

ARTFORUM

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IT'S BEEN NICE GNAWING YOU

Rhonda Lieberman and Cary S. Leibowitz/Candyass talk with Peter Saul

Like fashion, current art is seeking to “get over” the '80s, and is looking to the '70s and '60s, that is, to the prehistory of that moment, to oedipally murder it. The uncannily excrementalized styles of the recent past appear so fresh, so “modern,” as they reemerge like platform shoes from recent total trend-repression. If appropriation art is the art-world version of big shoulder-pads, getting over Pop (while still being informed by it) is the Pepsi Challenge of the '90s: you read it here first kids, Photorealism is coming back!

As one of our totally favorite strangely neglected painters who was in on the ground floor of Pop but never quite became canonized as one of its greatest hits, Peter Saul is not only back and sassy as ever, but he never really went away. OK he's been teaching for years at the U. of Texas at Austin, which has recently erupted on the complexion of pop culture via the film *Slacker*. Saul said he knew one of the students in the film but he didn't say which one.

Peter Saul should be worshiped as the precursor of all the post-Pop painting that's going on now. Ever immune to Stately Male Syndrome, his painting is lush and fantastic and reflects his personal vision of consumer-culture sexuality and libidinal appliances in untight-assed painterly ways. In the '60s, he was right out there with the anti-Vietnam stuff, thalidomide imagery, and provocative portraits of artists and dealers caught in unattractive acts of “homosocial bonding.” While we're happy he was in the recent, splashy “Hand-Painted Pop” museum show, and rightfully so, we were disturbed that he was hardly mentioned in any of the writing about that show, as someone particularly resonant to painters now and deserving of his turn as a cult figure.

As total fans, Cary and I were both sort of mystified enough to be amazed that such a great painter would live a relatively quiet life teaching at the university: “They hired me because they thought my career was over 30 years ago.” He said that in all the years he'd been showing with Mr. Frumkin, we were like the second people from the New York art world that he met through the gallery. The first one died! Spending the day with him, we learned lots of life

lessons. Cary marveled: “We could have a career for 30 years without people knowing about it and that’s OK!”

I should set the scene: as a neurotic anti-p.c. fag and a neurotic anti-p.c. woman, Cary and I wanted to pay homage to Saul publicly as an honored master in our underdog pantheon. We applauded him for his consistently “unfashionable” oeuvre. We bonded with him in dismay when he said that like half the women left the auditorium recently at a slide show of his work. Nevertheless, in retrospect the interview wound up giving me a vintage ’70s-style feminist consciousness-raising effect!

In one of the outtakes, Cary asks why Saul chose this rather uninteresting semiabstract lady landscape painter for an artist’s-choice show a while back. Saul said, Everybody picked their wife! But I didn’t like my wife so I picked somebody else’s. How charming for me to imagine all these validated guy artists “giving a break” to their significant others. While the guy is pushing 60, and these situations reflect the cultural ambiance of his time, I was particularly pierced with irony when he referred to the “depressing types of women” attracted to male artists. . . . I was glad I came of age now, when I have choices!

The whole interview, as usual, was a symptom of something. We’re grateful to Saul for frankly sharing his experience with us. I’m sharing my reaction in the desire to frame the interview and put it in perspective: it hovered in my mind as a fascinating stinky little cultural snapshot of the kind of attitude toward women that has produced so much well-intentioned but *blechy* p.c. art in recent years. One of the best things he said was how he likes to deal with political issues because they made him make *better paintings*, not because he felt, as a painter, that he was doing politics. We agree that you don’t have to be a “good person” to be a good artist and certainly the opposite is true, given so much of the p.c. art that has become fashionable recently. Here’s what happened when a neurotic fag and a neurotic woman wound up interviewing Peter Saul for five hours. We still support totally un-p.c. art; we had to deal with the fact that great art often comes out of a politically pooppy reality. We’re still trying to figure it out. . . .

—RL

RHONDA LIEBERMAN: I’m a complete fan of yours. We’ve both been coveting the paintings in the “Hand-Painted Pop” show, especially the refrigerator piece.

PETER SAUL: The weirdest thing was that when I made those things, I was living in Europe and had no idea how much I was part of the Pop thing. Coming back to the work in this show, I said, for the first time, Yeah, I’m definitely a part of that.

