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Transcript: Uncovering the Great Art of the 2000s with David Salle and Alison Gingeras

Host Charlotte Burns with Allan Schwartzman and guests Alison Gingeras and David Salle

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CHARLOTTE BURNS: Hello, and welcome to "In Other Words." I'm your host, Charlotte Burns, editor at Art Agency, Partners. This is part one of a two-part podcast. Originally intended to be contained in one episode, the conversation was so good that we decided we had to give you more. Join us and see what we discovered.

My guests for this conversation: the artist David Salle, an American printmaker, painter, and stage designer who is based in New York. His work is in major museum collections and he heralded a new way of painting. He is the perfect person for today's conversation, in which we're looking at art of the 2000s and why we're finding it so hard to pinpoint who the great and important artists to emerge have been.

DAVID SALLE: Hello

CHARLOTTE BURNS: Alison Gingeras joins us today. She is a curator and writer, who was the curator of contemporary art at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, as well as the chief curator of the Palazzo Grassi in Venice. Alison is an original thinker, and we wanted to ask her point of view as somebody out in the field, talking and working with many of today's artists.

ALISON GINGERAS: Thank you for having me.

CHARLOTTE BURNS: And finally, the art advisor Allan Schwartzman, who was a cofounder of Art Agency, Partners. He began his career as a curator and a writer, and has been thinking about many of these issues for decades.

ALLAN SCHWARTZMAN: Hello.

CHARLOTTE BURNS: Allan. I thought we'd begin with you. What are your thoughts on this topic?

ALLAN SCHWARTZMAN: In the various decades that I've been involved with the art world, as new art has emerged that's been distinctly different from the art that preceded it, it was pretty clear which artists were interesting and were relevant—who had something unique to say, and who one could imagine sustaining meaningful production over a period of time.

The same artists who we now know of today and we think of as significant were fairly evident at that moment. I've found it extremely difficult in the last 10 or so years to have that kind of clarity. And, I want to understand why that is, or am I alone in this?

CHARLOTTE BURNS: Alison, I want to go to you next because, as a curator, you are out there in the world talking to artists. You've spoken before about this idea of radical pluralization, which in some way feeds into this.

ALISON GINGERAS: The difficulty to localize a single figure has a lot to do with a larger paradigm shift away from mastery. Not only is there a pluralism of media, it's not about painting over sculpture over video. There isn't this kind of ideological motivation to dictate a movement.

In many ways, what we've seen is a pushback from the hegemony of either regional superiority, or a single set of ideas that dictate what is the most valid position, whether from a marked point of view, or a more critical, intellectual point of view.

Maybe it's more interesting to think about the intersectionality of art, and the way that museums are under pressure to move away from celebrating individual genius, but throwing light on different artists or moments in time, or regions which have not received intensive consideration in the history of art.

CHARLOTTE BURNS: It seems too that there's some kind of tension between the renaissance of museum buildings that we've been having. There are a lot of biennials and triennials that are dedicated specifically to younger art and a lot of artists are moving on the market stage or the exhibition stage with greater speed than they were in the past. And then you have this tendency to look back, there's a more inclusive reexamination of art that's been made from the post-war period, that I think is distinct from earlier decades.

ALISON GINGERAS: The way it was explained to me from a more commercial point of view— which I don't have any experience actually working in—there's this desire for quality and opportunity, and that somehow dovetails with an intellectual shift in terms of moving away from the master narrative that was taught for decades about post-war art. And looking at the avant-garde or the post-war [artists] coming from Eastern Europe for example, or from Japan, Korea. That has

fueled a kind of agency that museum curators build their cultural capital along the lines of critically looking back recuperating figures and making arguments. It's almost a sub-niche of curatorial practice that wasn't available when I started working in the art world in the mid-90s.

