

ETC



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In a season which everyone agrees to be the least eventful, or the least pseudo-eventful, since the late 1970s, the most significant development in the art world has been effected by the municipal government. Invoking a law that requires all retail businesses to post the prices of their merchandise, the city is now insisting that galleries prominently display the prices of the art they show. Before the application of this law prices were rarely available, even if one asked for them.

Now anyone can walk into Mary Boone and find out how much a David Salle costs (between \$90,000 and \$150,000, if you're interested). The dealers are, almost without exception, opposed to the law and have numerous arguments to support their position. They claim that posting prices will distract the viewer from the aesthetic value of the art work, that it will increase the risk of theft, that selling art has nothing to do with selling clothes or watches and that they must be allowed to do their work in privacy. The most common argument, recently espoused by Hilton Kramer in the *New York Times*, is that art galleries provide the public "with a free and immensely varied cultural and educational service... without the slightest commercial obligation on the part of the viewer" and that in return for this "service" they should be allowed to conduct their business as they see fit. The New York City Department of Consumer Affairs, on the other hand, believes that citizens "are entitled to know what their purchases will buy without being subject to the vagaries of mystery, theater and snobbery." While Hilton Kramer is correct in asserting that one cannot legislate against "theater and snobbery", there really is no good reason that the price of art should be shrouded in mystery. This is also the opinion of most artists I have talk to — they are very interested in knowing what each others work is selling for. This governmental attention to the hitherto unregulated art world is probably a result of the immense expansion of the art world over the past eight years and no doubt people will get used to it in time.

There have lately been a number of changes at various institutions that, taken together, suggest that some kind of realignment is underway. Kirk Varnedoe a young art historian, has been appointed to succeed William Rubin as director of MOMA and Thomas Krens is taking over the Guggenheim. Ingrid Sischy, who has been editor of *Artforum* for most of this decade, has resigned from the magazine and has been replaced by Ida Panicelli. Richard Martin, editor of *Arts* for 15 years, where he gave a chance to many new writers, myself among them, has also resigned. It remains to be seen how these changes will effect the direction of these two important magazines, as well as what will happen to the museums.

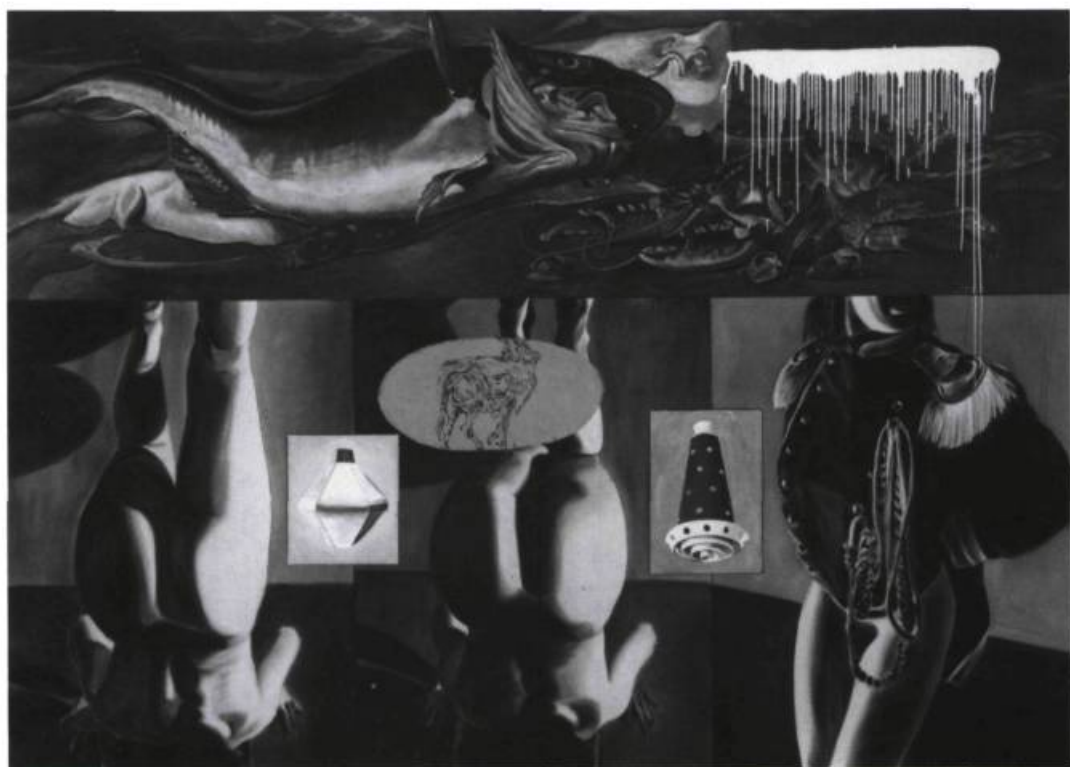
In many ways it is a relief that there have been no startling new developments this season. It has been a

