

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

523 West 24th Street, New York, New York 10011 Tel: 212-243-0200 Fax: 212-243-0047

Peter Cain

Press Packet

Viveros-Faune, Christian. "Peter Cain," *New York Press*. November 13, 2002, p. 31.

"Peter Cain," *The New Yorker*. October 28, 2002, p. 25.

Saltz, Jerry. "Carpe Diem," *The Village Voice*. October 23, 2002, p. 67.

Dunham, Carroll. "Head Over Wheels," *Artforum*. April 1997, pp. 19–20.

Schjeldahl, Peter. "Hail and Farewell," *The Village Voice*. February 25, 1997.

Smith, Roberta. "A New Surge of Growth," *The New York Times*. February 14, 1997.

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"Peter Cain," *New York Magazine*. February 10, 1997, p. 131.

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## Peter Cain

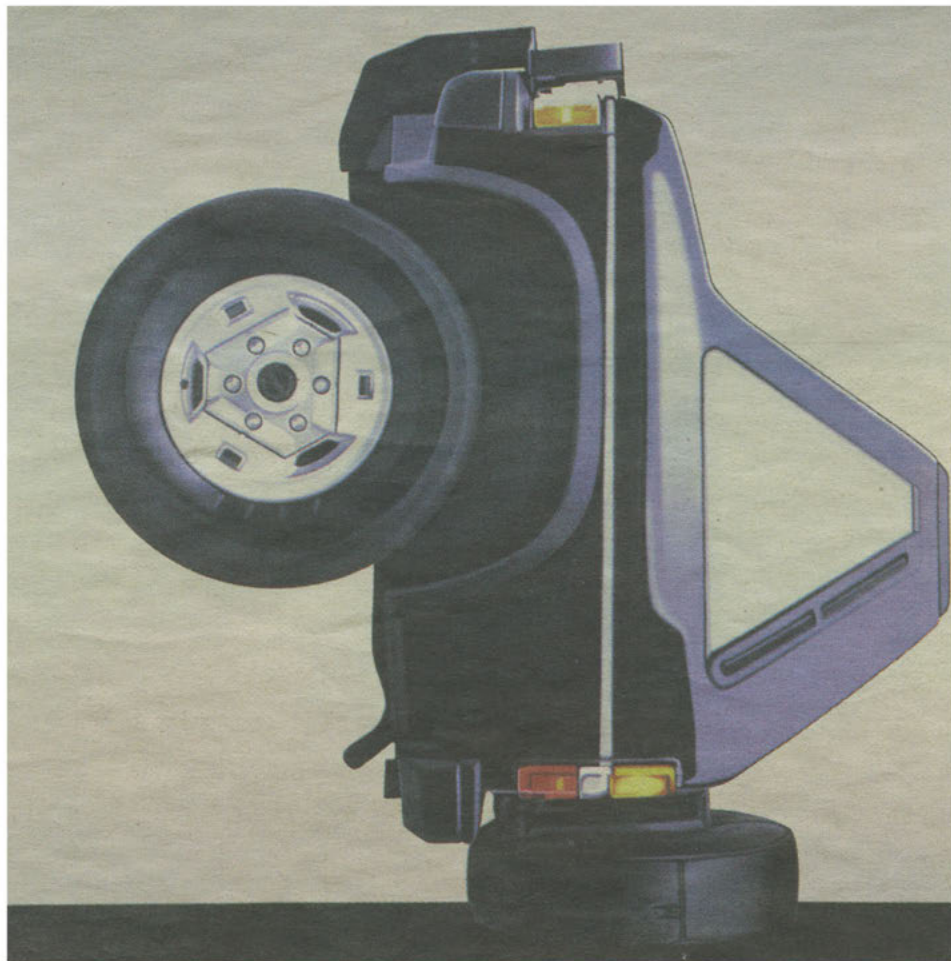
“I THINK that cars today are almost the exact equivalent of the great Gothic cathedrals,” a breathless young Roland Barthes wrote in 1957. By that he meant “the supreme creation of an era, conceived with passion by unknown artists, and consumed in image if not in usage by a whole population which appropriates them as a purely magical object.” The quotation, minus the key bit about mass consumption, could just as well have been written about the paintings of cars by Peter Cain.

Nearly unknown today, Cain passed away, a budding treasure whose unfulfilled promise sadly overshadowed his significant gifts. Dead at the age of 37 from a brain hemorrhage, Cain had just managed to do what many thought was impossible: paint himself out of the tough thematic impasse he had set himself by picturing automobiles.

For his posthumous exhibition in March 1997, which he had been working toward until his death in January, Cain broke with the “car guy” mold and exhibited three large, awkwardly cropped paintings of his lover, Sean, lying on the beach with prize desuetude. Universally praised for their skill as well as their ambition, the paintings drew comparisons to the two irreconcilable elder statesmen of painterly figuration: Alex Katz and Gerhard Richter. Another four paintings of gas stations included in the show suggested Hopperish landscapes reconceived through the formalist concerns of Mark Rothko and Kenneth Noland. The sixth and last full-fledged show of Cain’s work, it left people wanting much, much more.

More, of course, is impossible to ask of Cain’s memory, his estate or his faithful dealer, Matthew Marks, who has long carried a torch for Cain’s place among the painterly notables of his and subsequent generations. An argument has steadily been made to connect his work with that of other better-remembered, albeit living, painters of the 1990s: John Currin, Peter Doig, Elizabeth Peyton, Richard Phillips and Lisa Yuskavage. The shoe, on first and second examination, appears to fit. But perhaps it has never done so as well as during the current mini-retrospective of Cain’s work at Matthew Marks’ 22nd St. gallery.

If it’s impossible to expand on Cain’s lifetime of production (only some 60 paintings), it is at least possible during the next few weeks to revisit his brief if brilliant career by actually studying the paintings in person. The current exhibition, enigmatical-



PETER CAIN, *PATHFINDER*, 1992-1993

### Accessible and erotic, obscure yet totemic.

ly titled “More Courage and Less Oil” after a note found tacked to his studio wall, packs together 14 canvases made between the years 1988 and 1995. Their effect, individually and jointly, is one of bizarre contemporaneity. All other things not being equal, Cain’s paintings have never looked so “Now” as they do at this very moment.

In the words of Cain pal and fellow painter Carrol Dunham: “[I]n a relatively brief period, on a steep learning curve, Peter took an idea of questionable promise and drove it hard.” Anticipating not only the current resurgence of fine art painting but the real-life design of 21st-century smart cars and tank-like SUVs, Cain picked up and adopted a few creative leads that the art world had cruelly orphaned. Like other

important artists, his influences appeared at once to be many and few. Shuttling uneasily between pop, the meticulous renderings of photo-based realism, the sexy vapidness of finish fetish and the enigmatic appeal of Ed Ruscha’s photographic work, Cain established a practice that ran counter to most developments in art in the early 90s.