ALLAN SCHWARTZMAN: I mean it's an interesting point. A collection I work on focused initially on post-war European Painting precisely because it wasn't collected well in this country for the reasons that you point out. Early on in this process, we were focusing on Italian artists, Fontana, Manzoni, Burri, Arte Povera. Also on German painters. At that time, we also saw great examples of Shiraga and yet we couldn't place it. I would say that each of us had a somewhat different view of the work. I knew that there was something more to it than how it had been viewed—which was as third-rate abstract expressionism—but it still wasn't clear how it could fit in on a visual level.

But, eventually, ten years into it, it started to make sense because of this decentralization of geography, and in fact, recognizing that in, let's say the 1950s and early 60s, there were parallel developments happening in many different parts of the world, some of which were familiar with one another, and some of which were not.

But, having said that, this part of the conversation is about how our frame of reference for recent history has changed, but does that have an impact on the work of younger artists, or are you saying that has an impact on a way of, of looking at, or sorting through the work of younger artists?

ALISON GINGERAS: In this invitation to participate in a conversation about the art of the 2000s, I thought about two strands. One is the strand we'd been discussing this kind of permission to recuperate the past and to fill out the narrative. The second is something that I think has ultimately failed, but that emerged in the 2000s where artists really seized upon an active participation in the market. I'm thinking about, for example, an exhibition I was involved with as a curator at the Tate, which was called "Pop Life" but was originally to be called "Sold Out".

And it was about this agency of artists like Damien Hirst and Murakami who are no longer passive creators of product that then get put out into the marketplace, but [who] seized the power of capital. And that was something I think was a hallmark of the 2000s, and it reached its climax in 2008, with the crash of the economy. Young artists are hyper-aware of that. And there is a hesitation to assert a position of mastery because they know the pitfalls, they've come of age seeing that.

I'm close to a group of very young artists who are in their late 20s and early 30s, and they ironically call themselves Group Show, just because it's a social and intellectual commonality. There's an incredible, again, radical plurality to what they produce.

CHARLOTTE BURNS: David?

DAVID SALLE: There's so many different strands of activity that go into this thing we call art. It gets so murky, very quickly. Or I should say that probably no-one here that has less connection to the world of very new art that I do—I don't see a lot.

So what I'm saying is more a hunch then than something I can really verify. But I think that it comes down to a basic identification with the image of the artist, as Alison was saying. Is that person enacting a kind of exceptional narrative [or is] the artist someone who's, almost—I mean this really sounds kind of very belittling, but it's, this is the phrase that come to mind—is that artist is someone who is re-tweeting, as it were, something which is already in the cultural sphere?

Sometime in the 70s, I feel like John Baldessari made some work that either had the title, *This Is The Way We Make Art Now*, or that was the, activity that John was writing on a blackboard, the way we make art now. There is, at any given moment, a way we make art now. I mean, not one way, 15 ways—but there are, more or less identifiable methods that one can approach if you're a young artist, and when you combine any one of those with—there's something in moving editing that's called "borrowed motion"—if you, look at, in film, a shot of someone in a boat, it appears as the, the shoreline is moving along with them. It's a metaphor, this idea of borrowed motion. I feel like so much of the art of the past however many years, kind of works off of that principle, and the borrowed content is the local flavor, the thing which makes it, gives it its identity within the multicultural, sphere. That a formula for producing art which is neither good nor bad. I don't mean any of this stuff as a value judgment.

ALLAN SCHWARTZMAN: I have a question here, which maybe you could talk about David. In the 70s, when you were

formed as an artist, that was a period that was referred to as a pluralistic time. It certainly began with a kind of throwing out with the rule book, and starting from afresh: the impact of feminism and how that changed in the short run and the long run, a notion of what art can be, or what the practice of art was—or what the value system could be—behind art.

It was a period in which so many different mediums and styles were potentially relevant and interesting, but by the end of the decade, or certainly by the beginning of the next, the 80s, there became a much greater clarity, not only about where art was going, which was very different from how it looked in the 70s. But several decades after the 70s, that pluralism is not looking as confusing as it seemed at the time.

Are we in a similar kind of pluralism today, or is it a very different kind of pluralism?

