers, nudes, monarchs and knights in armour compete on the pictorial plane with fragments of fashion advertisements, stacks of teacups and other still-life objects. Simulated and painted realities collide and interweave, creating fluid juxtapositions that resist temporal or geographic identity.

Everything in painting exists in the present tense. Art-historical past-times resonate through the painting even as they are subsumed within it.
— David Salle

While AI can rapidly scan, metabolise and average vast streams of visual material – doing, in effect, what Salle has done in painting over the course of his career – the machine's neural network originally had no grasp of basic pictorial values such as contours, edges or value patterns. Salle imbued the machine with the digital equivalents for those values, for example, the way a brushstroke can both define an edge and also be an expressive element in its own right. By giving the AI this rudimentary capacity for translation, Salle enabled it to assume the role of creative junior partner. The AI acts as a kind of double agent that freely roams between past and present,
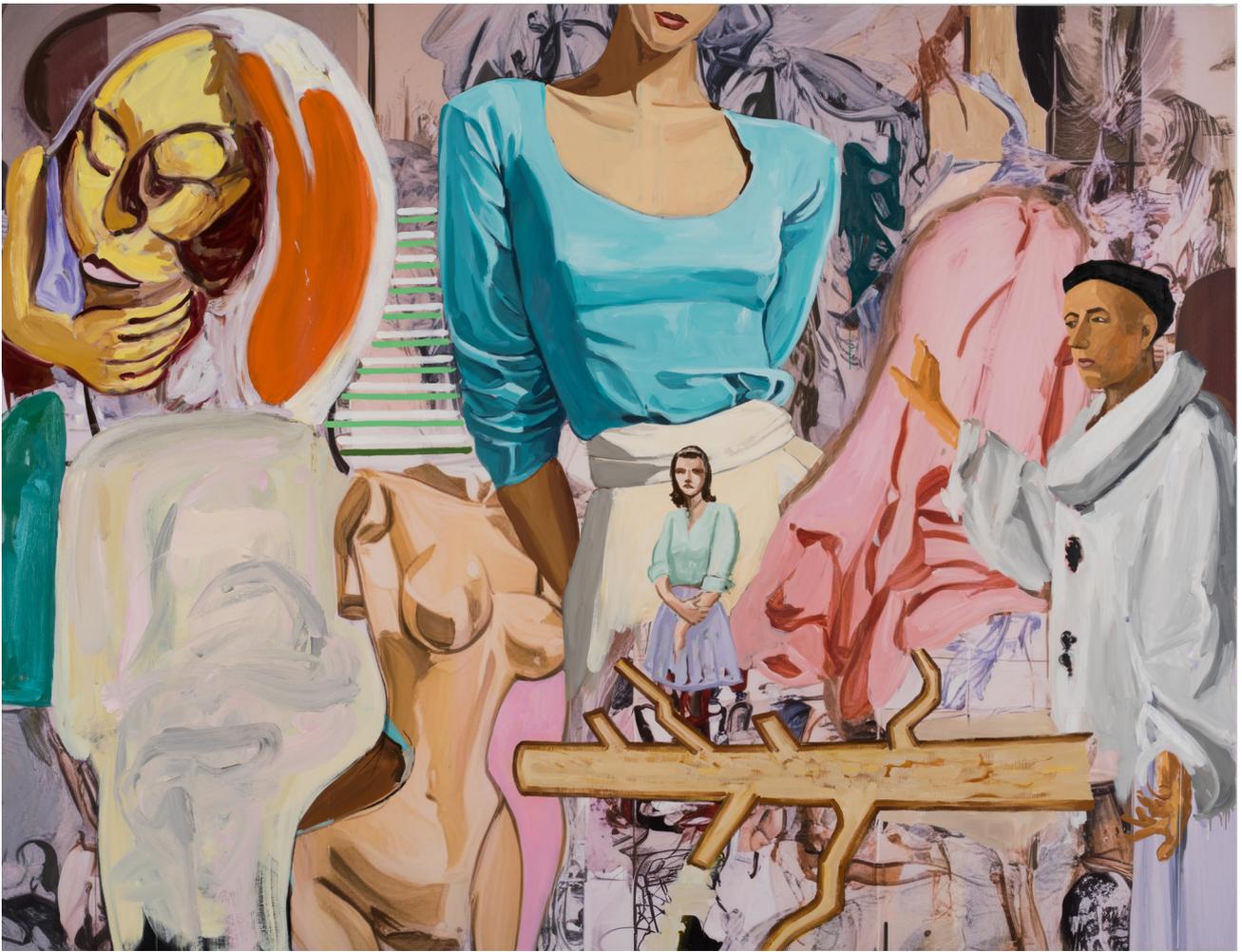
Mime, 2026
Oil, acrylic, Flashe and charcoal on archival UV print on linen
182.9 x 236.2 cm (72 x 93 in)