During a period in which art turned inward on itself and its myriad, warring identities, young Cain moved ever closer toward a sleek, male-dominated strain of vernacular culture. Whether through third-eye vision or out of perverse instinct, Cain was able to gain the attention of several notables, including Whitney curator Elizabeth Sussman. She became an instant convert and included his work in two Biennials, celebrated in 1993

and 1995. In one, his paintings of crab-like, cyclopic buggies shared a room with Ray Charles' distortedly realist sculpture *Family Romance*. It was, without a doubt, the weirdest, most explosive pairing in an otherwise lousy, predictable exhibition.

Cain's paintings of cars, of course, were always a carefully calibrated excuse to pick up a brush and paint something disturbing and lovely. Distorting the popular "muscle car" look until it became unrecognizable, he began by painting entire trademark autos, like the Charger and the Impala, in fields of purple and blue as if they were monochrome abstractions. He followed this first foray into car culture by upending a pair of wagons vertically in a shallow white space and stretching out their middle sections so that they appeared, in effect, totally undrivable. The distortions continued. Cain remodeled and mutated the familiar lines and swoops of classic car design, turning twin images of a Barracuda into an intensely cool Rorschach test, a Pathfinder into a folded up R2-D2 bot straight out of *Star Wars: Episode II*.

Accessible and erotic, obscure but undeniably totemic, Cain's car paintings oozed advertising popularity while being, on closer inspection, subtle works that took their fluid forms and product colors as seriously as any minimalist sculptor might covet the purity of his materials. Precise in their facture and biomorphically suggestive, they reconfigured popular American culture's vaunted normality while retooling the endgame of late 20th-century painting. His works were capable of speaking to various contradictory constituencies. All one had to do was listen.

Cain's car paintings engage the culture's fetishized nostalgia for the 50s and 60s worldview, though not nearly as well as they provide images to match the lingering insecurities of our brand-new century. These monstrosities, polished motorized pucks and time bombs in lipstick colors, are Cain's obsequies to a time that harbors Humvee sports utility vehicles and unmanned missile drones. Drawn directly from the pleasant myths of pure design, they are, in Barthes' words, some of the supreme artistic creations of our era, purely magical objects drawn from the most mundane, ubiquitous sources that make an unstoppable case for us to recognize them as our own.

*"Peter Cain: More Courage and Less Oil," through Nov. 23 at Mathew Marks Gallery, 522 W. 22nd St. (betw. 10th & 11th Aves.)*

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# THE NEW YORKER



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## GALLERIES—CHELSEA

### PETER CAIN

Cain, who died in 1997 at the age of thirty-seven, hatched a dissonant style—call it photo-surrealism—that is growing in retrospective prestige. A crisp show celebrates his paintings of mutant cars: gleaming sedans reduced to a pod of their front and back ends, set on a single wheel; a head-on S.U.V. squeezed toward telephone-booth proportions; and coupes elongated like exactly pulled taffy. Many of the images are set sideways or upside down, further straining their realist manner with assertions of the painter's impunity. Grating at first, Cain's sleek grotesqueries prove unforgettable. His transformation of our definitive machine—making it symbolize indivisible love and hate—takes willing viewers for a fast, rough ride. Through Nov. 23. (Marks, 522 W. 22nd St. 243-0200.)



Are These the Most Underrated Paintings of the '90s?

## CARPE DIEM

BY JERRY SALTZ

### PETER CAIN

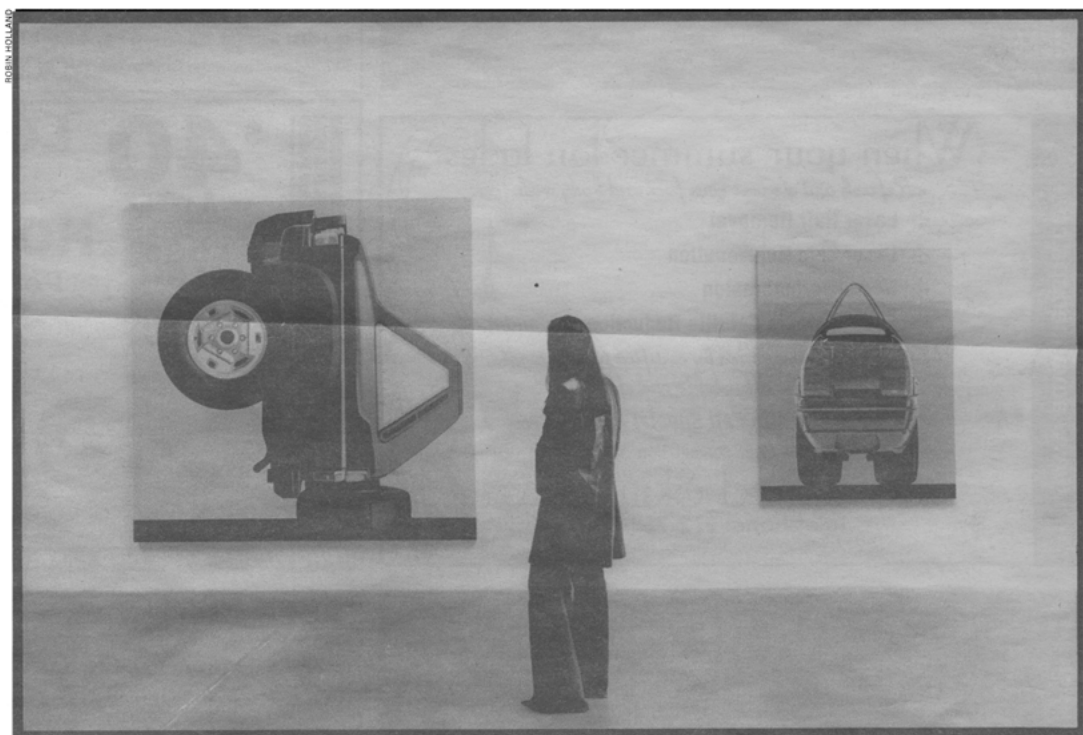
Matthew Marks Gallery  
522 West 22nd Street  
Through November 23

Peter Cain's late paintings of his lover Sean on the beach, and several of his mutant car images—all made in the five years before he died in 1997, at the age of 37, of a cerebral hemorrhage—are among the sexiest, strangest, and most underrated paintings of the 1990s. Cain's great accomplishment is that although all of his paintings derive from photographs, none of them picture the world as if seen through a lens. Cain wasn't interested in the Gerhard Richter, Walter Benjamin, mediated-image side of things. Photographs weren't distancing devices to him or ways to comment on painting's relationship to photography. He used them in a Dr. Frankenstein manner—the way people show magazines to hairdressers and say, "Make me look like this."