DAVID SALLE: Well it's so difficult to make the comparison because of the matter of scale.

What happened in the 70s, I think, is the decades-long, formalist hegemony collapsed out of exhaustion, and created kind of a vacuum and lots of different things rushed into fill the vacuum. We think that if you look at it [but] it's actually not that many different things. Instead of the 27 varieties we'd have today, there might have been seven.

It's felt like a wildly pluralistic moment because, as you say, there was the emergence of video and the emergence of performance artists like Joan Jonas alongside formalist object-maker like Richard Serra. Feminism I think had a great deal to do with it, a great deal of setting the tone, the mood of challenging authority. Artists always said they were on the side of challenging authority but in practice, it didn't always work out that way.

So that all came started to come apart at the seams. These collapses, we know from the political sphere as well, they start slowly then they then accelerate. When they start to happen, it feels like it happens all at once.

It coincided with a very slow time in the art market, as I recall—not that I really knew much about it. I think that, that gave people a great sense of license and liberty: we might as well have fun, because we're sure as hell not going to make a living.

And I think that was all very healthy and gave rise to what we think of as pluralism but it wasn't really as diverse as the world is today, simply because there were few people who would risk their necks doing it.

But I still think the paradigm for what an artist was and what an artist did in the 70s and the 80s, was based on personal psychology, and a personal one-to-one correspondence, or a one-to-something, one-to-some-belief—and that was how one defined oneself. And that was enough.

I don't know if that's what's changed. It seems to me that the inciting shift might be the collective mind, which is something that my generation would've run from in horror, and I still find very sketchy. It has a different meaning. Because maybe, if you're a 27-year-old artist now, the collective mind is the thing you believe in the most. That's a profound shift.

CHARLOTTE BURNS: And can I ask you all a question? We're talking about great art: we're talking about significant and important artists. What is it that defines that? Is it a sense of the new, like when Pop Art emerged, everybody couldn't help probably, but feel that was different? What is that we mean? When we say that we're finding difficult to pinpoint the great artists, what exactly are we looking for?

DAVID SALLE: Well there are two things, well not two things, but there are 20 things, but one is, the way it was established in the past was influence. The artists who influenced other artists. Duchamp became important retrospectively because Bruce Nauman made him important. Influence which is very hard to pinpoint or chart with any accuracy.

It's more like a reverberation in a room with uneven surfaces. It was easier to chart influence, I think, in the past. That's just one way. Allan, you probably have other thoughts that you constitute as important.

ALLAN SCHWARTZMAN: I can remember sometime in the late 70s, running into you on the street and you showed me images of what you were working on, and I didn't know your work at all at that point. As I remember it, you were working on canvas, and you were drawing on it.

And what you were drawing was figurative, it was in a sense fragmentary, and it didn't fill the canvas.

DAVID SALLE: Good memory.

[Laughter]

ALLAN SCHWARTZMAN: It was a meaningful moment for me, because everything I saw there was different from the art I had known and didn't accept the rules as we understood them to be. The very idea of working on canvas at that moment had a radicality to it, even though it sounds like an anti-radical move.

The idea of drawing rather than painting on it, was a way of subverting the material you were working with. And the idea that the image would be identifiable but not really knowable or fully knowable, and that it didn't aspire to complete itself like a painting. All of these were achieved with language. And so I saw it and I said: "I don't know where this will go, but this is something that's a shift. This is a person of a different generation thinking in a different way." And so, to me, that had resonance, not just because of the language, but because it had a look and a feel to it that I found visually engaging.

When Bob Gober and Charlie Ray became very prominent and significant in the latter part of the 80s, the values of their work, the things that identified it were fundamentally different from the painting of the early 80s that had come to dominate. Which got larger, bolder, more expressionist. Their work all of a sudden got closed in, much more introverted, psychological, focused more on craft.

When I first saw Luc Tuymans paintings, that too was a substantial shift from what I understood painting to be, just prior to it. I had my own interpretations of what that meant.

