

CRITIC'S PICK

# The Wild, Anti-Authoritarian Art of Peter Saul

The painter's biting critiques shape his five-decade retrospective at the New Museum.



In "Peter Saul: Crime and Punishment," the artist uses offensiveness as a form of resistance in paintings portraying Ronald Reagan (top right), Donald Trump (bottom right) and even George Washington.



By Holland Cotter

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Politically, 2020 has been, so far, a gonzo variety show of executive howlers and hissy fits; prayer breakfasts and Iowa pratfalls; split "victories" and revenge firings. The weirdness overload has almost seemed staged to distract from other American realities: migrant detention centers, corporate land grabs, climate catastrophe and the cruelties of poverty and racism. All of which makes the arrival at the New Museum of "Peter Saul: Crime and Punishment," a critically acidic dirty bomb of a show, well-timed.

The 61 works in this exhibition, installed on the museum's third and fourth floors, span the career of an American painter whose art has, for more than half a century, both diagnosed national maladies and been shaped by them. The result is work that's virtuosically bizarre in style (Tiepolo meets Mad magazine) and ecumenically offensive in content. Whatever your ethnic, sexual or political persuasion, there is something here to give you ethical pause, to bring out an inner censor you didn't know was there.

Born in San Francisco in 1934, Mr. Saul had, by his own account, a materially privileged but punishing childhood, first as the offspring of hyper-censorious parents, then as a student at a boarding school where physical beatings were not considered abuse. In both environments, making art offered an area of psychological safety and freedom, a place from which he could look out at the world, including, later, the art world, with a critical combination of fear, fascination and scorn.

After studying painting in college he moved to Europe for several years. There he began as an abstract painter but soon, influenced by Surrealism, began to introduce images from the comic books and magazine ads that had been his primary visual resources as a kid. Some of the earliest paintings in the New Museum show include figures of Mickey Mouse and Superman; others refer to the American consumerism he'd left behind. "Ice Box Number 1" (1960) is a still life interior of an open refrigerator crammed with slabs of meats, brand-name canned goods and detached penises.



Peter Saul, "Ice Box Number 1" (1960). Peter Saul/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

That year, in Paris, he met the New York dealer Allan Frumkin, who gave him his first American solo two years later ("Ice Box Number 1" was in it) and represented him until 1997. And by the time Mr. Saul returned from Europe to California in 1964, he was clear on what he wanted, and didn't want, from art.

He didn't want the pretensions — the ego, the angst — left over from Abstract Expressionism. And he didn't want the social trappings associated with a mainstream career. (He has referred to himself as being "fairly communistic" at the time.) What he did want was to be able to paint what he pleased and to have his work noticed. And one way to get people looking was to take subjects from a source they cared about: the news.

Back home, he found that anger over the Vietnam War, which he shared, had reached high boil. And the paintings he made in response to it — seven are in one gallery on the third floor — are among the most powerful antiwar works of that era. He had, by then, traded in rough-and-ready brushwork and modulated colors for graphic crispness and a high-keyed palette. His once-loose compositions had become airtight linear tangles. Tubular figures twist and stretch in a cartoon version of Mannerist serpentinata. The formal elegance momentarily stops you, holds your eye. A beat later, content starts to come through.

It's strong stuff. The monumental 1967 painting "Saigon" is a phantasmagoria of erotic violence so complex you almost can't, at first, decipher it. A label painted in faux-Chinese characters clues you in: "White boys torturing and raping the people of Saigon." Indeed that's exactly what the scene portrays, a nightmare that is American policy in action.



Peter Saul, "Saigon" (1967), a critique of America's role in the Vietnam War and phantasmagoria of erotic violence. Peter Saul/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Whitney Museum of American Art/Licensed by Scala; Art Resource, NY



In "Pinkville" (1970), a year after the My Lai massacre, the artist takes on a risky role: critic and caricaturist. Peter Saul/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Winnie Au for The New York Times



Peter Saul, "Subway I," 1979. Peter Saul/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; via Hall Art Foundation

In the 1970 painting "Pinkville," the last of the Vietnam series, violence is the subject again, but the actions are clearer. The picture was done a year after the story of the slaughter at My Lai — Pinkville was a military nickname for the village — was made public. Mr. Saul reduces the American troops to a single giant multilimbed G.I. who shoots three bound nude women while sexually assaulting a fourth.

