

BOMB

Peter Saul by Saul Ostrow



Peter Saul, *Stalin*, 2007, acrylic on canvas, 78" x 108". All images courtesy of David Nolan Gallery, New York.

There is something odd and persistent about Peter Saul's mixture of social commentary, bad-boy imagery, and his ever-evolving cartoon style. While his '60s paintings seemed clearly anti-Vietnam War, Saul was never a hero of the liberal left, unlike Leon Golub, probably because his work had no clear moral message. Never politically correct, Saul's paintings continue to be tinged with imagery that could potentially be read as both racist and misogynous, playing with a self-described attraction for pictures with problems. Recently, younger artists seeking a model for

addressing the dilemmas of contemporary life and politics have generated a renewed interest in him. In the '60s, Saul's cartoon style led many to assume he was associated with the Chicago group of artists known as the Hairy Who. Actually, he's originally from California, and was living in Europe when Allan Frumkin discovered him. He returned to the U.S. and lived in California before teaching at the University of Texas. After living in upstate New York for the last five years, Saul decided he was finally ready to be closer to the art world and recently moved to New York City's Upper East Side. The day after he and his wife moved, we met over coffee at his kitchen table.

Saul Ostrow

Let's start with that old favorite: the state of painting.

Peter Saul

So-called "good painting" is like a parade of intelligent thinkers. I'm glad to be outside of that. Call me a crackpot if you want. Painting has been all about technique since Manet, and I understand the importance of that: how it takes painting away from the customer or collector or whomever and gives it back to the painter. There was nothing the matter with this "how-to," formal phase of modern painting while it lasted. Painting, to be talked about right now—argued with—has to result in a picture of something.

SO

What's the relationship between your style of painting and your images or subjects?

PS

I'm painting subjects the best way I can at the time. Recently I've felt a surge of skill. I've had these before, in like 1983 or 1984, and another one in 2003. I just felt able to paint anything I wanted, making the image more fully done and beautiful so people would want to look at it. The problem with a lot of image painting is the lack of a technique that can give a real loving illusion instead of that flat, matter-of-fact style where the artist tries to make the paint look like it just came out of the can.

SO

So you see style and technique as a form of seduction?

PS

It's the way I try to get people to look at a picture. If it wasn't interesting to look at, what could I do instead? Talk to art critics? Pretend it's worth \$1,000,000? Sometimes I go look at *Love's Labor Lost* by Frederic Leighton at the Dahesh Museum. I like so-called academic painting a lot, especially Rosa Bonheur's *The Horse Fair* at the Metropolitan.

SO

What do you think about the fact that younger artists are now looking at you?

PS

I don't think about that.

SO

But you said that for a long period of time no one wanted to talk to you, and now all of a sudden everyone wants to talk to you. (*laughter*)

PS

I'm not aware of anybody wanting to talk to me particularly, but commercially things did suddenly improve in 1988. At a museum show in Aspen, Allan Frumkin said to me, "Things are changing. A German collector bought five of your paintings from me for a substantial sum, and he'd like to meet you." So I did meet this guy at a bar in Chicago and he ordered two drinks, scotches or something—down we go. Two more—down we go. I thought, Hey, I quit this right here. I just got up and left. Didn't even say goodbye. I'm not interested in that kind of relationship. But things did turn around right then. This started a nice thing for a college teacher. You paint a picture, roll it up in a tube, send it over, and get \$10,000 back. Modest, but real.

SO

Do you think that had to do with the German invasion of painters like Immendorff? That all of a sudden it was okay to make political paintings?

PS

I don't know, I didn't reflect on it, oddly enough. I think about the long-range goals of art. There were hundreds of years of painting pictures, then you have this strange period where everybody exercises their technique, and then art leaves painting and goes into video, concept, and so on. That's where we were a few years ago. I didn't think complicated thoughts about why I might be popular or unpopular. I was surprised by Minimalism. It had never occurred to me that viewers would want less to look at. Finally, I realized it gives the spectator a chance to be more interesting than the picture.



