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Art in America

EXHIBITION REVIEWS

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PETER SAUL DAVID NOLAN

This show of new work by Peter Saul followed on the heels of the well-received touring museum retrospective organized by the Orange County Museum of Art, where it debuted last year. The six large canvases and the group of works on paper in the more recent show proved the San Francisco-born Chicago Imagist veteran to be in fine, acerbic form. Saul uses his twisted cartoon imagery to tackle, or rather attack, a host of topics ranging from Cold War politics (*Stalin + Mao*, 2009) and gratuitous sex (*Viva la Difference*, 2008) to Joe the Plumber (*Plumber Joe Meets Francis Bacon*, 2008) and Bernie Madoff (*Testicles of a Billionaire*, 2009), part of a series of raunchy portrayals of the Ponzi schemer as a self-emasculating oaf.

Swipes at art-world values appear in a number of works, including *Better*

than de Kooning (2008), a wildly exaggerated pastiche of the maestro's venerated "Woman" series from the 1950s, which Saul has reinterpreted in his own work periodically since the 1970s. The 7-by-6-foot canvas's airbrushed-looking surface of finely dappled brushwork in garish hues, is a send-up of Ab Ex's revered gestures and impastos. Further skewing de Kooning's iconic image, Saul adds to the swirling morass of breasts, teeth and hair a large and grotesque penis.

Elsewhere, he is more deferential to artist-predecessors. Over the years, Saul has acknowledged the influence of Paul Cadmus and Max Beckmann, and he pays homage to the latter in *Beckmann's The Night* (2009). This nightmarish image features an armed figure with knife and pistol on the right attacking a naked woman to the left. In the lower left corner, a head in the style and likeness of a Beckmann self-portrait licks the foot of a screaming man in his underwear hanging from a noose. Updating the Expressionist idiom of Beckmann's *The Night* (1918-19), Saul, in this ghastly scene, brings it to a whole new level of brutality and violence.

Saul's ongoing struggle to bore ever more deeply into his own creative psyche is evident in two of the show's most striking works: the obvious but hilarious *My Lousy Brain* (2008), showing a blocky figure with knife in hand, who examines the brain he has just carved out of his own skull; and a more playful composition and the exhibition's tour de force, *Bad Restaurant* (2008). Here, four well-defined self-portrait heads top diminutive bodies. The figures, undulating above a dining room table, traverse a quasi-surrealist space. On the far right, a figure squeezes a red fish; another, holding a giant pickle, slogs through a big bowl of spaghetti. On the left a hot-dog figure with Saul's head glares pop-eyed at an olive hovering above an overfull martini glass, the artist's reward, perhaps, at the end of a long and productive day in the studio.

—David Ebony