Cain's work is a combination of photorealism, Pop, commercial art, surrealism, and pornography—James Rosenquist and John Chamberlain by way of Magritte, Mel Ramos, and Robert Bechtle. He emerged at the end of the 1980s as the art market was collapsing, the art world was mired in a consumerist discourse, and painting, in John Currin's memorable words, "had become a laughingstock." Out of this morass came a promising crop of young Americans. In spite of a cultish following, back-to-back Whitney Biennial appearances in 1993 and 1995, and five solo shows in Los Angeles and New York in five years, Cain was an odd man out. Perhaps because everything is on the side of the living, by now he's almost forgotten. Today, when he's mentioned, it's disconcertingly as the "car guy."

This invaluable—and for those of us who admire him, moving—exhibition of 14 of his car paintings shows Cain was much more than that. Wedged into half of this good-looking space, however, the paintings are cramped and don't get to make their case as surely as they might have. It also would have been helpful to see some of his finely rendered graphite drawings, notational sketches, and wily photographic collages. Still, this show is not to be missed by anyone interested in understanding how painting got from the cul-de-sac it found itself in at the end of the '80s to where it is today. Cain is an American pivot point in that story.

"More Courage and Less Oil," as this exhibition has been wonderfully titled (after a note the artist scrawled and pinned to his studio wall; literally "Be brave and try to make the



ON THE ROAD WITH THE ODD MAN OUT: CAIN'S *PATHFINDER* (LEFT, 1992-93) AND *OMEGA* (1994) AT MATTHEW MARKS

paint more viscous"), shows Cain to be a natural who tried hard and was trying harder. His color is Pop-y and uncomplicated. He liked cherry red, but was better with orange, black, and gray, and was in the process of nailing mint green and ocher. There's a tremulous depth to Cain's space: A car might look like it's underwater or in the ozone. His surfaces are thin-ish and smooth (but were getting thicker), and can be slick. His paint was always changing density. His edges started inconsistent, as if he reworked things a lot, or was a closet perfectionist. By the end, they were sleek and sexy, as was his touch, which also lacked tenacity and was occasionally blurry, like Milton Avery's. Cain's initial, semi-photo-realist work was dull. The four 1988-89 images here, two elongated cars on white backgrounds and two blurry coupes, are unpromising. However, Carroll Dunham, who wrote one of the two excellent catalog essays (the other is by Bob Nickas), refers to them as "formalist paintings with Ed Ruscha punch lines," which opens

them up. But they're still too industrial-design and "boy" for me. Then Cain started doing something he did for the rest of his brief life: He took his work to a much more optical, complex, and thrilling place—a place I am still trying to explain to myself.

Donald Judd said, "The big problem is to maintain the sense of the whole thing." Cain did that with a twist. His morphing skills are amazing. You can linger over details, imagine this piece of chassis is a phallus or that wheel is an anus. But no part ever separates from the whole. And the wholes are uncanny, iconic, totally familiar, deeply abstract, and often startling. Cain's cars aren't cars or critiques of them. Shapes may look like helmets, vacuum cleaners, or s/m devices, but like Mark Rothko's fuzzy, floating Buddhist televisions, Cain's shapes are things unto themselves.

If it's possible to divide such an abbreviated career into phases, Cain's had three (excluding the fabulous finale of the late paintings of Sean). The early cars account for the first, least inter-

esting phase. Next comes a breakthrough, more in the ways he complicated his space, image, and technique than in the paintings themselves. These paintings, which date roughly from 1990 to '92, include the upside-down, sideways, or right-side-up surrealistic fenders with headlights mounted on wheels (e.g., *Prelude #2*, *Carrera #4*, and *Miata #9*). The largest painting here, *EP 110* (1992), represents a transition from the second to the third phase. In this work Cain, who had a great sense of how to fit things within a painting, introduces the element of movement via a multicolored background, with mixed results. However, the scale and space are monumental, and the way the car is painted is richer, more solid and subtle. This canvas paves the way for his next phase and my three favorite paintings in the show: *Pathfinder*, *Omega*, and *Glider*, each better than the last. If any of these paintings were left on view at a museum, I believe it would be esteemed as a masterpiece of its period. Maybe more. ▣

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# ARTFORUM

## HEAD OVER WHEELS

Peter Cain,  
500 SL #5, 1992, oil  
on linen, 67 x 70".

**PETER CAIN DIED** on January 5, 1997, at the age of thirty-seven. He had a cerebral hemorrhage in his sleep, lingered in a coma for a few days, and was gone.

His work was widely seen but not too widely known. He'd had five one-person exhibitions in New York and California since 1990. He was in the 1993 and 1995 Whitney Biennials, so he had "respect," and a lot of warm bodies had passed in front of his work, but his serious audience remained small—small enough that we mostly knew who each other were. His paintings and drawings are odd and special, and they've always polarized people.

An occasional bonus of following art is the experience of having your mind changed by something you've seen without your conscious involvement. When I first saw Peter's paintings turning up in group shows in 1989, they seemed too precise and mechanical to be connected to anyone's inner life, and I filed them away as part of the "consumer art" discourse that was in the air then. But for some reason, I found myself gradually thinking about them in another way, as a kind of abstraction. The cars started to feel like vehicles for thought; the compression, inversion, and distortion charged the images with a claustrophobic grandeur, and I remembered an end-of-the-world kind of light. I found myself referring to these encouraging examples of new painting.

When I met Peter in 1990, he was living in a tenement apartment with nothing much in it, just a bed and the material to do his work. There wasn't enough stuff around to call it "squalid." The atmosphere was intense and focused, all business. Several large canvases he was working on filled the main room, and his meticulous pencil drawings were pinned to the walls. There were collages lying around that he used to develop the images for the paintings, cutup car ads that he reassembled according to his peculiar formal logic. I don't know how long he'd been painting the cars, but it felt like he really knew what he was doing.

When we first met, we spent a while feeling out each others' tastes and attitudes. I could immediately recognize a fellow member of the Cult of Painting who appreciated a wide range of things. At one point I was trying to understand where he located his work, and he said he felt