refreshing change to just look at shows as they come along, instead of rapidly trying to assimilate the tenets and calculate the significance of the latest tendency. Perhaps, in this penultimate year of the decade, the art world is catching its breath and positioning itself for the 1990s.

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David Salle at Mary Boone — Nothing lasts forever. David Salle has had about six good years during which his work continually changed and improved, as well as being state-of-the-art art. One looked forward to his shows with something of the anticipation and excitement that used to attend Rolling Stones albums, and one was never dissappointed. But, like the Stones in the mid-1970's, Salle seems to have lost his edge in his latest show at Mary Boone. Several factors have probably contributed to this aesthetic fall from grace, and not all of them are the artist's fault. The rise to prominence over the last two years of a number of artists whose work is antithetical to Salle's, has inevitably affected the way we see his paintings. We have acquired, or reacquired, a taste for abstraction, conceptualism and mechanical reproduction that seems to leave little room for figuration made by a human hand. One can sense just how far the pendulum has swung when Salle, who was once derided for his mechanistic, dehumanized style of paintings, can be held up as an example of touch-sensitive painting. The real irony of the situation however is that Salle is concerned with many of the issues that inspire the work of artists like Peter Halley or Haim Steinbach, yet by carrying Salle's tendencies to extremes these younger artists have made his work look old-fashioned. Compared to Steinbach's shelves of shiny commodities, the pieces of furniture attached to Salle's paintings look almost quaint. The chief difference, though, is one of technique; Salle is still laboriously painting the objects that attract him, while Steinbach or Koons simply go out and buy them. Another extenuating circumstance is that we have simply grown used to Salle's vision. What was new and strange in 1982 is now familiar. Salle's success in insinuating his way of seeing into the common visual discourse has threatened the very distinctiveness that first drew us to his work. This is the risk that every successful artist runs and it is only through continual or periodic innovation that one can prevent yesterday's Surrealism from becoming today's advertising. All Salle's previous shows have been sufficiently innovative to keep his work fresh, but his March 1988 show reveals nothing especially new and the effect is near catastrophic.

If, by some miracle of aesthetic isolation, one had never seen a painting by Salle before, these canvases might seem exciting and intriguing, but for



David Salle, *Epaulettes for Walt Kuhn*, 1987. Acrylic, oil on canvas, linen; 96 x 133 1/2 in. Courtesy of the Mary Boone Gallery. Photo: Zindman/Fremont