But those to me were important moments. What makes for an important artist and someone who sustains himself, those are hard things to pinpoint. What is it that makes Agnes Martin or Giorgio Morandi a compelling artist as a lifetime of work making virtually the same painting over and over? But in a way, they make it fresh every time—versus an artist who has a limited language and keeps repeating it and can't come up with new ideas. What's the difference? I mean that's a certain kind of spark of true creativity.

I find that, when you start off early on, you have this commitment to a notion of radicality to breaking the rules and yet, as time goes on, the art that resonates, even if it's art of a radical language and position, is that which ultimately fulfills traditional values of what we expect from art, which is something that's mysterious.

That's engaging, that you can't fully know whether it's visually engaging or intellectually engaging, or whatever. I think sometimes importance is not so clear, until one has the time with which to have it evolve. I think of an artist like Paul McCarthy, who to his peers at the time was clearly significant and onto something, but he was invisible to the market and to museums for 20 or 30 years.

I think even as he started to become visible in New York, or was accepted in New York in the late 90s, maybe, having emerged in 1969, 1970, well his work I don't think was in the collection of a single museum Los Angeles, his hometown, and I could still remember, "Worst Of" exhibition lists, in Art Forum where he was accused of sexism. And I thought: "How bizarre that this point one couldn't look at that work through a different lens." Perhaps you experienced something similar in your work, with the imagery that you sometimes address, so—

I guess I sometimes make the distinction between importance and greatness, not that a lot of important art isn't great. I do equate importance with influence, but there's art that I love that means so much to me, that I think defines greatness in a period of time, that may not be relevant to anything else.

DAVID SALLE: I think that my way of saying that would be the art we remember over time is, is more than just an accumulation of cultural signs. Cultural signs might be a thing that gives it influence or importance in the moment. It's not the same thing as what you respond to after that argument has died down.

I had an experience with a young artist who, I won't name of course, but who has become probably celebrated in recent years. It was in my studio awhile back, and I asked him his opinion about some paintings that I could see clearly he didn't like him, and I said, "Well it's fine, but do you have any idea why?" He said, "I know you're trying to tell me something about Yves Klein, but I don't know what it is, and it bugs me that I can't tell what it is that you're telling me."

I suggested I wasn't telling anything about Yves Klein, that I didn't care about Yves Klein, I didn't really think about him very much, he said: "I don't buy that. You're telling my something about Yves Klein, it's a position you're taking vis-a-vis Yves Kline, and it's vague, and it's pissing me off." It crystalized this worldview of art as purely a set of cultural signs meant to be

decoded. Not that it doesn't have that component, but I thought, God, this is limited. Isn't there any other point of contact that you could make, or any other entry point to the work? Apparently not.

I think that is the cultural currency which, not just in the art world, in the world of magazine writing and book publishing and lecture touring and fashion, that is the nature of the engagement. And I think that's the nature of the engagement that has given rise to great popularity and great celebrity.

It's also the nature of the engagement which has limited, I think has damped down our emotional response to things, maybe brought us to this moment where we're asking, "Hey, where are all of the great artists?"

CHARLOTTE BURNS: David, your recent book, "How To See" is really a wonderful read and reminds everybody in the spirit of John Berger to look and to see art. You talk about Polke who is an artist of great innovation and who is still misunderstood in many ways, and you have this great like where you said, that people should "immerse themselves in his art and weep for the diminished spirit of our present age." I wanted to ask you about that specifically. What did you mean?

DAVID SALLE: Well it's funny that we're talking about … the art world evolving into a less masterpiece-oriented context. I can think of no more hierarchical place on Earth than the German art world. There's a struggle for dominance that you feel in every artist coming out of Germany.

The thing that, Sigmar had was the combing of so many different kinds of gifts that kept being recombined in different variations like atoms making different molecule, then each recombination allowed for a new body of work that seemed like a new fresh breath, fresh wind. That's something that doesn't come along very often. Why should we expect it to?