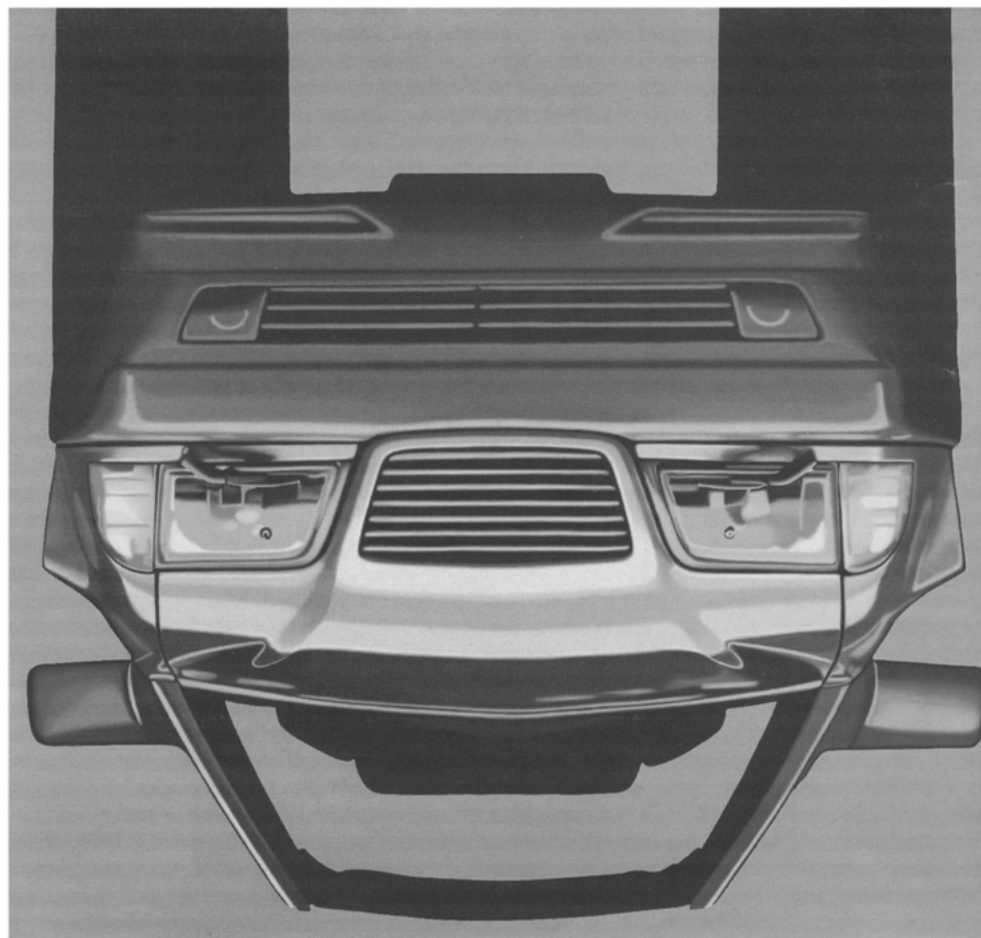
very close to Robert Ryman. I've remembered that, partly because it confirmed my sense of his work as a variant of abstraction, but also because I loved the perversity of Peter surrounded by his mutant automobiles, claiming that affinity.

The "isms" his work seemed connected to weren't ultimately that useful, but weren't completely irrelevant either. The work certainly wasn't Photorealism, although his method owed something to those artists and his source material was always photographic. It was too deadpan to be surrealism or dada, but there was a biomechanical quality reminiscent of aspects of Picabia and Duchamp. The connection to Ryman and Mangold was strong, but the car subjects

drastically subverted any such reading. When I understood how deliberately he worked and how formally intuitive his decisions were, I thought of Myron Stout's hermeticism and micromanagement, but joined to something garish and vulgar, much closer to an artist like James Rosenquist.

Surprising connections and subverted readings: Peter's paintings have an absolute specificity. Once I got it, I never thought of his work in terms of style. The entire surface is made—you can feel stiff oil paint being spread with brushes at every point. All the painterly decisions are labored over, and you can see it in the surface of the object.

It's too limiting to think of Peter as "the car





Superficially Peter's paintings resemble nothing so much as billboards of car advertisements, but devoid of their sunniness or idiotic libido. Everything is turned inward, toward thought and myth. They feel like "good design" run amok, with no human component. The cars balance on one wheel, they have no room for passengers, they hang upside down or race vertically up the edge of a painting. The fields around the cars define a place simultaneously cramped and streamlined, filled with a bright, ubiquitous light that seems to emanate from the cars themselves.

Through 1995 Peter's focus on the cars was almost complete, but there seemed to be action at the fuzzy edges of the project. Drawings appeared that were less labor-intensive, concerned with defining the images using a blunt, wobbly line. There was a group of small grisaille paintings of cars based more directly on straight photographs,

which seemed to be a bit too close in feeling to Gerhard Richter's Baader-Meinhof series. Now they can be seen as a transition, all grist for some future mill. At some point, the edges must have started to feel more like the middle to him. Less than a week after he died a poster arrived announcing an exhibition of his recent work. It showed a painting unlike anything he had made before. Clearly when he died he'd been having a growth spurt.

Peter made three paintings and numerous drawings based on the same three images of his boyfriend Sean lying on the beach. They all show him from the side, close to his head, viewed from the level of the sand. The one on the poster has him lifting his head and looking out, at what? The waves, a fly on his foot, someone's head in his lap? He has an urban-primitive haircut, long tail hanging from his head, goatee on his chin. The moles on his neck and shoulders are rendered with great care. The other

images have Sean inverted. In one his face is abruptly cropped. In the other he's laughing, but it's hard to tell because he's hanging vertically down like a slab of beef. The same formal considerations, fused with that careful, imploding paint that Peter had applied to the car subjects, had been brought into the most intimate realm. The process is subtly opened up—you feel a bit more direction in the surface, and the edges of objects have an ambiguous glare, like those of a cutout. Peter was finding a way to create an entirely new formal vocabulary for himself by painting hair, and profiles, and trees. It's hard for me to get the goatee out of my mind, painted like a nest of little worms growing from Sean's chin. These works have an almost domineering presence infused with a disconcertingly gentle, pillow-talk type of content. I can imagine artists as irreconcilable as Alan Turner and Georg Baselitz occupying some virtual chat room in Peter's mind while he made these things.

Something else was on his mind as well, leading to something perhaps riskier and not as immediately easy to see, a path into a more sociological space. When he died he had also finished four of a group of "landscape" paintings, and was at work on two more, based on his photographs of the facades and parking lots of gas stations and convenience stores. At first glance they play right into the hands of those who never stopped seeing him as a Photorealist, but then his "alterations" and "improvements" begin to creep forward. Chain stores are stripped of their logos; colors are changed, the type on signs is eliminated; things become more abstract and simultaneously yield up more of their essence, full of potential motion, waiting for something to happen. These environments, shaped for automobiles and people, are drained of both. The slightly loosened handling and hard, cold edges of the paintings of Sean are here too, giving the scenes a loopy sort of calm. Their flat, lonely narratives bring to mind Edward Hopper's canvases, but emptied of people and turned into something nearly amusing. That Peter was willing to let his work take him so near to Hopper and certain of the Photorealists bespeaks his confidence. These are courageous paintings.

With Peter's death, I've never felt so aware of art history's contingency on the actual. We don't count what people think about or what they might have done, only what they do. The developments at the end, the opening up onto new trains of thought, leaves one feeling deprived of all the potential growth. Peter's contribution stands as it is; I hope younger artists will know his work, and use it. □

painter," but for most of his working life that's what he was. While I would have been happy to continue seeing him as a rogue post-Minimalist, as he began to exhibit more, I realized you couldn't deal seriously with his work without thinking about cars. A hundred years ago there were no cars on earth, and now look around. Who was consulted about this? Who voted? If you spend time driving, you get whiffs of Peter's paintings constantly—the anonymous character in your rear-view mirror, or the one you're tailgating. Thinking about his work, I remembered how cars functioned in my childhood imagination. First the realization that a car's front or rear could be a face, and that those sailing along the highway could be huge heads on wheels or aliens. Later there was an obsession with brands: going for family drives and pointing out Chevrolets, Fords, whatever, excited about being able to tell the difference. Peter's work conflated these levels of thought into one demonic, unconsumable presence.

