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### Provocateur: The Peter Saul Manifesto

By HOLLAND COTTER



"Vietnam" (1966), one of a series of Peter Saul works in the 1960s prompted by the war.

NEWPORT BEACH, Calif. — Peter Saul, who turns 74 on Saturday, is a classic artist's artist, one of our few important practicing history painters and a serial offender in violations of good taste. His career, while long, steady and admired, has never exceeded cult status. It's an example of can't-see-the-tree-for-the-forest visibility.

The influence of Mr. Saul's paintings, with their cartoony figures, lurid-lush colors, splatter-film expressionism and contrarian take on topical subjects, pervades recent art. It has contributed mightily to major careers, like those of Carroll Dunham and Elizabeth Murray. And it has paved the way for the neo-Surrealist noodlings of countless student painters spilling out of art schools and straight into the arms of a ravenous market.

Yet his own welcome by the market has been, until fairly recently, less than avid. His reception by museums has been marked by indifference, if not avoidance. That the retrospective of his work at the Orange County Museum of Art here in Southern California is not scheduled to go to New York City, where Mr. Saul now lives, says much.

True, the Museum of Modern Art, with its white-box politeness, is not a natural home for his visual perversities. Nor is the Metropolitan Museum, despite its vaunted embrace of "challenging" new art. But why hasn't the Whitney, which owns one of Mr. Saul's grandly scathing Vietnam War paintings, stepped up to the plate? And where is the new New Museum? Totally lost to painted prettiness these days? (The Saul show of 50 works is organized by a former New Museum curator, Dan Cameron.)

Mr. Saul's art is not pretty, though it has many eye-catching pleasures. Nor is it polite. Indeed, the artist makes zealous efforts to ensure the opposite. In America today, he says in a catalog interview, "there's a tremendous need to not be seen as racist, not seen as sexist. So I want to make sure I am seen as those things."

He succeeds. What museum would be the right one for a painting of a knife-wielding O. J. Simpson strapped down for execution as a buxom blond angel points to a blood-stained glove and intones, "This is why you have to die"? Or for a picture of Christopher Columbus slaughtering New World natives who themselves hold platters of chopped human limbs in their arms?

What is the appropriate place for art that stirs together John Wayne Gacy and Angela Davis, Mickey Mouse and Ethel Rosenberg, Stalin and Willem de Kooning, Basil Wolverton and George W. Bush, then spikes the broth with prickly references to capitalism, Communism, homophobia, feminism, Black Power, racism, pedophilia and art-world politics and — last but not least — to the aging, decaying, self-lacerating artist himself?

Depending on who's looking, Mr. Saul might be seen either to embrace or revile individual ingredients in this stew, though when his art is pressed to declare its loyalties, it gives no unequivocal answers. Indeed, it seems to be answer-averse, a species of painting as agitation, picture-making as button-pushing.

Mr. Saul, who was born in San Francisco, started pushing buttons in the late 1950s when he discovered that although he liked the way certain Abstract Expressionist artists painted, he couldn't stomach the Existentialist mumbo-jumbo that surrounded their work. So he adopted the brushy style but dumped the pretensions. Instead of spiritual

depths, he painted icebox interiors stocked with soft drinks, steaks, daggers, penises and toilets. In the process he created a painterly version — Larry Rivers did the same — of what would come to be called Pop Art.

During this time, from 1956 to 1964, he was living in relative isolation in Europe. In Paris he met a few career-shaping figures, including the Surrealist painter Roberto Matta and the American art dealer Allan Frumkin, who would represent Mr. Saul for more than 30 years. He also had transformative encounters with Rembrandt's "Night Watch" and Mad magazine.

In the mid-to-late '60s, after he returned to California, Mr. Saul produced a series of paintings prompted by the war in Southeast Asia. In "Vietnam" (1966), done in a sleek, linear but oozy graphic style, figures embodying racial whiteness, blackness and yellowness twist together in a kind of apocalyptic gang rape, with all parties violated and violating.

Other paintings in the series — what an amazing and timely show they would make on their own — push a vision of universal defilement even further. In their unchartable moral compass, their disdain of humanist solace and their alarming formal beauty, they are among the benchmark art images of their era.

In 1975 Mr. Saul moved to New York. But by then painting, or at least his kind, was out of fashion. So in 1981 he relocated, this time to Austin, Tex., to teach. He stayed there for almost 20 years, once again removing himself from the mainstream, and at a time when political art, including political painting, was finding a new audience.

Actually, Mr. Saul had long been doing some of his work for an audience of one, himself, specifically a series of self-portraits that he began in the '70s and continues to add to today. The images are, almost without exception, of the body caught in the grip of mortifying instincts and erupting emotions while under assault from a hostile world.

In "Oedipus Junior" (1983), the artist simultaneously stabs himself in the eye with a paintbrush, castrates himself with a buzz saw and offers a beer to a female breast that sprouts from his neck. In a 1997 drawing, a vomiting woman pushes through a man's forehead with a placard reading, "Your sexist jokes make me sick." In several paintings, heads are shown in meltdown, dissolving into fat and sweat, eyes and teeth swimming around in a puddle of fleshy goo.

Such images — Rembrandt's late self-portraits are not all that far off — have increased in number as Mr. Saul has grown older. Yet his work continues to look youthfully of the moment. And for young artists he is, for several reasons, a worthy role model.

He has kept himself more or less clear of the art world, so owes it nothing. He has also kept clear of fashion — having a longtime supportive dealer was, naturally, an enabling factor in this — and, with scant critical encouragement until recent years, has gone his own masterly realized hideous-hilarious way. And that way has been based on taking a fundamentally facile genre, Surrealism, and loading it with purposeful, critical content.

If his work has softened and broadened with time — a few of the later pictures in this otherwise sterling selection feel undercooked or overstated — its essence remains tough and firm. This is an art of combative moral ambiguity that looks as if it's coming from some laugh-riot lunatic fringe but is, in fact, a sane and realistic depiction of the world. What's wrong with this picture? each Saul painting asks. And each one answers: Everything.

“Peter Saul” remains through Sept. 21 at the Orange County Museum of Art, 850 San Clemente Drive, Newport Beach, Calif.; (949) 759-1122, [ocma.net](http://ocma.net). It travels to the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia, Oct. 18 to Jan. 4; and the Contemporary Art Center in New Orleans, Feb. 14 to May 24.