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Peter Saul, *Peter Saul vs. Pop Art*, 2012, acrylic on canvas, 75 x 72".

Peter Saul

Peter Saul's paintings are clever, witty, ironic—and nasty. In *Peter Saul vs. Pop Art*, 2012, a grimacing, sweating figure—a representation of the artist himself—uses a chain saw to cut into a can of CAMPBELL'S TOMATO SOUP, clearly a reference to Warhol's work. In a further act of destruction, *Campbell's* is spelled "Cambell," suggesting the childishness or perhaps faux naïveté of Pop artists; they don't know how to spell, let alone copy. cambell tomato soup is hand-written—clumsily, even crudely—and the word CONDENSED may acknowledge the cheap artificiality of the soup, not to say the fakeness of Pop art.

Saul's dislike of canonical painters is self-evident in *Raccoons Paint a Picture*, 2011. Rendered cartoonishly in red, four of the striped-tailed animals slather multicolored paint on a sickly yellow ground, evoking the old idea that a messy monkey could make an Abstract Expressionistic painting. Driving the point home, fezzes perched on (or flying off) their respective heads spell out the name "Pollack." Again there's the suggestion of childishness—

recall that many modern artists acknowledge a debt to children's art—as well as infantilism. The Surrealism-inspired *Shark in My Bathtub*, 2011, is a sort of bad dream, not to say nightmare. Hands reach from a pie slice's molten filling and grasp a golf club; a head pokes out of a roasting chicken; another hand holds a frothy mug of beer. The shark, opening its wide, tooth-lined maw, is yet another toy in the bathtub of Saul's zany unconscious.

There's something rubbery and lightweight about Saul's peculiarly spineless, fantastically distorted figures—they appear to be made of infinitely malleable putty, and may embody a pseudo-automatist character. It's as though Saul had applied Dalí's "paranoiac-critical method," and it had gotten out of hand. Saul uses Dalí's "phenomenology of repugnance" to make art more repugnant than he or any Surrealist did, finally suggesting art's nonsensical, not to say inherently absurd, nature. In Saul's paintings, what Dalí called the "surrealist experiment" has become a caricature of itself.

Saul was once a telling critic of the Vietnam War, but his cartoony critique *Wall Street*, 2010, seems at once labored and lame. Earlier works, such as *Drunken Cowboy*, 1985, with its luridly mad figure and garish colors, show us the insanity Saul was capable of when he let his imagination run wild. The old gutsy, satiric, nihilistic madness has been lost, leaving us with facile commentaries on the contemporary world and art.

—Donald Kuspit