Peter Saul, *Self Portrait as a Woman*, 2006, acrylic on canvas, 72 x 102 inches.

SO

Do you think of your paintings as conversation-starters, given their politics, their bad taste?

PS

I have suffered for my vulgar art style. It's my misfortune to not have realized art is supposed to be about how it's made. I couldn't believe in that.

SO

There's this notion among art students, and some younger artists, that you were kept a secret. That your present success is akin to the return of the repressed.

PS

Wow! That's flattering. Intellectuals who were in charge of U.S. art between 1950 and 1990 were not generous to artists who did not fit their stylistic needs. I was there, in the occasional art magazine or *New York Times* review, but you would have had to be a detective to find and remember me.

SO

Except that you got a large section of wall space in a Pompidou show.

PS

No, no. Occasionally they put up one, two, or three of my pictures in some group show. One funny anecdote—a curator from the Pompidou came to New York to see my large *Saigon* picture from '67. The Whitney said, "You can't see it because it's in deep storage." So, he just had the Whitney send it over anyway, and it was shown at the Pompidou. I am very grateful to the viewers in France who seem to like my pictures. Without them, I'd be a goner. Maybe I should be careful of what I say?

SO

You get to see the transcript.

PS

I don't understand why the painter is confused with the painting. You don't say the book is a direct reflection of the author. You don't say, for example, Nabokov was a child molester because he wrote *Lolita*. I think the picture that has problems is more interesting to look at. I want to see the sexist and racist ones first when I go to a museum. Usually, there aren't any.

SO

Earlier you were talking about when you first realized that your paintings were funny. When the paintings began to be about the Vietnam War, no matter how much people wanted to see you as a great liberal—well, you're not. (*laughter*)

PS

I want praise for my art, not for some political opinion I might have. All my Vietnam pictures were an exaggeration. I could never figure out whether I was just trying to be over the top, the exact opposite of Judd and Stella, or whether I was sincerely trying to present a point of view that could be believed in.

SO

Those paintings condemned the Vietnam War but they were also terribly misogynistic. (*laughter*) Was that an intentional setup? Is that mixed message the conversation you want to have with your viewers?

PS

An exaggerated idea of women was one part of the Vietnam pictures. Right now I'm concentrating on Stalin because he's a useful bad guy. That is, I can use him to destroy the German army. I just finished a version where he personally shoots eight German soldiers with eight bullets. In the next one, he's going to use his fist to sock their heads off. Bloody stuff! This is my struggle to gain attention.

SO

What's the appeal of World War II? It's a theme that comes back regularly.

PS

It's a piece of history that can still be considered hot. I did other war scenes like the fall of Constantinople and Custer's last stand. I just like to have a painting that swings

out with a kind of exciting interest that I think pictures should have. I don't like to see a picture controlled by the artist's belief system.

SO

But don't you think your audience is geared to believe that in those paintings, you're trying to send them a message based on your belief?

PS

I don't know how to answer that question. I don't take it for granted that I have a guaranteed audience. I'm not a successful artist yet.

SO

It's not about whether or not you're successful or sincere. Obviously by this point you are a successful artist.

PS

How can I be considered a successful artist? I live in a one-bedroom apartment and commute an hour by foot and subway to a studio in Brooklyn that I share with six other artists. I stretch my own canvases and sort my own slides. I chose this life, and I'm having more fun than a lot of other people in their mid-'70s. But, as an example of success, it's nuts. Where are the millions I'm supposed to have?



Peter Saul, *Little Joe in Hanoi*, 1968, acrylic on canvas, 84½ × 90½ inches.

SO

This brings up one of the reasons I wanted to talk to you. The generic Peter Saul image has really changed over the years.

PS

Maybe Frumkin did me a favor by insisting on something interesting to look at when he came for his once-a-year visit to my studio. I was afraid to show him something he'd already seen.

SO

Yet, when you were painting versions of other artists' work, your use of Max Beckmann's *The Night* really pops out—this is seemingly the one you did the least to in relation to its origin.