February 25, 1997 VILLAGE VOICE

# Hail and Farewell

**N**ew York art-worldlings ploughing through our daily curse of not-invariably-100 per cent-useless art mail last month unfolded copies of a modestly sized poster and instantly reacted in ways that caused anyone who was in the room with us to stare quizzically. My wife heard me laugh from sheer startlement. Then she saw the poster and was wowed, too. Many exhibition announcements are intended to do this, and maybe two or three a decade do it: go off in one's hands like letter bombs of unique, original beauty. It was—and is and will be, as already a classic—the painter Peter Cain's announcement for his present, posthumous show.

The lovely surprise of this show, by far Cain's best, renders very hard to bear the sadness of his death on January 5 of a cerebral hemorrhage (reportedly out of the blue, the sneak attack of a previously unsuspected congenital condition). He was 37 years old. Not knowing him personally, I had assumed he was younger, because he began exhibiting only a few years ago—with a bang. He appeared in the last two Whitney Biennials and won a nearly cultish following with his surreal paintings of car parts congealed into hybrid car-things against suave abstract grounds.

Like some other people I know, I had trouble with Cain's car pictures while being enchanted by the promise of his painterly gifts and obvious ambition. Now we see the beginning of the promise's fulfillment in the same instant as its end: an exceptional talent nipped in midblossoming, just short of full bloom. Even more than usual in an era almost accustomed to untimely losses, the unfairness of it infuriates. It makes for a singularly awkward occasion of celebration and mourning, hail and farewell.

The great poster reproduces a large painting of a young man's head and shoulders in three-quarters, monumentalizing close-up from behind. The young man, Cain's companion Sean Leclair, lies on his back on a blanket at a beach. The brown hair of Sean's raised head dangles in a blond-streaked ponytail. His freckled, orangish-pink skin—an incredible color, virtually tasted and smelled as much as seen—conveys incipient sunburn. There is a tangled, adorable goatee. Under a tremulously pale, hazed sky, a sliver at the horizon of dark green foliage subtly communicates, by being "out of focus," the picture's source in a photograph.

Peter Cain  
Matthew Marks Gallery  
523 West 24th Street  
Through March 15

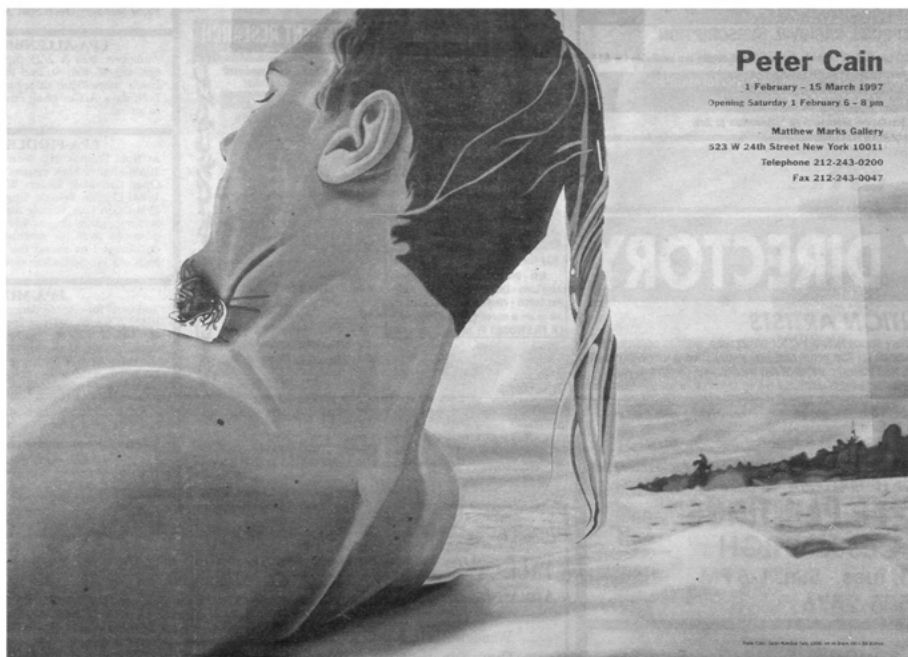
BY PETER  
SCHJELDAHL

I am riveted by that foliage, which calls strongly to mind the "blurred" Photorealist landscape paintings of Gerhard Richter. ("Out of focus" and "blurred" go in quotes, because what does it mean to ascribe photographic

prayerful concentrations of a brush directed from the heart. What joy to see it connect with flesh and blood! By his Mercedes fenders and other automotive quiddities, Cain surely always meant what he came to express with the freckles, goatee, and other calling cards of Sean-ness. Except in the painting that is reproduced on the poster, Cain's Sean pictures hadn't yet dispensed with his previous compulsion—which strikes

of pure color. A shocking sparseness results. I think I never realized before how very little there is to commercial strips in the way of physical substance, so peremptory is their glut of language. Take away the verbiage, and an odd and flimsy pop-up world looms.

It is a world that in geometry, color, and frontality is practically an idea of painting in itself. All a painter need do is remove depth, and the subject



Capturing intimate nuances of contemporary Eros on a public scale: the announcement poster for Peter Cain's show

flaws to a painted image?) Meanwhile, the laconic modeling and crisp contours of the figure have a cutout air sharply reminiscent of Alex Katz. This blending of Richter-esque, epistemological mystery and Katzian, positivist elegance feels impossible, like a circle squared. But there it is. I feel present at the creation of a new high style able intelligently to capture intimate nuances of contemporary Eros on a public scale.

With this and other Sean images, Cain solved at a stroke the problem I had with his distorted cars: eroticism sublimated to a fault in techno-fetishistic icons. (The tone of the cars somewhat recalled Sacher-Masochian notions by Richard Lindner—and does anyone remember another once popular Germanic mooner over sexy mechanisms, Konrad Klapheck?) I believe that Cain loved cars. I sort of do, too. But there was something depressing about the investment of so much sensitive passion in mere machines as love substitutes. I sensed that Cain had more to offer than a peculiar flavor of racy perversity.

He had love to offer, in a word: the

me as a very American syndrome of insecurity—to employ arch formal gimmicks, such as orienting an image sideways or upside down. But plainly he was getting over it.

