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INTERVIEWS

1000 WORDS: PETER SAUL

WHAT DO YOU DO WITH PETER SAUL? He is an anomaly in relation to everything except himself, wearing his outsider status as a badge of honor. Indeed, it is perhaps his resolute consistency that most warrants our recognition today: Throughout artistic trends spanning from Pop to the present, he has remained a relative constant, making no bones about his skepticism toward the modernist underpinnings and antecedents of contemporary art. But despite his polemical parodies of such figures as de Kooning and Duchamp—just look at *Double de Kooning Ducks* and *Donald Duck Descending a Staircase*, both from 1979—Saul has never been a reactionary. Postmodernist tenets of irony and pastiche would actually come to echo much of Saul's beef, albeit in the kind of language that gives him hives.

Against the backdrop of Minimalism and Conceptualism's rise, Saul's turn toward overtly political subject matter in the mid-1960s (the Vietnam War, Ronald Reagan's California governorship, the civil rights movement, and black nationalism) stood out like a sore thumb—which was precisely the intended effect. While the works he made then still stick out, they have now taken on the contours of a kind of history painting. In fact, in light of developments both sociopolitical and art-historical—Abu Ghraib in the realm of events, Kara Walker in the realm of representation, for instance—the artist appears to have been well ahead of his time, seizing on a farcical, psychosexual dimension of history that is ever present but repressed. Yet Saul would be the first to cry, "Politics, schmopolitics!" For him, art is a place that, above all else, has no rules (or, as he would put it, "roolz"). In that regard, Saul can be seen to have problematized political correctness well in advance of the term's coinage. He has no qualms about potentially being called sexist and racist. But it usually becomes clear, before those labels come into play, that Saul denies himself any moral high ground precisely in order to challenge you to take it if you dare. (And here I am thinking of the cautionary tale of Eliot Spitzer, to

pick arbitrarily from our scandal-plagued politicians of recent popular memory, the likes of whom Saul is apt to portray on canvas.)

While Saul, living in Texas, was long an outsider to the New York museum and gallery establishment, in Chicago—where I hail from—he has always been something of a local hero. He is a key predecessor of the Imagists, including Ed Paschke, Jim Nutt, Roger Brown, Christina Ramberg, Phyllis Bramson, and Karl Wirsum. But unlike the Imagists, whose coherence as a group resides not only in a particular strand of figuration but also in a regional affiliation, Saul has no allegiance to any movement. Which leaves critics and historians with the same question: What do we do with Peter Saul? Perhaps we need to set aside such conventional classifications and look to a broader class of artists, the self-proclaimed outsiders, whose expanding ranks, from Jean-Michel Basquiat to Jim Lutes, have grown to a point where there can no longer be said to be an “outside” versus an “inside.” Indeed, for Saul, it was never really a matter of inside or outside, which is how it goes when you are a toxic asset in the best sense of the term.

—Hamza Walker

PETER SAUL

I GREW UP IN THE 1940S, when America was a polite country. Men wore vests, and nothing unpleasant was allowed in the house. When my mother showed me an art book with Paul Cadmus’s *Coney Island* [1934] in it, the ugliness of the people just knocked me out. It was so much more exciting than the rest of the stuff. I guess I found my style right then.

Twenty years later, in Paris, I got the idea of using “American culture” to make my pictures more exciting to look at. This was shortly before Pop art officially began, at a time when French art consisted mostly of Poliakoff, Fautrier, and Wols. Then I got the idea that my pictures could be funny, could actually make me laugh, from seeing *Mad* magazine in 1959.

My current concern is how much of a story—and what kind of a story—a picture can have. I’m not devoted to any intellectual point of view, but the work has to be paint on canvas. I spend all my brainpower on the individual picture, how to make it interesting. In my version of Max Beckmann’s *Night* [1918–19], I wanted to increase the violence of the original, because in contemporary US culture there’s so much more violence to start with that I have to go a long way just to be noticed. That’s Beckmann on the left, licking a foot that probably has gangrene,

a common affliction in World War I trench warfare. The black coming in from the right is the night.

In my new picture *Stalin + Mao* [2009], the two dictators fight their World War II enemies side by side. They're using their fists because in our culture, superheroes (or just evil big shots in this case) always use their fists; Captain America and Batman never used guns. Here, Stalin and Mao hit so hard, with ten times the force of Joe Louis, that the heads of their enemies come right off.

At the moment, I'm working on a painting titled *Worse than van Gogh*, in which a man cuts off his nose with a saw—which is worse than van Gogh, who only cut off his ear. But don't get the wrong idea! A lot of my work has been family friendly—such as *Donald Duck Descending a Staircase* [1979], *The Neptunes* [2005], and one that I'm planning right now called *Raccoons Paint Abstractions*, because I think modern art should make room for cute animals.

I start all these paintings from a pencil sketch, each about six by eight inches, which then takes three to four weeks to paint. However, some works on paper are more spontaneous, like the one about Bernie Madoff: I remembered that some animals gnaw off a foot to escape being caught in a trap, and Madoff was certainly “caught by the balls,” one could say. Joe the Plumber was famous for a moment, so I used him, too. I am a history painter, so why not? It's all history. I've also done *The Fall of Constantinople (1453 A.D.)* [2004], *The Alamo* [1990], *Raft of the Medusa* [1990–92], and San Francisco during an earthquake that hasn't happened yet.

VIVA LA DIFFERENCE [2008] started as an update on Magritte's *The Rape*, but after I put in the angst-ridden guy in pajamas, it reminded me more of Cadmus. It suddenly occurred to me to involve the three basic racial groups and to top it off with a toast, one martini clinking against the other.

Which reminds me, people have recently begun congratulating me just for being over the age of seventy. When I was in art school, back in the early '50s, everybody was obsessed with form, Cézanne and so on. Now it matters more who you are: age, gender, race, nationality, all the biographical stuff. Well, whatever! Regardless, some artists I'm very sympathetic to are Mike Kelley, Kara Walker, Erik Parker, Lisa Yuskavage, Carroll Dunham, Jim Shaw, and Jim Nutt. There's actually a long list, but I'm so self-concerned as I speak, I can't remember their names.

My Lousy Brain [2008] is a kind of self-portrait. The guy in the picture does a lobotomy on his head to see what's inside, and much to his unhappy surprise, his brain looks like a lump of poop. *Bad Restaurant* [2008] is a self-portrait four times over: green, purple, red, and blue. The picture has a bee-hive in the lower left; a deviled egg in the middle; and on top of that, being knocked over, a poorly designed modern home, a kind of condo. On the right side, coming out of my green head, is a dog with a glass of wine upside down. He drinks like a fish. And coming out of my dress—because I change genders as you look from the right toward the center—is a big pickle I'm holding, and slices of lemon, and I'm stepping in spaghetti. Finally, on the left, raising an olive out of a martini just by looking at it—that's me, right inside of a hot dog. Everything is Freudian, meaning everything is in reverse.

Looking back about sixty years, I was a natural for Pop art, and the idea of Pop still makes me laugh with joy, just to find something in our culture I can use for one more picture. It's the world's best art movement. Minimalism, on the other hand, I could never understand at all. Why would anyone want to look at less instead of more? Politics has always been a corny subject up until very recently. But that's the fun of it. I get to be a relaxed rebel in the field of art, which turns out to be harmless. For instance, years after I painted pictures of Vietnam, someone told me that that's exactly what the war was like. It was a total surprise—I had no idea I was telling the truth.