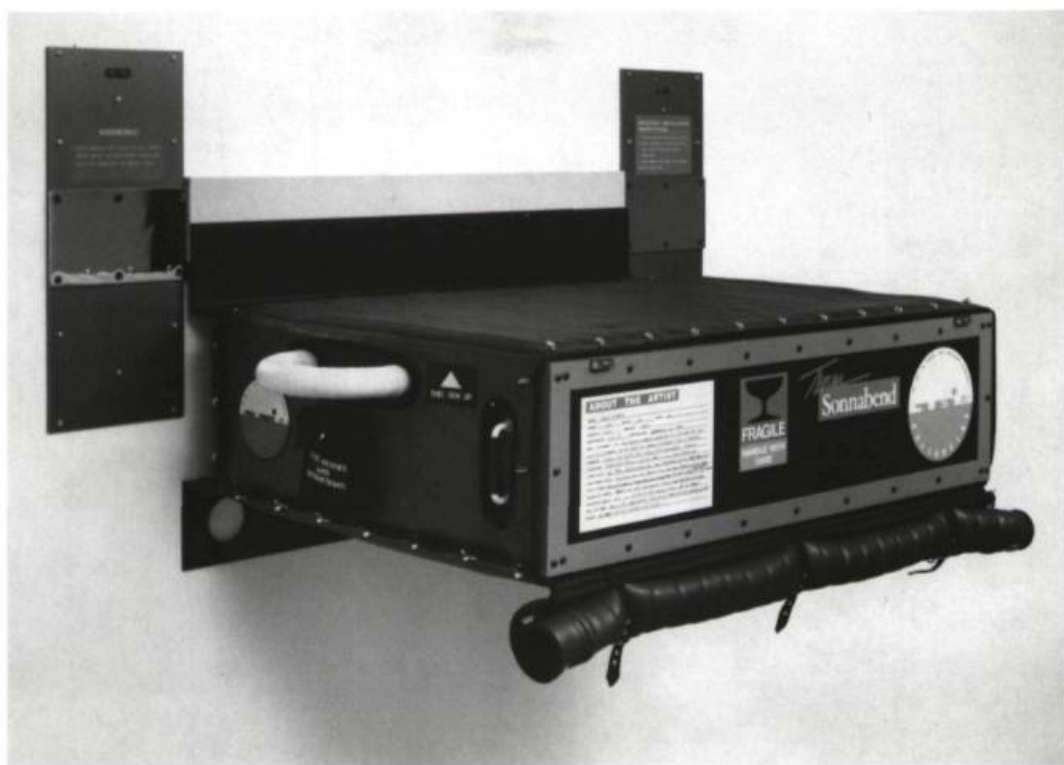
anyone else they will appear familiar and academic. Once again he combines photographic grisaille nudes, repainted fragments of art history, and vignettes of contemporary cultural detritus in a non-linear, disjunct logic. His sources are more recondite than before, but this does not make up for the formal and thematic complacency they exude. This complacency also makes Salle's voyeuristic fascination with female nudes more troubling than it was. As long as his paintings were advancing apace, one could ignore most feminist critiques of them, but now works like *Epaulettes for Walt Kuhn* seem stubbornly and unnecessarily sexist, nor does the calculatedly gratuitous swathe of dripping white paint in the upper right — a last ditch effort to make the painting jump — help matters. David Salle is too ambitious and important a painter to be written off because of one bad show, but he is going to have his work cut out for him the next time around.

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Ashley Bickerton at Sonnabend Gallery — Ashley Bickerton is a 29 year old artist who has just been given his sixth one person show in New York. This may sound like a lot of exposure for a younger artist, but Bickerton's first five shows were at alternative spaces and small East Village galleries. His latest show, at the prestigious Sonnabend Gallery, is his first appearance alone at center stage and he seems to have risen to the occasion. While the impact of his recent work has been helped along by the lackluster quality of this year's