Much of the impact of both pictures lies in the fact that the women depicted, with their bright yellow skin and slanted eyes, conform to Western stereotypes of Asians. The setting they're in may be self-consciously critical. (Mr. Saul said in a 1967 interview that he intended his Vietnam paintings to be seen as "treasonable.") But the figures remain racial and misogynistic caricatures. The artist is playing a risky role here, that of double agent. He's giving us his own condemnatory view of the war, but also the view of Americans who saw it through the filter of racism and supported it.

He uses the same strategy, less securely, in two paintings of the American political activist and professor Angela Davis. Both date from the early 1970s, when Ms. Davis, having been convicted of conspiracy to murder in the Marin County Civic Center case — where four people died, including a judge — spent more than a year in prison. (In 1972 she was acquitted of the charges and released.) In both pictures — one is titled "The Crucifixion of Angela Davis" — she is shown as a victim: nude, prone, helpless under assault. The idea of injustice is conveyed, but in a sexualized image that, with its overtones of sadism, reads uncomfortably in the #MeToo present.



View of "Peter Saul: Crime and Punishment," an exuberant free-for-all full of anti-authoritarian chutzpah. Peter Saul/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Winnie Au for The New York Times

Time and history change art. Identity politics of the past several decades have changed the ways “racial” images are received. In particular, the question of who owns identity — who has a right to depict whom, and how — has sharpened in the past few years. Mr. Saul’s Angela Davis need to be revisited in this light, as does his mural-size 1979 “Subway I,” with its image of mixed-race mayhem. In that case, at least, stereotyping is an equal opportunities affair. Everybody takes a hit.

The show’s second half, on the museum’s 4th floor, is an exuberant free-for-all: 30 paintings hung in two rows, salon-style, in one big room. They range in date from 1973 (“Custer’s Last Stand #1”) to 2017 (“Donald Trump in Florida”). There are remakes of historical classics like Emmanuel Leutze’s 1851 “Washington Crosses the Delaware,” and several presidential portraits, all of Republican sitters.

If Ronald Reagan is clearly the POTUS Mr. Saul most loves to hate, his image of a smiley George W. Bush tormenting an Abu Ghraib inmate is the most effective takedown. Three separate likenesses of Donald Trump are bland, soft, but perhaps understandably so. Mr. Trump may be all but unsendupable.



Peter Saul, "Self" (1987). Peter Saul/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; via George Adams Gallery

And the show — organized by Massimiliano Gioni, the New Museum’s artistic director, and Gary Carrion-Murayari — has a few self-portraits. (I wish there were more; they’re so good.) In one from 1987 Mr. Saul, looking like an addled Baby Yoda, has undergone a craniotomy which has left his brain exposed, letting us see its contents. These include, half-embedded in goopy tissue, a crushed beer can and a giant lighted cigarette. The can carries a label reading “Esteem.” A label tied to a gnarly hand clutching the cigarette reads “Abuse.”

The self-portraits, many of them a lot freakier than this one, hint at what so many young artists over the decades have loved about Mr. Saul: his pictorial inventiveness; his persistence (at 85, he’s still hard at work); and his anti-authoritarian chutzpah. Through a long career he has used offensiveness as a form of resistance — political, personal — and just by doing so given everyone permission to do the same.

You won’t hear him acknowledge that though. More and more, in interviews in recent years, he has taken to insisting that all he’s ever really been interested in was opportunistically grabbing attention by being outrageous. Saying this may be his way of slipping out of the categorizing grip of art history, preventing it from getting a handle on him. Anyway, I don’t believe him. His art is the work of a brilliant showman who is also a canny ethicist, one who knows about the damage power can do and who, tossing incendiary matter around as he goes, refuses to let it have its way. That’s the artist his admirers should pay very close attention to, especially today.