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Peter Saul, *San Quentin #1 (Angela Davis at San Quentin)*, 1971, oil on canvas, 71 × 94".

Peter Saul

SCHIRN KUNSTHALLE FRANKFURT

HOW LONG UNTIL Peter Saul is rediscovered once and for all? His off-putting yet oddly appealing paintings—marked by a Day-Glo palette, cartoonish (dis)figuration, and obscene imagery—emerged in the early 1960s, gaining him prominence and notoriety by the decade's end. Though he has consistently shown at galleries and smaller museums, Saul's work has always been seen as slightly out of step—puerile, even. Deeply irreverent toward art, the art world, and the world at large, his paintings maintain a willful distance from prevailing notions of good taste, assailing decorum with a vile arsenal of electric chairs, STDs, crucifixes, guns, improbable anatomy (bugged-out eyeballs protruding like tumescent scrota), American flags, and a lot of bodily fluids. Saul's work moves beyond perversity for perversity's sake by plainly and openly acknowledging the darkest aspects of society.

When Saul's survey at the Schirn Kunsthalle was announced earlier this year, some thought that 2017 might not be the most appropriate time to revisit such a divisive body of work. (Consider the fallout surrounding Dana Schutz's *Open Casket* [2016] at this year's Whitney Biennial, though in that case the painting's *abstraction* of its subject, a photograph of the dead Emmett Till, is often said to have intensified the furor.) In the ensuing months, the civic

climate has deteriorated to unthinkable lows as the American president has come to the defense of white-supremacist terrorists and threatened to annihilate a country of over twenty-five million. If a survey of Saul's truculent, cyclical half-century career affirms anything, it is that systemic evil is, well, systemic, even if its celebration by the current executive branch feels, to some, unprecedented.

Organized by Martina Weinhart, Saul's most comprehensive European exhibition to date brings together key works with rarely seen paintings, drawings, photographs, and ephemera. Weinhart, a veteran of '60s revisionism, takes the opportunity to fill one of the major gaps in the Pop canon, expanding our understanding of a critical moment in postwar art but also in mass culture, the rise of what J. Hoberman has dubbed "vulgar modernism." Understandably, the lion's share of the show is given over to Saul's production in the '60s, though this means it is hardly an exhaustive overview.

Saul has been called many things—satirist, lampoon artist, prankster—but "painter" has rarely been one of them. So that the exhibition's first gallery highlights not just Saul's critique of postwar society but also his innovative facture is a boon. As evidenced by several early works on paper, Saul dexterously mined the world's quickening pace, yet his slapdash brushwork became one reason why his paintings didn't quite fit with those of his Pop peers, though he did find early admirers among the Chicago Imagists, who shared his hallucinatory realism. Saul attacked both fine art and mass consumption in his early paintings, applying Surrealist tendencies (attempts to free the unconscious, often via figurative distortion) a scene inspired by the unlikely combination of American satirist Paul Cadmus, Abstract Expressionism, and *Mad* magazine. In *Ice Box*, 1960, a roughly sketched refrigerator fills the canvas, its door open to reveal a glutton's dream of perishables and domestic objects (pie, soda, a Murphy bed, ham hocks, cigarettes). Saul's work became more overtly political after he moved to the San Francisco Bay Area in 1964, slowly shifting his focus toward the injustices camouflaged by branded goods in his "Ice Box" series, 1959–64. His pictures grew more skillful, more formally complex, showing the painter confidently employing multiple painterly styles—as keenly demonstrated by the underappreciated *Vietnam*, 1966, a nauseating scene of slaughter carried out by American soldiers.

Where Saul had previously depicted Superman robbing a bank or rotting in jail or Donald Duck's crucifixion, during the latter half of the '60s his fantasy scenarios began to include real-life settings and subjects (most notably, American soldiers abroad), the better to capture the world's malice, deceit, and profligacy. One of the best examples from this period, *The*

Government of California, 1969, depicts an epic battle on the Golden Gate Bridge: A monstrous Ronald Reagan strokes his cock into the mouth of the University of California school system, embodied by a brown-skinned girl in pigtails, while the saintly, tentacular ghost of Martin Luther King Jr. tips the contents of a Bank of America building into the hands of the poor.

Crime and punishment are Saul's twin motivating factors. Walking through the exhibition, one might at first take lightly the violence he depicts laughably, a cartoon character screaming in anguish, or Mickey Mouse dropping a bomb on Communists. But despite the paintings' absurdist, saccharine appearance, in concentration the violence overwhelms, becomes deafening. On reaching the final galleries, it's impossible to ignore the brutal implications of Saul's work, including the torture of Angela Davis by the three little pigs (*San Quentin #1 [Angela Davis at San Quentin]*, 1971) and a double portrait consisting of George W. Bush with his finger stuck up the mouth of the corpse of an Abu Ghraib detainee (*Bush at Abu Ghraib*, 2006). Saul doesn't abstract injustice and pain: He amplifies them. In contrast to the cool, dispassionate mimesis of Pop, Saul's art seems more akin to the violent, unflinching intensifications of *Neue Sachlichkeit*—another moment in which fascism, corruption, and biopolitical control threatened the very possibility of a public sphere or body politic. Saul has continuously made work so attention-grabbing that it dares its viewers to look, at a time when looking away is no longer an option.

Beau Rutland is a curator and writer living in New York.