

Peter Saul "Art can't do Anything for Politics"

Interview by Annabelle Ténèze

For the first museum retrospective in France since 1999 of the American painter Peter Saul (b. in 1934, San Francisco), Les Abattoirs Frac Occitanie of Toulouse have brought together eighty works, some of which never seen before.

For *L'Officiel Art*, the artist spoke with the director of the institution, Annabelle Ténèze.

"PETER SAUL: POP, FUNK, BAD PAINTING AND MORE,"
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FEATURES



Peter Saul, *Rights of the Individuals*, 1989; black and white lithography; 70.7 x 55.6 cm; coll. Centre national des arts plastiques.
© the artist and CNAAP.



Peter Saul, *Untitled*, 1962; oil on canvas; 120 x 140 cm. Courtesy: Michael Werner Gallery.

ANNABELLE TÈNÈZE: Your retrospective for Les Abattoirs in Toulouse opens in September. How does it feel to show your work in France after living there from 1959 to 1962? Many people don't know that your first works, which seem so "American", were actually created in Europe.

PETER SAUL: It feels just fine to show in France. To me Art Appreciation is an individual response, nothing to do with nationality. I do remember quite well sitting in the Dome café and trying to think of American imagery to put in my pictures, like Donald Duck and the electric chair and so on, after I figured out that that was going to be a big part of my art style. That would be later, in 1958.

Despite having always refused to be in the "norm", you travelled to the Netherlands, France and Italy in the footsteps of the great European painters. By reviving the "Grand Tour", what were you looking for: inspiration, escape, or both?

I was definitely looking for escape. My knowledge of art history was minimal; I certainly did not know of any grand tour. I wanted to live in a romantic and beautiful city without bothering to know

anybody or speak the language (beyond the essential 200 words so that I could order food, etc.)

While in Paris, you said that you didn't know anyone, even though you exhibited at the Salon de la Jeune Peinture or at the Galerie Denise Breteau. How did you end up exhibiting in these venues? You also showed with Allan Frumkin in the US. How did you deal with having one foot in Europe and one in the US?

I found out that anyone could enter a picture at the Salon de la Jeune Peinture by simply presenting the picture at a specific door at the Musée d'art moderne, at a certain moment, and it would be considered by some kind of jury. So I did and my picture was accepted. This led to my first sale to Gérard Philipe, who was part of the French Communist party. A friend from art school in St. Louis, Missouri, James Bishop, was standing looking at the pictures and Madame Breteau asked him what was new, so he mentioned me: the American kid who painted iceboxes, etc. She drove out to see me the next day, at Bures-sur-Yvette, where I was living. I met Frumkin, the American art dealer, at the same time—I think through Matta.

Press Reviews

Annabelle Ténèze 'Peter Saul: Art can't do Anything for Politics', L'officiel Art, July-September 2019

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L'OFFICIEL ART



Peter Saul, *Criminal Being Executed n° 2*, 1964; oil on canvas; 171.5 x 151.5 x 4 cm; collection Frac Pays de la Loire.
Photo: Bernard Renoux. © the artist.



Peter Saul, *Abstract Expressionist Portrait of Donald Trump*, 2018; acrylic on canvas; 198 x 213.5 cm; private collection.
Courtesy: Michael Werner Gallery. © the artist.

You are often associated with the Pop Art movement. Did you have contacts with the artists of this movement then?

I had no knowledge of the Pop artists in any country until about 6 weeks after the end of my first New York show, which was in March 1962, when I received in the mail from Frumkin an article from an art magazine describing Roy Lichtenstein, James Rosenquist, and Jim Dine. Probably *Art International*. Immediately I felt very uncomfortable because I had hoped it was my idea only to use this American subject matter, plus their pictures, in reproduction, seemed more different from the famous Abstract Expressionist art style than mine—meaning my pictures would be forgotten soon enough. I made the decision straight away not to get more realistic about this American type of subject, but to instead go for a richer, more psychological narrative in the picture.

In 1964, you decided to go back to the US, although you had said that you were gone for good. It must have been such a contrast to go from Europe to San Francisco. What was the atmosphere at the time?

