

ARTnews

From the Archives: Peter Saul's Twisted Allegories Strike a Chord, in 1969

BY *The Editors of ARTnews*, POSTED 06/02/17 3:13 PM



Peter Saul, *Saigon*, 1967, acrylic, oil, enamel, and ink on canvas.
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Peter Saul's chaotic paintings feature entangled figures rendered in toxic-looking shades of bubblegum pink, nuclear-waste green, and dandelion yellow. Ronald Reagan, Richard Nixon, and Josef Stalin are recurring characters in these violent works, and religious imagery and references to art history often feature. Initially grouped with the Pop movement in the 1960s, Saul continues to elude critics, although a major survey of the the artist's work at the Schirn Kunstballe in Frankfurt may change that. With Saul's first comprehensive survey in Europe in mind, reprinted below is a profile of the artist from the November 1969 issue of ARTnews. David Zack describes Saul's quaint lifestyle and unusual working methods. Pogo sticks are involved. —Alex Greenberger

"That's Saul, Folks"

By David Zack
November 1969

Funk-Art father-figure, Peter Saul paints his highly ambiguous social comedies in San Francisco and exhibits them successfully in Paris and New York

It's fun to visit Peter Saul. You leave San Francisco driving through broken bottles and a thick rubble of purses and billfolds discarded by last night's stick-up and second-story men, and go straight across the Golden Gate Bridge; you don't even stop to pay a toll any more.

There are deer on the other side, browsing over all those bare hills the army occupies. Ten minutes on woody curves and you're at Peter Saul's house in Mill Valley.

Saul's kids show off a new turtle, a green lizard, a hermit crab. The younger one claims his favorite chair, the one Vicki painted blue. Vicki, Peter's wife, has a lot of slides of Europe, but today ping-pong is scheduled under the deck, near some of Saul's old sculptures. They are simple, like the older paintings: bright, finely done cartoons.

Artist Roy De Forest comes by in his turquoise Datsun. Three men bounce around on a pair of pogo-sticks on the Saul's hilly asphalt parking area. De Forest gets 23 bounces, Saul nine. I manage four, but I never rode a pogo-stick before.

Inside the house there's a thick white furry rug in front of the fireplace and not much art on the walls.

Early in the afternoon, we walk downhill to the studio. From the outside it looks like the house, redwoody. Inside it's about a 12 foot cube, all white. Six canvases are tacked to the walls (Saul

lets the galleries stretch his canvases). He's working on all six at once. On the floor are a couple hundred tiny containers of the Day-Glo paints Saul has been using in increasingly garish colors.

All the canvases are about the scene outside. They used to be very strong on Vietnam, dragon ladies, generals, executioners and brutal G.I.'s getting their doses of V.D. the hard way. Lately a lot have had clubby riot cops and black representatives with knives in hand and blood in eyes. The rioters get mixed up with rich pearly old ladies, the kind who support radical arty causes, the Birch Society and other lumbering organizations. Or they merge into young businessmen who look a lot like Reagan, Nixon, Jack Paar or even Saul himself. In one new painting, these young business types are strangling on their own personal gangrene-decorator-shade telephones.

Saul has achieved identity as a political painter in a time when the fashion is Byzantine estheticism. He hates painting about painting and mocks it as furniture.

"If I don't do political painting, no one else will," Saul said in an interview with Joe Raffaele.

His paintings are stronger than political cartoon. The politics is like a way of saying, "take me Seriously." The fantasy reveals a mind too active to take sides, except as a sort of game.

Not that Saul isn't serious. He's as serious as all great humorists.

Saul really hates small businessmen. Once he was driving to Davis in his new Rover (the poor man's Rolls). He had a flat. They couldn't get the wheel off the car in a Shell service station. Saul was furious. "God damn corporate inefficiency!" But Saul isn't crippled by his hatred. He incorporates it into fantasy.

There are lots of people around who do even stranger things than get mad at gas stations. They actually reason seriously about subjects like sociology and economics. They take the thinking processes of Sir Francis Bacon very seriously, whether or not they believe he wrote *Hamlet*. They let their kids get drafted. They have great respect for their friends who work in ad agencies, and a lot of contempt for the clods who fall for ads. They have two new cars. They use spray deodorants.

Then there are other people who've given up reason. They enjoy color TV, without getting hung up on its social implications. They'd probably never fight. They certainly don't make ads or have close friends who do.

People in the first group still vote for the lesser of two evils. People in the second would vote for Timothy Leary as governor of California, or not vote at all. The first group still trembles about Dachau and is afraid of nuclear annihilation. The second's a lot more hopeful.

Saul's work is like a bridge between the two groups. He's not personally on the New York scene, though he shows there and in Europe (which is even more conservative).

Saul's fantasy has a great appeal for young San Francisco artists, all irrational. The "Hairy Who" group in Chicago owes a lot of its impulse to him. ZAP comic artist S. Clay Wilson is a fan.

