

## DAVID NOLAN **NEW YORK**

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# THE NEW YORK OBSERVER

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“GROSS ANATOMY”

By Mario Naves



What a Boob!

*Viva la Difference*, 2008, acrylic on canvas, 72 x 72 inches, 182.9 x 182.9 cm

Bernie Madoff and his testicles make a fleeting appearance in Peter Saul's exhibition of paintings and works-on-paper at David Nolan Gallery, and New Yorkers are poorer for it. Actually, it's Mr. Madoff's castration Mr. Saul depicts. Notwithstanding the artist's typically over-the-top finger-pointing, the "Maddoff" drawings aren't anywhere near as disgusting, funny or caustic as they should be.

The Ponzi King deserves, not commentary done on a deadline, but vitriol made gross and lurid through paint. Mr. Saul's finicky style, with its innumerable pats of oversaturated color, is inherently anti-immediate; we'll have to wait for his definitive take on capitalist excess and arrogance. But then, topicality isn't Mr. Saul's forte. Bile is.

For the last 50 years or so, he's thrived on the stuff, and created a body of work that stands as a monument to garish, adolescent overkill. From his early, not un-fond forays into AbEx pastiche to the pseudo-pointillist cartoons for which he's gained a significant following, Mr. Saul has trained his

scatological eye on humankind's failings and follies. Ronald Reagan, Fidel Castro, O. J. Simpson, Donald Duck, Jeffrey Dahmer and Newt Gingrich—in mortal combat with Little Orphan Annie, no less—have met with his ire.

Mr. Saul has worked on themes both grand (totalitarianism, the ubiquity of racism and genocide) and trivial (zit-popping, nose-picking and Marcel Duchamp). Either way, he invests a given motif with gleeful and raucous overstatement. “I like the way [a] picture presents problems you have to deal with,” the artist, in an understated mood, told BOMB magazine. If there's no particular breadth to Mr. Saul's maliciousness, its unflagging nature is impressive in its purity.

Which is a not-so-roundabout way of saying that the exhibit is more of the same. The fleshy and contorted figures; the electric palette; the Silly Putty-like elisions of space; and an endearing weakness for the easy mark—Joe the Plumber no less than Bernie Madoff—the recent work demonstrates that Mr. Saul is as reliable a stylist as he is a misanthrope. Stalin and Mao make an appearance, as does the artist himself, brandishing a large pickle and running through a bowl of what appear to be SpaghettiO's.

A keen, if dyspeptic, student of art history—Mr. Saul is, for example, a fan of 19th-century academic painting—he knowingly parodies Willem de Kooning's slash-and-burn methodology in a canvas titled (what else?) Better Than De Kooning. A homage to Max Beckmann's *The Night* simultaneously simplifies and amplifies that masterpiece's grotesqueries without necessarily tapping into the German painter's philosophical gravity. But that's kind of the point: Mr. Saul prides himself on his amorality. He trades in across-the-board vituperation. He's refreshingly un-p.c. that way. That's why charges of, say, misogyny don't phase him.

Not that he doesn't ask for them. The unabashedly puerile *Viva La Difference* (2008) is a case in point. A kneeling man in purplish-pink pajamas—he resembles Derek Jeter, though the folks at Nolan emphatically state that it's not—crouches by a bed, putting his arm around a multiethnic lump of flesh with six breasts, six vaginas, blond hair and no face. In the catalog interview, Mr. Saul's posits the canvas as a bedroom emollient for the collector ready to snap it up. There's no accounting for one's tastes in aphrodisiacs. But neither is there any doubting the integrity of an artist who is, in the end, less cantankerous or scabrous than just plain lovable—at least for those of us with a weakness for exuberant ill will.

“Peter Saul: New Paintings” is at David Nolan Gallery, 527 West 29th Street, until May 23.