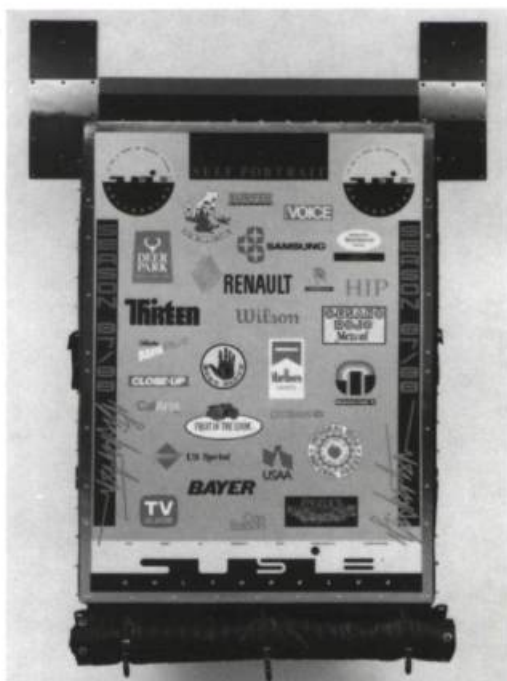
exhibitions, it probably would have made a strong impression in any season, for unlike the artists with whom he is usually linked — Peter Halley, Jeff Koons and Meyer Vaisman — Bickerton promises to be more than just a one idea artist. Not as theoretically consistent as Halley nor as concisely cynical as Koons, Bickerton nonetheless possesses a thematic exuberance and a visual energy which they do not. He is an artist filled with notions and points of view which form a hectic agenda for his art. If this agenda is at times immature and silly, it also has led to some interesting work. As with Rauschenburg or Beuys, it is not the quality of Bickerton's thought that matters so much as what he does with it.

The reader may have noticed that in my first paragraph I have avoided being precise about what sort of art Bickerton makes, attaching the conveniently vague label of "artist" to him, rather than the more specific "painter" or "sculptor". While Bickerton, through titles like *Formalist Painting in Red, Yellow and Blue* or *Good Painting*, offers his work as painting, it seems to have little to do with what we traditionally think of as painting. Metal boxes screwed to the wall with aluminum brackets, equipped with heavy leather or plastic coverings, digital read-outs, fake rocks, instructions for hanging in 10 languages, side pockets with gloves in them — these are not paintings no matter how strenuously Bickerton claims they are. They are, rather, examples of that relatively recent form, wall sculpture. They are also examples of another not quite so recent but lately popular genre, art about art. In Bickerton's own words, each of his pieces has been



Ashley Bickerton, *Little Self-Portrait*, 1988. Mixed media construction with neoprene covering; 34 1/4 x 62 1/2 x 36 in. Courtesy of the Sonnabend Gallery

“realized in a manner that will make reference to every station of its operational life, i.e. Storage, Shipping, Gallery Access, Rack, Reproducion, and On The Wall.” He even goes so far as to put jokes and cartoons on the back of his work — the side the gallery audience never sees — “for the amusement of shippers and movers.” No aspect of his work’s future goes unsupervised. One piece contains a list of all the materials used in its construction and a detailed explanation of how the production of these materials has affected the environment (e.g. the chlorofluorocarbons from spray paint deplete the ozone layer), two other pieces have digital displays of the “current estimated value” of the work — the figure increases by one cent every 30 seconds, a rate based on Bickerton’s calculation of how much his work has risen in value since his last show. How different this exhaustive quest for signification is from earlier practice is evident in something Bickerton said in a recent interview : “... when Judd used a screw, it was a screw solely for the pragmatic purpose of holding the object together. In the current scene, it would be viewed semiotically... it is quotation and allusion.” If Bickerton went no further than rendering his components semiotic, his work would not be so striking. As it is, his well-aimed satire and world of tomorrow formalism in which Van Gogh and Surfer Magazine, Donald Judd and Robin Leach, the sophomoric and the incisive are all linked with gleeful perversity make him seem the most real of all the Simulationists.



Ashley Bickerton, *Tormented Self-Portrait (Susie at Arles)*, 1988. Mixed media construction with padded black leather; 90 x 69 x 18 in. Courtesy of the Sonnabend Gallery