As further heartening and thus frustrating evidence, there are several streetscapes in the show: rather plain but excitingly suggestive views of gas stations, a convenience store, and some sort of showroom, all from photographs taken in Los Angeles. I get from these modest pictures the inception of a decidedly immodest project to take on the visible world with a fully considered and responsive, smart brand of Realism. Stay with these paintings, which grow stranger and stronger the longer they are contemplated.

What does it mean today to gaze out a car window at a passing suburban commercial strip and to believe that one sees what's there? Cain hints, profoundly, that the looking should be a negative exercise, a disciplined determination first and last *not to read*. Surveying jungles of signage, Cain blanked out the signs, rendering them as shapes

arrays itself on the picture plane with the alacrity of a puppy jumping into a lap. Observe the enthusiastic roughness, the tough love, with which Cain handled the vision: vigorous brushwork, spanking shapes, yelping colors. The L.A. topics point up how New York-ish a painter he was. A Southern Californian would never allow the tonal jumps and bold textures with which Cain made these pictures proclaim the self-conscious, sweaty, rejoicing work of painting.

The current level of art in our town was about to rise markedly, on account of Cain. That much is clear, though little else is. The emerging style of Cain's maturation is too preliminary, which is how it will remain. Not since Moira Dryer's death at age 34 in 1992 has contemporary painting suffered more hurtful a loss. But there is this one thing to be said for pain: only the living feel it. It is a proof of life. To miss something is an act of imagination by which one aspires to be worthy of what is missed. While we live, we may show that Cain's goodness was not wasted on us. ♦



THE NEW YORK TIMES, FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 14, 1997

## A New Surge of Growth, Just as Death Cut It Off

By ROBERTA SMITH

When Peter Cain died of a cerebral hemorrhage last month, he was 37 and in the middle of a great leap forward in his chosen field, which was painting. He gained visibility in the late 1980's as a "car painter," a maker of cool yet oddly visceral, if not sexual, images of disturbingly truncated Mercedeses and other cars.

Depicted floating above the horizon, minus their passenger compartments and all but one wheel, these hovering bull's-eye forms were caught simultaneously in suspension and rapid motion. They were embryonic, which is to say vulnerable and also sinister, and beautifully painted.

Stylistic hybrids, they related at once to Photo Realism and to abstract art, including the encyclopedic reliefs and refined drawings of Lee Bontecou. And they were among the early warning signs of a generation of younger realist painters that includes Elizabeth Peyton, John Currin, Richard Phillips, Karen Kilimnik, Lisa Yuskavage and Peter Doig.

The paintings Mr. Cain completed in the year before his death were intended for his fourth solo show in New York, which has now opened on schedule, at the Matthew Marks Gallery in Chelsea. It is a beautiful, unavoidably sad affair, as well as an inspirational testament to art-making as a growth process. These new, last Cain works show the artist shedding the "car painter" label, expanding his subject matter and the content of his art while also applying the weirdness of the car images to larger chunks of the world.

Three of the paintings are large-scale images of the head and shoulders of a man named Sean, shown in close-up profile as he lies on a white towel on the beach. He is seen intimately, from the viewpoint of someone on the adjacent towel. Either his neck arches back or his head cranes forward in an animated tension that suggests laughter, pain or perhaps orgasm.

The remaining four paintings are urban landscapes, images of generic American gas stations whose pavements are devoid of cars and whose various signs have been rendered blank, devoid of lettering, numbers or logos.



Matthew Marks Gallery

"Sean No. 1," an oil on linen by Peter Cain, at Matthew Marks.

Both series fine-tune the hallucinatory power of the car paintings so that they are more about painting than objects, and each does this by a slightly different balance of abstraction and realism. The giant heads are cropped by the canvas edges with an abruptness similar to the cars' truncations. Two of the images are also tilted on end or inverted, an approach that recalls Georg Baselitz, while the blurry painting style brings Gerhard Richter a little to mind.

These gravity-defying shifts further break the image down into big abstract areas: the shadowed pink of flesh dotted with brown moles, the gray of sky, the tan of beach. Details assume a life of their own: the tumbleweed stiffness of Sean's goatee growing vertically out of his jutting chin, the cablelike strands of hair and, in two paintings, the rather strikingly voluptuous treatment of distant trees, small swirling patches of green that can recall Munch.

These little patches of far-off, far-off green make one think about the

kind of painting Mr. Cain might have moved on to had he lived longer. Some of them contained exuberance is also present in the gas station images. In these classically American scenes, descended from Ed Ruscha, the blank little signs function as bright monochrome paintings within paintings.

In "Mobil," a solid red circle, provisionally part of a gas pump, occupies the exact center of the canvas, like the heart of a Kenneth Noland target. At the same time, the reflections in various plate glass windows here and in "Glendale Boulevard" are occasions for the carefully contained gesturalism of the trees.

Mr. Cain was clearly interested in slowing and breaking down the act of painting, and therefore of looking, creating a kind of visual silence in which the viewer would be forced to consider the nature of perception, both inside and outside art, in addition to the meaning of the image. He did this by making seemingly whole images constituted of incongruous parts. His new paintings fit together a little like puzzles whose parts are a series of autonomous pleasure points in different scales and degrees of focus, their varying textures and colors occupying shifting locations on the sliding scale between abstraction and representation.

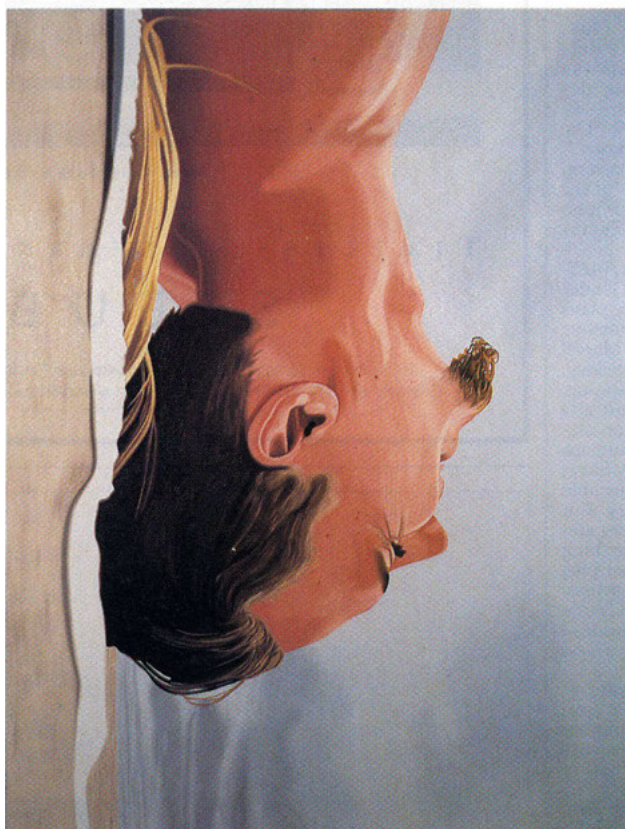
Mr. Cain's last paintings represent a tremendous effort to develop, to bear down on, examine and evaluate the elements of his art with the kind of disinterested yet passionate intent that can make some artists their own best critics. In the last year or so he had dismantled and reconstituted his approach to painting. He was in the process of taking it from there, and he was off to a great start.