But Saul sells in Europe and can be looked at in rational, political terms. Not too closely, but it can be done. Saul's work is a sort of bridge between the gloomy rational approach still in vogue as a scene thing, and the cheerful intensely individualistic approach current in California and in the Midwest. No wonder his recent paintings have a lot of bridges in them.



Saul in his Mill Valley, California, studio, 1974.
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Peter Saul, *Superman and Superdog in Jail*, 1963, oil on canvas.
©PETER SAUL/FARZAD OWRANG/COLLECTION OF KAWS



Peter Saul, *Sickroom*, 1964, oil on canvas.

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Saul has done a whole series on the bridge that leads from San Francisco to his home in Marin County. In one the Golden Gate is choked at both ends. No people could get across. None are in sight. But the sun shines in a blind sort of way. The message is “Happy Birthday, Peter Saul.”

Or take the one where Yellow Justice is balanced on a bridge supported by dollars. She whirls spiked crushers at the dollar supports, and clings desperately to the bridge itself so she won't fall into the bay labeled “Personal Disease.” Shades of thalidomide, she is armless. Saul doesn't let you sympathize without sympathy.

Sometimes the bridge between city slum and country split-levels is looped around like a reflection in a funny mirror. A bridge between such opposites is useless. No matter how strong it is, it can never unite San Francisco and Marin County. It couldn't reach between the opposites of husband and wife, both laughing and slobbering in their motel twin-beds.

A bridge can't join the opposites in a black's mind—between ripping society apart and getting martyred on a cross: the man's halo glows, his cigarette juts out, his penis bulges. Stars glisten off his jack knife.

One of the new paintings brings the black opposition into focus with social and economic forces. Black man and woman, done with real vulgarity, are on a bridge like a chain link. They're behind bars, trying to hold their prison together and force it open at the same time. A comment floats in the air: “Slavery is hell.”

Saul's new series of suburban houses is bulbously inhuman. In one, the only sign of habitation is a giant footprint that doubles as a swimming pool. The foot has six toes with clawlike joints. As with all of Saul's paintings, the color and outline keep the scene from seeming macabre. It is more the dispassionate humor of Magritte than the hysteria of Ensor.

The houses are no more or less hopeful than the fantasy of yellow booby-trap seductresses and tortured ex-GI's with twisting eyeballs and self-devouring bodies. There's no hope for either side, as in Swift, where the Houyhnhnms are as priggish as Yahoos are gross, and neither has human appeal.

The hope isn't Gulliver's, but Swift's: to see things clearly. Saul does this well. His clarity comes from escaping ideology into patterns of fantasy that correspond in a general way to current social developments in Saul's America.

Will these paintings date? They seem extremely self-contained. In a more fortunate age, their fantasy would give as much insight into the human as it does now, and seems even funnier. The form would surely be as interesting, seen like Egyptian tomb paintings, but livelier.

By appealing to conservative as well as radical thinkers, Saul gets widely seen. It would be hard for him to be a pop success as things are, because his ultimate appeal is to people committed to making art. Certainly his concurrent one-man shows last year at the California College of Arts and Crafts in Oakland and the San Francisco Art Institute drew the attention of more art students than any other event of the season.

Saul shows that stuff of old-fashioned political thought can be material for fantasy as easily as the joyous scatology of Robert Arneson or Gerald Gooch, or the deceptively childlike journeys of Roy De Forest, Dave Gilhooly and Harold Schlotzhauer.

Even Saul's personal saga is bridgelike. He was raised in the tightest minority group, the children of the big (oil) company executives. He disdained family security, went from St. Louis to Europe with only a B.F.A. and a wife who could not work. That was in 1956, when he was 22. Saul spent eight years in Holland, France and Italy. At first he sold newspapers on the streets. Horatio Alger-like, he was discovered by one of the big guys, Matta.

From that point on the story of grants and sales is cheerful. The Frumkin galleries in New York and Chicago have shown him steadily. He's sold

out of Galerie Breteau in Paris and at the Tartaruga in Rome. After eight years in Europe, Peter Saul triumphally returned to San Francisco, where he was born. He crossed the bridge to hilly Marin County, where he avoids seeing a lot of people and steadily paints his visions in the little white room. His life in the woods shows a natural yearning for the opposite of the mess in his paintings.

Saul himself is a less twisted bridge than the ones he paints. He leads toward a new fantasy vision, away from rational discourse and discord. At least this is how it seems to me, living in California and writing steadily about nut artists, all of them wonderful irrational.

Of course Saul can also be seen as a fine young painter making out very well with ambiguous political cartoons in a culture where high art has nothing to do with non-esthetic approaches. But if Saul couldn't be taken both ways, this painter of bridges just wouldn't be much of a bridge himself.

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Peter Saul, *Ronald Reagan in Grenada*, 1984, acrylic on canvas.
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Peter Saul, *Oedipus Jr.*, 1983, acrylic and oil on canvas.
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