Yes, it was a huge contrast with living in Europe. I could speak the language and got to know a few artists who turned out to be "funk": Wiley, Allen, Hudson and Geis come to mind. Plus, San Francisco was becoming fashionable and sexy by 1964. From the newspaper I discovered that the Vietnam war was being protested by students, and drugs (of which I had no prior

knowledge) were being used. Drugs seemed dangerous—the penalty for one marijuana cigarette was life in prison in Utah, plus I didn't want to alter my thinking, because I needed to think clearly, so I skipped drugs entirely. However, protest against the war made sense (the war did seem wrong), plus it made good fresh subject matter that I badly needed. So I started using both in my pictures. Even though I lived in a liberal community (I didn't meet a single person who approved of the war) I also didn't meet a single artist or viewer who thought my Vietnam pictures were of any interest—too "old fashioned" was the unanimous opinion, except for Frumkin who was very encouraging. This pleased me a lot because I wanted singularity, not a group to belong to, and I'm fortunate to need very little appreciation. It surprised me to be included in the *Funk show* in 1967, and my inclusion upset some of the artists. Some students at the colleges did find my pictures interesting though and I was invited to teach at several of them. It was a confusing situation that I thoroughly enjoyed.

You also tried sculpting in the late 1960s. Was it simply a game, or a more pronounced desire to change your medium?

I didn't want to change mediums but I had an idea for making brightly colored figurative sculptures, sort of like my pictures come to life. The big problem was that I wanted to work by myself and not have any "helpers" hanging around the studio. I'm very adverse to working with other people, I don't want to deal with them, period. So the only way I could make sculptures was out



Peter Saul, *Businessman n° 6*, 1963; oil on canvas; 160 x 189 x 3 cm;
collection MAC VAL – Musée d'art contemporain du Val-de-Marne. Photo: Jacques Faujour.

of Styrofoam, light enough to move around by myself, but very fragile, even though I covered them with fiberglass. A lot of work, sanding and painting with enamel. I only made six and the others all broke. I didn't worry about "classification".

Many of your works are quotations of historical paintings, upon which you imprint your blatant colors, deformations, and your usual insolence. Do they speak of an "ideal museum", or are these works an additional mockery of institutionalized art and "masterpieces"?

Actually, although it may look like mockery, my motivation was to make my pictures more popular with viewers by resembling Old Masters. I wanted it to be in my own style, easily recognizable as a "Peter Saul", but hopefully more likely to be appreciated because of its resemblance to some already-loved masterpiece. People pointed out to me that it was mockery and I thought, oh well, it doesn't really matter what the motivation was if the resulting picture is interesting to look at. So I simply continued.

I have been to many of your openings, and there are always so many young artists around you. How does it feel to have such a following?

If true, that there are many young artists appreciating my work, that's a huge lucky break for me. However, I'm not sure that it is true, and I'm not inclined to want to find out, because I think the less attention I pay to other people's opinions the better off I am.

Also, it doesn't seem fair that for as long as I've ignored or laughed at negative opinion, I should now take pleasure in the positive.

Your Donald Trump paintings have become viral, but you have always taken a stand on major social movements since the 1960s (the Vietnam War, racism, etc.). Do you think that painting can change the world?

Trump is a difficult subject, compared to previous idiots such as Johnson, Nixon, etc., because about 10,000 artists got to him before me and insulted him thoroughly on every level—sexual, financial, and so on. I'm lucky no one else thought to turn him into a crocodile or a "Wonder Woman". I simply never expected him to get to be president until suddenly he was! Anyway, by now it's part of my "art style" to paint big shots and presidents in this manner. I agree with Harold Rosenberg—politics can help art, but art can't do anything for politics; anyone whose opinion is influenced by a painting is nuts.

Are you comfortable with being called the "bad guy" of painting? Isn't it strange that in an era where almost anything can be shown on TV or social media, your work still triggers caution?

Again, I can only guess at an answer. Our society seems to want art to be beautiful, deep, true, respectable, intelligent. Hopefully, my work leans more towards humor, excitement, imagination. This is bad luck for me, but I'm enjoying life, so I don't care.