CARY LEIBOWITZ: I got the invitation to your show in the mail the other day, and I thought it was so funny that you put *Pop Art II* on it.

PS: Once you've done a more or less straight copy, there's nothing to do but do something with it. You can't go on copying a Campbell soup can forever; you gotta pour it out or crunch it up.

CL: Or eat it with a hot dog.

PS: I made *Pop Art I* and *Pop Art II* because of the "Hand-Painted Pop" show. In *Pop Art I* I'm relating my own Donald Duck to Jasper Johns, and *Pop Art II* combines the Dali clocks and Lichtenstein's brushstroke thing. Dali's one of my favorite artists. I even like his late work.

RL: When did your paintings with the art-history references start?

PS: In about 1975, just as I was about to leave California for New York. I think California changes a lot of people's lives. It changed me from being a repressed, nerdlike individual to the kind of person who expects something out of life. I wanted to be healthy and have normal sex. Before that, sex was frightening; I never thought or even fantasized about it. My historical paintings were an attempt to have a normal art period.

When we moved to the East Coast, my wife, Sally, and I rented this huge rickety mansion in Westchester, owned by an art collector. It was very beautiful and romantic, but I soon noticed that I had no real art career. Up-and-coming artists like Jack Beal were getting attention so I thought what the hell, I better do something. That's when I started to paint pictures about art.

RL: I actually think that you are part of post-Pop, because of all the younger people who. . . .

PS: Well, I did get a boost from Mike Kelley when he gave a lecture in L.A. during the "Hand-Painted Pop" show.

RL: It's gonna be young people that see your influence; they're gonna say, Oh there was this whole thing going on before.

CL: You had a big early success.

PS: What happened was I was making these paintings and Mr. Frumkin showed up and seemed interested (this was before the Pop art show "The New Realists" at Sidney Janis in 1962); and I said great and sent him the work. At first I was mentioned in all the art magazines. I was a famous artist in '61 and '62, but by '64 I was much less famous. There was a long period of having no one to talk to at my art shows but Frumkin. I'd show up and nobody else would be

there. He'd say, You know, Pete, no one's coming in, but it's OK. Tell you what . . . I'll buy them all. And he did. For many years he supported me totally.

CL: It's amazing, the whole career thing. My current mood is to feel like my career is over, but I am trying to make it a theme.

PS: Be confident. Sometimes the obvious is a good theme. Anyway, I think it's important to get through the period of time when you are fashionable and to get into the next period and still be interesting; if you can live through it then all is well.

CL: We've been talking about something similar lately 'cause we've been making these videos that are talk shows.

RL: But we have no guests.

PS: That makes sense. To hell with the guests.

CL: We thought, well, all these people on TV are so mediocre, but they're comfortable with themselves . . . so they come across professionally.

RL: We're going to be the Regis and Kathie Lee of the art world!

CL: You know in the "Hand-Painted Pop" show, I still don't understand the reason for Cy Twombly.

PS: I don't either. And I don't understand why Tom Wesselman was left out.

CL: That's bad. I didn't even remember that.

RL: He's hated for some reason.

CL: You spent a lot of those early years in Europe?

PS: Just before my first New York show, or was it just before the second (they showed me as much as possible then, as things were going well), I said, Do you think I should come to New York? And Frumkin said No, you're too naive. I thought to myself, Well, he's probably right. But the years I spent in Europe, from '56 through '64, were the worst of my life. I wasn't appreciated. I was just trying to get through the day.

RL: But you had three one-person shows when you were 30. That's amazing.

CL: Now that we've complained about Europe, let's complain about New York. What lessons do you think the New York art world needs to learn?

PS: Too much professionalism in New York art, not enough painting. All these found objects. I just try to make a painting individual. There's not supposed to be any real continuity in my stuff; I pick a subject and I do it. You know the Francis Bacon painting of the screaming cardinal? Now I'm doing a screaming duck, and then I'm going to do a *Sardanapalus* duck. You know that big Delacroix painting with the red bed? I've got ducks doing everything, a total slaughter of beautiful ducks—black-skinned ducks, slave ducks—even the worst duck of all, *Sardanapalus* duck sitting on the bed.

CL: You know I was totally amazed when the whole Mapplethorpe controversy came up; I thought, If people really examined your paintings they'd be outlawed.

