

Peter Saul is Older (and Cooler) Than Your Favorite Artist

Last Friday night at Neuehouse, we attended a conversation between painters Peter Saul and Joe Bradley. Here's what we learned.

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Peter Saul is probably older—and cooler—than your favorite artist. Last Friday night at Neuehouse, he and contemporary art star Joe Bradley took part in a conversation moderated by Dallas Art Fair founder Chris Byrne. The talk surrounded the topics you might expect from two heavy-hitters—technique versus content, art movements, and new ways of viewing art—with each matter seriously enhanced by the quirky, dry sense of humor that Saul interspersed within his refreshingly frank perspectives.

Saul came of age during the 1960s. Today, he's currently showing work from his early career in solo exhibition *From Pop to Punk* at Venus over Manhattan, with which this talk coincided. The duo met when Bradley first interviewed Saul for *The Journal*. "If you haven't read it," Saul said at one point, "heck, I'm proud of it."

His first paintings were shown in January, 1962, the same month of the debut of *Pop Art* with Rosenquist and Lichtenstein. They weren't very well received—some critics called them "boring" while others claimed Saul's "paint was too loose." The discourse around the work stuck to the technique of the paintings, like brush strokes and color, all but completely disregarding their unnerving imagery. At the time, Saul mentioned, "this was the polite way to deal with artists."

It's a total 180-degree shift for the current reception of *From Pop to Punk*, for which Saul has seen glowing reviews from the *The New York Times*, *Art News*, *Hyperallergic*, and more. "For the last 30 years," Saul rationalized during the conversation, "there was so much political correctness that [now] the audience wants to see something wrong." When Bradley mentioned that he painted "disparagingly" of people, Saul simply admitted that his work offends. Although some might be turned away by his anti-institutional, explicitly sexual, and otherwise totally un-PC imagery, he even said, "when I was making these images, I felt like I was barely going far enough."

During the talk, Saul sounded off on his preference for making pictorial images psychologically rather than theoretically, his influences, his perspectives on changing art movements, from Pop art to modern art, and his views on viewing art:

On Pop art:

"I think Pop exists, but I think it exists as an attitude—it makes more sense as an attitude."

"It depends on who owns the pictures, is it in your uncle's garage or is it in a gallery? It's about context, but to me, a thing is a thing."

"New York Pop is a flop. It's a success financially but not much to look at. All they do is copy, you've seen it before, and here it is again."

On modern art:

“The only thing that doesn’t have any psychology, any story, is Modern Art. The story is still there but the story is himself— the artist has a certain gender, color, age, nationality and background and that becomes the story. The painting tells you none of these things, all the painting tells you is that it’s a surface and it’s testing if you have read Art Forum magazine. Have you read it? Do you know what’s going on? It’s a stupid situation, frankly, I believe in psychology in the picture.”

On viewing art:

“I find that I don’t mind looking at paintings that have big problems—like they’re boring, they’re not painted well— whatever it is, I don’t really care, if I’m interested in something for some unknown reason, I just look at it and I think about it’s problems and what the artist may have gone through to paint the pictures. I do think that I’m a good viewer. I think that if these artists were to Pop alive, right now, all of the sudden, they’d feel like I was looking at their painting in a good way. I think I’m a good viewer of art— at least past art. Current art, not so good because so much lays in the theory. There’s just so much theory in the current art, that appreciation can only be approached by reading.”