Press Reviews

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Art as Misbehavior: In a Freewheeling Talk, Peter Saul Addresses UFOlogy and Political Correctness

BY *Alex Greenberger* **06/30/17**

Lolita Cros and Peter Saul.
COURTESY HOTEL AMERICANO

"Did you know 121,000 people have seen a flying saucer?" Peter Saul asked curator Lolita Cros on Tuesday night at New York's Hotel Americano. "How can you be sure that none of these people have seen one?" This comment drew laughs from the crowd, but no one could provide any evidence suggesting he was wrong, so Saul continued. "I accept fake news as news," the 82-year-old Pop artist said.

It was a characteristically off-the-wall comment from a painter, who, over the past six decades, has lampooned American celebrity culture, offered anti-war commentaries, and done a series of paintings devoted to Superman, all in a color palette that resembles nuclear waste mixed with bubble gum. At the talk, Saul, who is the subject of his first major European retrospective, at the Schirn Kunsthalle in Frankfurt, discussed that work, and how it has been received.

At the start of the event, which was held on the hotel's rooftop, near a tiny pool that is just under five feet deep, Saul, who was dressed in a blue button-down and slacks, delved briefly into his personal history. He discussed being given a box of oil paints by his mother, and how he never finished graduate school. Then he moved on to his time in Paris in the '60s. He lived in France with his girlfriend, and he smoked Gauloises and drank beer. "You didn't meet artists in Europe," he said. It was mainly a lonely time.

When Saul moved to Rome for a spell, he was given the opportunity to paint at an Italian church. He recalled a priest telling him, "You can paint in the church. You just can't paint on Sunday mornings." That was fine for the artist, and it offered him the first chance to paint a scene that, in his hands, would soon turn risqué: the Crucifixion. "Why not?" Saul said.

Saul would go on to reuse that scene in some of his most controversial works, in particular *The Crucifixion of Angela Davis* (1973), which features the titular activist rendered in garish green, pinned to a cross by knives. "I saw art as misbehavior," he said. Later works feature Richard Nixon, Donald Trump, and George W. Bush, all engaged in unspeakable acts of violence.

Naturally, the discussion turned to political correctness. What are Saul's views on that? "Uh-oh," Saul said. "I'm trying never to think about it. It's one of those gloomy things like cancer. It'll happen to you. You'll have a heart attack from political correctness."

Asked what artists Saul is looking at today, he said Nicole Eisenman, Dana Schutz, and Michael Williams. And about the controversy surrounding Schutz's *Open Casket*: "I was very envious of the tremendous response! I wish I painted the picture. . . . I would've jumped right in a cab, gone down to the museum, and confronted this guy"—meaning Parker Bright, who protested the work by standing in front of it with a shirt that said BLACK DEATH SPECTACLE. "I absolutely disagree" with that critique, Saul said.

Peter Saul, *Ronald Reagan in Grenada*, 1984, acrylic on canvas.
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Nevertheless, even as someone who has painted Hitler killing himself and Stalin mowing down Nazi troops with handguns, there are a few subjects Saul won't touch. He won't make jokes about murder, and, at the request of his dealers and collectors, he won't update an earlier painting that shows the police killing people in the subway. He also promised his wife he'd never depict 9/11.

In addition to being an artist, Saul has also taught at the University of Texas in Austin in the past. Asked by Cros for pointers for young artists, Saul simply said, "Avoid advice." Still, he has learned quite a bit while teaching, he said. "You have to say something entertaining within the first half hour, or they're gone."