RL: What do you think of the whole politically correct thing?

PS: I hate it. It makes me want to smoke.

RL: And cat meat and wear fur.

PS: First of all I was startled by it. It never occurred in my life until 1988, when I went to Boulder, and I showed my slides doing a guest artist job. The women started booing and hissing and walking out. First I couldn't quite figure it out, but when I thought about it, I realized, This is me, and since then I've been really into anticorrectness. A work like *Jeffrey Dahmer*, 1993, is not a protest. If crooks are merciless they should get the chair. I'm not against capital punishment. String them up and flay them alive.

CL: Is that a Texas thing?

PS: I think people in Texas are like that.

CL: What do you think of Ann Richards?

PS: She looks well-preserved—fantastic. I could do a portrait.

RL: She looks like a lizard.

PS: She looks sensational. I saw her for real; she came to campus with Clinton when he was campaigning. As a rule I don't follow politics that closely unless I can get something out of it. My idea is that politics draw attention to art, not the other way around. Even when I became influenced by the Vietnam thing, my paintings were totally unsuitable for use as protests because they were full of wacky psychological ideas. At about that time, the mother of one of my kids' playmates said that I looked really troubled psychologically and signed me up for this shrink book club in California. (Her husband was a major shrink in the Bay area.) I would sit up late and read these books, and before long my paintings had become a mass of Freudian doings. If you look at my paintings of Vietnam they are all sexual.

In the long run I'm not interested in whether or not my paintings contribute to some political attitude. It would be madness to think that paintings could do anything like that. What I'm interested in is making painting less boring to look at. To make people look at a painting is almost impossible. If every artist could cut off an ear it would help. And personally that's the kind of juice I want to read about. I read about that Spanish guy Botero—about his ritzy New York apartment and all that stuff. Didn't he have a car crash and wreck his hands so he couldn't paint for a while? If you compare him to someone like Donald Judd (I know some people say his boxes vibrate like a Rodin, but well . . . ha!) there's no comparison. You just gotta get the juice. If you don't get to the juice it's hopeless. I could never understand why Minimalism had the popularity that it did. The word "cool" wasn't positive to me. To me, to lower the temperature of a painting, to make it less impressive, is just a kind of maniacal suicide. If anything I want more, not less.

CL: Are there certain periods in art that you do like?

PS: I really like the 19th century because at that time painting was the thing most likely to be liked or disliked. We hadn't gotten into the pure art thing: Painting hadn't yet become a problem. I go for Géricault. He put his paintings in a big tent and tried to get people to pay 25 dollars, or cents, or whatever, to see them. I want to make a painting good enough to be publicized and not just a "good example of Peter Saul's work." I guess I just hate to see painting not successful. No successful artists paint anymore, and I guess that really worries me. I went to Yale yesterday, and the painters there are involved in patterns of behavior that are very strange. No one there is going to enter the art world easily. They're just too tame.

RL: Do you think it's William Bailey's fault?

PS: No, no. I never met any of the teachers. It's the fault of the students. Unfortunately, the screwball types don't take up painting anymore. You don't paint that much, do you?

CL: No, I don't.

PS: I thought not; neither does Mike Kelley. I personally decided to keep painting anyway. I'm gonna do it regardless of what the results are. It's not that I feel that loyal to painting, I just personally don't want to do anything else. I haven't ever collected objects in a room. I have no talent for finding them, storing them, paying somebody to move them. I am not likely to do installation.

RL: Is it possible for two artists to have a healthy relationship?

CL: Is your wife an artist?

PS: Yes, she is. But she's very modest about it. Sally just sold her first sculpture recently in Sacramento. It was a sculpture of an angel. It was politically correct. We don't agree on art. My whole family thinks that animals are better than people. Beavers deserve a break, all that kinda stuff. So we're talking about a healthy relationship not based on art; it's about hanging out.

My feeling is that women artists over 30 and men over 50 have a built-in feeling that they'll never be important. As I myself am over 50, I am feeling it, even though my life story is probably gonna have a happy ending. Now when it comes to women artists over 30 nothing can be done about this gloomy outlook. If you transported their work to MoMA, they would look at it and say, Yeah, but it's all a setup.

