

ARTFORUM

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FIRST BREAK

PETER SAUL

TEEMING WITH POOP, spew, blood, guts, and jism, Peter Saul's visceral, virtual-toon paintings pop off the wall and go straight for the eyeballs. The proper response is to duck and cover, but the comic-book insults and all-round humiliations—evidenced in images of public executions, orgies, and massacres—have already grabbed you and are busily inverting tropes, violating taboos, and facilitating every kind of social and cultural heresy. Finding an art-world niche for this guy hasn't been easy.

A prep school heavy on discipline made Saul into a bad-boy for life. He proudly recalls that his first painting—executed at age thirteen—depicted a drunken sailor vomiting off a bridge under a large red sun. Being forced the principles of tasteful abstraction by the Fine Arts Department of Washington University only fostered an acute case of AbEx-phobia, manifested in a refusal, as Saul phrases it, “to put the art materials in front of the image.” The eureka moment occurred after his St. Louis professors “extremely negative reaction” to the inclusion of depicted objects like radios, handbags, and motorboats in his realist renderings of models. For the young rebel, that disapproval was the green light, inspiring paintings wholly devoted to refrigerators and cars.

Leaving school in 1956, Saul went off to Europe to flounder for a while in Holland, living with his girlfriend in a hotel room and trying to work in a tiny loft-studio. Nabbed two years later for overextended visas, he and his friend took the first bus to Paris, where he set up shop in the nine dollar-a-month common atelier of the American Students and Artists Club. Soon thereafter, at the Mistral Bookshop, he stumbled across a copy of *Mad* magazine and had a creative breakthrough. He began to aim for a naughtier, more satirical style and content. His new compositions featured maelstroms of scribbled iceboxes, bathtub submarines, dollar

signs, coffee cups, Mickey Mouses, penile shapes, and nonsensical cartoon bubbles. Working largely in isolation, Saul concocted an original stew: a loosely drawn concatenation of proto-Pop junk strewn all over with de Kooning-esque frantic energy. He knew he was onto something—but he knew also that he was incapable of promoting himself.

Then Saul saw an exhibition at the Galerie du Dragon of work by Matta, forty-nine years old and living in Paris, freshly elevated in status after his 1957 MoMA retrospective. Responding to the bursts of saturated color and exuberantly drawn war machines, insect gods, and sci-fi transports, Saul decided that the Chilean artist was the only person around who would understand his work. But how to get to him? Terminally shy, Saul didn't dare make inquiries at Dragon. He pondered his dilemma for a month or so until finally asking the head of the Artists Club, Roger Barr, for advice. Barr promptly produced Matta's address.

Figuring, Why not?, Saul put ten of his crayon drawings in the mail. A couple of months passed—no word. Then Saul finally got up the gumption to call. It turned out that Matta actually loved the drawings. In fact, as Saul dutifully reported in a 1960 letter to mom and dad back home in San Francisco, Matta had proclaimed his work “perhaps the first genuine figurative alternative to the young artists who have followed the direction of abstract-expressionism in the last few years.” Even better, Saul continued, the artist told him “that he knew what was on my mind, how hard up I probably was at the moment—and as André Breton had helped him once, so he was going to help me. He said he would make dealers buy it and not to worry.”

Three days later Matta set up a meeting for Saul with one of his dealers, Chicago's Allan Frumkin, who had opened a second gallery in New York and had just arrived in Paris on a visit. Saul phoned immediately and Frumkin said he could meet him right then, in the lobby of Hotel Lutetia—and to bring along some drawings. Although Frumkin characterizes the hotel at that time as being “rather down at the heels,” Saul remembers it as ritzy and impressive. Even more awesome to him was the fact that Frumkin took a look at the drawings and asked, “How much do you want for them?” Saul recalls stupidly stuttering, “I don't know—ten dollars apiece?”

“I'll give you twenty-five,” the dealer magnanimously responded—which amounted to a third of what they settled on as the retail price. Frumkin remembers being impressed with Saul's “innocence and purity and his very particular slant on things, apparent even at this first meeting.” A forty-year artist/dealer relationship was born.

After Frumkin saw Saul's paintings in his studio, Saul wrote home relieved that his new dealer "liked the real thing, not just a side issue like 'the way I use color.'" He was surprised too that for Frumkin "all the violence and scatological reference was OK." Saul's first exhibition in Frumkin's Chicago space was well received, featuring such classics as *Sex Boat*, 1961, and *Ice Box #1*, 1960. Numerous New York and Paris shows have followed, but only in the past decade has the art world seemed to catch up with the artist's crazed tough-mindedness. This month, Saul will be featured in the Stedelijk's exhibition, "Eye Infection" alongside fellow American mavericks H.C. Westermann, Jim Nutt, R. Crumb, and Mike Kelley, all key figures who employ the resources of cartoon imagery and caricature to create art that is both pathetic and powerful.

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