Peter Cain's new paintings are at the Matthew Marks Gallery, 522 West 24th Street, Chelsea, through March 15.

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

523 West 24th Street, New York, New York 10011 Tel: 212-243-0200 Fax: 212-243-0047

## THE NEW YORKER



*"Sean Number Three" (1996), by Peter Cain (Marks).*

### GALLERIES—CHELSEA

**PETER CAIN** (1959-97)—Three large paintings of a man's head, sunburned, apparently from lying on the beach on one of those cloudy days we have all been warned about, and six smaller Los Angeles industryscapes. The artist's flat poster palette elicits the familiar ache of home videos played on mute; as in his earlier portraits of radically truncated cars, there is a feeling that something is missing, and it's both comical and unsettling. The show includes the last completed works of the artist, who died last month. Through March 15. (Marks, 523 W. 24th St. 243-0200.)

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

523 West 24th Street, New York, New York 10011 Tel: 212-243-0200 Fax: 212-243-0047

# NEW YORK



**Talent** In the last two years of his life, **Peter Cain**, who died last month at age 37, broke away from his signature car imagery and began painting portraits and landscapes of industrial Los Angeles. These canvases, like his earlier ones, display Cain's talent for extracting iconic possibilities from ordinary subjects. At Matthew Marks Gallery, 523 West 24th Street; through March 15.

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# The New York Times

## **Peter Cain**

*Matthew Marks Gallery  
1018 Madison Avenue (at 78th  
Street)  
Through April 25*

Peter Cain loves cars. His paintings of them are big and glossy, but curiously flat. It's a billboard style, like that of James Rosenquist, but Mr. Cain focuses on one motif per canvas instead of piling up seemingly unrelated images as Mr. Rosenquist does. Mr. Cain's preferred motif is a car's rear end, from the back wheel to the bumpers and brake lights. Seen from the back or from the side, flat on the ground or poking into the air, the car's posterior assumes almost iconic status.

Mr. Cain's show includes two photographs: a door in a steel locker and what seems to be a tiny section of a car seat, with a rounded black button floating in an expanse of perforated black vinyl. In both cases, the true subject of the picture seems to be the gleam of light washing across the glossy surfaces. There are also several big line drawings done in thick black pencil: some cars, and three views of the head of a man lying on a beach, rotated so that he's successively prone, perpendicular and upside down. The decisive line, the absence of shading and the microscopic wavering of the pencil point make these drawings more seductive than anything else in the show.

PEPE KARMEL

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

523 West 24th Street, New York, New York 10011 Tel: 212-243-0200 Fax: 212-243-0047

# THE NEW YORKER



## *Auto Exotic*

**I**N Peter Cain's paintings (Marks, 1018 Madison Avenue, at 79th Street; through January 28), automobiles like the Mercedes 500SL and the Bugatti EP 110 appear as de-luxe mutants. The original showroom images of the cars have been sliced up on Cain's drawing board and reassembled in such a way as to suggest a faintly sinister, if timely, reversal of the process by which limos are "stretched." These disconcerting contractions were then projected onto canvas, rendered in oil (with some taped edges), and set against sleek, painterly grounds that would very likely get an A from Clement Greenberg.

In one outstanding work, the largest in the show, a blue bumper hits the road upside down, in a highway landscape of refracted planes in fruity pinks and peaches that evoke Poons, Noland, and the whole mandarin color-field gang of the nineteen-sixties. In addition to these ties, there are strong echoes—in Cain's high-resolution technique and in his very subject—of that abstract movement's contemporaneous flip side, hyperrealism. Likewise, the artist's relation to Pop is not at all a subtle one; his debt to Rosenquist in particular is apparent throughout.

Less obvious, perhaps, is what Cain makes of his customized auto bodies. His galleryful of seductive crippled vehicles, in fact, find their exact counterparts in Alan Turner's lyrically painted mutations of flesh and faces. Cain's cars are likely to rack up a lot of mileage in the new year.

**NOTES ON A PAINTING**

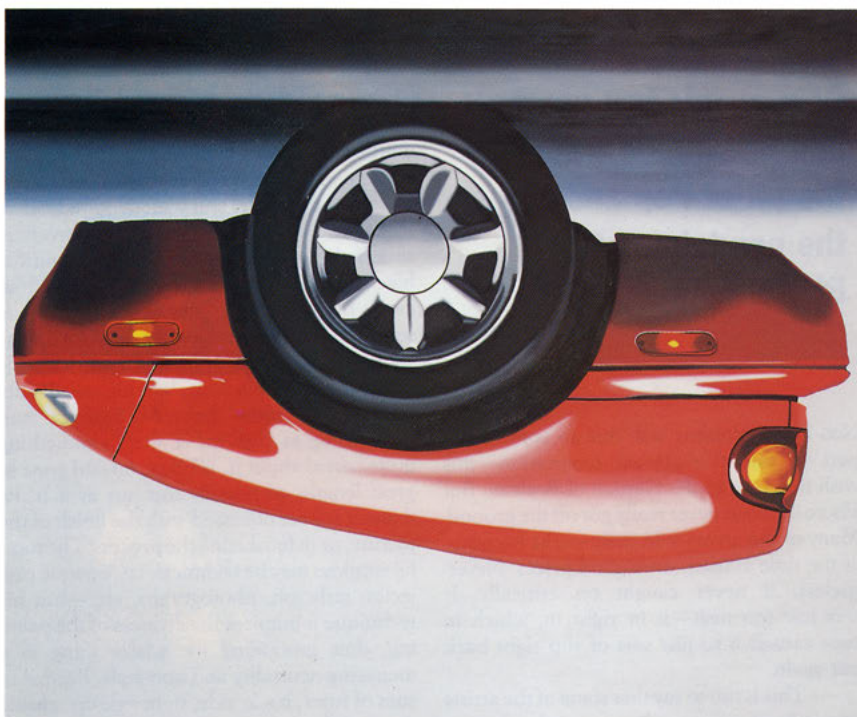
Jerry Saltz

# Wild Thing

Peter Cain's *Untitled*

Peter Cain makes paintings of cars that are not cars but which convey the essence of "car-ness" (whatever that may be). His paintings operate in an area bordered by Photo-Realism, Minimalism, Pop Art, and Surrealism. With incredible realistic precision Cain presents the car as either a sleek abstract form or a strangely truncated, disturbingly amputated "thing." In *Untitled*, he turns something that is known and familiar into something weird and unfamiliar—painting a kind of visual oxymoron, he creates something that is perfectly imperfect.