PS

That's an artistic mistake I made. I thought I was doing a whole lot of changes on the Beckmann picture, but I wasn't. I'll do it better next year. That was an artistically hopeless time in my life, the mid-'70s.

SO

What do you mean?

PS

I felt helpless. People enjoyed looking at pictures with less and less in them and I was going in the other direction. I had an opening at Frumkin's in '76 in which four people showed up. Jesus! That's kind of scary. (*laughter*)

SO

What's your relationship to an artist like Max Beckmann?

PS

Beckmann's work was all around St. Louis in the early '50s: in the museums, and also several big collections had like 50 of his paintings. As students, we weren't supposed to pay attention to his subject, just the technique. Our teacher, who was Wally Barker, Beckmann's favorite student before he died, would say, "See how he uses this green here, uses the same green there? He's so economical. He never mixes colors he doesn't have to mix."

SO

You got on well with this teacher?

PS

No. He gave me a C, and I ran outside to where he was sitting on the grass and said, "You can't give me a C, I'll be drafted. They'll send me to Korea. I'll be killed!" and he said, "It'll make a man out of you." Fortunately, the war came to an end and I wasn't drafted. What a bastard! Still, he was a very good art teacher and taught me a lot of things I needed to know.

SO

Certain techniques are now coming back into play in your work. You're doing a lot of overpainting and glazing, and you're using chiaroscuro, complex color, and modeling.

PS

Yes, it's important for the illusion to try and make the things I'm painting look like they're really there.

SO

What's your obsession with De Kooning and his painting *Woman, I*?

PS

I was very impressed because it's a good painting. Also it was made in a moment, 1952, when painting was supposed to be abstract. Here was the most famous artist in the world returning to the human figure without a loss of style. The result even resembled a caricature of Marilyn Monroe. This gave me heart, helped me to continue. But *Woman, I* received very negative reviews in the professional art world, which alienated me. From then on, I began to dislike pompously deep articles in art magazines.

SO

From talking with Rob Storr, I was expecting you to be much more cantankerous.

PS

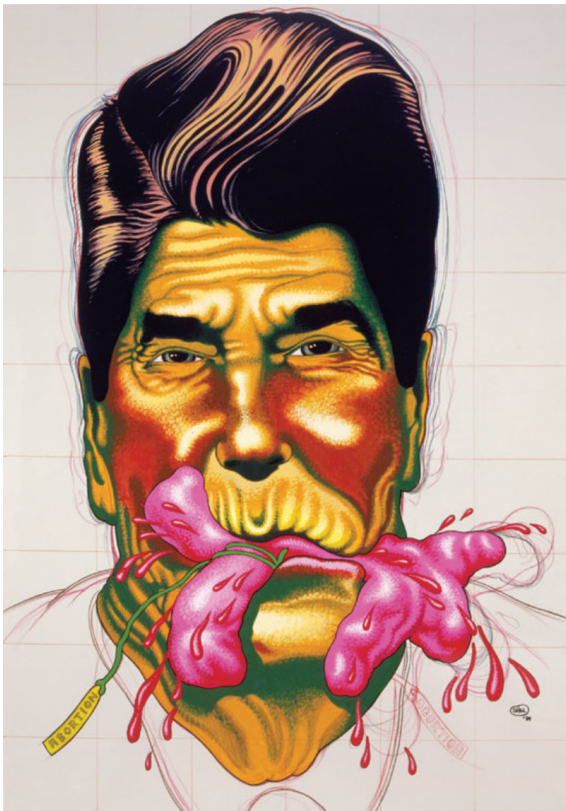
I'm not cantankerous. I'm a happy man, for one thing. He said I was cantankerous?

SO

He said you could be argumentative.

PS

Well, I have argued with everything you've said that I could possibly argue with. I'm enjoying painting so much. I like the way the picture presents problems I have to deal with.



Peter Saul, *Ronald Reagan (Abortion)*, 1984, acrylic and colored pencil on paper, 43½ × 30 inches.