The diminishment of the age part, I think has to do with the pieces of Polke that can be segmented out as tropes, which other artists, whether they're younger or same generation can build on. Which is not in any way a criticism—it is a cliché in Modernist art history that the corner of one painting from this time will become the entire painting of a painting 20 years later, and so on and so forth.

And that's been itself something that was such a cliché that was already parodied by Baldassari in the 70s. I guess the way in which people integrate Polke in their art-world view differs depending on which era of Polke we're talking about.

I mean, to me he's that exceptional figure who is in parallel with the idea of pluralism. I see the pluralism as not unrelated to people who blog. There's lots and lots of people who blog, and, which was meant to be the end of published books, because why would you need to have a book when you can just blog—you reach the same audience, or a much larger audience? But I think in practice, and again, I don't work in publishing, this is what I hear, but every blogger really wants a book deal, and as soon as one has that book deal, that blog is left behind.

Artist always play a very funny game between group and individual identity. That's something that's probably been going on since God knows how long—at least since the dawn of Modernism in the 19th century, and probably much, much earlier.

But certainly in the 20th century, there's the group dynamic and it fuels itself. And creates a tremendous sense of camaraderie. And then the individuals that function within that group dynamic, because of the way art history works, the way the art market works, those people then kind of get extracted from it.

I don't know if we're at fundamentally a different place or not. I think we are experiencing the result of just plain demographic expansion. Such a tremendous number of people going to art school, coming out of art school, and wanting to find a way to practice, making art! And then, all the alternative methods that people are finding to do that in all corners of the world is all to the good. You don't know where it's going to end up yet.

CHARLOTTE BURNS: David, you wrote eloquently about your great fortune of being at the right art school at the right time in terms of being somewhere at a moment of great change. And I've been thinking about how to identify which those great schools are now. How did you know where to go?

DAVID SALLE: I didn't know. It was just blind luck. I had no idea what I was doing.

ALLAN SCHWARTZMAN: My understanding always that as soon as one knows of the right place to go, it's no longer the right place to go. It keeps shifting and it's, it's a magical moment in a particular place, that it's just a confluence of people.

DAVID SALLE: It's true that no one can predict it, and it comes when it comes.

ALISON GINGERAS: The art world as a whole has become so hyper professionalized, and that impacts young artists. When I was starting out in the Whitney program, there was not this awareness of. No-one talked about auction prices: no-one talked about arcs of careers; there was not this kind of strategy. When you go into a studio visit today, in any art school, most of the questions come from the students in an MFA program about strategy and positioning, and an awareness of what those realities are in terms of how do you get a show; how do you be in the right place at the right time? Whereas 20 years ago, there was a lot of intuition—there was room for experimentation and artists like Polke, or Asger Jorn, who had such a radically heterogeneous practice because they weren't under the microscope of hyper professionalization.

There wasn't this access to documenting every single move, every Instagram post, social appearance. The matrix of how consensus is built in the art world can almost be distilled into an anthropological formula, to a certain degree. And smart, young artists know this, so it really influences, and one could argue, impedes the reflex to be intuitive, experimental, radical.

DAVID SALLE: Yeah. That sounds right. The pressure for instant gratification is at odds with the, intuitive termite-like digging in the dark that we associate with people who make real breakthroughs.

CHARLOTTE BURNS: A museum curator in London essentially said the same thing. Maybe the really creative people who were working in new ways that have made a break from the past in a dramatic fashion, aren't working in the art world. Maybe they're working in different industries now. Maybe the really big cultural shifts that are happening to us, aren't happening where we're looking because maybe they're happening on the West Coast in technology, or in things that we're just not thinking about.

DAVID SALLE: I don't buy that at all. I think it's just a different idea of creativity. I don't think that the creativity in the technological sphere is supplanting creativity in the art: it's a different animal.

ALLAN SCHWARTZMAN: I've been asking myself that question for 40 years. I don't know if it, if it's any more valid now.