Cain is tantalizingly difficult to classify. Going against the prevailing winds of taste, he is decidedly *un*-Neo-Geo and *non*-Simulationist (though in some ways he does relate to Ashley Bickerton), nor is he a tasteful painter of Neo-Nostalgia. Cain is a strange, unorthodox, and odd young artist. Employing techniques more in keeping with industrial and graphic design than fine art, Cain's paintings have non-surfaces of carefully blended and rendered painted areas that are both obviously handmade and airbrushed or otherwise mechanically applied. Half perfect and focused, half blurred and confusing—Cain's paintings create highly disjunctive, border-to-border, edge-to-edge effects. The centrally pierced, off-kilter, imperfect paintings of James Rosenquist come to mind. Rosenquist painted food, body parts, and household items—but he also painted cars and car parts, though almost always life- or larger-than-life-sized. The connection between the work of these two painters lies in the mysterious irrationality and inconsistencies in common things both bring out. Cain, however, is never as abrupt or jarring as Rosenquist—preferring simple, less visible solutions.



Peter Cain, *Untitled*, 1989, Oil on canvas, 58" × 70". Courtesy Pat Hearn Gallery.

The skeleton key to understanding Cain may be the paradoxical moving target Gerhard Richter. Richter peripatetically throws his audience off balance with visual curveball after psychological screwball. Cain attempts to negotiate the same aberrant gap between what is real and not real, painting and photograph, photograph of a painting, and painting of a photograph.

Cain paints in a way that, if not executed just right, will slip off into one of two surrounding styles and be critically sucked up and immediately neutralized—banished to some nether world of bad art, an eternity of suburban artfairs and Greenwich Village sidewalk shows. Cain seems to have a built-in early warning system, because in *Untitled* he avoids these two nearby and hazardous traps: the pit of Pop, on the one hand, and the pen-

dulum of Photo-Realism on the other. While the styles and names of the Pop artists are not only remembered and all but canonized, the names of the Photo-Realists have all but been forgotten. (With the exception of Chuck Close—who never really fit the label, what with his ways of converting marks into images, his gargantuan scale, and his defiant techniques.)

Photo-Realism was a kind of phantom or dream movement of the '70s. In a decade permeated with pluralism and art that was resistant to dealers and collectors alike, Photo-Realism came along—almost prepackaged, ready to be bought up by hungry collectors. A return to any kind of Realism is never really far off—because the desire for a recognizable image is never far off. It could be argued, in fact, that the headlong rush to

## Cain avoids two nearby and hazardous traps; the pit of Pop and the pendulum of Photo-Realism.

Neo-Expressionism was due in some small part to this ever-present temptation—this wish to return to the Garden of Realism. But Photo-Realism never really got off the ground. Many of the artists sold their works for what, at the time at least, were good prices. Nevertheless, it never caught on critically. It was just too neat—it fit right in, which in turn caused it to just sort of slip right back out again.

This is not to say that some of the artists were not of interest—it was just hard to remember who did what. I can remember Robert Cottingham, Tom Blackwell, Robert Bechtle, Don Eddy, Richard Estes, Audrey Flack, and Ralph Goings—only which one did parts of new cars and who did old trucks, diners, and dying towns? Who did old cars and who did still lifes of gumball machines? Who did New York Streets and store windows and who just did oldish neon signs? And didn't one of them just do women's underpants? Like many of the mini-movements of the '70s, Photo-Realism came and went—a dinosaur the day it was born.

Peter Cain's *Untitled* is more uncanny, inexplicable, and multifarious than anything that came out of Photo-Realism. In a hybrid image so farfetched and outlandish that it begins to appear normal, Cain paints a "thing" that is simultaneously coherent and incoherent, whole and fragmented, ordered and deranged. A mutant "thing" unprecedented and yet so everyday that it is instantly recognizable.

*Untitled* is an image not so much of a car as of a car run amok. Looking for all the world like a living film-splice of a car, Cain has joined the front and rear ends (side view) of some late-model shiny metallic-red car to make one attenuated, eccentric, inverted, smashed-together form. A big, beautiful, black radial tire with a gun-metal gray hub cap is placed in the center of this form—like some black and silver eye of a cyclops. The whole thing hangs or is suspended upside down from a blacktop-looking road substance—like some bat. As realistic and painstaking as *Untitled* is, there's something quite casual about it. While Cain had gone to great lengths to portray this just as it is, he doesn't appear obsessed with the finish of the picture, or in fetishizing the process. The tools he employs may be technical, i.e., opaque projector, airbrush, photographs, etc.—but his technique minimizes the artiness of the painting, thus grounding the whole thing in a menacing neutrality and non-style. Formal issues of front, back, side, right side up, upside down, left, right, top, and bottom are addressed not only in the splicing together of all these pictorial elements and their composition—but in the peculiar, if bizarre, anthropomorphic quality of this shape turned "thing," as well.

Nothing is more commonplace than pictures of cars. The car is seen as a sexy, sleek, beautiful thing—a thing that gives pleasure and takes you to faraway places. Cars, along with war scenes and buildings, are the early drawings of many little boys. So the car is a primary channeling-reflecting device and an early image around which roughly half the culture "acts out"—drawing, manipulating, and converting the car into images of pre-adolescent desire. Cain has taken this "ordinary" thing and refashioned it into something vested with longing and awareness.

In *Untitled* he has brought out something not only sinister but provocative and even seductive. There is a phallic-tantric quality to the painting. A two-headed phallus with an eye, or an opening at each end is suggested

—with the tire doubling as a giant scrotum. Or A stump, a vacuum cleaner or prosthetic device, a cartoon character or Robo-cop, a wheelbarrow from Hell, an R-2 D-2 robot that runs on the ceiling and might just start spinning around at any moment—or an athletic supporter for a warrior from another dimension. Cain has created a painting that seems to defy and overturn simple natural laws like gravity, symmetry, and motion. *Untitled* cleverly questions the nature of intelligence by presenting the image of a "thing" that is unknowable and unclassifiable in a painting that is like a filmstrip of a painting all collapsed and run together into a single dense frame. Misrepresented to a tee, an exoskele-

### A mutant "thing" unprecedented and yet so everyday that it is instantly recognizable.

ton of mysterious origin, *Untitled* creates a kind of gravity and orbit for itself, dictating its own set of rules and laws. Organic, yet neither flora nor fauna; a protoplasmic force caught between vitality and extinction—a killer/butcher/heat-seeking/lover/observer—*Untitled* is a strange amalgam of a painting.

Its almost as if John Chamberlain, who took cars and car parts and crushed them into blocks of abstract sculpture, and Lee Bontecou, with her centric, symmetrical, ocular floating works, had to make art together and retain the image of the car. If these two artists were combined and had added the fur-lined tea cup of Meret Oppenheim, the spirits of Richter and Rosenquist, a dash of Surrealism and a pinch of evil—they might make Peter Cain's *Untitled*. □

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*Jerry Saltz has edited several books on contemporary art. His column, which concentrates on a single work, appears regularly in Arts.*