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David Salle Teaches Us How to See Anew, This Time Using a Private Collection Rich with Centuries' Worth of Treasures

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An installation view of Beautiful, Vivid, Self-contained, curated by David Salle, at the Hill Art Foundation.
MATTHEW HERRMANN

On a recent afternoon, at the two-story **Hill Art Foundation** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/hill-art-foundation/>) in Chelsea, the collector **J.**

Tomilson Hill (<https://www.artnews.com/t/j-tomilson-hill/>) and the artist **David Salle** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/david-salle/>) stood in front of Salle's *Reliance* (1985), a painting of a person, their arms bent a sharp angles, surrounded by a yellow field. To the right was a Rubens, the stoic *Portrait of a Gentleman, Half-length, Wearing Black* (1628–29). Across the way was Cecily Brown's *The use of blue in vertigo* (2022) and Frank Auerbach's *Head of Julia* (1985).

Salle, dressed in a blue chore coat and matching denim pants, surveyed the works around the gallery, most of which were on the floor, leaning against the wall. His hands were straight down by his side, as if he were standing at attention, his fingers were tap dancing against his pants. Hill, who stood next to him in a navy-blue suit nearly the same color as Salle's outfit, watched the artist watching the room.

It was just a few days before “Beautiful, Vivid, Self-contained,” an exhibition curated by Salle and culled from the Hill Art Foundation's collection and the personal collection of Hill and his wife Janine.

“It's like the candy store has been opened up,” Salle said.

“Well, I know David's work going back to the 80s—and you know, I've read everything he's written,” said Hill. “Anybody who thinks about art knows his book, *How to See*.”

Salle continued Hill's thought: “We were all pandemic-ing in East Hampton, and I got an email from a mutual friend Lawrence Luhring who said, ‘I have a couple I think you should meet.’ I said, ‘Well, we are all here doing nothing.’”

Their initial meeting, Hill said, was “a really lovely afternoon. David's set-up out there is wonderful. It's just a few minutes from our house.”

“By the end, he said, ‘Maybe you'd like to do something for the foundation,’” Salle recalled. “It was so nice, so natural.”

Salle is a painter who's long been interested what he once called “concrete visual perception”—an emphasis on seeing over theory as the key to understanding art. (He even wrote a book called *How to See*.) His new show for the Hill Art Foundation makes that line of thinking manifest, since it implodes art-historical lineages and boundaries.

The show's 37 works span multiple mediums and art-historical eras, and are organized non-chronologically. “One of the animating ideas was that if art has any kind of communicative value to the present tense, you should be able to move back in time, which is not how it's presented in museums curatorially—they're things are bracketed by time. We are freed from that constraint. We don't have to make sense. We just have to make beauty.”



A pencil and charcoal version of Pablo Picasso's *Femme aux Mains Jointes* (1938) sits wonderfully next to Amy Sillman's 2023 canvas *Untitled (blue, black)*.

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Indeed, the show is beautiful. Connections that wouldn't inherently jump out at you emerge. Francis Bacon's moody *Study for Figure II* (1953) sits across the room from the raucous, scrawl of an untitled work from 2001 by Christopher Wool. A pencil and charcoal version of Pablo Picasso's *Femme aux Mains Jointes* (1938) sits wonderfully next to Amy Sillman's 2023 canvas *Untitled (blue, black)*. In each pairing the works compliment each other, though there are no immediate formal similarities. Shapes with the Picasso and the Sillman echo one another. The bright red lines of Christopher Wool's picture plays a strong counterpoint to the streaks of brownish grey paint that make up Bacon's study.

Works by Francesco Clemente, Robert Colescott, Reggie Burrows Hodges, Callum Innes, Karen Kilimnik, Doron Langberg, Brice Marden, and Henri Matisse are also included. Nothing about the show's hang is set in stone, however. Just days before the private opening, paintings were swapped out. When asked about the reason for the last-minute changes, Salle said, "I don't want to go into detail about things that were substituted—there's no magic reason or formula, the point simply is that it is all intuitive and felt rather than predetermined."

The private opening was attended by names almost as well-known as those that decorated the gallery walls. Curators like the Metropolitan Museum of Art's David Breslin and MoMA's Ann Temkin, as well as New Museum director Lisa Phillips and market rainmaker Amy Cappellazzo were in attendance. The Guggenheim, where Tom Hill is board chair, was also well-represented, with outgoing director Richard Armstrong and curator Katherine Brinson also on hand. Artists in the show came by to see what Salle had up: Christopher Wool, Nicole Wittenberg, and Cecily Brown.

If Salle's purpose was to help viewers find a new way to look at art they've seen, an original way to appreciate beautiful things, then the show is a success.

Walking around the room guests could be heard saying "I never would have thought to put that there" and "imagine if this was over there next to the Salman Toor, would it work?" The organization of the works was captivating enough to make visitors actively look at the art. With the help of Tom Hill, Salle was showing us another way to see.