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Peter Saul

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It is hard to identify the precise moment when Peter Saul's work began to shift into its present state of willful petulance, in which the cranky artist vents his spleen in picture after picture of barely suppressed rage. But shift it did, and this retrospective of 30 years of his career traces a journey from wit to whine, from trouble-seeking angry young man to bitter misanthrope uttering shrill Cassandralike warnings to audiences more amused than angered. Therein lies Saul's special place in contemporary art: like some beloved court jester, he seems to have been granted special license to rant and rave in all directions, and it seems to be his lot to see his caustic commentaries rather blithely consumed.

Saul's energies have been sharply focused since the early '60s, when his goofy and gluttonous paintings first attracted notice. Images such as *Icebox #1*, 1960, and *Mickey Mouse vs. the Japs*, 1961–62, join multiple and indiscriminate fantasies with brushy and amorphous spaces, creating a kind of painterly Pop that infectiously insists on being open-handed and charged with glee. Elements accrue upon elements in rampant horror vacui; they acquire meaning by their sheer numbers. Over the years, Saul has developed and perfected his consummate plastic figuration, rendering malleable and fluid bodies that ooze and weave their way through complex paintings of abject and tortuous violence. Works such as *Typical Saigon*, 1968, and *Pinkville*, 1969–70, focus on the cruelties of the Vietnam War, working themselves out in a multiformed interlace of agony, like some snuff *Battle of Cascina*. Murder, rape, mutilation, dismemberment, and other sordid and sundry atrocities are rendered in acid tones of orange, green, and yellow, a merciless palette of bitter acrimony. No bullet ever misses its mark, its intrusive entry and explosive exit lovingly described and augmented, its function as new orifice-creator dutifully catalogued.

Saul's fascination with the viscera of violence, his understanding of its psychological impact on its viewers, his ability to balance revulsion with black comedy began to diminish in the early '70s. He then started targeting what he viewed as the empty rhetoric of art in pastiches and parodies after artists such as Rembrandt, Delacroix, Leutze, Marcel Duchamp, Willem De Kooning, and Francis Bacon. Saul ends up playing Peck's Bad Boy, and even images such as *Donald Duck Descending a Staircase*, 1979, end up reading more as homages than subversions. His innate love of the vulgar, his urge to foul the altar of High Art, rings quite hollow here.

More recently Saul has focused on compositions with just one or two figures, and these have been realized with a darker palette marked by sfumato-like modulations of form. Whether the subject is psycho-sexuality, as in *Oedipus Junior*, 1983, or the imagined wages of crime, as in *John Wayne Gacy Being Executed*, 1984, or the artist's recurring theme of misogyny, as in *Woman in the House*, 1989, what continues to dominate is a sense of Saul's stubbornness, his desire to ruffle complacency by the invention and shouting of pictorial curse words, his single-speed attack of frenzy and tumult. All this is interesting to witness, but its hoped-for revelatory shock seems dulled and late in arriving.

—James Yood