real and fantastical, as it remixes Salle's work in ways that are often surprising, bizarre or even subversive. 'The machine violates the rules of depiction without suffering from a guilty conscience,' says the artist.

Centuries of art history leapfrog one another as AI burrows into the circularity of Salle's pictorial logic. Mimesis – the AI's raison d'être as well as the painter's own pretext – is pushed to its limits as a generative force in art, into what Salle describes as a 'kind of ventriloquism'. Salle explores how far imitation can go before short-circuiting, before the relationship between the *thing* and the *description* of the thing collapses into nonsense. At the Palazzo Cini, Salle's circuitous process meets another art-historical backdrop. The Palazzo's lower galleries house Italian Renaissance paintings and decorative art objects, including tapestries dating from the 15th century onwards, while the upper galleries are devoted to contemporary art. The setting becomes an echo of the paintings' historicising impulse, producing the sensation of an endless mise en abyme.

In a world where inauthentic images are actively manufactured to manipulate and distort reality, Salle's proposition of a truly malleable pictorial space carries urgency. His collaboration with the machine has become a contest: at stake is the artist's ability, as he puts it, 'to wrest meaning away from the direction AI is taking it, back into human hands.'

About the artist

Portrait of David Salle. Photo: Costa Picadas

Born in 1952 in Oklahoma, Salle lives and works in Brooklyn, New York. He studied at the California Institute of the Arts from 1970 to 1975, where he was mentored by Conceptual artist John Baldessari. Often cited as an exemplar of Postmodernism, Salle came to prominence in the 1980s as a leading figure of the Pictures Generation. Salle's first solo museum exhibition was held at the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam, in 1983, followed by a mid-career survey in 1987 at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, which later travelled to the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, and The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. In 1999, a retrospective of his painting originated at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, and travelled to the Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, Vienna; Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, Turin; and Guggenheim Bilbao.

Subsequent surveys of Salle's work were held at the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Monterrey (2000), Kestner Gesellschaft, Hannover (2009), Centro de Arte Contemporáneo de Málaga (2016) and The Brant Foundation, Greenwich (2021). While primarily a painter, Salle has also been active in the performing arts, designing sets and costumes for choreographer Karole Armitage. Their collaborations for the stage were seen at opera houses around the world, including the Metropolitan Opera, New York; Brooklyn Academy of Music, New York; Citizens Opera House, Boston; Opéra national de Paris; Deutsche Oper Berlin; and Opéra Comique, Paris. Salle was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship for his work in the theatre in 1986. In 1995, Salle directed the feature film *Search and Destroy*, produced by Martin Scorsese, starring John Turturro, Christopher Walken and Griffin Dunne.

Salle is also a prolific writer and critic whose essays and interviews have been published in Artforum, Art in America, The New York Times, T: The New York Times Style Magazine and The Paris Review, as well as in numerous exhibition catalogues and anthologies. He is a frequent contributor to The New York Review of Books. His highly lauded collection of critical essays, *How to See: Looking, Talking, and Thinking about Art*, was published by W. W. Norton in 2016.

Salle is a member of the National Academy of Design, and the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

For further information, images and interview requests please contact us:

Nina Sandhaus, Head of Press, London
nina@ropac.net

Marcus Rothe, Head of Press, Paris
marcus.rothe@ropac.net

Patricia Neusser, Head of Press, Publications and Content, Salzburg
patricia.neusser@ropac.net

Jihyun Lee, Press Officer, Seoul
press.seoul@ropac.net

Sarah Rustin, Global Senior Director, Communication & Content
sarah.rustin@ropac.net

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