

ARTFORUM

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Peter Saul, *The Government of California*, 1969, acrylic on canvas, 68 × 96".

Peter Saul

VENUS OVER MANHATTAN

The wonderful exhibition “Peter Saul: From Pop to Punk”—challenging, engrossing, troubling—which consisted of sixteen ambitious paintings and five equally ambitious drawings from the 1960s and ’70s, was woefully mistitled: There was nothing waywardly adolescent about this show, nothing *punk*, as I understand the meaning of both word and style. Indeed, with the passage of half a century, these paintings seem even more centered and gravely pertinent—prescient, even—given the ghastly world we now live in than they did when they were first championed by Allan Frumkin, the placid but remarkable dealer who impulsively took the artist on, surely with no hope of profit, considering the unrelenting aggression reflected in Saul’s amalgam of surrealist cartooning and the day’s politics.

Think back to the many contrapuntal divisions of the ’60s—abstract painting versus provincial representationalism, or an unyielding Minimalism ascending coincidentally with its evil fraternal twin, Pop art. Or, as another example, consider the last gasp of a humanistic political art (as manifested, say, in the disparaged “New Images of Man,” Peter Selz’s 1959 curatorial debut at New York’s Museum of Modern Art) versus the supposedly apolitical nature of AbEx, at least according to puritanical period formalist readings. Saul’s paintings, in retrospect, seem the meeting place of these antipodal encounters. I can bear witness to all this,

since, as a graduate student in art history at the University of Chicago, I first encountered Saul's disconcerting works chez Frumkin, who would later open in New York, a move underscoring yet another either/or—that of New York versus Chicago, the latter denigrated, locally and otherwise, as the “second city.”

Chicago aside, Saul hails from San Francisco, city of Haight-Ashbury, and Berkeley's neighbor to the west. The archvillain of his work is Ronald Reagan, back then only the governor and, perforce, the regent of the University of California system and the guy who called in the cops to quell the student antiwar uprisings at a moment when free speech and freedom of conscience meant something acutely real. Reagan sits deep in Saul's Dantean circles of hell, his placement particularly visible in the ambiguous *The Government of California*, 1969, wherein we discover the future president pinioned against the Golden Gate Bridge alongside Martin Luther King Jr., who had been assassinated the previous year; against all reason, Dr. King is here disturbingly “memorialized” as a creature with dangling tentacles. Indeed, Saul's work frequently includes distressing ethnic stereotypes—of African Americans, of the Vietnamese, of Jews. See *All the Money in Palestine*, 1969, with its slogans reading FUCKING MILLIONAIR, USURY, SYPHILITIC PROFITS, not to mention the big noses of the painting's stereotyped central characters. What to make of such ostensibly left-wing agitprop?

Despite the confrontational nature of Saul's potty-mouthed paintings, a virtually pastoral mode marks his earlier art, works pleasing in their scoured surfaces of delicate coloration: The artist's plangent, whistling neon only fully ignites by 1966. This early output reveals Saul's struggle with indecision and piecemeal discovery, though the imagery remains that of the virulent propaganda germane to his whole enterprise (if not the entire history of the cartoon tradition). Some of the early work may strike certain viewers as a trifle perfumed—*Sex Boat*, 1961, particularly so. With its obdurate and crude imagery—check out the ballooning yellow phallus rising in the upper right—the painting's gentle palette also registered in *Superman in the Electric Chair*, 1963, with its eccentric yellow water-closet shape that fills half the composition.

These were the years of the American misadventure in Vietnam, spurred by a self-deluding domino theory; the '60s were marked by a disastrous loss of life and treasure (both American and Vietnamese), as emblemized by the 1968 Tet Offensive. Thus was set the background for Saul's acerbic, dreadfully painful, funny canvases, premonitory works acquired by a uniquely comprehending art dealer who held them dear for a lifetime. Here reassembled, these paintings were recontextualized as national masterworks by a veteran artist who may now be seen as an unanticipated Emanuel Leutze (of *Washington Crossing the Delaware* fame): political satire as history painting.

—Robert Pincus-Witten