

ARTFORUM

NEWPORT BEACH

PRINT OCTOBER 2008

Peter Saul

ORANGE COUNTY MUSEUM OF ART

OK, I MESSED UP / WHAT'S NEXT? asks a man with an extra ear and nose, his ocher and hot pink face feverishly oozing beyond its familiar contours, in a typically nightmarish painting by Peter Saul (*OK, I Messed Up . . .*, 2003). The question—a casual admission of guilt immediately followed by a lusty lurch forward—marks a moment of unvarnished self-awareness in this timely retrospective of the painter's genuinely unsettling corpus. People tend to either love or hate Saul's paintings, though some split the difference, detesting their lurid subject matter—which aims to offend everybody, if we take the artist at his word—while still indulging their eye-popping, radioactive surfaces. But once encountered up close and personal, Saul's canvases make being indifferent impossible. This succinct yet intense career survey, organized by Dan Cameron and traveling from southern California to the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia this fall, should provide ample opportunity for the art world to decide upon which side of the knotty fence it should gather.

Born in 1934, Saul is a peer of the Pop artists, but despite his embrace of familiar icons (Superman, Donald Duck) and topical, all-American subjects pulled from the evening news, the artist has typically been placed at the art-historical margins of that movement. Saul's early work was included in the 1993 traveling exhibition "Hand-Painted Pop: American Art in Transition," co-organized by Paul Schimmel and Donna De Salvo; indeed, unlike many of the major players in what is called Pop, Saul never retired his "hand" in favor of machine-inspired production. His product- and text-laden canvases from the early 1960s subtly recall pre-Benday Roy Lichtenstein yet also anticipate Philip Guston's cartoonish figuration. While working with overtly familiar subjects, Saul never directly copies the source but pulls it through his own perverse wringer: Donald Duck's nipples pucker, bullets leave noirish guns and become drooping dicks, and so on.

Compare and contrast the cool demeanor of Warhol's empty electric chairs, which arrived in 1963, with the gruesome execution paintings Saul delivered a year later—*Donald Duck Crucifixion*, *Woman Being Executed*, *Sex Deviant Being Executed* (all 1964). The theme is continued with portraits of notorious figures being brutally put to death (regardless of whether they actually faced capital punishment in real life—Saul takes OJ Simpson as a subject along with Ethel Rosenberg and John Wayne Gacy).

When many of his peers turned toward the rational reserve of Pop and Minimalism, Saul asserted his unfashionable intoxication with Surrealism—and not just Salvador Dalí’s melting watches or the psychedelic mindscapes of Roberto Matta, but also the oversexed populism of Tex Avery’s bulging eyeballs and Basil Wolverton’s disgusting “spaghetti and meatballs” draftsmanship on the covers of *Mad* magazine.

Still, despite his perceived position at art’s outskirts, Saul’s influence is felt heavily a generation later in Mike Kelley’s naughtiest adolescent leanings, Jim Shaw’s lysergic fantasies, and especially in Carroll Dunham’s dueling dickheads, not to mention the bent figuration of younger artists such as Dana Schutz and Aaron Curry. Perhaps appropriate to a marginal position, Saul seems to stumble hardest when he directly targets the art world. While his nasty skewerings of Warhol and Clement Greenberg are left out of the show, *Francis Bacon Descending a Staircase*, 1979, included here, is a flatfooted groaner that lacks Saul’s usual visual audacity.

If Saul’s extraordinary technical gifts as a painter don’t exactly redeem his subjects—from the atrocities of Vietnam and Abu Ghraib to Columbus’s conquest of America to the violent anxieties leaking out of the modern male—they certainly compel us to look at his epic canvases, much like rubbernecking drivers gawking at a horrifying freeway wreck. These are fierce allegories, double-dipped in acid, and they look remarkably honest right now. It’s Saul’s moment, even if one foot is still stuck in the margins. Or, as a screwed-up head puts it in a 2001 painting: stop KISSING MY ASS / AND LET’S DO BUSINESS.

—Michael Ned Holte