SO

So how do you develop an image?

PS

Well, I try to develop a fresh approach in a little pencil sketch, about 8 × 10." Then I blow it up and square it off onto the canvas, redraw with chalk. Chalk, chalk, over, over.

SO

So it's fairly traditional. What about subjects? Do you wake up in the middle of the night and go, "Stalin, that's a subject!"

PS

I might. I just thought Germans haven't been beaten up on enough. It needs to be death by another bad guy. Ask me some questions I can respond to intellectually. I feel like in my conversations with Storr I've already explained my psychology, and now I need to get into ideas. Such as, why after hundreds of years of painting does the image disappear for a while?

SO

Well, what's your view on the present situation?

PS

Everybody has mostly left painting except dignified older people. I'm glad some artists still paint pictures of things.

SO

What about John Currin or Elizabeth Peyton?

PS

I have trouble seeing it with Peyton; they just looks like normal pictures.

SO

I think that's what they're trying to be.

PS

I'm startled, that's a startling effect. You mean it's not trying to be different or anything?

SO

Just a normal picture, a painting of a celebrity. What I want to know is: what does painting still do for you?

PS

It gives me a chance to handle subjects that are not handled by cameras. For instance, if there was a photographer present when Hitler blew his brains out, Hitler would have first asked him to leave the room. As a painter, I can do a subject where no

photographer was present—and in an exaggerated way, too, which I think is important.

SO

But then you say that painting has been left to a bunch of old geezers...

PS

It annoys me, but I understand. When you visit colleges, students have so much to learn in different media, there's no time for doing the necessary hours of painting. This is especially true at the best schools. On the other hand, I know Jim Shaw and I see the excellent work his assistants do. They have *astoundingskill*. So I don't know if I'm correct in criticizing today's art education. I know my path into painting, my right to be looked at, is based on dealing with unusual subjects in a fresh way. Like most people who paint Stalin are dealing with some true fact. They look him up, they find out about him: where he was, who he liked, who he didn't like. I just do anything I want with him.

SO

Do you sit around making up stories?

PS

I have a couple of sketches. Here's a two-headed businessman. Here's the one for *Raft of the Medusa*, which I need to do again. It's a good subject. Look at this one, a piece of shit down there, living in the toilet. It's a good idea, don't you think? (*laughter*) I have a show coming up in Los Angeles at Patrick Painter.

SO

Moving up in the world.

PS

You consider that up? Good. Why do you say that, though? I only met him for two minutes, six months ago. Perhaps you know a lot more than me.

SO

It's moving back to the art world.

PS

I want to get further up the ladder of art appreciation before I die of old age, which, hopefully, gives me 20 more years.

SO

It potentially means making new friends. Maybe a little retrospective in France, you and Mike Kelley...

PS

I can't consider fantasy art shows because I'm too busy with the real ones coming up. Mike Kelley has always been generous in his support.

SO

Back to why you need to make a big intellectual statement: is there one behind your paintings?

PS

I've thought about that, but haven't figured out how to say it yet. You've asked me a question I can't answer today, but maybe in six months, with a little practice...

SO

Oh, come on! That seems truly disingenuous; it's hard to believe that one could sustain an activity for 40 years without having some vision or reflection.

PS

Well, I truly enjoy painting pictures, one after the other. I like the problems presented. I do believe that there's a formal problem in painting—of course. You have to actually do it to be able to think it through. I believe in the illusion of space. I don't believe in the flat effect at all. Often I'll wake up in the morning and it will occur to me that a certain color needs to be done in a certain area, as if I've thought about it in my sleep. Different ways to paint a certain brown—It's just on and on with these things, which I pay a lot of attention to. In fact, that's my day. I've always enjoyed it. I'm not the least bit looking upon painting as a job. I calmly enjoy technical problems as they occur. Can't wait to deal with the next one.

SO

In terms of the social issues...

PS

Social issues are good subjects! Like, hot dog! I've thought of something that's mutually interesting—GIs committing crimes in Baghdad—that kind of thing. Then: can I do it as more than just a tangle of arms and legs? Can I get an image that's actually fresh?