In general, there's something about artists—male artists—that attracts a very depressing kind of woman. Another artist had a wife who was even more depressing than my exwife. He used to show here—a famous artist who made painted-metal sculptures and lives in California. He's the only other person I knew who had any success in the art field from Washington U., though there must have been others.

CL: You have to give them time, after all that whole Philip Guston thing took a while. . . .

RL: There are late bloomers.

PS: But I always wanted to be an artist. It's funny, though, Guston did teach at Washington U. just before I was a student there. But that was even before he began his abstract work. He was doing these children with wooden swords and paper hats back then. It's a kick that when I was there, I never thought he'd have any connection to me. His work was so well-behaved in my opinion. I never liked his paintings: early, middle, or late.

CL: What art attracted you when you were a kid?

PS: I went to a prep school up in Western Canada that was once publicized in *Time* magazine as being the strictest school in North America. They had fantastic notions of punishment. They gave beatings that drew blood and that kind of stuff. If you didn't have a hobby there, they made you haul logs. So I got a paint box and got interested. And I guess I just kept going. By the time Jackson Pollock was in *Life* magazine, I had been furiously at work for about two years on these canvas boards, painting the sort of things I continued to do later. I made one painting of drunk sailors vomiting off a bridge in Brooklyn, which I actually saw with my parents from a train. I saw it and I thought, Wow, that's it.

CL: Did you know Paul Cadmus' stuff?

PS: Yes, I love it. But my first knowledge of art was from *Time* magazine. The first things I became aware of were publicized there between '46 and '50. That would include a surrealist artist from Miami, and then of course Pollock, who was interesting to me because he was the first artist to become successful. It turns out he wasn't really making a lot of money, but we imagined that he made fabulous sums. I thought, Wow! And when my art school bought a Pollock, I realized my own ideas about art must have been all wrong—that you're supposed to spew paint around. I put a few drops on a canvas but then quickly desisted. So I had a little contact with Modern American art but decided to remain loyal to my old idea anyway.

CL: Did your parents like your paintings?

PS: They died a long time ago. My father died in '63, shortly after I had my first two shows at Frumkin. He was tremendously proud. He told people that his son got paid \$1,000 to paint a picture of a toilet. He got so drunk before coming over to see my show that he crashed into the tollbooth and never made it to the opening. In those days drunk-driving wasn't such a major crime, so they let him go home and he came over and saw it another day. I guess he thought I was pretty crazy.

RL: You're a teacher? We were wondering if you believed in art school?

PS: I never deal with that question. I have two classes. I leave for my first class at about the time it begins. I get there and talk-talk. And I walk home for lunch and then back again. I do that twice a week. Sometimes I get up at four in the morning on teaching days and paint for four hours and then walk to school and teach, teach, teach. Then I walk home for lunch. When I get back to school I take a nap. I lay right down on the concrete floor in my office.

RL: I think it's really good to beat the students to falling asleep in class.

PS: I don't do a very good job, but they let me get away with it. I even boast about it. I don't improve the work they're doing; I don't insist they paint; I don't even insist they show up. Sometimes my class is empty, so I just go around and talk to other people. But I'm a very important part of the art department because I'm their oldest person. That's how you get a job; you have to be almost dead.

My sons were going off to colleges (Columbia and MIT were their choices), so I said to myself, You better get a job. I hardly made any money other than from my sales to Mr. Frumkin. So I got this teaching job in Austin. But by the time my sons were finished with school I was used to teaching, so I kept doing it.

RL: Do the students help you keep in touch?

PS: Yes. It's been good for me. Sally feels it was good for me, since when you spend too much time alone you get weird. Before I taught, I stayed in my studio for like six months and didn't talk to anyone but my family. Then I got out one day and the noise of the traffic was too much for me.

RL: Do you see seeds that you planted in the work of younger artists?

PS: I'm careful not to look at that angle. If that were to happen it would be good for me but perhaps lousy for them. But you know, I must say, I was really pleased people saw that "Hand-Painted Pop" show, because I would have thought that would have been the deadest show.

RL: Are you kidding?

CL: Everyone was really waiting for that show to get here. You know it's funny, recently two artists—one of Rhonda's students and another artist who's making a success right now

downtown—are using a newer generation of cartoons, like the Flintstones and stuff. One does total sex scenes with Betty and Wilma making out together in this sort of watercolor style.

PS: I'm impressed. I better get right to work. They're gaining on me.