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Peter Saul *New Paintings*

David Nolan April 2–May 23, 2009 John Yau

I wonder how many artists would readily admit that Peter Saul has influenced them. He certainly was the first to make high art out of strident and cartoony in-your-face images. Isn't it about time the art world acknowledges Saul as a modern master? Not for the kind of formal innovation that has been pursued by Jasper Johns or Robert Rauschenberg, although, like them, Saul's inventions can't be reduced to style, materials, process or, as some have advanced in his case, subject matter—all middlebrow markers of success. Saul's innovations instead spring from picture-making as an imaginative act. This is what he has in common with Johns and Rauschenberg, as well as Squeak Carnwath, Mark Greenwald, Catherine Murphy, and Thomas Nozowski. All of them know that style is death, and art isn't about originality: it is about reality, the time-space continuum we inhabit as we are pulled toward termination. To dream of freedom in the face of inevitable destruction is a far more powerful and compelling accomplishment than kissing the ass of theorists espousing a one-size-fits-all narrative.

Saul makes inimitable paintings. For all their zaniness and rage, provocation and weirdness, chilling violence and outlandish humor, his are some of the most complexly sophisticated, densely engaging pictures of any painter of his generation (he was born in 1934). His manipulation of forms is both fluid and sculptural: pictorially speaking, a wildly imaginative synthesis of Salvador Dalí's melting and rubbery forms and Willem de Kooning's savagely comic, figural distortions that results in something all his own. He conveys distance not through perspectival means but photographically,

with crisply focused foreground objects juxtaposed with fuzzy-edged ones behind. In terms of spatiality and color, highly revered figurative painters like Francis Bacon and Lucian Freud are pedestrian compared to Saul. He dances circles around his contemporaries, and younger artists, such as Peter Doig, Carroll Dunham, Elizabeth Peyton, and Lisa Yuskavage, are not even close to being in the same category.

The question remains in the air, like a fart in a crowded bus: Why hasn't Saul's work gained the status it deserves? Why has it always been regarded as a special case? Is it too iconoclastic to be considered mainstream? Is it because the mainstream prefers the predigested, quick but anticipated shock rather than a prolonged engagement with something open-ended, irreducible, and other? One reason is capitalism—Saul's works can't be financed. Nor are they interchangeable products that can be theorized, like Wade Guyton, Jeff Koons, Richard Prince, and other appropriation artists. (Have theorists, in their institutional critiques, ever explored the link between their theorizing and capitalism?)

There are six paintings in this exhibition, all completed since 2008, with no two that are remotely similar, and four drawings. Instead of an overriding theme, a hook to hang the paintings on, Saul depicts all kinds of figures, things, excretions, and liquefactions. He takes a perverse delight in conflating the viscosity of paint with that of the body's innards, jamming together the image and the visceral. His scatology is an unequivocal reminder that art is rooted in the body, time, and mortality. The mind-body problem has never been presented like this.

In "Bad Restaurant," lemon slices, spaghetti, fish, and wine all play a role, as well as a giant, phallus-like cucumber balancing a slice of chocolate cake, two cups of coffee, and a bumblebee. The artist makes four appearances, in sneakers and a T-shirt, as a snake/hot dog inside a bun, as a head popping out of a coffee cup, and with a pickle for a body. Starting with the pickle body on the far right and ending with a sneakered, headless creature on the far left, Saul lines up a distinct range of green, from Veronese to the electric and bilious.

It is fairly easy to recognize what's in a Saul painting but impossible to explain what's going on. He has a genius for following internal logic to its troublesome conclusion—something that is also true of the great stand-up comic and outspoken libertarian Bill Hicks (1961–1994), who described himself as "Chomsky with dick jokes."

The masterpiece of the exhibition is "Viva la Difference" (2008), in which a pajama-clad man crouches beside a bed, his arm around a half-reclining female nude, all breasts and vaginas, whose puppy-like face is crowned with reddish-orange hair. (Magritte's "Le viol" [The Rape] [1945] is the likely source for her body). A martini glass filled with an orange-colored drink, complete with orange slice, rests rather precariously in one of her vaginas at the dead center of the painting. From the crimson satin sheets to the man's phallic cigarette,



Peter Saul, "Viva La Difference" (2008). Acrylic on canvas. 72 × 72 inches (182.9 × 182.9 cm). Courtesy of David Nolan Gallery.

there is nothing that Saul hasn't considered. And yet, for all its clarity of detail, the painting is irreducible. And Saul isn't trying to be ambiguous or ambivalent, which are familiar forms of avoidance.

Is "Viva la Difference" Saul's vision of otherness? If so—and certainly the tongue-in-cheek title suggests it—then it is an otherness that remains beyond naming and cannot be colonized. There is nothing coy or haughty about this painting or any of Saul's work, in fact. This is what the mainstream art world can't deal with. They prefer self-satisfied judgments and easy putdowns to the tenderness and sympathy that Saul infuses into his paintings of losers, dumbbells, schlubs, murderers, dictators, and headless monsters. He recognizes that they are not as inhuman as many would like to think. One even feels something for Bernie Madoff who, in one drawing, offers up his "bloody testicles." To his credit, Saul never indicates whether it is payment extracted ("a pound of flesh") or penitence. And therein lies more than one tale. **BR**