SO

When did it first come to you that it was about making things fresh, that it was not *just* about subject?

PS

When I looked at some old *Crime Does Not Pay* comics that had thrilled me when I was eight or nine. Suddenly, I saw how boring and tediously drawn they actually were. The excitement was all in my own head. If I didn't want my pictures to share the gloomy fate of old comics nobody wants to see ever again, I'd have to give my imagery some kind of surprise, some freshness.

SO

So "freshness" was about making it—

PS

Interesting. I didn't worry about true or false, really. I just looked for interesting stuff. It seemed to me that my own life was too boring to be a subject, so I would have to reach outside into culture.

SO

You've done that.

PS

Yes.

SO

So what piques you now?

PS

This challenge of getting more interesting as you get older. Over the age of 60, people expect a repetitious quality to your imagery. So, I have to defeat this expectation. I've started exaggerating my age, telling people I'm 74 even though I'm 73.



Peter Saul, *Execution of Jesus*, 2006, acrylic on canvas, 78 x 72 inches.

SO

The greatest amount of interest in your work has been in the last ten years.

PS

I guess you're right. When you're over 70, your art is looked at differently. I'm going to paint myself as a woman artist painting a woman-type picture, but haven't yet figured out what a "woman-type" picture looks like.

SO

So you're looking to catch real hell.

PS

Usually—but not always—negative reactions make me laugh. I think art is pretty harmless. A tiny bit of harm would help it out.

SO

Can you talk about the notion of danger? Do you see your work as dangerous?

PS

Of course I know Rembrandt's *Night Watch* has a heavy frame that would kill someone if it fell. I suppose I could give my picture a heavy frame and it would be dangerous, too, but mentally, I think art is a harmless pastime.

SO

You think there's no dangerous image?

PS

Well, sex between celebrities, but I did that in 1969.

SO

That would be scandalous. What about dangerous? Could you imagine making riskier images than you presently do?

PS

I don't know how to answer. If I have an idea for a picture I'm going to paint it. But, I'm simply not sure in advance what a risky image looks like.

SO

So your faith in painting is reestablished painting-by-painting?

PS

Yes, definitely. I don't count on the future. I take a sort of oath to do a certain subject—I'll make a wild boast to an art dealer. Okay, I've got Stalin coming in the next six months. And then I've got to paint it.

SO

I'm flipping through this in my mind, wondering if I've ever heard anybody say that they literally sustain their faith in what they do one work at a time.

PS

It was more common in the '50s. De Kooning or Kline. Not that you necessarily believed them, but they made that claim.

SO

Yes, but it's not something one expects to hear at this moment.

PS

If you say so. I hadn't thought of that. Also, I'm doing it for fun. I don't trust myself to get by in the art world if I'm not provocative. I don't think I could get away with doing stripes or circles because I wouldn't have a convincing argument to back it up. It's that Duchampian idea that a museum can transform anything, but not really, because if the museum director doesn't know who you are he or she is not going to display your readymade. It could be a fraud. You could be an ordinary person instead of an artist.

SO

Is it also getting harder to get bad?

PS

I don't know. I started out to be a good artist but then when I got called bad I said, Okay, that's what I am.

SO

Once upon a time you were the only one with big boobs, cocks, and toilets. Mike Kelley, Raymond Pettibon, Carroll Dunham, and a whole range of artists came around after you.

PS

Well, it's helpful that these other artists exist. You can't get anywhere in the art world as an individual.

SO

You're like the eccentric uncle that nobody ever wanted to talk about, but when he finally shows up he's the only person anybody wants to talk to.

PS

(laughter) That's not true, but it's such a flattering idea.

Saul Ostrow is Chair of Visual Arts and Technologies at the Cleveland Institute of Art and editor of the book series Critical Voices in Art, Theory, and Culture published by Routledge. A writer and curator, Ostrow is BOMB'S Contributing Art Editor.