ALISON GINGERAS: I was thinking about how, on one hand you have cultural capital, which is something that is essentially ephemeral. It is lived in a moment, supported by moments of consensus that are forged through sociopolitical context, or shifts in the market, and then if you take the view of art history as a time machine. My primary love was Flemish painting. And I think of those, the accidents of what survives art history. Material culture and art history is forged by what can be salvaged and that privileges a certain kind of production, which, you know, most of the time, is painting on canvas because it's one of the more durable artifacts in a kind of an archaeological point of view.

While I am very attracted to the radical, to the performative, and to all of these things that are outside of material culture that are very important and have a lot of cultural capital, maybe I'm deep down, really conservative. But I think of, great art as being what can survive as a time machine, centuries in the future. Even though we might lose the legibility of, an abstract painting, or a work from I don't know, I mean, just pick something at random—a Mark Flood painting that has text on it. We might not really understand 300 years from now what it means. It might survive and it'll take on new meaning because it's a material object that can survive and that will be treasured or not.

ALLAN SCHWARTZMAN: But at the same time, if you look at the 60s, after Pop Art, I would say, at least from my perspective, that sculpture, by and large, was a far more significant medium or realm of artistic exploration than painting.

When video emerged in the late 60s as a medium, even though the video of that moment may not be as accessible or

known to a younger generation, that played a significant role in redefining art, for the artist both in terms of sculpture, and in terms of time based creativity, and in terms of object, non-object, value, anti-value, and a whole host of different criteria.

In the 80s, painting reemerged in a very substantial or centralized to me. Let’s say in the last 10 years, did you feel as though painting is a central medium? I mean certainly it’s the one that the market has centered upon.

ALISON GINGERAS: I think it is a central medium, and again to go back to this idea of the 2000s being a moment where historical agency is what art defines our era. We are going back, and looking, primarily at painting as something that we can latch onto in our desire to look critically at how the canon was made.

So, when you talk about Shiraga, you talk about Mono-ha, you talk about—and it was all very object-based—painting does have primacy. Even though it might drive me nuts on an intellectual level, I think it does have primacy, because we are essentially a form of archaeology, this is what survives.

ALLAN SCHWARTZMAN: And do you see an impact of this re-examination of the recent past, on the work of the other artists, or are you seeing this as more relevant to our thinking about what art is?

ALISON GINGERAS: I see a lot of young artists being uninhibited by the problem of making a painting, so therefore they’re able to go at it investing new ideas or new subjectivities into the way they make paintings.

So they might be identity politics’ artists— in the 90s they would’ve been in a more dematerialized vein, but now they invest those ideas into the canvas, and into the practice of making a painting. I think it also has again to do with this professionalization, because there’s a realization that in order to, the way one makes it into being seen is through a production that can be sustainable in the market, there’s a pragmatism that young artists, is just a fact for them.

ALLAN SCHWARTZMAN: And are there certain individuals that stand out for you in particular within this realm, or do you see it more as a generational shift?

ALISON GINGERAS: This thing that has been dubbed “Zombie Formalism” or Crapstraction, that was its own bubble within the market and even within its currency amongst curators, it was something that made it into a few biennials, or kind of taking the temperature-of-art-now-type exhibitions, but ultimately didn’t really have serious legs. And we’re seeing a backlash against that.

ALLAN SCHWARTZMAN: Was it created by the market or destroyed by the market?

ALISON GINGERAS: Both. I think.

ALLAN SCHWARTZMAN: Somebody once pointed out to me that all of that work is this format—holding up an iPhone—and that so much of the rise of popularity or awareness of that work was rooted in rapid trade.

ALISON GINGERAS: And also this non-criticality of artists that are trained to produce product, to get their name out there, don’t really have an understanding of rigor, or self-regulation in terms of the amount that they produced. Even artists thinking that success means having a bunch of assistants in the studio, having that kind of factory—which is like a misunderstanding of the original, let’s say, Warholian paradigm.

DAVID SALLE: Right, the irony seemed to have bypassed them.

ALISON GINGERAS: Exactly.

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